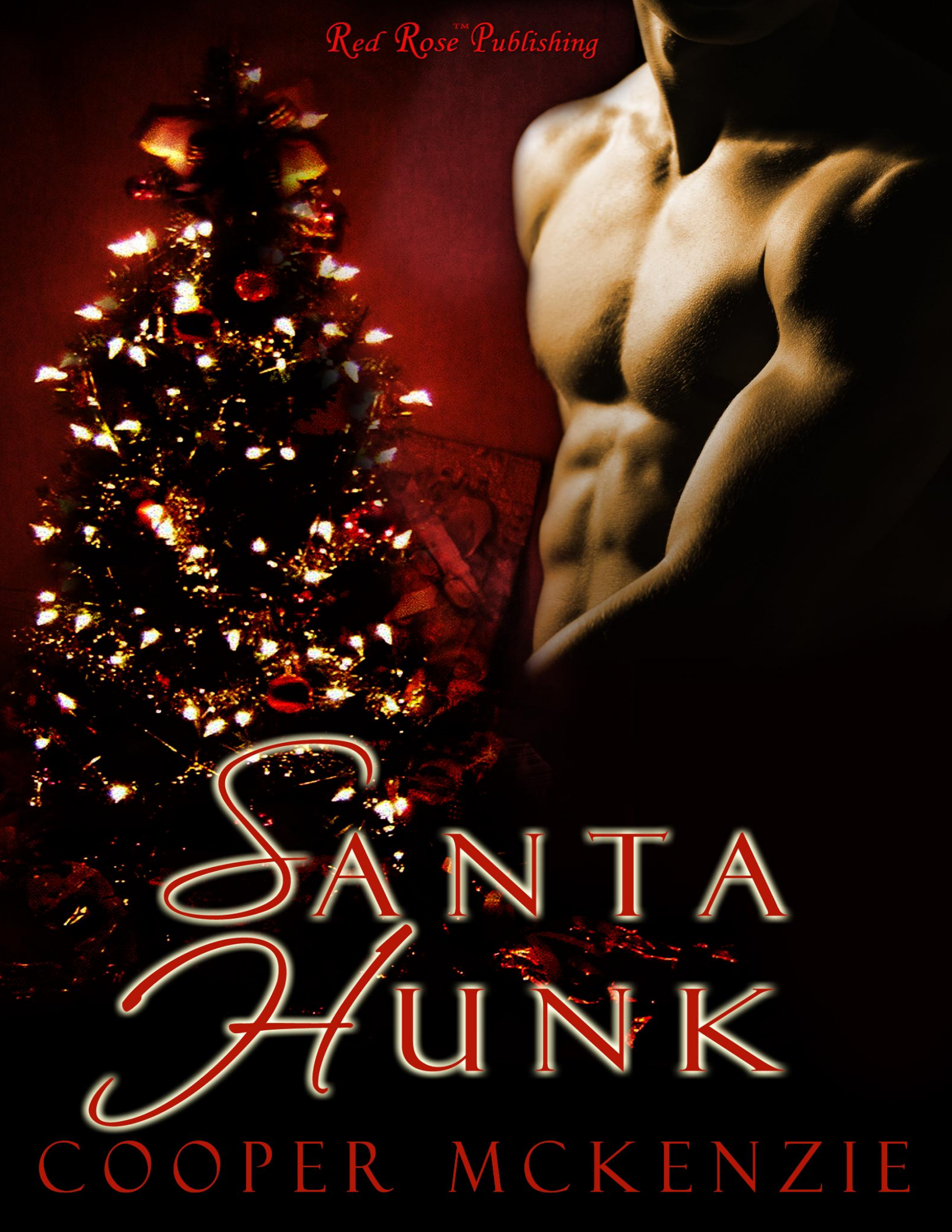


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# SANTA HUNK

COOPER MCKENZIE

*Santa Hunk*

*By*

*Cooper McKenzie*

## *Dedication*

*To all those who still believe in  
Santa Clause, may you find  
what you really want under  
your Christmas tree.*



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Santa Hunk by Cooper McKenzie

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*Santa Hunk*

*By*

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“Bella, what you need is a man.” My twin sister, Anna Marsh Winstead, made the statement as she pulled her minivan into the only parking space left at the Jacksonville Mall. Jacksonville, North Carolina, had the best mall I had been in since visiting the Mall of America. For someone who did most of her shopping online because she lived in the sticks of Montana, this would be an adventure.

“No, what I need are a few wonderfully creative and cost efficient Christmas suggestions,” I replied, not wanting to get into this conversation again.

“Aunt Bella, you really do need a man. A hunky, sweet man to help you forget about...everything.” Twelve-year-old Haylee carefully avoided mentioning the thing everyone most wanted me to forget, my ex-husband, whose name we do not speak. Not surprisingly, she leaned between the van’s front seats and kissed my cheek.

As she retreated, her twin, Hannah, took her place. “You don’t need a man, Aunt Bella. What you need is a dog.” Then she kissed my cheek as well.

“Thanks, girls. I’ll think about your suggestions. But right now I need to do some power shopping before I head home tomorrow.”

“I still don’t understand why you don’t stay through Christmas. You’re off and...” Anna trailed off, knowing it was futile to talk me out of leaving.

Anna had found a wonderful man in Major James Winstead, USMC, and

thought I should do the same. She had been after me ever since my divorce to find another man. While I didn't want to agree with her that Bella needed a new man, it was hard not to. I was thirty-five years old and, though my ex had walked out, I had yet to figure out what had gone wrong with my marriage. Out of the blue on Christmas Eve three years ago he announced he was not happy and wanted out. He didn't even want to try counseling. I agreed because I was in shock and did not know what else to do.

I moved to Bainville, Montana, six months later. I'm now the school nurse for the Bainville School that serves kindergarten to twelfth grade under one roof. Since I 'm also a trained midwife, I serve in that capacity for the town's almost one hundred and fifty residents. Twice a year I take a break, during the first two weeks of summer vacation and a few days before Christmas. Usually I journey east to visit Anna and the girls. I enjoy the visits, but I needed to be alone during the upcoming holiday. A dark mood comes over me, so I stay away from people. After I get home tomorrow night my only planned excursion out of the house will be a midnight run to the twenty-four hour convenience store to restock my supply of chocolate, soda, and ice cream.

"Enough about me, let's go shopping." I fumbled for the door handle.

"Yeah, let's go shopping," the girls squealed as they climbed from the van.

"Hello Kitty, Jonas Brothers, and bookstore, video store or clothing store gift

cards,” Anna said softly as we followed at a slower pace. “And do not break your bank on the girls. I know your budget is tight.”

“Yes, mother,” I said in a tone that we both knew meant that I had heard her, but I would do as I damned well pleased.

“You need a man. We will have to visit Santa so you can ask him to bring you one for Christmas.” She wore a grin that said she was up to something.

“Not me. I don’t sit on any dirty old man’s lap and make wishes for the impossible. You can if you want to, just make sure he’s young, rich, and sexy as hell,” I responded with a grin as I tried to get into the spirit of the season, though it was hard.

“Come on, Aunt Bella, let’s go see Santa Hunk.” The girls each took a hand and dragged me through the side entrance to the mall. A few yards in and we joined the mass chaos that was the Saturday night before Christmas at the mall.

“Santa Hunk?” I looked over my shoulder at Anna.

My sister was grinning as if the answer boded no good for me. “You’ll see,” she said as we joined the flow of shoppers.

I faced forward just in time to see a poster advertising Santa Hunk and his Elves. The picture showed a group of tanned, well built, half naked men wearing bright green pants gathered around Santa. It was Santa that captured my attention. I froze, my hands pulling from the twins’ grip as they continued on. The

girls turned to stare at me until they saw what had stopped me.

“Isn’t he dreamy?” Haylee joined me in admiring the bare-chested man in the center of the group photo.

He was wearing Santa’s red velvet pants, black boots, and white fur trimmed hat. No coat covered the rippling muscles of his upper body. Christmas green eyes smoldered under black eyebrows that were even darker than the black hair that was combed back from his face and fell in curly waves to brush the top of his shoulders.

“Oh my,” I breathed, feeling my nipples stiffen and my cunt dampen. If I reacted this way to a picture, what would happen when I saw the flesh and blood man?

“That is Santa Hunk,” Anna sidled up next to me.

“If I could find one of those in my stocking on Christmas morning, I’d be tempted to actually put up a tree,” I whispered, hoping the girls would not hear the needy tone my voice took on.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Anna said before guiding me away from the poster. “Girls, do you have your watches?”

“Yes, Mom,” they answered as each held up their wrists to show us the matching purple watches.

“Meet us at Santa’s village in an hour,” Anna said. “After we see the show

we'll get dinner."

"Yes, Mom." The girls took off, disappearing into the crowd before I recovered from a pair of flashing green eyes and a sexy Christmas smile.

"Now, sister dear," Anna turned her focus to me. "Let's go shopping."



As Anna and I approached the center of the mall and Santa's Village, my stomach knotted up and my sexual organs began to hum. I mentally sent them orders to stop preparing for a big disappointment. I was just another face in the crowd and from a look around I was nothing special. There were more women here than in the entire population of Bainville.

The crowd was thick and no one was moving. Everyone seemed focused on the stage. It was impossible to look for the twins, who were not quite five feet tall, when neither Anna nor I were but a few inches taller.

Anna held tight to the sleeve of my sweater so we would not be separated as she forced our way to the front of the crowd, where a green velvet robe separated us from the elevated stage. Currently, six gorgeous, well built men dressed in green elf costumes were dancing to a stylized version of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." As the song ended, Santa made his appearance through a red curtain at the back of the stage. A roar of applause, catcalls, and whistles rushed through the crowd. He smiled and waved before settling into his gold throne.

As his gaze drifted over the crowd, our eyes met and held. I swallowed hard to keep from drooling. Now I understood why Anna encouraged me to change into one of her dressier sweaters for our trip to the mall. It was hard to snag the attention of the most popular hunk in the room wearing a faded Snoopy sweatshirt.

Our staring contest ended when one of the elves stepped between us. He handed Santa a red and white striped clipboard. Santa read whatever was on it, nodded and handed it back. Then he settled back in his chair and smiled at the other side of the crowd.

The other elves spread themselves around the edge of the stage and motioned for the crowd to quiet down. I was still captivated by Santa and was not paying attention, that is until I heard “. . . the grand prize winner is . . . Bella Marsh.”

“That’s you!” Anna squealed in my ear before waving her hand over my head. “Here she is!”

“What? What’s going on?” I asked as two elves descended from the stage to help me step under the green velvet rope.

The crowd, after an initial outcry of feminine disappointment, now applauded politely. As I was led onto the stage, I looked around, still at a loss as to what was happening to me. I was surprised to see quite a few women and even one

or two men tearing up in disappointment.

The elves led me to where Santa was now waiting.

“Congratulations!” he said as he wrapped powerful, naked arms around me. He was nearly a foot taller than my five feet three, but even with that height difference, we seemed to fit well together.

“What’s going on?” I looked up as he lowered his face.

“You won the grand prize,” he said just before he kissed me.

As soon as his lips settled on mine the world went silent, as if someone had dropped a glass bubble around us. I heard Santa groan at the same time I felt his chest reverberate against my breasts. A second later, his lips and his tongue slipped between my lips. I had no idea what was happening, except for the first time in years, it felt right to be this close to a man.

Thoughts of everything except this kiss disappeared. I didn’t care about anything but the man who now had me pulled tight to his chest. When someone finally pried us apart, I was sure that the pattern of the fisherman’s sweater I was wearing would be imprinted into his skin.

I shifted my hips and felt Santa’s surprise package. Long, hard, thick, and ready for action. For a moment, I considered dragging Santa behind the red curtain for some private gift giving, but before I could make good on the thought, Santa jerked his lips from mine.

“Wow,” I breathed, trying to find the muscle and bone and balance to stand on my own.

“Wow, indeed.” He eased away slowly, running his hands down my arms to take my hands in his. “Come with me,” he said, stepping backward. I had the feeling he wanted to shield the crowd from the blatant evidence that Santa was as hard as an icicle.

I followed, my eyes still locked on his. How could I fight those mesmerizing green eyes that held a fire I had little experience with? My ex-husband had never looked at me like this. Until Santa, no man had ever looked at me with an intensity that suggested he wanted to open his skin and pull me into his very being.

Santa sat on his throne and pulled me onto his lap. As I settled, Santa’s thick, hard cock nudged my thigh. I shifted on his lap and felt Santa’s best gift twitch in response.

I shifted again when I felt my cunt leak a few drops in preparation.

Santa groaned in my ear, then whispered, “Please hold still or Santa will be getting a very bad reputation with this crowd.” He tightened his hold around my waist and shifted under me.

Cameras continued to flash in the crowd and the applause slowly died away. “So, Bella Marsh, what do you want for Christmas?” His tone was so falsely lecherous that I giggled.

I looked over the crowd for the twins, but did not recognize them. Then a pair of high-pitched squeals that only preteen girls can produce drew my attention back to Anna. The twins had found her and were jumping up and down and waving wildly at me. I smiled and waved back before turning and looking at the man on whose lap I was sitting.

He was smiling broadly, but his eyes held a smoldering intensity that made me want to kiss him again and not stop at just kissing.

“Bella Marsh has won the Jacksonville Mall’s grand prize of a two thousand-five hundred dollar shopping spree. She will be escorted through the mall this evening by our very own Santa Hunk, Peyton Daws,” the elf with the microphone announced. “Hopefully, she’ll find a present or two for herself as well as for the people on her Christmas list. Now, for the final Christmas dance from the Santa Hunk and his elves. Then we’ll let Bella begin her shopping.” Another elf handed me an envelope.

I stood and let Santa up before sitting down again and enjoying the back stage view as the seven men lined up and began a dance meant to tantalize and tease every female in the audience, while a jazzy version of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” filled the air.

As the men danced, I opened the envelope and found a mall gift certificate for twenty-five hundred dollars. With this kind of money, I could really ratchet up

the twins' Christmas gifts. I wondered if the mall would mind if I also bought school supplies and had them shipped back home.

When the song ended and the men froze in a final pose the applause surged once again. The men took a bow, and then ducked behind the curtain. Santa stopped in front of me and held out a hand. "So, Miss Bella, are you ready to shop?"

I took his hand and allowed him to pull me to a standing position. He did not stop when I was on my feet, but kept pulling until I was off balance and leaning into his chest again. Still holding my hand, he wrapped both arms around my back. As his head lowered for another kiss, we were interrupted.

"Aunt Bella that was so cool!" "I can't believe you won!" The twins spoke over each other as they bounced across the stage toward us.

"Congratulations," Anna said once the girls were finished doing their Tigger imitations.

Santa Peyton slowly released me and focused his ivy green eyes on the girls. "You must be Haylee and Hannah," he said with a knowing Santa smile that he had no doubt perfected over the last few weeks.

The girls froze and stared, suddenly shy. Finally Hannah nodded. "Yes, sir," she said in a voice that was so soft I barely heard her words.

"I was very impressed with your letter about your aunt," he said, extending a hand to each girl. "You must love her very much."

“Yes, sir.” With wide eyes they each shook his hand, then looked at each other and squealed again, too excited for words.

“Hi, I’m Anna Winstead.” My twin shook Peyton’s hand as well.

“So, ladies, how do you want to work this?” Peyton looked at me. “We have a lot of stores to visit.”

I wondered if walking through the mall with the half naked Santa was really a wise thing. “Would you like to change first?” I said, wondering if I could help, although I knew if I did lust would make it a challenge to get him dressed again once I got him out of his red velvet pants.

Peyton looked surprised at my suggestion. “It would be nice, but I think the mall is expecting me to go like this.”

I looked into his eyes and smiled. “But would you feel more comfortable in your street clothes?”

He shrugged then gave a small nod. “Yeah.”

“Then go change. While you do that we’ll figure out where we’re going first.”

Peyton kissed my cheek then whispered in my ear so no one else could hear him, “When we’re done shopping I’d love to explore whatever it is that’s between us. That is, if you’re interested.”

“Very,” I said brushing my hand up the inside of his thigh. His body hid the

intimate touch from the twins, who were trying to figure out how much they could con Aunt Bella into spending on them. Anna, on the other hand, watched us closely and smiled broadly in approval.

Peyton ducked behind the curtain a second later while I tried not to grin like a crazy person. “So, girls, what do you really, really want for Christmas?” I asked, wrapping an arm around each girl and hugging them close.

The girls spent the few minutes we waited for Peyton revising their Christmas lists to include DVDs, CDs, and every one of the latest electronic devices they thought they might be able to get away with. Anna finally stopped them with a mother look. “Girls, how about you think of others. Aunt Bella has some friends in Bainville she would like to buy gifts for as well.” She emphasized the word friends while smiling at me with one eyebrow cocked a notch higher than the other.

Before the girls could protest too much, Peyton returned wearing jeans, a pale green Oxford shirt that turned his eyes an even deeper green, black cowboy boots, and a black leather jacket. Fully clothed, he was still one gorgeous man. Too bad I was going home in about twelve hours. I would love to spend some serious quality time getting to know this man, in bed and out. My thoughts of all I would do with him were cut short when he stopped next to me and touched my arm. “So, ladies, are we ready to shop?”

“I think the girls and I are going to get dinner and then head home. That way Bella can concentrate on other things,” Anna said.

“But, Mom,” the twins harmonized as if they had practiced. “We want to go shopping with Santa Peyton and Aunt Bella.”

Before a mutiny could break out, I said, “How about we all go eat dinner and then Peyton and I can go shopping. I’ll call when we’re done and you can come back and pick me up.”

“I can give you a ride home when we’re done, if that’s all right,” Peyton offered, placing his hand in the middle of my back.

I looked up at him and was tempted to fall into the green fire in his eyes. “I’d like that.”



After dinner, Anna and the girls left for home, taking the shopping bags with my earlier purchases with them. Thankfully, I’d had the foresight to have everything wrapped in the stores. Peyton and I began to walk the mall. While we shared the normal getting to know you information, it felt like we had been together forever.

Peyton shared that he was single, a trained paramedic and firefighter who played Santa Hunk as a way to earn extra money to pay off the last of his school loans. At thirty-one, he was four years my junior, but he didn’t look at me like I

was old, dried up, or useless when he found out I was older, divorced, and planning to hide away during the next two weeks. Instead, he looked at me with an intensity that smoldered and set fires off in every nerve ending from my nipples to my knees.

It didn't take long to shop through my revised Christmas list. I bought matching CD/DVD players for the twins along with generous gift certificates for movies and music. A new top of the line digital camera for Anna as well as a gift certificate for two spa days that were packaged with specific instructions. The first was to be used the day before James arrived home from his latest deployment and the other was to be used when she needed a break from her life at some time in the future.

After picking up a few small gifts for my friends back in Bainville, including a coffee table gift book of North Carolina history for my next-door neighbor, Georgia Maloney, I still had nearly a thousand dollars left over. Peyton took the shopping bags from the hand closest to him, which he then took in his. Our fingers wove together easily, as if we had been together for ages and not just a couple of hours. Even when our conversation stalled, the silences between us were comfortable, but laced with sexual tension.

Peyton stopped me in front of the Victoria's Secret store. "How about something special for Bella?"

I looked from him to the window display of lacy red, white, and green lingerie and then back again. I felt uncertain, like waking on a frozen pond for the first time, hoping it wouldn't crack and break apart underfoot. Taking a deep, breath I nodded.

Peyton guided me into the store. As soon as we entered, he had the attention of all the saleswomen who had seen the Santa Hunk's show each night they worked. He ignored the young girls who were hiding behind the counter giggling. Instead, we approached the only fully mature woman in the store who was refolding panties in a display across the room.

"Can you help us please, Mary?" Peyton asked after a glance at her nametag. His smile turned me on so much I was barely able to think and Mary blushed as she took in our joined hands. "This sexy lady would like to see some of your most comfortable, uh, um," all at once he couldn't finish the request. When I looked up at him, his cheeks were burnished with heightened color as well.

I was pleased to see that he wasn't as comfortable as he appeared in a women's underwear shop. "Why don't you go over there and behave yourself while we find a few things," I suggested, gently squeezing his hand.

He returned the gesture and leaned close, turning his back to the still silent Mary. "Only if you'll model them for me."

"Meet you in the dressing room in ten minutes?"

Before he could move away, I pulled my hand from his and ran it up his inner thigh. I did not stop until I was cupping the front of his jeans.



My first stop yielded some matching cotton panty and bra sets for work that Mary took directly to the counter for me. After that, I allowed myself to go crazy and choose every manner of camisole, teddy, bustier, and lacy thong I had ever dared to dream about wearing. I hoped at least one or two of them would meet with Peyton's approval. I even picked up a couple of pairs of sexy Santa boxers for him as a thank you and souvenir of his time playing Santa Hunk.

Mary led me toward the corner where a pink curtain blocked the hallway leading to the dressing rooms. "Take all the time you need, dear. I'll send the others home and close up so you and Santa can have a little privacy."

"Thank you," I said, heading for the last door down the short hallway with my arms full of silks, satins, and lace.

As soon as Mary walked away, Peyton pushed the curtain aside and stepped into the hallway. His arms were full and he was sporting a lusty grin. His excitement distorted the front of his jeans. Once we were inside the last dressing room, Peyton shouldered the door closed and dropped his choices on the bench that ran along one side of the rather large room. He looked around for a brief few seconds before turning those deep green eyes in my direction.

“Mary said to take our time, but I can’t wait any longer. Strip now, please.”

He stripped off his leather jacket and tossed it on the bench, and then bent over to pull off his cowboy boots.

I turned away and reached for the hem of my sweater. Any hesitation I may have had evaporated like the first drops of rain on asphalt in the summer sun. I kicked my sneakers into an empty corner while I whipped Anna’s sweater over my head and tossed it after the shoes. As I took everything off, I listened to fabric rustling behind me. Once I was naked, I ran my fingers through my hair and slowly turned around.

Peyton was standing a few feet away, watching me. His cock extended an impressive length to greet me. “Wow,” he said as his eyes traveled from hairline to toenails, and then returned up my body at half speed.

My stomach clenched, my nipples beaded diamond hard, and my cunt blossomed as juices began to escape my thighs. Closing the distance between us, the need to feel his skin against mine consumed me. I had been hot and needy since first seeing the Santa Hunk’s poster. Now that I saw the entire present, I couldn’t wait another minute to feel his long, thick cock inside me.

Wrapping my hands around his head I kissed him deeply. I slowly backed him toward the plastic armless chair placed conveniently in the corner.

“Sit down,” I urged even as my hand reached between us to take hold of his

cock.

The skin of his phallus was hot and silky and I could feel his pulse as I wrapped my fingers around him. I slid my fingers up his shaft to circle the tip with one fingertip before sliding back down to the base again.

Peyton sat, and then wrapped his hands around my waist and helped me to straddle his lap. Looking up at me, he stared into my eyes as I positioned his cock at my open, wet lips and then slowly settled over him. I lowered my head and kissed him as we both growled at the feeling of his jutting manhood completely filling my dark wet emptiness.

“Oh. My. God.” I wasn’t sure who whispered it, but the words echoed through my brain as I began to lift and lower myself, riding him. Peyton shifted his attention to my breasts, suckling at first one, then the other as he helped me up and down.

It only took a few minutes before I shook with an intense orgasm that tightened every muscle in my body. Peyton lifted his head from my breast and took my cry of completion into his mouth. A moment later he growled in response, his body stiffening as I felt hot fluids splash deep inside me. That set off my second orgasm, which rippled and melted away any reservations I had about having sex in near public.

I collapsed against him, unable to move for several moments. He didn’t seem

to mind, as he held me tight to his chest with one arm, the other rubbing up and down my back in a soothing motion. When my heart slowed and I was able to breathe again, I reluctantly stood up, releasing him from my most intimate hold.

Peyton pulled several paper napkins from his jacket and wiped us both clean. He kissed each breast, then my lips and handed me a red lace nightie. “Try this on first.”

I handed him one of the boxer sets I’d brought in. “This is for you.”



By the time I finished trying everything on under the watchful eye of the green-eyed hunk, I had two piles, ones that were sexy, almost practical, and fairly comfortable and then everything else. I had no idea who I would be wearing them for since there was no one back home. Maybe I would leave them for Anna and James to enjoy.

After adding the last black teddy to the buy pile, Peyton pulled me into his arms. “Wall or floor?” he asked with a wild, hungry fire burning in his eyes.

“Floor,” I said, wrapping myself around him. I willingly threw myself into the sexual fire his expression ignited in me.

Peyton lowered us to the floor and slid home. I welcomed him with a sigh and deep kiss. I wanted to cry out my need for this man, but fought the impulse. It was going to be hard enough to check out as it was, but to confirm Mary’s

suspicions with a scream that would be heard all over the mall was out of the question.

He kissed me as he eased out, and then back in again, setting a slow pace. I rocked my hips in rhythm as our eyes met and clung. Messages of heat and longing and love passed between us.

This coupling was as intense as our earlier one, though on an entirely different level. It was again only minutes before the tidal wave of release rolled over us. Peyton followed me over the edge into orgasmic bliss, our cries muffled by each other's open mouths.

It took longer to recover, but finally Peyton pulled his cock from me and reached for the last of the paper napkins. After wiping up, he helped me to my feet. I stood and watched as he dressed, feeling cold and lost without the warmth of his skin against mine. All at once I saw my future lay before me, as cold and desolate as the Montana prairie in winter.

Once finished, he turned and found me, still naked and looking sad, a single tear rolling down each cheek.

"Oh, darlin', don't cry. It will all work out," he said, wrapping me in strong arms and pulling me close.

"But I'm leaving tomorrow," I whispered into his shirt as he kissed my temple.

“You could stay awhile longer,” he said, releasing me and retrieving my clothes from the corner.

“No, I have to go home. I just wish...” I accepted my clothes then turned away to dress. As I pulled on my sensible white cotton panties I heard the dressing room door open, then close again. Peyton had slipped out with the discarded clothing.

As I dressed I fought for control. I focused on the wonderfulness of the evening, of meeting such a man, one with whom I felt an instant connection. I did not let myself think about the emptiness of the rest of my life that lay ahead.

After dressing and checking out with a new wardrobe of sexy underwear in a rainbow of colors, Peyton and I left the mall and he escorted me to his silver Jeep Cherokee. Except for directions to Anna’s house, the drive was made in a silence filled with resigned sadness. The Winstead house was dark except for a small lamp in the living room and the front porch light.

I looked at Peyton and could not help myself. I leaned toward him and kissed him, putting everything I was feeling and wanted to say into that kiss. His hand cupped my cheek as he returned the kiss, his own hunger evident. Finally though, I could take no more. I broke away and climbed out of the front seat. Opening the back door, I gathered the shopping bags on the back seat. Then I looked through the dim interior and blinked back fresh tears. “Peyton, thanks for

the ride...and..." I couldn't finish. I had never had an affair that only lasted a handful of hours and had no idea what to say, though I was tempted to lay my heart on the line and tell him the truth, that I had fallen in love with him in our one evening together.

"Take care of yourself." His voice sounded strained as he turned around to face forward again.

I pulled the bags from the car and bumped the door closed with my hip. I did not look back as I walked to the porch. The running engine was the only sound in the silence of the night as I juggled bags and opened the front door. Peyton waited until the door was closed behind me before slowly driving away.

By morning, I was vomiting, running a fever, and could barely sit up to drink the juice Anna brought me every two hours. "A virus," she explained as she handed me painkillers. "The girls had it last week. You'll be better in a couple of days."

It was three days before I packed my bags and climbed on the early morning plane that took me to Charlotte on the first leg of my trip home. When I finally pulled into my driveway late that night all I wanted was to sleep until school began again. Looking at my little house, I was surprised to see there were lights on. Only this light wasn't from any of the lamps in the living room. It came from glowing twinkle lights arranged on a Christmas tree.

Leaving my bags in the car, I cautiously opened the front door and stepped

inside. I heard the crackle of the gas logs in the fireplace and smelled apples and spices mixed with the scent of pine.

“Hello? Georgia?” I called as I turned left, going first into the kitchen. But the room was empty. I traced the apple and spice scent to the Crock Pot on the counter. Apple cider with cinnamon sticks.

I backtracked to the front door then stepped into the living room. I froze when I saw the room had been rearranged. An oversized Christmas tree filled the bay window where my television set usually sat. The tree was covered with twinkle lights, silver tinsel, and the ornaments I had collected over the years when Christmas had been a joyous celebration. Ornaments I had not had out of their boxes in three years.

“Welcome home, Bella.”

I stepped forward to trace the source of the greeting. No one was supposed to be here, especially not a man. I was in no shape to be entertaining. All I wanted was to climb in bed and sleep.

My visitor was lying on his side, his legs bent and his head propped up on his arm. He wore a Santa hat. My empty red velvet Christmas stocking was draped over his hips.

“Peyton? What are you doing here?”

“Santa heard you were a very good girl this year and decided to deliver your

Christmas gift a little early. Problem was, I wouldn't fit into your stocking."

"But, how?" I crossed the room and knelt in front of him. Reaching out, I ran my hands over bare skin to assure myself he was real and not a figment of my tired and wanting imagination.

He looked up at me and smiled. "With a little help from your sister and your neighbor. I know we've only known each other a few hours, but I love you and need you in my life."

My heart screamed with joy as I threw myself across the space that separated us. "Oh, Peyton, I love you, too."

*The End*

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### Author Bio

Cooper McKenzie always thought she had been born a hundred years too late, but has come to appreciate air conditioning, computers and other conveniences of modern day living. She enjoys the slower pace of New Bern, North Carolina as well as the history and small town community found there. In addition to dreaming up her next story, Cooper enjoys reading everything from children's books to vampire romance, singing in her church choir and needle-weaving. She loves to hear from her readers at coopermckenzie@ymail.com

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