

## Chapter 2

Heat shimmered off the hood of my car as I crawled through downtown Beaulac at approximately three miles an hour. I cranked the air conditioner up as high as it would go, then glanced in the rearview mirror to see my demon bodyguard Eilahn a few cars back, astride her sleek new motorcycle. She didn't appear to mind the oppressive Louisiana summer heat and sported a vivid green tank top that accentuated the rich olive tone of her skin. I thought I heard a distant wail of sirens over the blasting AC but had no desire to turn down the air to find out.

The line of cars moved forward a few more feet before stopping again. This was more than the usual post-lunch traffic jam, but whether the cause was an accident or the ubiquitous road construction, I wasn't going to let it stress me out. I had nowhere I had to be anytime soon. Besides, it gave me a chance to ponder the weirdness of my lunch with Pellini.

What the hell was up with him? For years he and Boudreaux had been nothing but pricks. Annoying, but generally harmless. Then, gradually, Pellini had begun to show traces of humanity, from warning me about Knight, to asking me to grab a beer with him, to this invitation for lunch—which I'd only agreed to because he'd mentioned the strange happenings at the plantation.

As soon as traffic moved again I capitulated and turned down a side street to find a detour around the jam. Three

blocks away the congestion eased, and I proceeded to mull over the photos Pellini had shown me. If the blurry one was the only piece of evidence that tied me to the plantation and the murder, I had no reason to worry. There was no way to make a positive identification from that even if someone suspected it was me.

*So why am I worried?* My grip tightened on the steering wheel. Because I was guilty in the eyes of the law, and any physical evidence I'd inadvertently left at the plantation had the potential to implicate me. It didn't matter that I hadn't pulled the trigger on James Macklin Farouche. One of his former hit men, Bryce Thatcher, had taken care of that detail. But Bryce had been part of our team—all of us acting as judge, jury, and executioner. Believing there was no other acceptable option, I'd stood by when Bryce put two bullets in Farouche's head. *What does that make me?*

Responsible.

Things had been a lot simpler when I was a street cop. Ignorance was underappreciated bliss, and my work ended along with my shift. A twinge of loss went through me, though I knew it hadn't been all sunshine and roses. Besides, I was a demon summoner with talents, knowledge, and experience I never could have imagined back then. With both Earth and the demon realm at risk from demonic lords with dangerous agendas, I had a responsibility to use my rare expertise to do everything possible to assure the safety and stability of—

I snorted. What a crock of shit.

Sure, those noble goals and ideals were there, but only because the alternative was catastrophe. I had no real choice in the matter. But it *was* my choice to act as responsibly as possible given the circumstances. Earth laws didn't take into account otherworldly schemes that put humans at risk. J.M. Farouche had committed unforgivable crimes against humanity, but we hadn't executed him as punishment. We'd executed him because, with his ability to influence others, human laws weren't enough to stop him. One hell of a responsibility.

That said, I had to admit it felt good to make a differ-

ence. Didn't matter that most of humanity remained clueless that a ragtag band of demons and humans fought tooth and nail for their right to remain blissfully ignorant. My posse had kicked ass at the plantation and prevented the Mraztur— the demonic lords Rhyzkahl, Jesral, Amkir, and Kadir— from establishing a permanent gate between the worlds.

Though not without cost. Another member of our team, Paul Ortiz, had suffered horrific arcane burns and now clung to life in the demon realm. Idris Palatino was there as well, recovering from the backblast of an arcane explosion.

Thoughts somber, I pulled into the driveway of a dusky blue, skinny two-story house owned by my best friend, Jill Faciane. She was currently almost nine months pregnant and living in a mobile home on my property until this whole demonic conflict settled down. Her boyfriend and father of her child lived here now: Zack, my favorite demon FBI agent.

Yet another casualty of the plantation battle.

As I walked up to the porch, I checked out the condition of the place. Though the lawn needed mowing, the potted plants looked perky enough to indicate they'd recently been watered. However, the blinds of the living room and the upstairs bedroom were closed tight, and a hand written *Do Not Disturb* sign hung on the porch rail. My worry rose in an aching wave. Zack had turned the tide of the battle at the plantation when he broke ancient oaths and severed his *ptarl* bond with Rhyzkahl. The act had shattered both of them, but Zack suffered an added blow by being ostracized, locked in human form, and cut off from the beyond-telepathy connection with the others of his kind, the demahnk.

I'd put off pestering Zack with questions so he could rest and recuperate. I truly hoped to find him strong enough to in-teract again, if only through insights and advice. But even beyond my need for him, he *deserved* to recover.

The door swung open a few seconds after I ignored the sign and knocked. Sonny Hernandez offered me a fleeting smile. "Hey, Kara. I didn't know you were coming over."

Sonny was a former Farouche henchman, one who had a

talent for keeping people tranquil in highly stressful situations—such as being kidnapped. That same talent turned out to be equally useful for easing Zack’s trauma, and Sonny had been grateful for the chance to use his ability in a positive way.

“Surprise inspection,” I said congenially as I peered into the gloom beyond him. “How’s everything going?”

Sonny stepped back and looked away. “Everything’s good.”

He was full of crap, but I didn’t challenge him on it. I moved past him and into the semi-dark living room. A lump shifted on the sofa.

“Sonny is overly optimistic,” the lump said—Zack, his voice thin and frail, as if each word lost its strength in the effort to come out. “Somehow I manage to put up with him.”

“Too soft for you, huh?” I said. “I’ll see if Moonlight Temp Agency can find an angry, bitchy nurse to babysit you. Whatcha think?”

Zack let out a breathless laugh and struggled to sit up even as Sonny swept in to assist. “I think I’d be an idiot to agree,” he said then murmured thanks to Sonny. My worry kicked up another notch. I’d spoken to Zack on the phone a few times since my return to Earth but hadn’t seen him before now. He’d managed to keep much of the weakness out of his voice when we spoke. Or maybe I hadn’t wanted to hear it.

“Damn straight.” I rested a gentle kiss on Zack’s cheek then sank to sit beside him. “You ever let any light in?”

“Not lately. It hurts too much.”

A lighter rasped, and Sonny lit a fat jar candle on the coffee table. “This is all he can tolerate. Sorry, Kara.”

“I don’t mind,” I said. “Candlelight’s fine.” Usually that was true, but in this case it only emphasized Zack’s pale, gaunt face—so unlike the robust surfer dude I’d known. My hope that he’d soon be ready to rejoin the posse dribbled away. I felt as if I was visiting a hospice patient rather than someone in recovery. “I won’t stay long, but I wanted to see you.”

“I’m not ready,” he said with such sorrow and understatement it tore my heart out.

"It's okay," I murmured, throat tight as I took his hand. It was so cold it seemed to pull the heat from mine. "You take all the time you need. Everything's okay." I abandoned all thought of updating him on the overall situation. His universe had collapsed to near nothing, and I felt as though I could scatter him to oblivion with a puff of breath.

He dropped his head back against the sofa and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

I squeezed his hand, willed him to take my warmth if it would ease him. "What about Jill? Maybe she could help you to—"

"No!" His eyes flew open, wild and desperate. "Kara, I cannot. *No.*"

"But she loves you—" I intended to add *and needs you as much as you need her*, but the panic that flashed across his face stopped me.

"No. Please, Kara," Zack said, breathing unsteadily. Desperation bled through the words. "Trust me. It's not her. But I can't. Please don't bring her here. *I cannot see her as I am now.*"

Was it because of the baby? I didn't dare ask him, though. He looked as if any more stress would shatter him. Damn good thing I *hadn't* brought Jill over—as I'd seriously considered doing. "Zack," I said gently. "It's okay. I trust you." A tiny amount of the tension eased from his grasp. "What about the Demahnk Council? Can't they help?"

"They won't." He paused and flipped me the bird with an unsteady hand. "They can't."

The middle finger was his signal that we'd ventured into territory he couldn't talk about. He was bound by agreement and mandate to both the Council and unnamed ones he obliquely referred to as "the others." Apparently, breaking his bond with Rhyzkahl hadn't negated his other contracts. "What about the demahnk who aren't on the Council? Surely I can rally at least a —"

"Kara. The demahnk *are* the Council."

I shook my head, confused. "Wait. Are you saying that every demahnk is a Council member?"

"All but one, now," he murmured. "The other ten remain united."

I sat in stunned silence. Only eleven Elder syraza in the whole of the demon realm and Earth? I fished through my memory for anything that contradicted his information and came up with nothing. I'd assumed the Council was comprised of a handful of the eldest demahnk, never guessing that there were less than a dozen demahnk in total. Questions rose, but as I opened my mouth to ask, Zack flipped me the bird again. I swallowed my questions back. Obviously that tidbit of information was all he could give me, and I wasn't going to push the issue while he was so weak. "Rest, Zack."

He focused on me with effort, pain he couldn't hide reflected in his eyes. "What of . . . Rhyzkahl?"

In those three words, Zack managed to express profound grief and frustration. Considering Rhyzkahl's betrayal and torture of me, I was inclined to do a happy dance to celebrate the lord's downfall. But Zack had been ptarl bound to Rhyzkahl, as his chief advisor and advocate, for *millennia*. His concern outweighed my anger.

"I haven't heard anything new," I said gently. "When I left the demon realm he was cloistered within his palace. According to Mzatal, he's debilitated to the point where he can't take care of his plexus, so the other lords are pitching in to cover it, like they do for Szerain." Each of the eleven lords had a plexus, a chamber dedicated to monitoring and adjusting the arcane potency flows of their planet. Without constant attention, the flows would tear the world apart. Preventing that end was the one thing the lords agreed on unanimously. "I promise I'll let you know as soon as I have any new info."

Zack slumped into the cushions with a long sigh as though he'd never draw another breath. Candlelight glimmered in a tear on his face. Though I couldn't hear the words, I read them on his lips. "Thank you." His hand went slack in mine, and my heart thudded in dread until I spotted the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

I untwined my hand from his and kissed his cheek again. "No," I whispered as I stood. "Thank *you*, Zakaar." I looked down at him, struck by the eerie sense that I might never

see him again. Aching, I finally turned away, caught Sonny's eye and nudged my head toward the door. With a last glance at Zack, I exited to the heat and blinding light of the afternoon sun. I wiped away tears and cleared my throat as Sonny followed me out and closed the door behind him.

"He's fading," I said hoarsely. "And I have no idea what to do for him." I wanted to thrash the rest of the demahnk and all the demons who'd turned their backs on him. Stripping his innate connections to the others was like pulling a fish out of water and leaving it to die slowly, gasping for breath.

"Every day it's as though less of him is here," Sonny said, grim. "I can barely get him to eat or drink anything, and he only moves when he has to. It's not good."

"Keep doing what you're doing," I said. "Let me know if there's anything, *anything*, that you need and I'll take care of it." My brow furrowed. "Has he had any contact with Ryan . . . Szerain?" The cagey demonic lord Szerain had recently freed himself from his horrific imprisonment as Ryan Kristoff. He continued to maintain the persona of Ryan, but I didn't know where he was or what he was doing.

Sonny shook his head. "Zack's had me call him a few times, but it always goes to voicemail."

"I know Ryan's working, but he's not answering my calls either." It was one thing for Szerain to snub me, but black-listing Zack was beyond the pale. Szerain wouldn't even be here if Zack hadn't kept him sane in his hellish prison for over fifteen years. "Let me know if he calls. Anything else I should know?"

"He talks in his sleep at times," Sonny said with a small frown. "Not a lot, but there are a few words and phrases he repeats. Jill, Rhyzkahl, and Szerain I recognize, but the others must be a different language." He paused, clearly trying to recall the sounds. "Ekeeree akar is the most frequent," he finally said. "Sovilas mir nah shey. Zarbeck. Ashava."

"I've heard a couple of them," I said. "Nothing alarming, but I'll keep them in mind." I didn't know what "akar" meant, but the Ekiri were an ancient race that abandoned the demon realm thousands of years past. Xharbek was

Szerain's demahnk ptarl, though he was deep in hiding for reasons unknown to me. I didn't recognize Ashava or the longer phrase. "You have my number. Keep me posted on how Zack's doing, please."

"You got it, Kara."

"You're the best," I said. And I meant it.

With that I headed for my car. Nearby, Eilahn leaned on the seat of her new Ducati motorcycle, her helmet under one arm, and her foot propped on the curb. With her sleek multiethnic look and hot chick body, she might as well have been posing for a motorcycle pinup calendar.

Her gaze slid to the front door of the house, and her face tightened into an expression of disdain. "I tolerate phone communications," she said as she turned her glare on me, "but I do not approve of in-person consort with the *kiraknikahl*."

I matched her syraza glare—hell, I doubled it. "Get. Over. It." In the eyes of demons, Zack was a *kiraknikahl*, an oathbreaker, having openly shattered the most sacred and hitherto unbreakable oath—his ptarl bond to Rhyzkahl. I, however, wasn't blindly stuck in bullshit custom. "Let me be clear," I said. "I get that you disapprove of him because of his actions, and that's your prerogative. No one's asking you to sully yourself by *consorting* with Zack. But I absolutely will *not* tolerate anyone disrespecting him in front of me. Everything will be cool if you keep your hostile opinions about Zack and me to yourself. He's no threat. To anyone."

She pursed her full lips then nodded. "Your conditions are understood and accepted," she said with only a trace of petulance in her voice. "Agreed."

I smiled. "Agreed." She believed what she believed, but in the end all she wanted to do was protect me. "Out of curiosity, how old does a syraza have to be to become an Elder syraza, a demahnk?"

"Your question is nonsensical and has no answer."

I tamped down my amused annoyance. At times my demon bodyguard seemed to enjoy being a smartass. "Then help me understand. How does a syraza become an Elder syraza?"

“That is like asking how a *faas* becomes a *reyza*.” She lifted one shoulder in a so-there shrug. “Or how a hamster becomes a crocodile.”

“No,” I said. She obviously didn’t understand what I was asking. “Those are different entirely different spe —” I stopped and did an open-mouthed gawk. “Hold on. Syraza and Elder syraza aren’t the same *species*? Elders look like big syraza with a few extra ridges and stuff. And you call them Elder syraza!”

Her hair flowed over her shoulders as she shook her head. “No, the demon designations are syraza and demahnk,” she said. “Syraza simply translates to shapeshifter. All demahnk are syraza, but not all syraza are demahnk. The ten demahnk are ancient. The oldest living syraza has lived less than one thousand years.” She gave me a sweetly patronizing smile. “To keep it simple for humans, we designate younger and Elder syraza.”

Demon logic. “I’m human and, speaking for all humanity, that’s *not* simpler.”

“Have you had difficulties with the terms before now?”

“No, but —” I stopped myself before I plummeted further down the logic hole. I got it. Most humans wouldn’t need more of a designation than younger and Elder.

Her smile turned smug. “There. All cleared up.”

“Ten demahnk? Zack is still demahnk, even if you *hinsliun*

“Yes, that is immutable. But Xharbek is no more.”

“Oh. Right.” No point in telling her she was likely wrong, especially when I had no solid evidence to support my belief. The demahnk Helori had told me that most demons considered Szerain’s *ptarl* to be dead, yet he believed Xharbek was alive and in hiding. Moreover, Zack’s count of demahnk had been eleven, not ten. I’d side with the demahnk on this one. But why was Xharbek in hiding? Szerain could sure as hell use the added stability. And why did the demons think Xharbek was dead?

Eilahn’s smile faded and she closed her eyes. My concern rose at the stress lines on her brow and around her eyes, and the slight tremor in her hands. “We need to get you back to the house,” I said. Before Rhyzkahl had revealed himself as a lying, treacherous scumbag, he’d placed Eilahn with me,

which meant her ability to remain on Earth depended on arcane support from him. With him stricken, that support was virtually nonexistent. Instead she was forced to spend time on the “mini-nexus” on my property, drawing what power she could. It seemed to be working, at least so far.

“That would be most wise,” she said and donned her helmet. In a graceful movement she mounted the Ducati and zoomed off, the throaty Italian purr of the bike fading as she receded in the distance. I wasn’t worried that she’d ditch me. She’d drop in behind my car as soon as I got on the road.

Indeed, within a tenth of a mile she and her bike slipped behind me. I cranked up the air, turned on the radio, and tried to pretend I was a normal person on a normal day.

That lasted less than five minutes. Mocking banter on the Terry & Kerry afternoon show riveted my attention, and I turned the AC down a notch in order to better hear. The traffic jam earlier had been the result of a fender bender, one caused by a black “devil dog” that had bounded over the hoods of several cars with animal control in hot pursuit. The hosts entertained themselves and listeners by baiting a caller who insisted the animal wasn’t a dog because it had double rows of teeth and spoke. Amidst gales of laughter, Kerry latched onto that one. “Speak, boy, speak!” and “Never heard a dog speak before. Woof!” That bit of fun complete, they cracked jokes about pink elephants and officers needing glasses since, not only did tranquilizers fail, but after cops shot the beast they couldn’t find a body. The consensus of the hosts and callers was that obviously the shots missed the dog and it remained at large.

I listened, palms sweating on the steering wheel. The “devil dog” nickname was very possibly closer to the truth than they knew. I was willing to bet Eilahn’s new bike that the “dog” was a *kzak*, a vicious demon species that could easily pass for a large dog at a distance. I’d had up close and personal experience with one that had been sent after either me or Ryan. Zack had brought it down with several well-placed shots, and it had discorporeated upon death, as did any demon killed on earth.

Fortunately, today's unwelcome visitor hadn't hurt anyone, but that didn't put my mind at ease. It had been sent from the demon realm for a purpose, and I doubted it was to play fetch at the park. I added the incident to my long list of things to stress out over, switched the radio station to mindless music, and continued on home.