

No Love Lost

a Weather Warden short story by Rachel Caine

This story is set at the time period of Ill Wind.

She was made of light, and silk, and he could not stop touching her. Fingertips traveling over the delicate arch of her collarbone, as fine as a bird's wing. Skimming over the curve of her shoulder to trace the long, elegant line of her arm.

She stopped. She stopped for me. It was an odd source of wonder to him. She could have waved him aside and pulled her car back on the road. She could have simply asked if he was all right, and left him in her dust once she was sure he wasn't hurt.

But she'd asked him, Need a ride?, and he had made a choice. The kind of choice that altered the course of his life, of hers, of everything they would ever touch.

He had chosen to love. She wouldn't know it yet -- and maybe she would never know it -- but what he had done was irrevocable. Possibly even unforgivable.

She murmured in her sleep, arching into his warmth. She'd intended some great sexual adventure out of this -- for her, it had been wildly daring, to pick up a stranger on the road and end up at a motel with him. An insane level of trust that fascinated him. He could see her past, see that she was a sexual creature, but not ... not so reckless. Never so reckless in her life.

It was the fear that had made her reach out for him. The truth was, she was so soul-deep frightened of what lay ahead of her on the road that he'd felt the ache of it rising off of her skin, and he was not yet such a heartless bastard that he could ignore that kind of pain.

So he'd trailed his fingers over her body, spreading warmth and peace, and she had relaxed in his arms. Asleep, and breathtakingly trusting.

David, having granted oblivion to her, stayed awake. Djinn could sleep -- needed to sleep, sometimes -- but there was something so undefended about her that he felt compelled to watch. The normally active face was so still, so peaceful. Her lips were slightly parted, and her dark hair had slipped forward across one smooth cheek. He let his eyes travel down the elegant column of her throat to the arch of her shoulder. He lingered over his appraisal, moving the sheet in slow increments to bare more of her lovely matte-tan skin. He supposed it was intrusive, but he wanted -- needed -- to burn her into his memory, perfect in this moment. Joanne burrowed closer to him in slow dreaming movements. He placed a light, warm kiss on her shoulder, and as he did, he felt the unmistakable twinge of another Djinn seeking his attention.

No, he replied. The tug came again, very strongly. No, I said. Go away.

This time it was painful, a yank as if a piece of him had been torn away. Careful not to wake Joanne, he got up and walked into the motel bathroom.

He shut the door and put his back against it, and said, "I don't like to be summoned."

His visitor was sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, looking disdainfully around; she tilted her head up to consider him, cornrows of beads clacking. Rahel was blindingly bright against the plain white tiles -- neon-green, today -- and she raised her eyebrows and nodded at what he was wearing.

Which was nothing. Without comment, he formed clothing: a pair of blue jeans and an open flannel shirt.

She barely paused. "Why do you do this?"

"Why is what I do any of your business, Rahel?"

"You had your freedom. You had the chance to break free of these humans and take your rightful place, and

instead I find you here, mating with that ... creature."

"Ah. You see, that's what happens when you don't spy on the entire proceedings -- I haven't mated with her, I've only slept with her, which despite all the popular misconceptions doesn't have to include sex. Now, is that all? Because I'd like to go back to bed. There might be sex later."

"You risk being claimed again, and for what? Satisfying your lust for human touch?" Rahel flashed across the room, inhumanly fast, and pressed against him. Her clothes melted away, and he had to admit, Rahel, in naked female form, was as lovely and desirable as any he'd ever seen. "I can see to that."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him, slow and warm. She banished his clothes again with a pulse of will. He allowed it. Allowed her to play out the moment to its logical end, when she pushed away and smiled at him, licking her damp lips. He deliberately scanned her, from her strong fine shoulders to the firm dark-chocolate slopes of her breasts, and then continuing. A tight waist, flaring to hourglass hips. Long, beautiful legs.

"You see? You can slake that lust with me. Flesh is easy."

He pulled his gaze up from contemplating her perfect, high-arched feet. "Is it? Your best efforts aren't having much of an effect, from a strictly hydraulic standpoint."

She looked temporarily amazed, and then laughed. "As if you don't control every aspect of your flesh. But I have not tried. Shall I?"

"Enough, Rahel." He pushed her off, and formed his clothes again. "This isn't about lust."

"I can feel it coiling off of you, dear one. Don't lie, it doesn't become you."

"This is about love, and that's something you know nothing about."

"Ahhhhhhhhhh." Rahel dragged it out into a low rumble in her throat, and moved back to perch on the closed toilet seat. Instead of clothes, she formed a soft gold robe that fell away from her knees to drape and frame her bare legs. "Yes, you are the expert in human love, all of us agree. So many human lovers. Does she know? Can she even guess how old you are? Or what you've seen and done?"

"No."

"You can amuse yourself with the lower creatures as you choose, David, but playtime must end. Jonathan summoned you, and you did not answer. That is not acceptable."

He shrugged. "If Jonathan's so angry, he ought to come himself."

"You were summoned."

David gestured around -- at the bathroom, the motel, the situation. "And yet ... I'm still here. If Jonathan wants me, he can come and get me. Otherwise, I'll thank you to tell him, once again, to get the hell out of my life."

"Ages have gone by since your stupid quarrel. Can't you let it go?"

"I have. He hasn't. I'm not going to see him until I get some assurance he's not going to hold a grudge."

She studied him with a puzzled frown. "Do you not understand that he needs you?"

David shook his head, and remembered so many things, so many places. "I haven't turned my back on him, and I never will, but I'm not like him. I can't shut myself up in a bubble."

"No indeed. Instead, you wallow in mud," she said. "Foul yourself with rotting flesh. This woman is nothing. A billion souls like her people overcrowd this earth, and billions more went before her. There is nothing special in her, except you imagine it to be so."

"No," he said softly, and his eyes met her burning golden gaze. He saw her falter. "She is unique. And if you ever use that tone when you talk to me again, Rahel, you'll regret it for eternity. You know I mean it."

Silence. The water in the sink dripped a slow, crystal rhythm. Neither of them breathed, or needed to.

Rahel's lips slid into a wide, wicked smile. "Behold, the great lover. Don't be a fool, David. This will last some brief time. A week, a year, a human lifetime. And then you will be with us again, and you don't want to burn your boats like that fool at Troy, do you?"

"I might," he said. "This time, I just might."

She watched him with a wary light in her golden eyes, as if he had done something unexpected. Something new. He supposed that after so many years of acquaintance between them, that was enough to merit a pause.

When she spoke again, she chose her words and her tone more carefully. "I -- know that you fall in love easily, David. In a Djinn, that is a terrible flaw." Rahel, he realized, wasn't trying to be catty-cruel; she was simply speaking the truth as she saw it. "You must not do this. Not now. Not with her."

"Yes. Now. With her."

"Can you not see that she carries the Mark?"

"Of course I know. I helped infect her, and then she helped free me. I can promise you, I'm not going into this blind, or stupid, or any of the things you assume."

"I see. And what would you have me tell Jonathan?"

"Tell Jonathan -- tell him that I can't come back. It isn't time."

She took in a breath, let it out, and slowly nodded. She stood up, adjusting the folds of the robe with sweeps of her hands, and it flowed into a long-jacketed suit of brilliant yellow. She blew on her fingernails, and they bloomed with the same luminous color.

"I will tell him," she said. "He won't be happy."

"Then he can come here and tell me himself."

She cocked her head to the side, looking at him. "Oh, my dear one. You don't want that."

He took her hands in his, and kissed them with formal grace. "I do," he said. "And deep down, I think you do, too. It's time somebody kicked his ass out of its complacency."

She laughed and patted his cheek, not gently. Tiger play. On a human, it would have left marks.

"I hope she enjoys what you offer," she said. "Someday, perhaps you will offer it to me."

She turned, and walked into the wall. Showy, and unnecessarily complicated for an exit, but Rahel did like to leave an impression. David sighed and leaned against the bathroom door, eyes closed. Memories racing too fast to catch, thousands of years of experiences and regrets and triumphs and tragedies. No love lost between them. He'd always found that a very curious expression. Love was always lost, eventually. Rahel was right about that.

He felt the tug of Jonathan's impatience again. "No," he said, out loud. "Not this time."

This time, he would prove them all wrong.

No love lost, after all.