

# Snowflakes and Puppy Love



A Novella  
by  
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## CHAPTER ONE



Sleigh bells jingled as the door at Archer Books opened. From the front counter, Brianna Kinney stopped hanging bookmarks on the display rack and turned her head.

An attractive man, probably in his late twenties to early thirties, nodded a greeting. His lips curved up, and sapphire blue eyes framed by dark lashes momentarily connected with hers.

Wow!

He removed a blue cap and ran his hand over short blond hair. Blue jeans encased slim hips and long legs, and the blue plaid flannel shirt under his open leather jacket complemented his eyes.

Brianna's stomach dipped, and she brushed a wisp of hair off her cheek. She faced him. "Good afternoon." Her usual greeting for customers, but this time her voice squeaked. She cleared her throat. "May I help you?"

"Is Robin here?" His eyes roamed the Christmas decorations hanging from the ceiling then shifted to the shelves of books.

Robin Archer, the store owner, knew nearly everyone who came in.

"Yes, she's in back."

“Cooper.” Robin’s voice came from the nonfiction section, and she appeared at the end of the aisle. “I thought it was you. What can I do for you?”

The customer sauntered toward Robin. Disappointed he didn’t ask for her help, Brianna returned to the bookmarks. She’d probably misread his interest in the momentary look that passed between them.

Why did it matter? She shook her head at her schoolgirl reaction to a good-looking guy. Yet, she couldn’t deny her interest in him.

The two stood close enough for Brianna to hear what they said.

“Tessa asked me to get some books for the kids.” Cooper’s baritone voice resonated inside her.

Of course he’s married, and he has children. Lucky Tessa. Heat crept into Brianna’s face. What was wrong with her? At least no one heard her thoughts.

“We have some great ones right over here.” Robin used her best salesperson voice, and Cooper’s leather-clad shoulders disappeared down a row of bookshelves. Their murmurs reached Brianna as they moved to the children’s book section, her favorite part of the store.

She added the last bookmark to the rack as the sleighbells jingled again. An older woman with gray hair entered. Brianna didn’t know her name but recognized her. The customer smiled, nodded at Brianna, and wandered to the table displaying Christmas items Brianna had helped Robin arrange that morning.

“Good afternoon. Please let me know if I can help you with anything.”

“Thank you. I will.” The customer continued browsing.

Cooper returned carrying two picture books. He placed them on the counter by the cash register and pulled out his wallet. “I think I’ve found what they’d like. Dogs for Lexie and big machines for Noah.”

Brianna smiled. “How old are they?” She rang up the books and told him the price, then she slid the books into a bag while he inserted his debit card into the card reader.

“Three and four.”

He had muscular, work-roughened hands. Like Luke’s. Her chest tightened.

“You have your hands full then.” She gave him his receipt. Tingles shot through her when her fingers grazed his palm.

“You’re right about that. They keep me on my toes. But they’re good kids.” He pocketed the receipt and slid the card back into his wallet.

No ring on his left hand.

“I think they’ll like the books you chose.” She dared to meet his riveting eyes. His long lashes must be the envy of many women.

“Thanks. I hope so.” He lifted the bag from the counter. “Tessa usually buys their books.”

Huh, why didn’t Tessa buy the books today? Brianna hadn’t met Tessa in the three months she’d worked here.

His eyes crinkled in the corners as his face lit with a thousand-kilowatt smile. “Thank you. See you around.”

Wow! A chill passed down her spine. “Bye.” She bit her lip as he exited to the jingle of the sleigh bells.

Should she ask Robin about him? No, it was too soon. She wasn’t sure she was ready for another relationship. But this was the first time she’d had such a response to a man since Luke. And this man was apparently married anyway.

“Can you tell me the price of this?”

Brianna stepped from behind the counter to help the customer at the Christmas display. “I’ll look it up for you.”



Cooper Stiles glanced in the bookstore window on the way to his truck parked along the street. Good, Robin had already posted the flyer about the Snowflake Festival. The festival wouldn't be held until the end of January, but it was important to get the word out now, before Christmas.

The clerk inside was talking to another customer. He'd never seen her before. She must be new. Who was she? He should have introduced himself and learned her name.

Her brown hair that fell in waves to her shoulders and light brown eyes the color of honey distracted him the moment he entered the store. The dark green pullover sweater she wore reminded him of the Juniper trees up by the falls. Just in time he'd remembered why he was there—the books for Noah and Lexie.

Was she married? He didn't see a ring. He could've asked Robin, but that was too obvious and might start rumors. He fell victim to too many match-making schemes on the part of well-meaning but interfering women. Robin wasn't one of them. However, he didn't want to put temptation before her.

Cooper preferred to purchase books online, but his sister-in-law would rather support the local businesses, especially this bookstore owned by her best friend. Work slowed for him during the winter, although he had a couple of indoor jobs lined up next week. He had time today to find books for his nephew and niece.

He liked to read. Robin had a good book selection in her store, or she could order one for him. He'd have to come back. Soon. He'd introduce himself to the clerk and learn her name.

He shook his head and strode to his truck. He didn't have time for dating or romantic involvement. Noah and Lexie were

his priority. He'd promised Tessa. And he was committed for six more months.

Before she left, Tessa had arranged for Noah and Lexie to be in daycare during the week. Kylie Ott, the Little Lambs Preschool and Daycare owner, was a fellow member of Grace Church, and Cooper knew they were safe and happy there. He had a few more errands to complete before picking them up.



“Business has been good this season.” Robin switched the positions of two ceramic figurines on the table.

The display table, covered by a red cloth and with a small Christmas tree in the center, held a few children’s picture books, a couple of books about decorating and traditions, several Christmas romance novels, packages of Christmas cards, and a few ornaments and decorations. Other Christmas items were arranged throughout the store.

“I think your decorations brought customers in.” Robin gestured with her hand in a sweeping motion.

Snowflakes and colorful red balls hung from the ceiling. Strands of white Christmas lights intertwined with green garland lined the edges of the ceiling. A decorated Christmas tree in the front window with suggested gift items invited customers into the store. Robin had supplied a beautiful ceramic nativity set for the window display, denoting the true meaning of Christmas.

Brianna ran her hand over the cover of a romance novel then glanced at the store window. That man Cooper had paused to look at the window display after he left the store.

“Thank you for letting me do it. I always enjoyed helping my third-grade students decorate the classroom for Christmas.” Brianna hadn’t decorated much at home in the last two years.

“Do you miss teaching?”

Brianna shrugged. “I miss the kids. But when the school district downsized last year, I decided I needed a change. I’ve always loved books and reading, so here I am.”

“I’m glad you’re here.” Robin’s words warmed Brianna. “With Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in January and Black History Month coming in February, we’ll set out books in the biography and history sections right after Christmas. Will you make a list of what we have available and send it to me? I’ll be in my office. I have a book shipment to check in before we close.”

“Certainly.”

When Robin walked away, Brianna stepped behind the counter and clicked on the computer inventory screen.

“Oh, by the way.”

Brianna swiveled her head, surprised that Robin stood nearby.

“Looking ahead for Valentine’s Day, I want to feature romances and books on dating, marriage, and wedding planning. And maybe you’d like to decorate.” Robin grinned and headed for her office. She peered over her shoulder. “My husband calls me a hopeless romantic.”

Romance. Brianna sighed. She’d met her true love, Luke Kinney, ten years ago, in high school. They didn’t fall in love right away, but their friendship eventually blossomed into love. They’d been married only two years when Luke died in an auto accident on a slippery, snow-covered road. Brianna’s shattered heart took a long time to begin mending, although she finally moved forward with her life. She hadn’t personally celebrated Valentine’s Day since then, although she’d let her students decorate the classroom and have a party.

She could make the store festive with decorations and maybe set up a table with a simple craft for kids. Valentine’s Day didn’t have to be just about romance.