

Previously...

My name is Joanne Baldwin, and in case you haven't been keeping up with current events, we're in big trouble. The world, I mean. As for me, I've been in trouble since...well, always...but this is big. The Wardens – the folks who are supposed to be protecting all of you from the dangers of raging fires, floods, earthquakes, and natural disasters of all kinds – have been compromised. Slowly but surely, they've lost their way and become corrupt and ineffective.

I used to be one of them, until I acquired a Demon Mark and fell in love with a Djinn, but that's another story altogether (*Ill Wind*, actually, if you're taking notes). The point is that now, the Djinn – who should be the allies of the Wardens – aren't playing by the rules that have held for millennia. A Djinn named Jonathan set up those rules, and now that Jonathan's gone, all bets are off.

And the Djinn's new leader? My lover, David.

What that bodes for a stable relationship is still up in the air, but confidentially? I'm worried.

The human race has one chance to keep its place at the top of the food chain: make peace with the Djinn, and that means somehow, some way, making peace with the Earth itself. Which ain't gonna be easy, because Mother Nature is pissed off.

And apparently, I may be the only one able to do something about it.

Lucky me...

Chapter One

I was thinking that the Wardens needed a new motto. The old one, the one on the seals on my diploma, was *Defensor Hominem*, Latin for ‘Defender of Mankind,’ but sometime in the past twenty-four hours, I’d become convinced that I had a more appropriate motto: *We’re So Screwed*.

Yeah, that pretty much covered it.

‘Duck!’ I yelled as another piece of debris came flying towards us, and grabbed for whatever order I could manage in the chaos of the weather around us. Not the easiest thing in the world, considering that the whole eastern seaboard’s system had been destabilised by a gigantic killer supernatural storm – now mysteriously vanquished, through no doing of mine – and all kinds of random, unpleasant, potentially fatal problems were presenting themselves.

Currently, those included a rather large and very aggressive tornado ploughing its way across some

unoccupied farmland and tossing pieces of broken fence ahead of it like shrapnel.

Cherise – my travelling companion, mainly because she had a kick-ass fast Mustang and I needed wheels – squeaked and hit the dirt, covering her pretty blond head with both hands. I remained standing. It wasn't heroism, exactly, more that I didn't want to dirty up what remained of my clothes. I think about things like that during the more garden-variety apocalypses.

This is what happens when someone like me – a Weather Warden – stops for a bathroom break in the middle of a crisis. And dammit, I hadn't even gotten bladder relief out of it. I had a very personal reason to hold my ground: the tornado was threatening to flatten the only roadside public restroom in forty miles.

I reached out for the wind currents and grabbed hold of the ones that would do me the most good. A sudden gust of wind, generated by a big push of heat in the right area, deflected an oncoming piece of fencepost – a nice big chunk of jagged wood, the size of a fire hydrant – off to the side, where it smacked into an unlucky wind-lashed tree, which it uprooted with a crash. Dirt flew, adding to the general chaos and mayhem.

I studied the tornado, ignoring gusts that tried to push me over; I was standing in a bubble of more or less calm air, but the wind was getting through in fits and spurts. Whatever good hair day I'd been

having was a distant memory. We were into the scary fright-wig territory now.

Yes, I worry about things like hair, too. Probably more than I worry about world peace, mainly because at least I can usually control my hair.

Unable to do anything about my ruined look, I focused on the tornado. They're relatively fragile things, for all the scary woo-woo attitude and screaming freight-train soundtrack. Oh, they're terrifying enough if you don't have the power to do anything about them, but luckily, I was well-equipped for this particular challenge. The twister reeled like a drunken top, right, then left, and headed straight for me with fresh enthusiasm, chewing up crops as it went. I hate it when they come straight for me. What did I ever do to them?

Cherise looked up through the gate of her fingers and shrieked, then went back to hiding her eyes. I ignored her and let myself slowly slide out of my body and up into that strange state – partly mental, partly physical, all weird – that the Wardens refer to as the aetheric plane.

It was only one of several planes of existence, but it was the highest one available to me as a human being (even one with, finally, a working set of weather powers). The world took on strange neon swirls, candy-coloured sparks, and currents of power. The landscape altered around me into unknown territory.

The tornado was a glittering silver funnel, physics in its most potentially deadly form and given an instinctive menace, like a baby cobra. Fully as deadly as the more mature version, but with less experience. I had to step in before it learnt where and how to strike.

I waited another few seconds, reading the patterns, then reached deep inside of the eye of the tornado and rapidly cooled the air into a heavy, sluggish mass. The energy exchange bled off in the form of a sudden burst of cable-thick lightning that snapped from the low-hanging clouds, and the wall of the tornado expanded and lost its coherence. In seconds, it was a confused mass of wind, moving too slowly to form much of a threat. It dropped its load of debris and wandered off at an angle, swirling petulantly.

‘OK,’ I said to Cherise as I sank back into my body and the comfortable solidity of three-dimensional space. ‘You can get up now. Show’s over. First one to the bathroom uses all the toilet paper.’

She didn’t seem inclined to believe me. I waited a few seconds, then reached down and grabbed her elbow to haul her upright. She looked around, breathless.

‘Wow,’ she said. ‘OK, that was intense.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. The hurricane was intense. This was just annoying.’

‘Jo, trust me on this one: Everything about

what's happened since I met you is intense. Does this happen to you a lot?'

'You'd be surprised,' I sighed. 'Seriously. Bathroom, or you're going to be buying new seats for the Mustang.'

We dashed off for the grubby-looking toilets. They were predictably scary, but I didn't care. It was a very happy few minutes, and if you've ever been stuck on the road without bathroom facilities for several hundred miles, you'll know what I mean.

We arrived back at the car at the same time. I held out my hand for the car keys, and a silent battle of wills ensued, but then Cherise had been driving the last stretch and what was she going to do? Argue with a woman who'd just stopped a tornado in its tracks? She dug them out of the pocket of her low-rise jeans and tossed them over.

'I'll try to keep us in the clear from now on,' I said.

'I'd tell you not to scratch the paint, but—' Cherise rolled her eyes. Yeah, the hurricane and ensuing sand blasting had pretty much taken care of ruining the shiny finish. But the Mustang still ran, and that was the important thing.

While I'd been asleep, she'd put the top up on the car – sensible, with the intermittent rain – but I pressed the buttons to fold it back again. I wanted as much of a 360-degree view of the sky and surroundings as I could get. My version of a Doppler system.

I eased into the comfy seat of the Mustang – candy-apple red, a yummy little treat of a car, or at least it had been before I’d gotten hold of it – and adjusted the seat for my longer legs as Cherise slid into my vacated shotgun position. Not that we had a shotgun. Though thanks to recent events, I’d have been more comfortable if we had some kind of arsenal beyond our wits, good looks, and a turbocharged engine.

I had my work cut out for me as we eased back into gear and tore at top speed along I-295. The storm systems just kept piling up – there was a new supercell forming off the low-pressure system in Georgia, and it was bound to head our way. That wasn’t good physics, but it was the way my generally crappy luck ran these days.

‘That was a good trick with the tornado, Mom,’ said a voice from the backseat. Formal, female, and a little awkward. I jumped in surprise, and then I focused on a face in the rearview mirror that was eerily similar to my own, except for the eyes. Mine were plain blue. The ones staring back at me were an interesting shade of ruddy gold – I don’t mean amber; amber’s a human colour. This was amber on acid. Amber taken up to insane saturation levels.

In short, the eyes were Djinn. And they belonged to my daughter.

They widened. ‘Did I frighten you?’

‘Frighten?’ I shot back. ‘Why should I be frightened if somebody pops out of nowhere into the backseat of my car? Let’s see, half the Djinn are trying to kill the Wardens, and at least some of the Wardens are infected with Demon Marks, and let’s not forget the weather’s all screwed up...oh, and the Earth’s about to wake up and destroy humankind. You know what? Being a little frightened is a pretty laid-back response, all things considered, and yeah, next time? Knock.’

She smiled. Tentatively, as if she was still translating all of that into Djinn-speak. I felt an immediate stab of guilt; the poor kid had been alive for all of not-even-a-day. She seemed to lack the one characteristic that was common among all the Djinn I’d ever met: smugness. I’d thought it came coded in Djinn DNA, along with pretty eyes and the cool ability to pop in and out of existence at will.

‘Although,’ Imara ventured, ‘you could have done it more efficiently. Do you want me to show you how?’

‘Not right now,’ I managed to say between gritted teeth. ‘Any guidance you can offer beyond second-guessing my lifesaving abilities?’

She looked injured. So I wasn’t good at this mom thing. I was still trying to get my head around the idea that the child I had carried inside me – and it wasn’t a normal pregnancy, by any stretch of the imagination – had all of a sudden sprung up fully

adult, with her own set of emotions unrelated to my own.

‘Sorry,’ I said, more softly. ‘Imara, do you know anything? Anything about—’ *David, oh God, I’m afraid for you. And I miss you.* ‘—about your father?’

She shook her head, holding my eyes in the mirror. Djinn, unlike human beings, spring out of death, not life. The greater the death, the greater the Djinn – that’s the rule. Djinn don’t like to acknowledge that a lot of them have very human histories behind them, but it’s an indisputable fact. David – Djinn and lover and father of my child – had told me months ago that in order for our child to be born, it would mean he had to die. That was the normal order of things, in the Djinn world.

Only something strange had happened, and another death – a greater death – had stepped in to give my child life. David was still alive.

Just not himself, exactly. He’d become... different.

‘Mom,’ Imara said. ‘Are you all right?’ She waved a graceful hand in front of my face, which I impatiently swatted away and focused back on my driving. ‘I apologise,’ she said, and withdrew back into a dignified sitting position. ‘I thought you were in some kind of distress.’

I can’t describe how it feels to hear that word. *Mom.* Oh, I’d gotten comfortable with the idea of

being pregnant, but being a mother was a whole different thing – especially mother of a grown young woman who dressed better than I did. I consoled myself that she wore couture because she was Djinn, and able to conjure up whatever clothes amused her, and plus she hadn't been through a hurricane. And a tornado. And a *very* long drive.

'I was thinking about your father,' I said. Which was an admission of distress in itself.

'He's all right,' she said, leaning forward and laying her forearm across the top of my seat. 'I would know if he wasn't. I just don't know where he is or what he's doing.'

Cherise was watching all of this with bright, feverish eyes. I had no idea what she was making of it. Knowing Cherise, probably something very interesting.

'Should I go find out?' Imara asked hopefully.

'No!' I yelled, and grabbed her wrist. She looked startled. 'You stay put. I want you where I can keep my eye on you.'

She gave me a mutinous look. Why hadn't my own mother traded me in once I'd hit puberty? I remembered giving her loads of mutinous looks. It was hugely annoying from this side of the maternal fence.

'I'm serious,' I said. 'The last time we saw any of the other Djinn, they weren't in the best mood ever. I don't want you running into trouble. I can't bail

you out of it. Not against David.'

I tried to sound as if dealing with this, and with her, was all in a day's work. Probably didn't succeed, judging from the smile she gave me. It wasn't my smile. It was entirely her own, with a little lopsided quirk on one side.

'I'll stay,' she said. 'Besides, you may need me next time, if the weather gets worse.'

Cherise blurted out, 'Next time? Does there have to be a next time?'

'Not if I can help it,' I said firmly, and pressed a little more speed out of the accelerator. The cool, damp air streamed over my skin like the ghost of rain. I could have done with a more substantial sort of shower, the kind that came with shampoo and soap, but this did feel good. There was heavier weather up ahead, but we were in a clear area for the time being. I could arrange for it to stay with us, at least most of the way. 'Cherise, you'd better get some rest.' She needed it, poor thing. She'd been too crazed to sleep before, so I'd let her take over after we were a few hours out of Fort Lauderdale, and then again seven hours later. She'd barely closed her eyes since, and now she was starting to show the effects. Cherise was a perky, gorgeous thing, all tanned and toned in the best tradition of Florida beach bunnies, but there were telltale dark circles under her eyes. (She'd actually been a bikini model. And the 'fun and sun' girl back at the podunk,

fourth-rate television station that had employed us both in Florida. I didn't like remembering my job, but it hadn't involved a bikini. Except that once.)

Right on cue, Cherise yawned. 'How much longer?' she asked. Actually, she said, '*Ow uch onger?*' but I got the point.

'About another four hours,' I said. 'I'll wake you when we get close.'

She yawned again and wadded up a blue jean jacket to serve as a pillow against the window, and in less time than it took to whip past six billboards, she was sound asleep. I thought about turning on the radio, but I didn't want to wake her.

'So,' I said, and looked in the rearview mirror. My daughter met my gaze, lifting her eyebrows. There was something of David in the expression, and I felt a sad little stab of recognition and longing.

'So,' she replied. 'This is strange for you, isn't it?'

'Little bit, yeah.'

'Would it make it better if I told you it was strange for me, too?'

'It might,' I said. 'You're sure you can't tell what Dav – what your father's up to?'

Her eyes took on a distant glitter, just a second's worth, and then she shook her head. 'No. I can't tell. He's shut me out. They've all shut me out.' She sounded wistful. 'I think he did it for my protection. This way *she* can't get to me.'

She, meaning Mother Nature. The Earth. One very ticked-off planet, who was coming slowly out of an eons-long slumber and wondering blearily what the hell had happened with the human race while she wasn't looking. After all, in the tradition of surly teens everywhere, we'd taken the opportunity to throw loud parties and trash the place while she'd been out. It's not nice to fool Mother Nature. It's even worse to fool *with* her.

I focused back on Imara. 'So...you're not connected to the Earth? The way the rest are?'

She looked away, and after a few seconds I realised that she was embarrassed by what she was going to say. 'It's a little like hearing music coming from the car next to you – you can hear the bass notes, but you can't make out the tune. It's not all Father's doing. There's a lot of you in me, and it holds me back.' Her eyes flew back up to meet mine, stricken. 'I didn't mean—'

'I know what you mean,' I said. 'I'm a handicap.'

Even though I was, of course. I'd worked out fairly quickly that Imara wasn't fully Djinn... Right now, that was an advantage, with the other Djinn more or less susceptible to control by the waking Earth, and pretty much unreliable in the free-will department. But what did it mean for her, long-term? How would she be accepted by the other Djinn? And what would happen if – God forbid – she ever had to go up against them in a real battle?

I couldn't think about that. I couldn't stand to imagine her going up against someone like Ashan, who had the morals and kindness of a spider.

She was watching me steadily with those bright, inhuman eyes. I had a cold flash. 'Can you tell what I'm thinking?' I asked.

Her eyebrows rose. 'Will it make you angry if I say yes?'

'Yes.'

'No.'

'You're lying to me.'

'Why would I do that?'

'You really are David's child, you know that?'

She smiled. 'He really loves you, you know. I can feel that, too. It's the warmest thing in him, his love for you.'

'I thought you said he'd cut you off.'

'He has. But short of killing me, he can't cut me off completely.' She shrugged. 'He's my father.'

I felt my throat heat and tighten, and tears prickled my eyes. I swallowed and blinked and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. 'Right. So, am I doing the right thing here? Heading to New York?'

In the absence of any other ideas, I was heading for the relative safe haven of Warden Headquarters, where those of us who'd survived the last few days were sure to gather. All hell had broken loose among the Wardens, with wholesale mayhem from the normally compliant and subservient Djinn. I just

hoped that I wouldn't be coming back to find... nothing. The last thing I wanted was to be the last Warden standing, with the Earth waking up and Djinn running crazy. Granted, it would be exciting. It would just be a very short story, and a very ugly ending.

'I don't know if it's the right thing to do or not,' my daughter replied solemnly. 'I'm only a day old.'

Great. I had no idea whether I was doing the right thing, I had a smart-ass immortal kid, and Cherise for a wingman.

Yeah, this was going to end well. No doubt about it.