



Better Not Cry

H.A. Fowler

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<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Barbara Marshall

Cover Artist
April Martinez

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Chapter One

“Here comes Santa Claus! Here comes Santa Claus! Here comes Santa Claus!”

The sound of Jenna Waverly's five-year-old son singing the same line of his favorite Christmas song over and over ... and *over* again at the top of his lungs had a multi-faceted effect.

First, there was the natural human one—it was more than a little annoying, and she had to continually resist the urge to feed Bentley the next line for the sake of her own sanity. Second, it made her laugh. She adored her little guy with every ounce of her being, and the sight of him dancing around in circles, thrown a little off-balance by the overstuffed pants of his snow suit sent a wave of joy rushing through her that nothing else in the world could match. The only true happiness Jenna had ever found in her life was in being a mom.

But more staggering than both of those was the creeping sense of dread and sorrow that promised to overwhelm her in just a few short minutes—her first Christmas without Bent since the day he was born. In fact, it would be the first holiday she had spent alone since ... well, ever, that she could recall. After her parents died when she was eight, there had been Grandma and Grandpa Hibbard, and by the time they died, she had already been with...

She gritted her teeth and growled.

“I keep telling you, you should just have him whacked.”

Jenna shot a look at her next-door neighbor and only real adult friend, fantasy writer Shaz No-Last-Name-That-He-Ever-Used. He was handsome in a giant hobbit sort of way, with long, thick blonde hair almost as light as her own, pulled back in a tidy ponytail. A sharply trimmed mustache and beard framed his round face, and his big, brown eyes were lined with lashes so thick a supermodel would probably kill him on the street if she could take them.

Shaz was a surly, but sometimes helpful and amusing presence in her and Bent's life, with his oftentimes impractical advice and collection of fantasy toys worth millions, according to Shaz, that guaranteed Bent's worship of him for life. That alone made him a huge help. On those rare occasions when she needed a break, or had something to do that couldn't involve her son, her reclusive but fun neighbor was the perfect hero. Of course, at this particular moment, the only thing he was helping to do was make Bent spastic with his gift of chocolate covered cherries. Shaz leaned his substantial girth indolently against the front door frame, munching on the remainder and watching Jenna scramble around as she herded Bent and packed his things at the same time.

“Yeah, I was just going to call Tony Soprano after I got Bent ready to go,” she replied as her son once again slipped from her grasp and went rocketing across the apartment, still screaming his single-line carol. Jenna didn't think she would ever be able to stand the sound of “Here Comes Santa Claus” again.

“Wouldn't be the worst thing you've ever done. That honor belongs to this abomination.” Her neighbor made a vague gesture that encompassed the pile of luggage, sprinting Bentley, and Jenna's life in general.

“The custody agreement says that this is Leo's year. I don't get any say in the

matter.” She focused on putting the last of Bent's toys in the giant duffel at her feet.

Shaz snorted. “He's never bothered exercising it before. Why now?”

Jenna shook her head and made one last grab at Bent as his circuit brought the energetic monster close enough to reach. He squealed as she caught him up in her arms, tugged up his little shirt and planted a loud, wet raspberry on his round belly. She shot her neighbor a glare.

“No badmouthing the R-A-T B-A-S-T-A-R-D in front of B-E-N-T. 'Kay?”

“B-E-N-T!” Bent shrieked. “Here comes Santa Claus! Here comes Santa Claus! Here comes Santa Claus!”

Shaz grinned even as he backed away from the hyper kid and his flustered mom. “Aaaand on that note, I have a plane to catch.”

“Oh, sure. Pump the kid up and run. Some friend you are.”

“I live to serve,” he said with a chuckle, and leaned down to kiss first Jenna's cheek, then Bent's. “Merry Christmas, Munchkin Head. You too, Jen. Don't let the R-A-T B-A-S-T-A-R-D get you down. By the way, what are you planning to do with an entire week to yourself?”

Jenna crouched down, shutting Bent up by stuffing him into the jacket of his snowsuit and trying to focus on not letting the phantom of dread and sorrow hovering nearby catch up with her.

“Standard girl stuff: endless romantic comedy marathon, trashy books, lots of hot baths in my big new bathtub, sleeping late, eating take out, and drinking wine. Not necessarily in that order.”

“You shouldn't be alone, Jen. Are you sure you don't want to come to Minneapolis with me? We can do the movie marathon thing ... but no chick flicks. You'd love my family. All loud, fat, and brilliant, like me.”

She planted Bent back on the floor, and he immediately took off in his perpetual circles, singing his song again as she rose to look at her friend. They had known each other for two years—since the day he'd helped her and Bent move in—and he had never made even the slightest pass at her, but she had always thought he harbored unspoken feelings for her. There were little hints here and there: longing looks when he didn't think she would notice, along with constant presents—mostly for Bent, but for her as well. Bentley worshipped his buddy, who he affectionately titled “Shazam.”

And Jenna valued his friendship enough to let all the little signs pass without acknowledgement. “No thanks, Shaz. You were right. I don't get enough time for myself. I figure now is the perfect opportunity to do something about that.” At her friend's skeptical look, she added a tiny lie. “I'll be fine.”

Bent came running back. “Santa Claus comes tonight, Mommy!” he announced.

But it wasn't Santa Claus that appeared in the doorway behind Shaz. In fact, it was the legendary joy-bringer's polar opposite, both in looks and in character.

Leonard Bentley Waverly the third looked like every society girl's wet dream: six foot one of firm, gym-worked, and plastic surgeon chiseled muscle draped in the latest stylish designer whatever that his endless money could buy. He had broad shoulders that tapered into a tight waist, athletic, toned legs, and a smile that could blind a room full of nuns with lust. All topped off with a haircut and highlight job she knew cost more than her rent. Once upon a time, all that glitz had indeed blinded Jenna, and she had been forced to spend every day of the last five years regretting that weakness.

Right now, however, he was wearing an unattractive scowl as he stood toe-to-toe with Shaz, whom Leo had never approved of. Jenna made the mistake of telling her ex that her next door neighbor was a best-selling fantasy writer, and Leo had commenced to spend an hour ranting and raving insensibly about basement-dwelling Internet predators. It was one of many times she had hung up on the snob she had once thought was the love of her life.

Of course, neither her behavior nor her choice of friends had changed Leo's mind about canceling yet another visitation the following weekend. If Jenna hadn't believed so strongly in the importance of Bent having his father in his life, and needed the child support money that was Leo's only steady contribution to his son's life so badly, she would have long ago indulged her petty urge and taken him back to court to have his custody rights revoked once and for all.

The two men glared at each other.

"And just when we started hoping you really had dropped off the face of the planet," Shaz drawled.

"How's the diet, elf boy?" Leo shot back with a flick of his hand against Shaz's belly. Jenna could swear she heard her best friend growl in response.

"Okay. That's enough," Jenna interrupted, stepping between the two ... well, overgrown children, actually. She faced Shaz. "Shaz, you've got a plane to catch. Merry Christmas, and tell your mother I said hello and thank you for the invitation."

He blushed deeply when she kissed him on the cheek, and with one final dark look at her ex-husband, stepped out the door, calling a final, "Merry Christmas, Bentley Bam Bam!"

"BAM! BAM!" Bentley screamed as he came dashing into the room. "Ho ho HOOOOOO!"

Shaz left laughing. Jenna closed the door behind him and took a deep breath, preparing herself as much as possible to face the man she had once loved, and now despised, more than any other on this Earth.

Peace on Earth, good will toward men, she reminded herself over and over as she turned.

Leo was already occupied with greeting Bent and gathering up the luggage piled in the middle of the hallway. "You ready to go, pal?"

Bentley huddled nearby, hiding behind the coat rack, shy of this person he'd been told was his dad, but whom he had only seen maybe three or four times in the two years since Leo and Jenna had split. "You're not Santa Claus," the little boy complained.

From the mouths of babes.

"No, but I'm one of his East Coast affiliates. Wait'll you see what he left for you at my house." Leo rose, and his smile evaporated as he looked at Jenna. "He's only going for a week. Was it really necessary to pack everything he owns? He has plenty of toys at my house."

His "house" being the palatial six bedroom palace on the north side of the city, known not-so-affectionately in Jenna's working class neighborhood as "Posh End." It would no doubt be filled with food, music, and lights that the staff had worked diligently to prepare so that their employer could be too busy to bother enjoying them. So his shrieking harpy of a mother could totter around drunkenly, criticizing everything, and whatever high society bimbo Leo was banging at the moment could sit around looking

bored in an outfit that cost more than Jenna made in a year, pricing the art on the walls and planning her future divorce settlement.

"I didn't think children's things fit in with the décor," she said. "I mean, it's not like he's had to stay there before."

"Don't start, Jenna. I'm not in the mood for your shit today."

"Oh, I know, it's such an inconvenience to fulfill your responsibilities toward your son. Why the sudden interest? What, did you get a new girlfriend who likes kids?"

His handsome features collapsed into a truly unpleasant expression that made him look constipated. "You're still the same shrill, bitter shrew as always, I see."

"Shrew! I was perfectly happy and pleasant before I found out you were fu..." She cut herself off with a glance at her son, who now clutched her pants leg with one hand and had his other little fist stuffed in his mouth. His eyes, exactly the same deep green as his father's, were now wide with fear and confusion. She gently pried him free and gave him the most reassuring smile she could muster before looking up again. "You were the one having S-E-X with every female in a hundred mile radius."

"Whatever, Jenna. I'm not going through this with you again. Come on, Bent, let's get going." He swooped down and picked up the little bundle of outerwear, carefully tightening the hood and balancing the bags in his free hand. "Merry Christmas. See you next Wednesday."

And with that, he turned on his Timberland-clad heel and marched out the door, down the hall, and down the stairs without a backward glance. She could hear Bentley starting to sing again before they were even out of her sight. Already her friendly little guy was loosening up. Bent could get along with anyone, even his snake of a father.

Jenna shut the door, slid to her behind on the foyer floor, and wept.

* * * *

Jenna knew that the only way for her to get through the week was to strictly schedule every minute of the empty days. She had originally hoped to take on a few more shifts at work, but because pretty much every family who used the daycare center would be out of town for the holiday, her boss had decided to close entirely. That meant Jenna had even more lonely hours to fill until Bent and Shaz returned.

She scheduled herself only a single hour to wallow in her solitary misery. But she took full advantage of that time, indulging herself in a good, gut-wrenching crying jag that left her feeling both drained and cleansed. After her assigned mourning period was over, Jenna moved on to the next part of "Operation Christmas Survival"—a decadent dinner followed by gift-wrapping in front of the fire. In order to really treat herself, she bought her favorite pizza—pineapple and pepperoni—which she didn't get to eat very often because Bent hated it. She also bought a nice bottle of wine, something she'd given up when she first got pregnant with Bent and hadn't picked up since.

With Christmas music playing like a dirge and the sounds weighing down the already oppressive, unnaturally vacant air of her apartment, she couldn't imagine too many ways that she could make herself feel more miserable. Maybe curling up in bed for a week wasn't such a bad idea after all. It was certainly an activity that would suit her frame of mind.

No, no. She was an adult, a healthy, mostly-fulfilled single mom who just happened to be childless for a few days. How many mothers would kill or die for some alone time

like this? Time when nothing was expected of her, nothing was scheduled, and no one would make any demands on her. She didn't even have to work! This was a gift, not a curse! Why was she driving herself to a breakdown?

"I am going to have a good time, damn it!" she announced to her fat, longhaired gray cat, Dusty, who didn't even bother lifting his head to look at her, professional disinterest being his primary pastime after eating, sleeping, and shedding.

So she threw herself into dinner, wine, and wrapping with a single-minded focus usually reserved for delicate craft projects and the more elaborate of her novels. Her apartment looked like the North Pole had exploded inside it by the time she was done. Christmas was her and Bent's favorite holiday, a feeling that was reflected in the festive decorating scheme. Ornaments and holiday knick-knacks covered every available inch of space, from the green and red entwined garland lining the top of the walls to the hand-knit stockings with their names stitched in the furry cuffs hanging from the fireplace mantel. The *pièce de résistance* was a giant fir tree, far too big for the room. All eight feet of it was buried under a mishmash of Bent's homemade ornaments, paper chains, and popcorn strings plus the extensive collection of Hallmark keepsakes Jenna had been collecting since she was a kid, tied together with yet more garland, and enough lights to illuminate a small city.

There was even the new throw rug upon which her and Bent's presents were piled—a plush knit portraying a scene with Santa, Rudolph, Frosty the Snowman, and Mrs. Claus partying hearty before an only slightly larger mountain of toys than the one under the tree awaiting Bent's attention. Finally, the last present—a Tonka dump truck that made realistic "construction noises"—was wrapped, the pizza devoured, and the wine bottle all but empty. "Here Comes Santa Claus" came on the CD player, and Jenna burst into tears yet again.

So much for careful scheduling. She should have known she couldn't out-schedule loneliness and heartbreak.

How had her life gone so horribly wrong? All she had ever wanted was to be a wife and mother, to create the home that she had lost when she was small, and to love a child as she had only really been loved for such a short time. She'd thought she had everything—the handsome, successful husband, the beautiful home. And best of all, the bubbly, vivacious, wonderful person that was her son. But pretty much from the moment she and Leo had returned from their honeymoon, he was occupied with "business" most of the time—nights, weekends, and holidays included—and Jenna had been forced to face the fact that her dream life was a farce. She was just another one of Leo's pretty possessions to be ignored until she was needed to advance something on his agenda, be it business or social.

One of the sparkling decorations hanging from the very bottom bough of the tree caught her eye through the wavering veil of her tears, and Jenna reached out, compelled to touch its shimmering surface. It was a piece she didn't remember seeing before—a purple, winged elf carved of what looked and felt like ivory, warmed from the lights so that it almost felt alive in her hand. A strangely realistic figure, very masculine, with long hair, chiseled features, and wings shaped like those of a very elegant moth.

"I didn't think elves had wings," she muttered to it, mopping the tears from her face with her free hand. It looked like a character from one of Shaz's books, actually, and she wondered if maybe her friend and neighbor had smuggled this in as a joke. Jenna had a

secret weakness for fairy stories and romance novels, although confessing to either guilty pleasure made her blush. When Shaz found out her proclivities were so close to his life's work, he had teased her mercilessly, and he never passed up an opportunity to remind her that she was as geeky as he at heart.

Although Shaz was fairly well-off, the ornament still looked like sort of an expensive item for a joke. An intricate work of art rather than one of the action figures Shaz had displayed all over his apartment next door. Jenna turned the statue over and over again in her hands, oblivious to the tears still running down her face and dripping onto the smooth surface of the strange piece.

As she caressed it, appreciating its masculine beauty and remembering, on top of everything else, that she hadn't had sex in over two years, the statue started trembling in her hand. Startled, Jenna dropped it on the rug with a thunk and leapt to her feet. The statue kept moving, shuddering and shaking as if there was an earthquake, and then started making a tinkling sound like wind chimes tossed in a strong breeze. The pale lavender hue of the ivory deepened, turned wine grape purple, and began to twinkle, spark, and undulate like the statue was melting under a super charge of electricity.

Muddled by confusion, the wine, and her own depression, Jenna stared at the strange statue, which began to grow before her eyes, the tinkle of chimes expanding, growing ever louder until they were more reminiscent of cathedral bells tolling, echoing through the room and thundering in her ears. Maybe she had been watching too much CNN lately, or maybe it was just the wine, but her mind somehow glommed onto the notion that this was some kind of chemical bomb. She kicked the shuddering, peeling statue across the room and made a mad dash for the door, throwing it open and diving into the hallway like she'd seen action heroes do in the movies. The statue exploded behind her, and the ensuing concussion knocked her senseless for a moment, huddling at the base of one standard, apartment-building cream-colored wall with her arms over her head.

In the ringing silence of the next few minutes, Jenna crouched there, fully convinced she was going to die of some kind of horrible chemical poisoning at any moment. She was surprised that none of the building's sophisticated alarm systems or sprinklers had gone off, and none of her notoriously nosy neighbors from other floors or down the hall had come to look. After a while, a cloud of something reached her, and she cringed ... until she realized that it smelled a lot less like tear gas, and a lot more like ... lilac? Lavender? The scent of those and other assorted flowers permeated the atmosphere, like a garden had exploded in her living room instead of a bomb. Instead of smoke, there were purple and silver sparkles glittering in the air all around her. Who the hell had bombed her apartment, a confetti store? She crept back into the living room on tiptoe, hunched over and hugging the walls like she'd seen in the cop shows, then poked her head around the corner and found...

The statue had come to life. A tall, beautiful winged man with hair as shining black as a crow's wing and pale skin with a slight purple undertone stood next to her Christmas tree, looking a little put out.

"Wuh ... who...?" she stammered. "Oh my God! You're an elf!"

He grinned and she was half blinded by his incredible, unearthly beauty, the shining white of his teeth. His lean, muscular frame, dressed in nothing but a tiny, sparkling purple loincloth, left little about his apparently substantial masculine attributes to the imagination. And he was clearly happy to meet her.

“There is no such thing as elves,” he said, very matter-of-factly, as though he materialized in an explosion of sparkles and wildflower scent in strange women's living rooms every day. “I am Phinn of the Unseelie Court. I have come to answer your call.”

Chapter Two

“You ... you're what? Come to what?” Jenna gasped, and her knees started to give way. Before she could fall, however, the winged man was across the room and boosting her up with a gentle, but plenty big and strong, hand under her elbow. His strange skin was warm, his palm smooth, and she found herself wondering nonsensically what a faerie actually did for a living that allowed him such nice hands.

She looked up—way up, it seemed—into the faerie's strange, pale chartreuse eyes, and for a moment, was lost in their undulating, swirling, green-gold depths. His black moth wings shivered as she and the faerie stared at one another, and the air once again filled with the weird lavender-scented sparklies his arrival had coated the entire apartment with.

“Tell me what you are called, human woman,” he said, his voice soft but clearly brooking no refusal. A king faerie, Jenna thought to herself.

“J-Jenna. Waverly,” she managed to stammer.

He smiled, and it lit the room like he had turned on all the Christmas lights in the world. His wings fluttered, letting out another puff of fragrant glitter. Jenna took a deep, gulping breath of it in spite of her continuing shock, enjoying the pleasant scent and the way breathing it made her body warm and tingly all over.

“I am at your service, J-Jenna. Waverly. What do you desire?”

He said her name in exactly the same halting way Jenna had introduced herself, and it made her giggle. She felt weird all of a sudden, a little high, like she'd smoked something on top of drinking that bottle of wine.

Of course! The wine! Jenna had never been much of a drinker. She was probably having a bad reaction to the sulfates in the wine. Or maybe she'd passed out on the soft living room rug, and now she was dreaming a much better entertainment than she had planned for herself during Bent's long absence.

So be it, then! She stepped away from the faerie man's steadying embrace and took a good, long look at him. He was built, but lean instead of bulging, cut and tight in all the right places, like a swimmer. His broad shoulders tapered down into a nicely defined pair of pecs and set of lats, sloped into a flawless eight pack of abdominal muscles that would take any normal man forty billion crunches a day to achieve, and finally ended with the silly, glittery loincloth that hid his “details” from her inspection. Still, there was an impressive bulge showing through, which she couldn't help but take as a good sign. He had equally nice, powerful legs, in perfect proportion to the rest of his godlike form. And those *hands*... She had a thing for big hands. Even if they were purple.

When she was done looking her hallucination over, she brought her gaze back up to his stunning face. He grinned at her, flashing a perfect set of straight white teeth behind those kissable gray-purple lips. That smile sent a bolt of lust ripping through her that left her wet and panting with need like nothing she'd ever felt before. She had never considered herself a particularly passionate person. Sex was something she had done to make Leo happy and had given her Bent. Beyond that, she'd never had much interest.

But staring at this faerie sex god, breathing in his shimmering lust dust, there was nothing she wanted more in the universe than to throw him on the rug, tear off that

loincloth, and...

Well, Hell! It was *her* hallucination!

"I want to make love with you. Right now," she announced, more bold in her dream/delusion than she would ever dare to be in real life.

Phinn the Faerie's smile only grew. "Your wish is my desire." His wings folded and magickally vanished behind his broad shoulders, and he took a step toward her, reaching out as he closed the space she had put between them. He wrapped Jenna in his arms, stared deeply into her eyes long enough for her to feel like swooning again, and then claimed her lips in a fierce, passionate kiss.

Great googly moogly! His mouth was hot and sweet like candy, his tongue a weapon of pure desire as he slipped it between her lips. He tasted every inch of her mouth, stroked his tongue against hers, and then suckled her tongue, the whole dance weaving a spell that left her helpless to resist even if she had wanted to. Which she didn't.

He canted his head, cupped her face in his big, warm hands, and deepened his sensual assault even further, and Jenna felt something cool and controlled inside of her snap with an almost audible sound. She moaned into his delicious mouth and went on the offensive with her tongue and hands. God, it had been so long since she'd touched a man, and she had never touched one built like this one! Leo was handsome, athletic, and owner of a very nice body, but Phinn went so far beyond "nice," she finally understood why her teachers used to say it was a tired word.

She molded and traced his endless muscles with her fingertips as she nibbled and licked along his squared jaw, his corded throat, reveling in the way a man could be hard and soft all at once. Phinn's skin was warm silk to the touch ... and Jenna couldn't seem to get enough of touching it.

The gentle beginnings of their embrace quickly heated, the kissing and touching growing needier, hungrier, like someone throwing lighter fluid on a fire. Phinn made a low, animal noise in the back of his throat, bent down to slip his hands beneath the simple cotton sweater Jenna wore, and smoothed a blazing trail up the sides of her body, skimming over her breasts and collarbone before he tossed the hateful barrier away. Without hesitation, he turned the same concentration to sliding her soft yoga pants down her legs, leaving her in nothing but the plain green panties with red polka dots she had put on this morning, never thinking that anyone else would be seeing them. Why did she suddenly wish she were wearing something a little sexier?

Once she was all but bare before him, Phinn rose to his full height and went still, staring at her like he'd found some great treasure hidden under her clothing. Jenna blushed furiously, but resisted the urge to cover her nudity. He was only a hallucination, after all. Why be shy now after she had practically begged him to make love to her?

"I knew the human woman would be beautiful, but I did not imagine this." His mesmerizing eyes roamed over her like a physical caress, raising goosebumps over every inch of her skin and sending a pulse of pure need shooting from low in her belly to deep inside her vagina. It was just her imagination, of course, but she thought she could feel herself growing wetter by the moment as he stared at her. She had never felt desire anything even close to this before. "I have never seen such magnificence."

"You've ... never seen a naked woman before?"

He shook his head and let his hands take the place of his hungry eyes. He touched every inch of her slowly, reverently, like a blind man trying to see each minute detail of a

fine work of art. Her eyebrows, the slight hollow of her cheeks, the silken skin behind her ear and its delicate shell—she had no idea those could be erogenous zones. He lifted her arm and continued the trail over the hypersensitive skin beneath; at the crook of her elbow, inside her wrist, the palm of her trembling hand, and then did it all over again in reverse. He lingered at her breasts, tickling electric circles around her aching flesh, the circles growing smaller and smaller as he drew inward until he was teasing her turgid nipples with those magickal fingertips.

By the time he moved from her breasts to lavish equal attention on her ribcage, her belly button, the slope of her hipbones, and the edge of her panties, Jenna was no longer caressing him in return, but rather clinging to him for dear life. Was it possible to explode from too much pleasure? The feelings rushing through her made her wonder if she was about to find out.

“I would like to taste what is under this garment,” he whispered in her ear, his breathy voice hot, deep, and soft as his fingertip trailed a bare half inch under the elastic of her bikinis, making her shiver. Making her visualize clearly, perfectly, her lying on the rug, legs splayed, hands tangled in his wild black hair, writhing and sobbing beneath him as his tongue did even greater magick than his fingers had.

And then the vision was real. Phinn took the same erotic journey with his long, strong tongue, delving into and laving over her every nook and cranny, smoothing his hands down her sides, her legs as he divested her of the panties. Finally, he urged her thighs apart and focused on her hot, aching core. Those careful, curious fingers parted the tender flesh of her outer folds, and she felt cool air reach the roaring inferno of nerves and need he revealed.

“Yes. Yes. Yes,” she chanted, running her fingers through his hair, watching his face come closer ... closer. “Please, yes.”

His strange eyes slipped closed and he took a long, deep breath, an expression of pure sensory bliss gracing his masculine features. “This is the scent. I have always wondered why human women smell so lovely, so like earth and life. It is this.”

He blew a tiny puff of air into her, and Jenna cried out, her hips thrusting involuntarily toward his face. Phinn chuckled and bent to the feast.

If Jenna had thought his tongue in her mouth, on her throat, her breasts, and her belly was amazing, those experiences were obliterated in an instant as he began to taste her most intimate flesh. He explored every shivering, hot millimeter with painstaking care, so slowly, like he was memorizing the feel and taste of her. He said he had never seen a woman nude before, which probably meant he had never done *this* either, but his masterful technique made that a questionable proposition. He knew precisely how and where to apply firm pressure and where to barely skim. He knew to dip that luscious tongue into her pulsing entrance and thrust, to circle the sensitive edges of her fluttering muscles and follow the path of nerves back out to her clit. He knew to lave the nub slowly and firmly, then faster, faster, faster until his tongue flickered like a butterfly wing over and around the focal point of her need. One long finger slid into her, thrusting in time with his tongue, stroking what felt like the very center of her being until she went blind with the bliss of it. The orgasm built like air being pumped into a tire, only she was the tire, and it was her skin growing too tight, too hot, too good, too *everything*. And then he crooked that talented finger inside her, touched some spot within that no one had ever touched before, and the universe exploded in a storm of white light and purple sparkles.

It took only a moment for Jenna to regain her senses, and when she did, only one thing mattered—having her fey lover's big cock inside of her. She dragged him upward and captured his lips, tasting her lingering essence in his hot mouth, and reached down to tug at the loincloth that kept her from her goal. It fell away as if it were made more for decoration than for any sort of real covering, and she got to feel him at last.

She could barely fit her hand around his girth. Hallelujah for well-endowed, wine-induced hallucinations! Jenna stroked him slowly and firmly and watched with feral glee as his eyes rolled back in his head. He made a growl so deep in his chest, she could feel it vibrate through the hot flesh she held in her hand. “J-Jenna. Waverly,” he groaned.

“I need you inside me.” She tugged gently, but hardly had to urge him any further than that. He knelt between her thighs, his member in hand, and pressed the first inch of it inside her waiting pussy. She was steaming hot, soaking wet from her orgasm, yet his cock still strained her entrance as he squeezed inside. The sensation, the ache of pleasure that just bordered on pain, was almost unbearable. Jenna cried out, wrapping her legs around his waist, digging her nails into the hard flesh of his ass, and thrusting her hips upward to urge him in. Urge him deeper, harder, faster. “Fuck me, Phinn!”

He roared as he gave a fierce thrust, stretching her wide open for him and driving himself to the hilt inside her. She could feel him bump the very center of her, feel her muscles tense in protest at his size, and then relax. It left her with the sensation that this man, this cock, had to have been poured from a mold made of her pussy; he fit her so perfectly, so completely.

Phinn went still and stared down at her, a look of pure wonder marking his features. “Yes,” he said with a sigh. “This is what I have been dreaming about.”

Jenna gave his ass a squeeze, arching up to claim his mouth as her hands roamed upward to his waist, the muscles of his back—she wondered for a split second where his wings went—the wide cut of his shoulders, and finally to his face. She squeezed his dick with her inner muscles, glad for the years of Kegel exercises she had been doing since Bent was born, and Phinn groaned like he was dying. Then he shifted his weight to his knees, clasped his hands behind her thighs, and did what she had been begging him to do.

He took her so hard and fast, Jenna was instantly washed away by another obliterating orgasm, and another, and another, until she was screaming for mercy in nearly the same desperate breath as she was screaming for more. He gave her not a moment's reprieve, pounding into her with a tenderly vicious abandon, pausing only a heartbeat to shift their position and change the angle of his impossibly deep penetration. Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, he withdrew, rolled her over, and pulled her up to her hands and knees, not hesitating before he drove back in from behind. His fingertips bruised her hips where they dug in deep, pulling her to meet his every slamming thrust, but that tiny bit of pain once again sent Jenna spiraling into ecstasy. Her chest collapsed to the floor, thrusting her ass even higher in the air, and Phinn cried out in triumph as he rammed into her harder still. She came once again, and this time, he joined her, shouting her name like a benediction, pumping his hot seed deep inside her still-pulsing center.

Jenna lay on her back afterward, cradling her new lover's head against her breast while he dozed, absently caressing her nipple. She grinned up at the cream stucco ceiling and the multi-colored tree lights reflected there, feeling so completely overwhelmed with an awesome sense of well-being, she had to wonder if Shaz had been right, and what she

needed all this time was “intimate male company,” as he politely called it. To get laid, in other words.

Of course, after a series of mind-blowing orgasms that left no room for doubt that this wasn't a dream, she also wondered what exactly was happening here. Although Phinn's wings were tucked away, and his body was more than perfectly compatible with hers, the tone of his hair and skin, the weird, shifting color of his eyes, and the fact that sweet-smelling confetti seemed more prevalent than oxygen whenever he moved in any substantial way told her that he definitely wasn't human. Which, of course, was impossible, and that meant she had to be dealing with something more insidious than some drunken dream or lonely fantasy.

Phinn beamed up at her, looking like ... well, looking like a virgin who had just discovered the joys of sex. “It was exactly what I dreamed it would be,” he gushed. “I knew the moment I felt your tears that it would be thus between us. We were made for one another.”

“Uh-huh,” Jenna said, stroking his hair until he relaxed again. Just what the hell was this? Either Phinn was crazy, or she was, and she was leaning toward the latter, since it would be hard to fake purple skin and wings. Had Leo done something to her? Put drugs in her water? No, that would have put Bent at risk, and though Leo was the grand high lama of rat bastards, she didn't think even he was that twisted. Maybe he had injected her with something when he had picked up their son for the holiday? Stupid. An injection wouldn't take almost four hours to hit her bloodstream. It wasn't until she touched the ornament...

She jerked upright, dislodging poor Phinn. He spluttered for a moment, then sat up beside her.

“Are you well, J-Jenna. Waverly?”

Jenna waved a hand at the weird way he kept pronouncing her name. “It's just Jenna.”

“Just Jenna.”

“Jenna! Only Jenna. Use Jenna. One word—oh, forget it.” She got up and began to pace the room, oblivious to the fact that she was still naked. “That ornament. Maybe there was LSD in the paint or something. Maybe Leo snuck it into the ornament box somehow. No ... that would have put Bent at risk too. He had no way to know only I would pick it up.”

Phinn cocked his head at her. “Ell ess dee?”

He had a cute little accent that was something like a mix of French and Russian. Combined with his deep, rumbling timbre, the combination was as irresistible as the rest of him. She couldn't help but smile. “It's a drug that makes you see things that aren't there. I think my rat bastard husband might be trying to drive me insane so he can get custody of our son.”

Phinn's delicious mouth quirked. “You think that I am not real. Even after what we have just experienced together.”

Jenna made a gesture that encompassed his naked, godlike form, the floor where they had just made hot monkey love, and her own nudity. “Duh.”

He rose and took her into his arms again, laying another one of those brain-melting, toe-curling soul kisses on her. He looked quite smug when he backed away.

“O-okay,” she stammered. “S-so you feel real. But there is no such thing as faeries.

There's just not. And let's just say for a minute that Shaz and my grandmother O'Halloran were right, and faeries do exist. They still don't just appear when you cry on a Christmas ornament. And aren't they supposed to be tiny? Hence, 'wee folk'?"

Phinn sighed and shook his head, making his thick, scrumptious raven mane shimmer in the twinkling Christmas lights. "It is not an 'ornament.' It is a prison. My mother, Queen Gwiffythn of the Unseelie Court, cursed me. All my life, I have shunned the way of my people for curiosity about the humans that lived on the other side of the Curtain. I never wanted to take my place as prince of the court, nor have the many Fae concubines that are my right. I wanted only this—to have one human mate for all of my days. My people are supposed to hate yours, and yet your beauty has ever fascinated me. As for being 'wee,' well..." He shrugged, a subtle gesture that said, "Look at me—do I look wee to you?"

Jenna swallowed stiffly, a little overwhelmed by the flowery speech. "Cursed?" was all she could manage to say. He most decidedly was not wee. In any way.

He nodded. "Banished from the Land of Perpetual Night for 'unseemly' curiosity and positive feelings toward mortals, and an 'unhealthy' drive to take a single mate. That was my mother's decree. She turned me into that statue, and it seems your tears and the call of your loneliness broke the spell. I am real, and I am yours to command."

She thought about it for a minute. Okay, so maybe she had gone insane. Maybe she was tripping, and she was stuffed into a straight jacket at Mercy Hospital. But she could hardly think of a better delusion than a hot, naked faerie that wanted to be her love slave. Plus, this meant that she wouldn't be alone on Christmas. Phinn had probably never celebrated before, so all the traditions and rituals would be as new and wondrous to him as they were to Bent.

Granted, even a hot stranger couldn't take the place of the true great love of her life, but... Phinn was so much better than nothing it was hard to express.

Jenna took his hand. "Come on, we have to find you some clothes."

"Clothes? Coverings, you mean? Are we not to 'fuck' again?"

She laughed. "Oh, we'll definitely do that again. But right now, we're going to do some Christmas stuff. I'm going to make this the best holiday delusion in human history."

Chapter Three

Jenna wound up committing a minor act of larceny by letting herself into Shaz's apartment with the key he gave her and swiping an outfit that looked like it might be adjustable enough to fit Phinn's much taller, leaner frame. She suddenly understood the appeal of her friend's favorite article of clothing, sweatpants.

A turtleneck, Jenna's oversized L.L. Bean sweater, a pair of wooly socks, Shaz's spare winter boots, one of Leo's old woolen overcoats, and a wool hat and scarf set later, Phinn was ready to go out into the world of Christmas Eve in her small New England town. They did all the quaint seasonal things she never would have done alone. They went caroling in the Town Square. They made snowmen with the neighborhood kids in front of the school—which of course led to a monstrous snowball war. Phinn had a major league-caliber arm and a good-natured bloodthirst and aim to match. Finally, they had dinner with the less traditional folks over at A-1 Chinese. Much to her amusement, Phinn looked almost as pleased with crab Rangoon as he had been with sex. Strangely, none of the waiters or other diners seemed to notice they had a six-foot-two purple, winged faerie in their midst. When she asked him about it, Phinn explained that he had a number of glamours he could use to disguise his true nature and make it easier to move about in her world. Yet another wondrous thing about her new friend.

Finally, stuffed full of Chinese food and holiday cheer, Jenna and Phinn headed hand-in-hand back to her apartment as a light snow began to fall. It struck Jenna as they walked along that she had finally accepted Phinn's presence was more than likely real. This gorgeous faerie man was beside her, sharing a night she had thought she would be cursed to spend alone. Just assuming that it was all an extended delusion, Jenna figured she would much rather be hallucinating a perfect Christmas Eve with a perfect, otherworldly hunk than say, something like Pink Floyd's *The Wall* or *A Clockwork Orange*.

Most of all, it struck her how easy Phinn was to talk to. He looked her in the eye when she spoke. Took in everything she said, and asked questions about things he didn't understand. And he talked, too, unlike her ex-husband, who always used to insist that his thoughts were his own business and nobody else's. Phinn spoke about his homeland, about the many hours he'd spent in his youth sneaking into the villages and watching his beloved humans go about their lives, every small detail of which fascinated him. From television to romance novels, microwaves to automobiles, weddings to funerals, he was consumed with curiosity over how the mortal half lived.

He had been everywhere in the decades he'd been alive—all around her world, and through many of the fantastic ones that apparently lay “beyond.” He told her that many of the familiar legends and fairy tales were based in reality. About countries that sounded like a mix of Oz and Tolkein's Middle Earth, and were populated with people that sounded a whole lot like Munchkins—or possibly Hobbits. But rather than being devilled by evil witches or wizards or flying monkeys, they had dragons and giant, flesh-eating lizards called wyverns to worry about. Their streets were really paved with gold, and their homes carved from the natural environment—the hillsides and giant trees. They really did sing, dance, and drink like fat little fish. Phinn told her about the drink they called

ambrosia that required only a thimbleful to make a mortal completely intoxicated.

He told her about his home, The Land of Perpetual Twilight, where the sun never rose or set, and the sky was always that soft, purple velvet of early evening when the stars just begin to twinkle. His own people were dedicated to mischief and decadence, constantly seeking new and more menacing ways to do harm or annoy without getting caught or adversely affecting themselves. He told her how he had never wanted to distress the humans the way his cousins and friends did, and how that natural empathy toward the mortal animals eventually made him an outcast.

They got back to her apartment and unwound themselves from their winter gear, and she gasped to see that his bare skin was even paler and more purple-tinted than ever. Goosebumps covered every inch of his muscular body, so that he looked like he'd developed grape-flavored chicken pox.

"Are you okay?" she cried in distress, reaching out to touch his upper arm.

He shivered. "It is never this cold in my homeland. Even the Northern Fae have enchanted cities so that the snow falls, but they are never cold, and when they leave their homes, they have personal weather shields. My people have no need for such charms, so I have never learned them."

"Well, obviously you do need them when you get conjured out of a statue and dragged out on Christmas Eve to live in a deluded woman's Hallmark card fantasy." Jenna sighed, tugging him toward the bathroom. "I'm sorry, Phinn. I didn't even think that the winter might not be good for you."

"But it was good. I enjoyed the human songs and the snow war and the Chinese food. I was simply unprepared. My mother always accused me of being too much like the Northern Fae, but I guess I did not inherit their magick."

Jenna undressed him and sat his bare bottom down on the toilet before she turned to start the shower, hiding the pity she was certain must show on her face to her visitor. What must it be like to be so different from your family and the people around you that you never felt you belonged? To eventually be cast out for simply being who you were?

Well ... wasn't that a lot like what had happened to her? She was raised a working class farm girl, and she had been swept into the alien world of country club intrigue and deception that was Leo's. When she refused to be the quiet, obedient house-frau he needed to match the rest of his sumptuous home's decor, he had cast her out, too. Or at least rejected her in favor of a more suitable lover. It had been her decision to leave, her choice to seek a divorce. She just couldn't see raising Bentley in that kind of home.

Her heart warmed as she watched Phinn unroll and re-roll the toilet paper over and over again. In so many ways, he was an innocent. So child-like and in need of help and comfort. Yet in other ways—really fun and sexy ways—he was fully a man.

Steam rolled out of the shower enclosure, and Jenna dipped her hand under the spray to make sure it was hot, but not scalding. This time she had the presence of mind to ask Phinn before she radically changed his environment again. "Is hot water okay with you?"

He nodded, and she could hear his teeth chatter. Jenna helped him up and eased him under the hot spray, then undressed, stepped in behind him, and closed the curtain. Phinn moaned deeply as the steaming water sluiced over his muscular form. The strangely colored goosebumps faded and then vanished, and she found herself mesmerized by the sight of the water glistening and flowing over his pale skin and defined muscles. Had she ever seen a more gorgeous specimen of maleness in all of her life?

She felt strangely outside of herself somehow, watching him. How he let his head fall back in pleasure as the hot water warmed him, his neck corded and mouth slack. A compulsion to touch him overcame her natural shyness, and she found herself reaching for the soap and a washcloth.

“Why don't I wash your back while I'm here?” she heard the foreign, wanton hussy that now lived inside her skin purr.

“My thanks.” His tone showed no sign that he might sense her less than pure intentions.

Jenna soaped up the washcloth and began to gently scrub the broad, cut expanse of his back. After a moment, she abandoned the washcloth all together, giving in to the next sensual urge she had to touch every inch of her faerie's beautiful body. She lathered her hands and began to massage him—his tight shoulders, the muscles of his middle and lower back, and then, finally, his round, tight rump. Jenna didn't think she had ever seen a finer rear end than Phinn's. And she had certainly never touched one even close to as nice, so she lingered for a while, letting her hands slip around and under the globes, her fingertips sliding into the crack and under, to the smooth, hypersensitive skin between his legs.

Phinn hissed in pleasure and turned, leaving Jenna with her slick hands right in the vicinity of what was his finest asset. She hadn't gotten a good look at his penis before, given the circumstances of their first tryst, but she took the opportunity to enjoy it now. She had seen a grand total of four penises in her life, one of which was her son's and certainly didn't count. Another was in a porno movie her girlfriends and she had watched at a slumber party, and that one had been so monstrous, she didn't think it counted either. So it was between Leo's perfectly average member and the one she held in her hand. There was no doubt in her mind whose took the prize.

It was different than a human penis, but not in any way that she could see or really feel. Nothing gross or weird. It was just ... harder than a man's, and yet it felt more alive in her hands than Leo's ever had. She doubted faeries circumcised, and yet Phinn's cock had a pleasantly bulging head, and smooth, veined skin down its silky length. The veins, of course, were pale purple.

A shudder shook him from head to toe as she explored him, and he rested his big hands on her shoulders for balance. She glanced up, even as she caressed his gorgeous penis with both her slippery hands, and found his eyes closed, his nostrils flaring as his breath grew faster, more frantic.

“The Fae are built for pleasure,” he said on a sigh, as if he had heard her earlier thoughts.

She couldn't say she was surprised. She reveled in her newfound power to turn such a strong, virile male with unimaginable might into the shivering, gasping creature she literally held in her hands. Jenna stroked his pulsing cock at the same time she cupped and rolled the purplish skin of his delicate sac. Occasionally, she caressed his perineum with her fingertips and flicked her tongue over the hard peaks of his nipples, alternating her attention between each area of his body until he moaned her name and clung to her shoulders as if he would fall without her there to hold him up. He probably would, if the way he thrust wildly into her grip was any indication. Phinn leaned against her, his forehead pressed to hers, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. He panted as he arched into her stroke, and she met the pace he set with his hips as his cock began to twitch and jerk in

her hands, signaling his release. Finally, he clutched her so fiercely that she could hardly move more than her hands, and with a final, desperate gasp, he came, spurting hot and sticky over her hands and her belly.

“Ah,” he said after, still breathless and limp, pressing her into the shower wall with his weight. “It would seem that you too are built for pleasure, Jenna Waverly.”

She didn't have a chance to insist once again that he call her only by her first name, because he quickly silenced her with a deep, devouring kiss. By the time his hungry mouth moved away from hers, Jenna had long since lost the power of speech, along with even the vague memory of anything she might have wanted to say. Now it was she clinging to him as that magickal mouth moved onward to spread its joy and cheer over her throat, her shoulders, and the valley between her breasts. He lingered at her breasts, taking first one, then the other nipple between his teeth and worrying it softly, suckling it firmly, and drawing each nub tighter and harder than she thought possible. Her breasts and pussy ached and swelled; her every nerve ending quivered and shook, starving for him to show them the same kind of attention.

One of his hands left the breast on which he currently showed his due diligence and slid down her belly and between her legs. He had broad, big, strong fingers, yet such fine motor control that his first strokes against her clit and the inner folds of her pussy were so soft as to barely be noticeable. That changed slowly, deliberately, the pressure growing in time with her increasing heart rate and sense of need. He slipped one finger deep inside her, then two, and finally a third, pressing her harder against the cool tile wall and reclaiming her mouth, his tongue matching the pace of his fingers inside her. Jenna felt completely helpless against this unbelievable assault on her senses—the wet heat of his skin, the faint scent of lavender that followed him everywhere, her own musk. The stars behind her eyes as she gasped for air. The hard tile, his hard body, his seeking, plunging fingers and tongue. The hot water like a rainstorm pounding over them. She could find the will to do nothing but hang on and ride it out.

But her body knew what to do. Her legs lifted and circled his waist, pressing his hand and her pussy against his erection. He eased his fingers out of her and pressed his cock into their place, keeping his hand between them, sliding over her clit in the same hard, fast pace he took with his thrusts.

Too much. Not enough. Jenna screamed as she climaxed, slamming her hips against him, wanting more, harder, faster. He complied, smashing into her like he was trying to drive her through the wall, hot animal sounds bursting from his throat until at last he went rigid against her, and they fell together into the screaming abyss.

* * * *

It took some time to disentangle themselves and find enough energy and sense of balance to crawl out of the shower. The drying took more time than average too, considering as much kissing, licking, sucking, stroking, and coming went on as actual standard use of towels. Finally, spent and limp as a noodle, Jenna got into her bathrobe just in time to have half-clad Phinn scoop her up and carry her out to the living room. He put wood on the fire and stoked it until it was roaring and the room was toasty warm once more, then snuggled up next to her on the couch.

They watched *A Christmas Story*, and although Phinn required a lengthy explanation for most of the jokes, Jenna's reward for her patience was sweet. He slipped open her

robe and proceeded to lick every quivering millimeter of her body like she was one of the candy canes dangling from the tree, until she was nearly whimpering from the oversensitivity of every square inch of her skin. Especially her vagina! Jenna could barely sit up by the time Phinn was done with her; her body was so exhausted, so replete with repeated orgasms.

Not that she was in any way complaining. She had never in her life felt so complete. Filled with such an all pervading sense of well-being, like there was absolutely nothing wrong anywhere in the world, and even missing Bent didn't seem like such a tearing agony any longer. She knew her precious baby was safe, probably having the time of his little life. And as much as she hated to admit it, Shaz was right in his occasional assessment that she didn't do enough for herself. Working as much as she did and dedicating as much of herself to Bent as possible, she rarely took much more than an hour a night to read one of her novels, or to have an occasional bath when Bent slept late on weekends. It had been so easy to suppress her needs as an adult, as a woman, after Leo had hurt her so badly that even thinking about another man, another relationship, had made her want to curl up and die.

If it had been left up to her, she never would have met someone else. When men flirted with her, she had a tendency to smile politely and then run as fast and as far as she could before they expected her to speak or something.

Instead, the change she never knew she needed had just fallen into her lap ... almost literally. And she thanked whatever weird deities made stories like Phinn's actually true that he had.

They started to watch *The Year Without a Santa Claus*, but Jenna got distracted by the hot faerie on her couch, grinning at Mr. Heat Miser like the character was the most interesting thing he had ever seen. Phinn, for all his innocence about the human world, was a man. Over a hundred years old, the best they had been able to reckon by comparing his world's calendar to hers. The combination of child-like wonder and purely adult male sensuality was absolutely irresistible to her, and far more interesting than an animated children's show she had seen a million times.

She straddled his lap, letting her robe remain hanging open as it had while he made love to her earlier, and rubbed her bare torso against his. The show was instantly forgotten as his gaze rose to hers and stayed there. If she had done something like that when Leo was busy...

Jenna cut off that train of thought. She was done thinking about the past, and had every intention of living for the present when she could from now on. She always managed to be a relaxed but devoted mother, but when it came to herself, she was merciless and obsessive. No more.

She kissed the miraculous change in her existence long and fiercely, claiming him even as she claimed her own life for once, her hands molding and caressing his powerful chest as she swore that she would mold and care for her own inner self from now on. Jenna tucked her hands in the waistband of his borrowed sweats, slid them down, and tossed them away, kneeling between his athletic, toned legs and smiling up at him.

He smiled back, his expression reminding her beyond any shadow of doubt that this was a fully grown, fully aware man to whom she was making love, not some innocent she was taking advantage of. She marveled at how his body could be so masculine, carved like some classic statue of a god cast in pale purple, and yet there was almost no hair

anywhere on him other than the thick thatch of black between his legs. She eased forward and took him in her hands once again, stroking him until he was flinty hard in her palm. She took the tip of him into her mouth and suckled, then laved quick circles around the bulging head. She was hardly surprised to find both his skin and his pre-cum sweet on her tongue. She took her time sucking him, setting her own arousal ablaze once more as he writhed and sighed under her attentions. He moaned her name, and Jenna didn't think she'd heard a more erotic sound in her life.

She finally released him from her mouth and ascended his amazing body until she straddled his now-naked lap once more. She slid her heat down over his hard cock until he was seated as far as he could go, and then she rode him, long and lazily as he sat on the couch, gazing up at her like she'd hung the moon and the stars just for him. Phinn's strong hands remained on her hips, urging her on without taking the pacing away from her as he just laid back and enjoyed it. But as he grew closer to orgasm, he reached between them to stroke her clit in that same easy rhythm, and they both came quietly, clinging together like the world would end were they separated.

They concluded the faerie tale night—literally!—by making Christmas cookies in the kitchen, singing carols to the tunes on the CD player, feeding each other dough, and then making love one last time on the kitchen table before falling exhausted into her bed just before dawn. As she snuggled in the warm arms of her faerie lover, Jenna started to wonder if Phinn wasn't exactly what she had been wishing for and never even known it. And if the world really might end if he suddenly vanished from hers.

Chapter Four

In her dreams that night, Jenna lived a very different life from her own. She and Phinn were both faeries, ruling with generous benevolence over the Land of Perpetual Twilight with their crown prince, Bentley. They flew around on their sparkling faerie wings granting wishes, blessing lonely, destitute humans with fulfillment of their wildest dreams, which the kind faeries could learn by peeking into their souls. And when the beloved king and queen of the Fae were not granting wishes or generally making the world a better place, they were making sweet, passionate love to one another in a soft, sweetly scented bed of flower petals deep in the twilight forest where Phinn's people lived.

One morning, in her dream world, she lounged in bed with Phinn, tracing lazy circles over his smooth, hard chest, and Bentley came fluttering into the room on his baby wings, crying, "Mommy, Daddy! Get up! Santa came!"

Jenna grinned, instantly awake, as excited as her dream son to start with the Christmas festivities. She opened her eyes...

And remembered that Bentley wasn't here today. There would be no screaming in excitement, no jumping up and down on the bed to wake her up. No Christmas cookies and non-alcoholic eggnog for breakfast, no "Muppet Christmas with John Denver" on the CD player. No tearing paper and flinging ribbons and squealing with delight with each new surprise that emerged thanks to his concerted efforts.

No joy at all. Jenna didn't think she'd felt so completely alone since the day Nanna Hibbard had come into her bedroom and told Jenna that her parents were dead, and that Jenna was coming to live with her and Pop-Pop now. The sorrow of missing Bent wasn't quite so deep, so soul tearing as that loss, but it seemed almost as bad, and she felt almost the same gaping hole at the center of her being. The sobs of despair hit her like a punch in the gut, pulling her into a fetal ball of wailing desolation.

Strong, gentle arms slipped around her, a face nuzzled into her hair, and a deep, masculine voice murmured words of reassurance and comfort in a musical language that she didn't understand. Her sorrow abruptly vanished as if it had never been, leaving only a small ache where her baby should be, and a much better sense of perspective about his absence once more—he would be back in a few days. He wasn't gone forever. And she certainly wasn't alone.

Jenna slowly rolled over and found herself face to face with what had turned out to be her very real imaginary dream lover. His mane of blue-black hair was tousled from sleep, the adamantite cut of his jaw lined with marks from the pillow, his unusual green eyes bleary but sparkling with dreams that were slow to dissipate. He smiled softly at her, reached up to carefully trace the details of her face with a tender fingertip, and by the time he was done, she was smiling, too. She didn't know how much of it was his faerie magick, and how much of it was just him. Frankly, she didn't care.

"I thought I knew your deepest desire when I arrived yesterday," he whispered, his eyes watching that finger circle her lips, "But I see that I was wrong. What makes your eyes so sad?" He wiped away a tear she hadn't noticed slipping down her cheek.

"Remember I told you about my son?"

“Little Bent,” Phinn said, as if he knew the boy personally and was proud of the fact. It sent a little pang of joy through Jenna's heart. She wondered for the first time how her son and her miracle Christmas faerie would get along if Phinn should decide to stick around.

“This is the first Christmas I've spent without him. His father... I don't know. He's never shown much interest in Bent since we divorced, but, suddenly, this year Leo wanted to exercise his custody options and keep Bent for Christmas. I know it was just so he could dress him up and parade him around for his society friends and his latest vapid, country club arm candy, but that was the agreement. There was no way for me to say no. I can't afford to go back to court again, and he knows it.”

“Arm candy?” Phinn asked, a moment's confusion marring the expression of concern on his face.

Jenna laughed—something she had thought impossible under the circumstances. She rewarded Phinn's presence, his ability to make even the worst moment seem like it would be okay, with a gentle kiss. “Never mind,” she whispered and kissed him again.

His morning breath tasted like peppermint candy—a trick she'd have to get him to show her. Which made her realize that the hours they'd spent together had opened something in her, made her feel things she'd forgotten existed. And suddenly, hallucination, psychotic break or no, Jenna didn't want him to leave. The kiss quickly grew into something else, something more than a simple expression of gratitude and appreciation. Soon, she rolled him onto his back and took the liberty of exploring every hard, sweet inch of his amazing body with tongue, teeth, and fingertips.

It was she who now had the magick, the secret to making hot dreams come true. She slid his impressive erection into her mouth, sucked and laved its hard length until Phinn was crying out for release. But rather than grant the mercy for which he pleaded, she ascended his body, straddled him, and guided his cock deep inside of her.

The connection made them both sigh, and Jenna's body took on a slow, easy rhythm that he soon matched. They flowed together like that, hot skin on hot skin, until a languid orgasm sent them sailing sweetly over the edge into bliss together.

They lay side by side, laughing, while the stunning rush of power wore off. Jenna was about to ask him how long he would be staying when the doorbell rang. Phinn jumped from the bed into a defensive crouch, wings appearing with a snap and spreading as if ready to fight or fly—literally. Jenna got up and quickly dressed in the sweats and tee shirt she had worn for cooking and kitchen sex last night.

“What is that sound?” Phinn cried. “The bells! Is there an attack?”

Jenna tried not to laugh at his obvious distress. “Don't worry, it's just a signal that tells us that someone is waiting at the front door and wants to come in.”

Which begged the question of *who* would be ringing her doorbell at eight a.m. on Christmas morning. Jenna left Phinn to get dressed and went to find out.

“Mommymommymommymommy!”

Jenna opened the door and barely had a moment to register what she was seeing before Bent shot like a monkey on a rocket from his father's arms to her own. The hyperactive boy immediately launched into a long, barely coherent story about something called “mawayna,” how “Gran'nmuhver's mean doggy” peed all over everything and bit Bent's ankles when they played chase, how the aforementioned Gran'nmuhver screamed, the nice nanny-lady laughed, the “mawayna” fainted, Daddy yelled, and a dozen other

exciting adventures that she couldn't quite make out for all the tangents Bentley's story took.

"I swear that child was raised in a barn!" Leo complained, shoveling Bentley's bags and boxes full of toys into the apartment without bothering to cross the threshold himself. "All he did was scream and cry and whine like a spoiled brat all night long. We were having a dinner party, for heaven's sake! The *governor* was there! We dressed Bentley in a little Armani suit that Marlena and Mother picked out for him, but what did he do? He poured grape juice all over the front! On purpose, I swear! When I introduced him around to the guests, he kept running away, singing the same line from the same song over and over again at the top of his lungs like some kind of demented parrot! Whenever anyone asked him his name, he screamed 'Santa!' and threw his arms in the air like some drunken football fan! I have never been so mortified in my entire life!"

Jenna stared at him for a long moment, stunned by the reminder of just what an unpleasant, demanding, judgmental *snob* her ex-husband was. And how little cut out for fatherhood. How had she not seen any of this before? Although, if she had to be honest, she had always known, she'd just chosen to ignore it most of the time. Leo was interested in an heir to take over his dynasty when he was gone, not in raising a happy child. "He's five years old, Leo. He doesn't know or care about dinner parties. Or manners. Or Armani. What were you thinking?"

"Yes, well, as my son, he *should* care. When I was his age, I was already carrying on full conversations with adults, in correct language! If you bothered raising him properly—like a young man instead of a deranged *animal*, he would *know* how to behave in front of company! You never had any class, Jenna. No sense of propriety at all. It's no wonder at all that your son is such a miscreant!"

Miscreant? Jenna had a number of scathing retorts paired with hair-raising insults to choose from, each fueled by equal amounts of protective rage and personal resentment, but before she could make the decision about which one to flog the jerk with, someone else entered to steal her spotlight.

"Do not speak that way to Jenna Waverly," Phinn commanded, his voice low and resonant, an intimidating growl that promised great violence and pain if not heeded. There was more power and strength in those words than in all of Leo's shouting, posturing, and blustering put together.

Oh, God. Jenna had never considered how she would explain Phinn to Leo. The wings! The purple skin! The weird, swirling green eyes! Panic clutched at her chest, her mind frozen with horror.

But when she turned to look at her new lover, he appeared to be a perfectly normal human man. No, actually—far, *far* better than "normal." He looked amazing. Delicious. Glorious. Like something straight out of any human woman's wettest dreams, or a hunk on a romance novel cover. His skin was still pale, but now it was fair and tinged with a healthy looking pink hue instead of his striking natural but peculiar purple-tinted alabaster. His eyes looked like an extraordinary, but perfectly human bright emerald green, although his sooty lashes were still too thick to believe. His hair shone in waves of thick, gleaming black, but the color now merely looked clean and lustrous instead of its normal purple-night shine, and his wings were nowhere to be seen. He stood several inches above her ex-husband, and used that difference in height to full, majestic, imposing advantage as he glowered down at his opponent.

Leo stared with his mouth hanging wide open for a moment, then turned to glare at Jenna once more. “Just who the hell is *he*?”

“Address me directly, mortal! I am Phinn, Crown Pr...”

“Crowningshield!” Jenna interrupted before Phinn could introduce himself as faerie royalty. She stepped closer to his side and wrapped her arm around his waist with a nervous chuckle. She could feel the urge to do violence coiled in the hard muscles of her lover's back. “Phinn Crowningshield. He's my, uh ... my boyfriend.”

Leo scowled first at her, then at the boyfriend in question, looking ready to do some damage himself, but something about Phinn—his greater height, maybe, or his much bigger frame, or perhaps the regal way the faerie carried himself, stopped Leo from responding. He shook his head as if to clear it, and finally remembered why he was there. “I don't care. You have to take Bentley back. This holiday is very important to the company, and I'll have a house full of guests all week. I asked to have Bentley because I *assumed* that he had been taught how to behave in the presence of adults and how to respect my home. There is a very good reason why I don't have pets, you know!”

Without thinking, Jenna hauled off and slapped her ex-husband across the face. The sound echoed through the hallway, and Jenna goggled, horrified as Leo sputtered in rage and it sunk in exactly what she'd just done. “I'm sorry, Leo. I didn't...” What was *wrong* with her? She had never struck another human being before in her life, and Leo had certainly deserved it more on other occasions in the past. “I shouldn't have...”

“That's it! That. Is. It!” Leo bellowed. “I have better things to do with my time than put up with more of your harpy shrieking, your undomesticated offspring, and now physical abuse on top of everything else? You're nothing but trash, Jenna! You always have been. I never should have married you or given you that little beast in the first place!”

This time, it was Phinn who hit him, a solid right hook square in the smaller man's patrician nose. Leo went flying out into the hallway and crashed into the wall on the opposite side, then puddled to the floor where he lay, stunned.

“Trash is a man who does not deserve the title. Who calls his son an animal, and treats the woman who graced him with such a gift like less than nothing,” Phinn said, no sign of upset or the violence he'd just unleashed evident in his deep voice. “You stand in no position to pass such judgment, mortal worm.”

“Yeah!” Bentley added from between Phinn's knees. “You're mean, Daddy! And I don't like you or Gran'nmuher or Mawayna or your ugly, bitey doggy either! You're all mean!”

“Bentley, that's not nice. Don't speak to your father that way,” Jenna forced herself to say in spite of her urge to explode with laughter at the look of horror on Leo's face as he lay on the hall floor, clutching his bleeding nose. Her men standing up for her gave her a rush of comfort and warmth that easily overwhelmed any remorse for the violence she and Phinn had just done to her husband. But no matter what Leo said, she was a civilized woman, and she wanted to set a better example for Bentley than that. “I'm very sorry that I and Phinn hit you, Leonard. Merry Christmas. You'll be hearing from my lawyer on Monday.”

And with that, she slammed the door on the past and turned to her future. Bentley already had Phinn by the hand and was dragging him toward the living room, explaining that he had been a very good little boy all year, and that was why Santa came to see him

twice. Phinn carried the large bag of presents from Leo's house in his free hand, agreeing that Bent certainly seemed like a fine boy who deserved many presents, and the pair disappeared into the living room.

Christmas in the house where she and Leo lived when they were married was like something out of a magazine—beautiful but cold in spite of Jenna's best efforts. As Bent had opened his gifts in those early years, there were servants hovering nearby to sweep the garbage quickly away. The family was expected to dress, not lounge around in their pajamas. Breakfast was eaten with proper decorum around the Chippendale dining table, with the children being fed in the kitchen. Like everything else in Leo's world, the holidays were carefully planned and controlled for maximum image benefit and minimum noise and mess.

Jenna had done her best not to mind. After all, it was her dream to have a family Christmas, and there she was with her rich, gorgeous, successful husband and her smart, funny, beautiful little boy. They had a gorgeous house, friends and family, all the trappings. Important people dined and celebrated in their home. Jenna had been cared for materially as she had never been before in her life, and Bentley wanted for nothing. “Thing” being the operative term.

It was only now that she realized just how empty it had all been. For the two years since their divorce, Jenna had convinced herself that everything had been perfect between her and Leo before she found out he was cheating on her, but the fact was, nothing had been right. Not the restrictive life she'd been forced to live as his pampered society wife, not the fact that Leo had had a string of mistresses almost from the time they were married, not that Bentley had been expected to act like a “proper young man” before he could even walk. Leo's family focused all their energy on being outwardly successful, cultivating a certain image in their swanky community in spite of the hollow inner life they led. They had little or no concern for the warmth and love friends and family were supposed to bring.

She never knew she missed those things until this Christmas morning, when with a single unconscious wish, suddenly all the dreams she'd had as a girl were coming true. The day drifted by like something from the sweetest dream—but infinitely more precious, because now she knew each one of these small miracles was real.

Bent and Phinn instantly became the best of friends, laughing and whispering with their heads together over the gifts as if the glamour-disguised faerie was simply a much larger child. Phinn showed as much excitement and enthusiasm over each gift Bent's efforts revealed as her son did, and more so toward the shining ribbons and colorfully illustrated paper the little boy tossed away in favor of the packages themselves. Phinn seemed especially fond of the electronics, with all the flashing lights and amusing noises, and had soon claimed possession of a handheld video game system. The trio ate the Christmas cookies Jenna and Phinn had made the night before and drank eggnog as they tore and tossed and played, laughter and chatter as much the music of the day as the non-stop Christmas music on the stereo. By the time Bent was done devouring the food and exploring all his new toys, it was already evening. Bit by bit, his seemingly endless energy began to fade until, finally, he curled up in the middle of the ocean of toys and paper that had overwhelmed their living room and, clutching his new dump truck to his chest like a beloved stuffed animal, fell fast asleep.

Phinn came to sit beside Jenna on the couch and put his arm around her like it was

the most natural thing in the world. They sat quietly together and watched Bentley sleeping for a while before Phinn broke the silence with a solemn tone that made her ears perk up even if she couldn't bring herself to move out of the warm shelter of his arms.

"Jenna Waverly, I would ask you a question."

All of this felt so right—more right than anything she and Leo had shared. She snuggled in closer, her ear pressed against Phinn's chest so that she could hear his heartbeat. It sounded like any other heart, and she wondered how closely related humans and the Fae might really be. How was it that in one day, she could have grown to so like and trust this strange creature that wasn't even human? It wasn't logical.

Of course, she had spent her whole life being logical, carefully planning and plotting every moment of her existence, and look how well that had turned out. Leo was, after all, the perfect husband and mate on paper. It was in execution where he failed so miserably.

"Okay."

"I cannot return to the Land of Eternal Twilight to live because of my exile, although my mother's curse has been broken. For now, I will stay here, in the human world, and learn all the things about which I have always been curious. But I do not know how to begin. Would you teach me, Jenna Waverly?"

He gazed at her with such honesty, such open entreaty. He wasn't ashamed that he didn't know what he was doing, that he needed help to get by. He didn't hide his true emotions behind good manners and etiquette, like the cold, emotionless automatons in her ex-husband's family. Phinn didn't grouch around, snapping and growling when he was angry or confused, buried under shame of not being able to do anything and everything perfectly the first time he tried. The faerie simply did what had to be done to change things. Like Jenna always had. They came from such different worlds, and yet, in the most fundamental ways, it seemed they were much alike; they both wanted a family. They both wanted to learn, to grow, to celebrate all of the joys and learn from all the mistakes ... together. How much lighter would even the heaviest burden be when they had someone strong and dedicated with which to share it?

Best of all, now they both believed in magick.

"Of course I'll teach you," she said, brushing a soft kiss to his chin. "But only on one condition."

He brought her knuckles to his lips, the kiss tingling across her skin and sending a ripple of electricity tickling through her body. "Anything, Jenna Waverly. Anything at all that it is within my power to grant."

"Take me flying? I want to see the world the way you've always seen it."

Phinn's smile grew, and the beautiful sight swelled her heart with affection. "Is that all you desire? Of course I will take you flying. We can go tonight, if you like, when the world is asleep. We can see it covered in snow."

"Not tonight. There's no way we could get a babysitter. It is Christmas," she said. "And we can't take Bentley yet. I think we should keep your true nature a secret from him until he's old enough to understand and keep it a secret."

"That is very wise. Well, then, if not tonight, then another night. Fear not, Jenna Waverly, for I am here to stay with you, as long as you wish."

He kissed her then, and like each time their lips met, the passion flared quickly out of control. He cupped and caressed her breast as he licked a long, cool line from the sensitive skin behind her ear to the hollow of her clavicle, until she was gasping and

panting for air that had suddenly filled with sparkling fairy dust once again. As he started to lay her back on the couch, she pushed gently against his chest to stop him before they went so far that she no longer had the will to do so.

"We have to put Bentley to bed," she said.

Phinn didn't complain, or even so much as frown. He let her go with a brief kiss, and bent over to pick up the sleeping child. They carried him to his room and tucked him in together, but he didn't stir, even when both of them kissed him on his cheek.

"He had a long day," Jenna whispered.

"Yes. And a good one, I hope," Phinn said, then scooped her up into his arms and carried her to her bedroom. He set her carefully down on the bed, then went back to close and lock the door, stripping as he returned to her again. "I have locked the door, because I will be kissing more than your cheek," he informed her.

Jenna stared at his amazing body and tried not to drool as he revealed himself to her hungry eyes, bit by bit. The glamour he'd worn for Bent's benefit all day vanished, and he appeared once more in all his magnificent faerie glory before her. His green eyes and pale lavender skin glowed in the moonlight, and she found herself breathless for the hundredth time since she had wished him into her life.

He reached out with a single fingertip and caressed the line of her mouth. As he made contact with her skin, a cloud of fragrant sparkles puffed around them once again, and every sensation intensified to the point of almost-pain.

"What is that?" she gasped, letting her eyes flutter shut as his gentle fingers caressed her cheek, her jaw, the sensitive skin of her throat and shoulders. "The sparkles, the smell of flowers. They make everything so ... so much more."

"Yes," he murmured, his voice rough with growing passion. "You have heard of faerie dust before, haven't you?"

Jenna nodded, stepping closer to him so she could lean against him as her knees began to tremble. "I thought it just made people happy."

When he replied, his whisper was a warm breeze against the fine hairs of her ear, and she shuddered so fiercely she had to hold on to him or come apart at the seams. "Does this not make you happy?"

"Oh, yes. Very happy."

"There you are," he said. "It is the purpose of faerie dust to manipulate the human world for the benefit of the Fae or those they choose to bless ... or devil. I choose to give you the love you need so badly. You are a wonderful mother, Jenna Waverly. But you have forgotten that you are also a woman."

Her eyes flew open at the earnest words, and she found he wore an expression of admiration and desire that she had never seen aimed at her before she met Phinn.

"You've reminded me. I don't think I could forget again if I wanted to."

His small smile held all the sensual secrets of the strange, magickal world from which he came. He stroked her breasts, hips, belly, and the dampening curls between her legs. He wrapped one arm around her to keep her from sliding away from him, and moved his caresses to her back, between her shoulder blades, down her spine, to the curve of her waist and over the muscles of her rear end. "Do you want to forget?"

Jenna tumbled backward onto the bed, bringing him down on top of her. "God, no. Never again."

They made love slowly, looking deeply into each other's eyes. Phinn's gentle strength

and sensual power was like a drug that took her higher and higher until her consciousness disintegrated in waves and glittering bits of pure pleasure, then pulled back together to do it all over again. They collapsed into one another's arms, spent and utterly exhausted, just before the sun rose on their second morning together.

"I would be your mate, Jenna Waverly," he murmured into her hair. "If you would have me."

Jenna sighed, wondering if this much happiness could possibly last. Since Phinn had been so honest about his fears, and probably didn't have the same kind of commitment hang-ups that human men did, she decided to simply tell him what was on her mind. It wasn't just about her, after all. She had to be as sure as she could be, for Bent's sake.

"How do you know it will work between us? How do I know that I can trust that you'll stay? That you mean your promises? What if you learn about the human world and you get bored of me, like Leo did?"

Phinn tucked a finger under her chin and turned her to look him in the eye. "I have told you why I was banished. I want only one mate. That is considered unnatural for members of the Unseelie court. But I have always suspected that I was not the queen's true son. I desire none of the things that the Unseelie desire—to cause distress, to make unkind mischief, to have many lovers, but no true mate. The things I desire reflect the way of the Northern Fae; the Seelie court who live at the top of the world, in the land of snow. They mate for life. They fall in love only once, and it is forever. I knew the moment that I tasted your tears that you were that one for me."

She melted under his intense regard, his sincere tone. Somehow, she found it easy to believe him. But something that he said interrupted her moment of cozy certainty. "Wait ... northern faeries? The top of the world?" Her fears now quenched, her romantic soul touched, the other things he had said registered more fully.

"Yes. The Unseelie and the Land of Perpetual Twilight lie at the bottom of the world, from whence nightmares come. The Seelie and the Land of Perpetual Day lie at the top, where joys are born. Did I not hear you and Bentley talking about Santa Claus? I assumed that you knew."

Jenna jerked bolt upright in bed and stared at him in wonder. "Wait. Are you saying that Santa Claus is real? That ... there's really a jolly old man and reindeer and a toy factory at the North Pole?"

Phinn looked truly baffled as he sat up beside her. "Of course. It is the way of the Seelie Fae to grant wishes, as I have done for you. It's more proof, I think, that Queen Gwiffythn stole me from the northern queen, and I was not born to her darkness."

"But ... but..." Her mind scrambled for some way to make sense of what he was saying and failed miserably. "But you said there was no such thing as elves!"

He smiled and shook his head as though teaching a silly child. "There is not. But there are many kinds of Fae. Some of them are skilled in building things. Once a year, the king of the Northern Fae takes all the wishes he and his kindred have collected and flies around the world, making them come true. You leave sweets for him, as his just thanks. Bentley said he wrote him a letter to clarify his wishes. How could you not know this?"

"Oh my God." Jenna fell back on the bed and ran her fingers through her already mussed hair. "You're Santa's son."

"I cannot know this for certain, but ... I believe it is so, yes. Santa too took a human wife. And I have broken the Unseelie queen's curse by granting both our wishes. Perhaps

next year, I will wait and speak to him when he comes and find out for certain. Or ... we could take Bentley and fly to the North Pole before then.”

Laughter bubbled up inside her, and before long, Jenna was doubled over with mirth, overflowing with perfect happiness and more joy than she had ever dreamed of feeling before. She had not only found the dream man she'd forgotten she wanted, but she had learned the secret of Santa Claus! And that her dream man was the son of the faerie who made wishes come true!

Here comes Santa indeed; right into her life, into her bed, and into her heart. Jenna threw her arms around her wonderful faerie and vowed to write Santa a thank you note the very next day. And to see what he and the missus were doing this coming summer.

The End

About the Author:

Heather lives in Upstate New York (almost Canada) with a 28-pound cat named Pig and an obscenely large collection of books. She is currently working on her MFA, likes yoga, reading, and finding new and ever more interesting ways to procrastinate.

Heather has nurtured an unhealthy interest in vampires since she read INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE when she was 9 years old. She is the author of dark fantasy novels THE VEIL, THE BLACK SUN CHRONICLES, and OTHERWORLD, the novella series THE GUARDIANS and the short stories SWORD OF REGRET and POSITIVE ENCOUNTER. You can learn more about Heather, join her mailing list, or check out her blogs at <http://www.hafowler.com>

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