

Mark of the Demon (Kara Gillian)

By Diana Rowland

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Editorial Review

Review
"**Mark of the Demon** is a nifty combination of police procedural and urban fantasy. Not too many detectives summon demons in their basement for the fun of it, but Kara Gillian is not your average law enforcement officer. In the course of Rowland's first book, Kara learns a lot about demons, her past, and above all, herself."—Charlaine Harris, New York Times bestselling author of *From Dead to Worse*

"Rowland spins a tale that is riveting, suspenseful, and deliciously sexy. With a unique take on demons, and with one of the most terrifying serial killers ever, **Mark of the Demon** will keep you up late at night turning pages."—Jenna Black, author of **Speak of the Devil**

"**Mark of the Demon** is a fascinating mixture of a hard-boiled police procedural and gritty yet other-worldly urban fantasy. Diana Rowland's professional background as a both street cop and forensic assistant not only shows through but gives the book a realism sadly lacking in all too many urban fantasy "crime" novels."—L. E. Modesitt, Jr., author of the *Saga of Recluce*

About the Author
Diana Rowland has lived her entire life below the Mason-Dixon line, uses "y'all" for second-person-plural, and otherwise has no southern accent (in her opinion.) She attended college at Georgia Tech where she earned a BS in Applied Mathematics, and after graduation forgot everything about higher math as quickly as possible.

She has worked as a bartender, a blackjack dealer, a pit boss, a street cop, a detective, a computer forensics specialist, a crime scene investigator, and a morgue assistant, which means that she's seen more than her share of what humans can do to each other and to themselves. She won the marksmanship award in her Police Academy class, has a black belt in Hapkido, has handled numerous dead bodies in various states of decomposition, and can't rollerblade to save her life.

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Chapter One

I could hear the intruder breaking into my house.

Unfortunately, it was in the same instant that the demon appeared before me.

The sound of shattering glass upstairs disrupted my focus for only a fraction of a second, but it was enough for the arcane portal to shift from my control and leap away from me like an untethered water hose. I made a frantic grasp at the portal, cold sweat breaking out under my arms as I struggled to wrench the power back into place. My heart slammed in my chest as I fought the uncontrolled energy, seizing each strand to bind and anchor it. My technique was raw and inelegant, but I didn't give a crap. I was only interested in surviving, not in how pretty it looked.

It felt like an eternity, but it was merely several frenzied seconds before I had the wildly fluctuating potencies settled and calmed. I cautiously loosened my hold as I took several deep, ragged breaths, struggling to slow the mad galloping of my pulse. That had been far too close for my peace of mind. If that

loss of focus had come just a few -seconds earlier, I most likely would have been ripped apart—either by the maelstrom of the arcane portal I'd opened in the basement of my house or by the claws of the demon I'd just summoned through that portal.

I exhaled a shuddering breath, finally releasing my hold on the portal as I looked with no small amount of triumph at the massive demon on one knee before me, his head lowered and his wings tucked along his back. He had remained utterly still throughout my battle with the portal, and I silently thanked whatever powers existed that I had already sealed the terms with him before losing control. I could feel a grin spread across my face. I'd done it. I had summoned a reyza, the highest of the twelve levels of demons.

I was officially a -full—fledged summoner.

The sharp crack of more glass breaking spoiled my reverie. My grin shifted to a scowl. A burglar. Just great. If I went upstairs to deal with the idiot, I would have to abandon my ulterior motive for summoning the demon. And summoning a reyza was worth more than a few wordly possessions. Besides, my wordly possessions weren't worth very much.

But the demon snapped his head up at the sound. "Some-one intrudes on your demesne," he growled, deep voice res-onating powerfully through the basement. Before I could take a breath to give a response or command, the demon bounded up the heavy wooden stairs of my basement, bursting through the door that exited into the main hallway of my house.

"Son of a bitch!" I swiftly anchored the potency that I hadn't yet grounded. Well, so much for that plan. My legs shook as I staggered up the stairs after the demon, and I snarled at the fatigue that slowed me down. I was used to feeling somewhat drained after a summoning, but this was more than I'd expected.

I heard a panicked shriek coming from the front of my house and I took off in that direction, forcing my wobbly legs to move. Okay, I managed to summon him. Now can I control him? The shriek of terror abruptly spiraled upward as I lurched down the hall.

"Kehlirik! No harm!" I shouted, commanding the demon with my voice even as I exerted mental pressure on the arcane bindings.

I rounded the corner to the living room, panting for breath and grateful that my house was "cozy" instead of palatial. I wasn't sure if I could have made it much farther without falling on my face. I made a quick mental note: Get more rest before summoning a -twelfth—level demon!

The demon snarled and turned to me, holding a -rail—thin, gibbering man by the collar and looking insanely incongruous against the muted -sage—green walls and cherrywood furniture in my living room. One wingtip brushed the computer on my desk, and I resisted the urge to grab that wing and yank him away. Probably not a good idea when I still wasn't certain if the demon would abide by my will.

"You should let me slay him, summoner," the demon said in a deep voice that sounded like rolling boulders. He held his captive dangling above the floor with no apparent effort and no strain showing in his heavily muscled body. He towered over me, his head topping mine by several feet, with leathery wings the color of burnished copper extending several more feet beyond that. In a house with -eight—foot ceilings, the demon would have been forced to crouch awkwardly and tuck in his wings in order to fit. For-tunately for him, my -Acadian—style house had the traditional -fifteen—foot ceilings designed for the subtropical climate of south Louisiana, where high ceilings helped keep houses cool.

I took a deep, steadying breath. The demon wasn't resisting my control. One less thing to sweat right now. "No, Kehlirik," I said carefully. "Our justice works differently in this sphere. But I thank you for your aid." The demon's captive had ceased his shrieking, at least, now reduced to whimpering moans. I rubbed the sudden gooseflesh on my arms, still horribly unnerved at how close I'd come to disaster. Just a few seconds earlier . . . I threw off a shudder and forced my attention back to the present.

A throbbing growl came from the demon's throat. "He is a thief. Worthless. He has no honor." He crouched and dropped the man to the floor, then pinned the intruder down with one foot. He tucked his wings behind him, clasping wickedly clawed hands together in front of him. A thick, sinuous tail curled around his legs, tip twitching in indication of his mood, and a dark and spicy scent surrounded him, foreign and wild. Crouched, his head was level with mine, and I was relieved that I could stop craning my neck to speak to him. This was only the second reyza I had ever seen, and I was still shocked at how large they were.

"It is . . . different here," I said, even though I heartily agreed with the demon's assessment of his captive. "I'm going to have enough trouble explaining away his talk of winged monsters."

"If I slay him, he cannot speak of winged monsters," Kehlirik replied, with undeniable logic. Then his broad nostrils flared as he snorted, "Not that I am a monster."

I had to smile. "No, reyza. You are no monster." Though the demon was monstrous in appearance—flat nose set in a bestial face, a wide mouth accented with curved fangs, and a thick ridge crest that swept back over his head and down his spine—I knew far too well that he was anything but a monster. "But it would be more difficult to explain a dead body," I continued. "Murder is a serious offense here."

He bared his teeth, lips curling back from the wicked fangs. "No body would be found, summoner. But I will respect your desire." He inclined his head to me, then spread his wings, somehow managing not to knock any of my pictures off the shelves. I looked at him in uninhibited delight. I'd spent almost ten years studying and training, carefully guided by my mentor and aunt through the summoning rituals of each level of demon, gradually working my way up to working solo. A solo summoning of a reyza was considered "graduation," and here I was with one in my living room.

I crouched to get a look at the -wide—eyed man beneath Kehlirik's foot, unconsciously echoing the demon's posture. Pale and skinny with scraggly hair that stood out from his head, the intruder was probably in his early to mid thirties, though I knew that my estimate could be off by about a decade. Heavy drug use tended to age a person, and I could easily peg him as a meth or possibly crack user. He also had the distinct sour odor of someone who hadn't paid close attention to hygiene for quite some time, and I found myself shifting slightly closer to the reyza, whose scent was far more appealing.

"Wow, did you ever pick the wrong house tonight," I said. Then I had to laugh as a realization hit me. "Wait. I bet you're the one who broke into those two houses up the highway last week. Am I right?"

The man whimpered and shook his head, his eyes wild. "No! No, not me! I . . . I thought this was my buddy's house—"

Kehlirik snarled down at the man, causing him to yelp in terror again. "I'm not stupid," I informed my intruder. "Don't insult me again."

The man began to shake with sobs. "OhGodohGod, pplease don't let it eat me! I'll never do it again, I swear. I just needed enough to buy a rock. Oh, God!"

I shifted my regard to the demon. Kehlirik rumbled low in his throat, returning my gaze with eyes full of intelligence and cunning. I was ridiculously tempted to screw with my burglar and ask the demon if he was hungry, but I wasn't completely sure that Kehlirik would realize I was kidding. I was fairly positive that demons had no taste for human flesh, but it was probably best to not test the issue. There were plenty of unknowns when it came to demons.

I stood, shaking a slight cramp out of my leg. I really couldn't allow the demon to kill him. The guy was a drug addict and probably had a rap sheet a mile long, but I doubted that any of his offenses were of the capital variety—most likely nothing more than theft to support his habit. Besides, I was supposed to be one of the good guys.

Oh, well. There was no doubt that he was going to babble about what he saw. I would just have to trust that no one would believe any ravings he might have about winged monsters.

Besides, it was his own damn fault that he'd picked my house to break into, on a night that I'd summoned a demon.

A deliciously wicked compromise occurred to me. "Reyza, I do not wish this one slain, but perhaps you could do me a service."

The demon's eyes glowed a ruddy orange in the dim light of my living room. "Name your desire, summoner."

With effort, I kept my face composed. "I would have him punished for his intrusion, yet he must be returned to me physically unharmed."

The demon inclined his head gravely, but I was fairly sure I could see amusement in his eyes. "It will be done, summoner."

I barely had time to step out of the demon's way before he snatched up the pathetic man and bounded out the front door. I followed, pausing just long enough to grab my cell phone and handcuffs off my desk. I exited onto my porch just in time to see Kehlirik leap into the air with my erstwhile intruder firmly grasped in clawed hands.

I let out a snicker and sat on the front step. I listened as the panicked screams faded into the night sky, then dialed the number for the St. Long Parish Sheriff's Office.

"Hi, this is Detective Kara Gillian with the PD," I said when the dispatcher answered. "Could you please send a patrol unit to my home address? I have a -ten—fifteen on a 62R here." A -10—15 was an arrest, and a 62R was a burglary. Though I worked for the Beaulac Police Department, I lived outside the city limits, which meant that if something criminal happened at my house, it was sheriff's office jurisdiction.

"A 62R . . . Kara, someone broke into your house? Way out there?"

I recognized the woman's voice as a dispatcher who'd previously worked with the PD. Slightly pudgy with harshly dyed red hair, but I couldn't remember the woman's name to save my life. "Yeah, but all he managed to do was break a window by the door."

The dispatcher laughed. "Bad choice of houses!"

You have no idea, I thought. "No kidding," I said instead. "Good thing the noise woke me up."

"All right, I'll get a unit out there."

I set the phone down and clasped my hands lightly around my knees, looking up at the moon that shone full through the barest sheen of clouds. A languid breeze twined through the dark trees, rustling needles and bringing a deep, rich scent of earth and pine to me. I hugged myself against the slight chill, listening to the faint buzz of a mosquito and the song of a nearby cricket. A satisfied peace stole through me, an -almost—Pavlovian response to my environment. I'd lived in this house my entire life—with the exception of one terrible month after my father was killed by a drunk driver. I was eleven and had been placed in foster care until my aunt Tessa could return from Japan to take over as my legal guardian. My mother had passed away three years before that, from ovarian cancer that had gone undetected until it was far too late, and there were no other relatives—or even close friends—to take me in, a fact that had not pleased my aunt at the time, especially since the one time she'd met me before I'd been in diapers. But she'd done what she could to lessen the upheaval for me, despite her reluctance to take on the enormous responsibility of raising a preteen kid. She'd moved into this house with me instead of yanking me out of the only home I'd ever known, knowing that in time I would find more comfort than grief here.

I was nearly thirty now and finally beginning to realize just how important that comfort was to me. I loved it out here, far from town and other houses. I lived on a -seldom—traveled highway, my driveway was long and winding, and the nearest neighbor was well over a mile away.

It was the perfect house for someone who required privacy.

And it wasn't until I was fifteen that I'd learned my aunt's ulterior motive for the decision to raise me in this house. My aunt Tessa was a summoner of demons, and the basement of this house was an ideal place for a summoning chamber.

A few minutes later, the demon swooped down to land neatly in front of me, dangling his -ashen—faced prisoner by one ankle. "I believe he is suitably cowed."

Too bad I couldn't give this treatment to all my arrestees. We'd probably have fewer repeat offenders, I thought as I handcuffed the unresisting man. I left him whimpering softly on the porch with his hands cuffed behind his back, then returned my attention to the demon. "My thanks again, Kehlirik."

The demon slowly sank into a crouch. "Summoner, this was the first time you called a reyza unaided, yes?"

I gave a wary nod. Had I screwed something up?

He snorted, flaring his nostrils. "I did not think that you called me for the sole purpose of thwarting an intrusion. Had you another desire for this summoning?"

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