

RACHEL CAINE

NY TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

WEATHER WARDEN: CLAIMED

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I didn't know Djinn could sleep -- not the way humans did. That was a new thought, and a very pleasant one ... after all, most of my encounters with David, from the moment I'd spun off the road and nearly run him down, had been on the order of cars speeding along on parallel routes, only to veer off in the curves.

But David did sleep. And that meant I could not only make love with David -- which was a rare and fascinating thrill -- but I could do the human thing too, curled against his smoldering warmth, both of us exhausted from a long day of driving as we headed for Las Vegas, and our latest life-threatening crisis.

We were sleeping off our worries in a kind of nice roadside motel, one of the bigger chains that promised free in-room wireless internet (not that I had a computer with me) and free movies (though not the ones that featured titles like *Hot Atlanta Nights*, which was disappointing). On the plus side, the motel had little baskets with free skin care and hair products. So when I'd gone to bed, I'd smelled clean and floral and felt almost normal.

My peaceful dreams suddenly changed to dreams that involved spontaneous human combustion, and as I opened my eyes I realized it wasn't just the bad take-out Chinese we'd had. David's skin had suddenly become unbearably hot -- a ruddy bronze, and it was too hot to touch, as if he'd just rolled out of a blast furnace.

He jackknifed upright, breathing fast. I sat up too, slowly, staring at him in profile. I could see steam rising off of his cheekbones, out of his metallic auburn hair. I smelled scorching cotton, as somebody had walked off with an iron left sizzling on a pair of sheets. There goes the security deposit, I thought crazily, though I was scared half to death. It's not my fault. That's just how my mind works sometimes.

"David?" I asked. He turned his head and met my eyes, and for a chilling, weird second, he looked right through me. I had no idea what he saw for that eternity, but whatever it was, it must have been horrible. "David, it's me. Joanne ...?" He still didn't seem to hear me.

"David!"

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The spell broke, and his eyes widened, their molten color dying back to a calmer brown. His skin cooled and took on merely human hues, but when I touched him he was still very warm. Fever hot.

And then he grabbed me and held me, stroking my hair, running his hand down my back. Rocking me, holding me tight against him as if he was deathly afraid that I'd slip away.

"What?" Not that I minded this, not at all. I relaxed against him, and felt him relax a bit, too. Animal comforts. "What happened?"

His voice was soft, nearly inaudible. "Nothing."

Ah, the famous, reflexive denial. He was good at it. "Wow, nothing looks a whole lot scarier than I'd imagined it would. Being, you know, nothing and all."

He buried his face in the curve of my neck, and I felt his lips press warm against my skin. "It's nothing for you to worry about," he finally said. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you. Please, you need rest. Go back to sleep."

He lowered me to the sheets again, smiling, and except for the faint trace of darkness and fear in those luminous eyes I might have forgotten all about it. He had ways of making me forget, and I didn't think they had anything to do with the supernatural. Well, not that much to do with it. He was just ... yeah.

But he didn't follow through with the expert seduction I'd expected, if he'd even been considering it. He just settled down, rolled over on his side and stared at me. I stared back. Seemed like the thing to do, and besides, I was wide awake now. Over his shoulder I saw the green glow of the motel room clock. 4:25 in the morning. We had plenty of time to drift off again, and he was right, I did desperately need it ... but somehow, I knew restful sleep was going to elude me. Again.

"Tell me about your nightmare," I said.

"I don't dream," he lied.

"Wow," I said, "then that must have been a totally new experience for you, having a

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nightmare. Which you did."

He reached out and traced a warm finger down the cool skin of my shoulder, down my arm. Drawing shivers. "I'm not human, you can't psychoanalyze me."

"Hey, I'm not making any guarantees of therapy here, and anyway I do better with weather than people. But -- I want to know. And I think you need to talk about it."

His eyes flickered, and being Djinn, that wasn't descriptive -- they really did flicker, like flames. Complete with orange sparks. His hand spread out on my arm, closed around my wrist. David made me feel small and fragile, two things I was not. Paradoxically, he also made me feel safe, although I could feel the breathtaking strength in him. His fingers lightly stroke the inside of my wrist, where I knew he could feel the quickening of my pulse.

"You could make me talk," he said. I thought he meant in the usual way, with bribes of hot sweet kisses and skin, but he continued without looking up at me again. "You can make me do anything, if you ask it three times."

It sounded casual. It wasn't. And it wasn't a joke. He was right -- I could make him talk, not from any threat or physical violence, but from the power I held over him.

The power of the Djinn, and the bottle to which he was enslaved. I owned David, body and soul.

The realization swept over me, leaving me chilled, and I felt somehow dirty. Small, cheap, and dirty. Some Wardens might have gotten off on it -- no, I knew very well some did -- but owning someone so amazing, having the power to force him to do things that would hurt him, maybe kill him -- it was too much. Too much power for anyone to have.

"I wouldn't do that to you," I said. He had enough strength to shatter me just by closing his hand. It wouldn't even take an effort. And yet I knew that he wouldn't do it. Couldn't. Not because of the bottle, or the master-Djinn bond, but because of something else, something deeper.

Something given to me freely, not taken by force.

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He rolled over on his back, and stared at the dimly seen ceiling. Though it was a better motel room than some we'd shared, it was still just an anonymous box with industrial-grade carpet, stiff sheets, and a creaking box spring. He deserved better than this, I thought. Someone so fine deserved better.

"You never asked me how I became Bad Bob's Djinn," he said.

I stopped breathing for a second, because this was a subject that we'd taken care to skirt these last few weeks, since I'd found out that he was a Djinn, and more than that, a Djinn who'd once held me down and helped feed me a Demon at the order of his one-time master, Bad Bob Biringanine.

Not the kind of introduction you forget, really. I'd been hoping we never had to go there again, because it was traumatic not just for him, but for me.

I kept my voice neutral. "Is that what the nightmare was about?"

"Yes."

"Bad?"

"I was hurting you."

"You were -- "

David shut his eyes, as if he wanted to shut me out, and the rest of the world too. "He could have made me do anything, you know that. Hurt you. Humiliate you. Slaughter you. We do what we're told, that's our protection and our curse. We're not to blame, but we can't forget a single moment of it, either."

I knew what he was talking about, knew it all too well. I'd been through it, as a temporary Djinn. I'd seen firsthand how awful that enslavement could be, to a corrupted soul. I put my hand on his chest, and his fingers closed over mine.

"I was stupid," he continued. "When he claimed me, I couldn't believe it. He couldn't have known what I was -- but he did. Somehow, he knew. He didn't need me; he handed me off

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as an amusement to his -- favorite."

His favorite. Yvette Prentiss. Talk about a corrupted soul. "Amusement," I repeated, faintly. Sick with the possibilities.

"Her word, not mine. She was careful with me, she knew that if she made a mistake I'd have ripped her apart, and besides, Bad Bob made it clear she couldn't -- she had to return me in a year. But a year -- even for a Djinn as old as I am, a year can be an eternity. I -- did things. Things I can't -- "

I'd asked him to talk, and now I wished he would stop; it made me heartsick to hear the pain in his voice. I put my head on his chest, draping my hair over him in a warm blanket. Trying, without words, to assure him that it wouldn't happen again. That I wouldn't let it happen.

But I couldn't guarantee that, I never could. If I freed him, he was still subject to claiming by anyone who discovered his true nature, so long as they knew how to manage it. He was always, ever, vulnerable.

"Jo," he said. His fingers stroked through my hair. "I want you to understand what I've done. I've killed. I've tortured. I did terrible things, even before I helped Bad Bob put the Demon Mark in you. I'm not -- "

"You're not responsible for what other people forced you to do," I said. "First law of rape victims. You're not responsible, David."

His fingers went still.

"That's right," I said. "Anyone who forces their Djinn to do something against their will, against their nature, that's a kind of rape, whether it's physical sex or torturing prisoners or killing people. It's sick, it's horrible, and I wish I could stop it. I would stop it. You have to believe that."

His lips touched the top of my head, a kiss of benediction. "I do believe it," he said. "But most Wardens will argue that sometimes unpleasant things must be done for the greater good."

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"Every bad thing wears its happy face for public viewing ... the greater good is neither, David, especially if it's composed of small, lesser evils." I took a deep breath. "I want to let you go."

"I know."

"I'm going to let you go."

"I know."

"And -- you can leave then. If you want to leave."

"I know." As if the Rule of Three worked on the Djinn side, as well as the human side, I felt compelled to stop talking at that point. Mostly, I felt compelled to kiss him, long and slow, our bodies melding together, curves and hollows, nerves whispering their pleasure and agreement at every brush. I felt his hands slide in different directions down my back -- one up, to cradle my head as the kiss deepened, and one down. I liked down. Down had my full approval.

"Jo." He pulled back a little, just a little, enough to allow words to escape between our lips. "Don't release me. Not yet. I need to see you through this, and I can protect you better this way, you know that."

Right in that moment, I had the impulse to reach out for the bottle imprisoning his soul and smash it into a million glittering pieces against the far wall. Someone so fine deserved better.

He deserved so much better than me.

I was weak, I was human, I was going to hurt him even though I wouldn't mean it. I'd disappoint him. I'd say stupid things and make bad decisions and fail to consider what he might want or need, and that was just for openers.

I opened my mouth to tell him that, but instead what came out was, "I love you."

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David made a wordless sound deep in his throat and kissed me again, ardently, igniting the warmth already cascading through me into a full-blown conflagration. I could feel the frantic need in him, the need to make me his. To keep me, the way that the bottle kept him.

But whether he knew it or not, he already had my soul.

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