

# Christmas Fever

**P.L. Harris**



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Published by Gumnut Press

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ISBN: 978-0-6483729-3-6

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([www.greenteaandpinkink.com](http://www.greenteaandpinkink.com))

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Cover by Beetiful ([www.beetifulbookcovers.com](http://www.beetifulbookcovers.com))

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# Chapter One

*DEEP BREATHS, TESSA. Deep breaths.*

Tessa Quinn's gut tightened as she pulled into the driveway of her mother's Tudor-style home.

It was an icy four degrees outside the car, but her sweaty palms soaked the inside of her new woollen gloves. She gripped the steering wheel and waited for the storm in her stomach to settle. The same storm erupted the moment she'd returned home to Whittaker Springs last week.

It had been six years since she'd left. Six long years of trying to make it as an actor in London. Six long years of failed romances and missed Christmases. Whittaker Springs still looks as wonderful now as it had the day she walked out on her life. Regret flooded her heart.

Tessa headed up the garden path, fumbling in her handbag for her house keys. The overgrown Holly bush stabbed her leg as she walked past. "Ouch," she groaned, then chuckled to herself. *Just like the old days.*

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She paused at the top of the stairs and glanced across the barren yard. Bland and empty. Void of the usual Christmas decorations her mother insisted on displaying each year. She suppressed the sudden pang of guilt churning deep in the pit of her stomach. Their house usually came alive at Christmas. It was always the best-decorated house in the street. She could hear her mother's words in her head, "If you're going to do it, do it once and do it to perfection."

*I hate to continue to be a disappointment, Mum, but perfection was not something I was born with.*

She entered the house, the sharp click of the door closing behind her disturbing her thoughts. The cold, sterile air hit Tessa square in the chest as she moved through the hallway toward the kitchen. Her bag landed with a thud on the kitchen table. The same table her mother slaved over, year after year, to make the perfect Christmas pudding. The same table she'd drawn flowers on when she was five. Tessa smiled, remembering the beetroot-red colour of her mother's face when she walked in and caught her in the act.

What was she going to do with the house, now that her mother was too sick to live here alone? *I could move back home and take care of you, but what do I know about the debilitating effects of dementia? I'm no nurse.*

Her hands crept up her arms as her gaze swept the kitchen and living room. It seemed so...stagnant and desolate. Her mother's perfection used to reign from every angle. *Everything in its place and a place for everything.* Except, now, chaos engulfed every corner. The evidence of her mother's ill health hit hard, like a sledgehammer. *Oh, Mum, how could I have been so ignorant to not see this coming?*

Tessa jumped at the high-pitched ring of her mobile. *Great, now what?* "Hello, Tessa speaking."

"Tessa, it's Sophie. Ahhhhhhhhh," she squealed in Tessa's ear. "I can't believe you're finally here, and just in time for the Christmas celebrations. Why didn't you call me as soon as you were back in town?"

*Because I was embarrassed and didn't want to face up to being a failure, especially to my best friend. That's why.*

"I'm sorry, Sophie. I haven't been back long and I've been busy sorting out the stuff with Mum and—"

"I want to know everything. John's flat-out working for his new promotion and I've got my two little cherubs booked in for daycare tomorrow, so let's do lunch and you can tell me all about it. I can't wait to see you."

Tessa felt sick to the bottom of her stomach. She used to tell Sophie everything before she'd left town. It was easier to bend the truth on a phone call from London, but now seeing her face to face, Sophie would work out

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she was lying in an instant. *I guess there's no use putting off the inevitable.*

“Sure,” Tessa said. “Lunch tomorrow sounds great. Where shall I meet you?”

“How about Tony’s Bar and Grill?” She asked. “I’m sure you remember it. Tony’s made a special effort with the new Christmas menu this year, you’ll love it.”

Tessa’s heart tore in two at the mention of Tony’s Bar and Grill. It had been the place to hang out in high school, and the place she’d first laid eyes on Blake. She pushed the unwanted feeling of loss aside and rolled back her shoulders, determined to show Sophie the past was buried deep in her heart. Her future was now focused on her mother.

“Tony’s sounds great. Shall we say midday?”

“Midday sounds perfect,” Sophie said. “I’ll meet you in our usual booth. It’ll be just like old times.”

*Yeah, just like old times.* Guilt shot up Tessa’s spine. “Midday it is, then,” she said ending the call. It had been Sophie who’d encouraged her to pursue her acting career, otherwise she may never have left Whittaker Springs at all.

Looking in the direction of the oven, she sighed. “Well, dinner isn’t going to cook itself.” As she prepared her dinner, her mind buzzed with the list of things to do before heading back to the hospital for her evening visit.

*One: pack Mum a change of clothes. Two: when I get back to the hospital, see Mum's doctor to get an update. Three: call the gardener. Four: check Mum's finances.*

Firstly, she busied herself making one of her favourite dishes, lasagne. She put the finishing touches on and popped it in the oven. Tessa sifted through the mail she'd thrown on the kitchen bench earlier that day.

"Bills, bills, junk mail. More bills," she said, sighing. "I don't know how long it's going to take me to get your finances in order, Mum, but I guess they're my problem now."

The blood froze in her veins. Her name splayed across the envelope in bold letters. Tessa's eyes stared at the words plastered in red print on the top of the envelope; *Whittaker Springs High School Christmas Reunion.*

*You can't be serious? Like I don't have enough complications in my life right now.*

Whittaker Springs thrived on the Christmas spirit. December had always been a special time of year for Tessa. Somehow, six years of Christmases in London seemed to have stolen the joy in her heart. No love and no Blake.

Scanning the invite, her chest tightened as if someone had squeezed the air from her lungs with their bare hands. *This Saturday evening.* Why couldn't it have been

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two weeks ago, before she'd arrived back in town? Everyone would be there, eager to know all about her life as an actor on the West End, sucking every tidbit of information out of her. The awful part was knowing she'd have to see Blake and he'd probably have a wife by his side. Her worst nightmare come true.

How could she face everyone? "They all thought I'd make it in London." She huffed, "What would they say if I told them I bombed out on the stage years ago and now I teach drama?" Tessa's heart burst with pride, remembering her students up on stage performing in her latest pantomime. *Guess the old saying still lives. Those that can't do, teach.*

She scrunched the invitation up and tossed it in the wastebasket. "Well, that takes care of that. If I don't go, I don't have to deal with it. Problem solved." She smiled to herself.

After dinner, Tessa made quick work of the dishes and headed back to the hospital. A twinge of envy scuttled up her spine as she drove down streets, seeing every house decorated with Christmas lights. Tessa envied the hassle-free life Whittaker Springs offered. She loved growing up here, but she'd always imagined herself living the high life abroad, with Blake.

The sterile odour of the hospital assaulted Tessa from every angle. She held her breath, hoping it would pass. Her mouth tasted like metal for hours after a visit. Watching her mother being slowly eaten away by debilitating dementia gutted Tessa. It was not exactly the homecoming she was prepared for. Maybe, just maybe, it wasn't too late to right some of her wrongs.

Tessa's heart broke for all the wasted time, spent over the years, bickering back and forth with her mother about senseless, petty issues that could have been resolved in minutes. If only she had been able to discuss them with her, instead of turning most conversations into screaming matches. Maybe she wouldn't feel so guilty, praying for more time to make things right between them.

Walking into her mother's ward, she ignored the niggling feeling of regret that had planted itself deep in her gut. "Time to move forward with my life, and that means sorting things out for Mum. Hopefully, that doesn't involve staying in Whittaker Springs a moment longer than I have to."

"So, Lyndall, do you think Tessa will like these blue orchids? I think they'll bring out her eyes, don't you?"

Outside her mother's room, the echo of her name froze Tessa to the spot. *That sounds like Isaac.* Her brow creased. *Why would he be bringing me flowers?*

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She'd met Isaac on her first visit to the hospital and they'd quickly become friends. She'd walked into her mother's room to see a tall, robust man, decked out in a nurse's uniform, staring at her with inquisitive eyes. He was a little on the slim side but what he lacked in muscle, he more than made up for in the looks department. Apparently, he was a new face around the hospital.

"Tessa?" The crackle in Lyndall's soft voice made her words barely audible.

"Yes, Lyndall. Tessa, your daughter. She was in earlier today visiting."

"She was?"

"Yes. She's a beautiful young lady, you should be very proud of her."

Tessa's stomach revolted at his comment. *Proud. Are you proud of me, Mum?*

"I brought these flowers for her. I thought they might cheer her up. She has the most gorgeous sapphire-blue eyes I've ever seen."

*Oh, my God.* Nervous tension shot through her spine. A relationship with her mother's nurse was completely out of the question. *It was wrong. He's my mother's nurse, for God's sake.*

She hadn't meant to lead Isaac on, but it seems she had without even knowing it. A smile edged the corner of

her mouth. Butterflies started doing backflips on top of backflips in her stomach and she wanted to jump up in the air and do a fist pump. Men hadn't found her attractive in a while and it felt good, damn good. Maybe she was reading it all wrong.

"I'm sure she will love them," Lyndall said softly. "I'm tired."

"Why don't you snuggle down for the night and I'll shoot off as soon as I have these flowers the way I want them?"

Lyndall sighed. "See you tomorrow?"

"Of course, you're my number one patient."

Tessa peered around the door frame, just enough to see Isaac tuck the blankets up under her mother's chin. "Now try and get some sleep."

She watched Isaac pause beside the bed and it wasn't long before Lyndall's heavy breathing filled the small room.

Tessa cleared her throat and headed in. "Isaac, how nice to see you again." She smiled, placing her mother's bag on the chair beside her bed.

His eyes followed her entrance like a hawk. "Tessa. Back so soon?"

"I didn't realise you'd still be working."

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He held his finger to his lips in a shushing action and pointed to Lyndall, who was already deep in slumber. “Actually,” he said in a quiet voice. “I finished an hour ago but I wanted to drop these orchids off for you. They reminded me of your eyes, and they add a little more joy to the room,” he said, fiddling with the vase placement on the counter. “I thought they might cheer you up.”

Tessa smiled. She liked Isaac. He did have great taste in flowers, not to mention his backside looked incredibly hot in tight jeans. Her chest tightened as she sucked in a deep breath. “The orchids are lovely, thank you. As you know, I haven’t been back in town long.” She shuffled from one foot to another. What was wrong with her? She’d never had a problem talking to a man before.

His eyebrow raised. “I know. This will be my first Christmas in Whittaker Springs and I hear it’s the best time of year. I love how the whole town gets involved. The excitement is contagious. I especially love the cute snowman near the rotunda. Do you know he gets a new outfit every day?”

Tessa’s nervous hands twisted in front of her. “Yes, yes, I do. That has been a Whittaker Springs tradition as far back as I can remember,” she said. “Listen, Isaac, I appreciate you listening to me babble since I’ve been visiting Mum.”

“No problem,” he chuckled. “I have been told that I’m a good listener once or twice before.”

*Cute, and a good listener. Maybe I’ve won the lottery, but he is no Blake.*

“It’s just that I haven’t really talked openly to anyone since coming back to town. I’m not intending to stay long so I’m kind of keeping to myself, so I’d appreciate it if you—”

His brow creased. “What do you mean, you’re not staying long? I thought you moved back to take care of your mum?”

“Yes, I moved back to sort out my mum’s affairs and work out what’s the best option for her health, moving forward. I have a job back in London, one I love, and at the moment I’m on leave—”

“But no one there who loves you?” Isaac butted in.

Isaac’s words were like rubbing salt in an open wound. *Worst mistake of my life.* Her decision to leave everyone behind, including Blake, still haunted her thoughts.

“For a newcomer like me, finding a friend in a small town like Whittaker Springs is hard. Everyone wants to know your business and I’m not exactly ready to share the ins and outs of my life with everyone just yet.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

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“It’s not important,” he said under his breath. “I just meant that when you move from the city to a small town, people tend to make judgements about you before they really get to know you. Judgements about your life and your past.”

Tessa began to unpack the change of clothes she’d brought in for her mother. “I know how fast gossip travels in this town. If I’m a master at anything, it’s keeping a secret.”

“There’s a lot more to that statement than meets the eye. Care to share?”

Cursing, she hurried forward and neatly placed the clothes in the top drawer. “I know you mean well, but my life is...a bit of a mess at the moment.”

“Whose life isn’t?” Isaac’s voice drummed on. “My family didn’t really approve of the lifestyle I chose to live.”

Tessa frowned.

He shrugged it off, but Tessa caught the pain strewn across his face. “If I wanted to stay a part of *their* family, it was live by their rules or get out. So, here I am.”

Her heart sliced in two, remembering how her mother had done the same to her. Her career or Blake. “Yeah, I know exactly how you feel.”

“That’s why I’m here in Whittaker Springs. A new life, a new start.”

Tessa smiled.

“I’m a friendly ear, ready to listen if you need it. I promise it will go to the grave with me.” He mimed a zipper closing his lips. “By the sounds of it, you don’t have many people to talk to.”

*You got that right.*

Tessa’s heart warmed to his trusting eyes. *What harm could it do?*

“Well, you know how sometimes you can bend the truth a little?” She exhaled and sat on the edge of her mother’s bed, careful not to disturb her slumber.

Isaac nodded.

“Well, me and my big mouth made all kinds of promises to the townsfolk here, that I’d return a famous actress on the West End. I left town to become an actress and it didn’t exactly work out as I planned, and now I’m too ashamed and embarrassed to tell people the truth.”

“Believe it or not, I do know how you feel. I know exactly what you mean. From what I hear around town, you’re a great actor.”

Anger bled through her body. “Stop, just stop, please,” she said, rubbing her temples. “That’s just it. I bombed out in London. I suck. I’m no great, successful actor. I haven’t had an acting job in the past three years. I work in a delicatessen and I teach drama part-time in a

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small private school, just outside London. Although I love it—the drama teaching, that is, not the delicatessen—it’s not exactly what I told everyone when I left.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.” Her gut wrenched and weariness crept over her body. “I thought I was the bee’s knees, as good as my mother.” Tessa gazed warmly at her mother as she slept soundly beside her. “Boy, was I wrong. I got a few good roles, but then it all fell apart. I couldn’t even get a job using my mother’s name. People didn’t know her anymore and I didn’t know how to tell her I was a failure. I knew I’d made the wrong choice and I wanted to come home.” *To Blake.*

“But she’d bragged to everyone in town about how I was going to be a famous actress. For once, she was proud of me and it felt good. How could I let her down? So, it was easier to just stay away and let her believe in her dream.” She hesitated, her chest tightening with an uncomfortable burn. “I thought I’d have plenty of time to come clean and then Mum’s condition got worse and then pneumonia set in and” – she shrugged – “here I am.”

“So, let me get this straight, you’ve been working in a delicatessen and teaching drama and no one knew?” Isaac asked.

She nodded. “I love my students. It’s a far cry from a West End stage, but after the way I big noted myself before I left, I can’t see people understanding when they find out the truth. God, I behaved like a spoilt child.”

His eyes widened and then he grinned. “I hope you can get out of it without leaving too much destruction in your wake.”

Emotion welled in her chest. “To top it off, I get home today and find an invitation to my high school Christmas reunion in the mail.” She chuckled to herself. “How the hell am I supposed to face everyone?”

“Well, it could be a good place to come clean. Since everyone will be there, you can do it in one blow.”

Anger tightened Tessa’s jaw. “I don’t think so. I’ll be the laughing stock of the school. Blake will be there and he was right to dump me. That way, he didn’t have to watch me make a total fool of myself.”

“And Blake is?”

Tessa’s throat clenched and she struggled to swallow around the lump in her throat. “My high school sweetheart. The man I thought I’d spend the rest of my life with.”

“I see,” Isaac said sympathetically.

Her lips thinned. Her breathing was heavy. The fight was draining from her body. “I’m sorry, Isaac. I

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didn't mean to dump all this on you. I guess once I started talking, I couldn't stop."

"No problem. Listening is one of my strengths, or so I'm told, and besides, it's part of a nurse's job to provide comfort for those in need, even the patient's family."

Tessa smiled. "Thanks for listening, but it's my problem to work out." She turned towards her mother's sleeping body. "It looks like she's out for the night. I've kept you here long enough and you're not even on duty."

"No problem," he chuckled. "Listen, if you want to go to this Christmas reunion—"

Tessa cut him off abruptly shaking her head. "No, there's no way I'm going."

"Okay, but if you *want* to, I'd be happy to go with you. It'd be a great way for me to meet a whole bunch of people, or just in case you need a buffer or quick escape."

Something in his voice settled her. "Thank you, Isaac I appreciate the offer."

"All right, I'm out of here." He smiled as he left.

"Well, Mum, it looks like I've really dumped myself in it big time." She re-tucked the blanket around Lyndall's neck. Tessa's cold lips were warmed by her mother's skin as she gave her a tender kiss goodbye. "I wish I could talk to you." Sadness crept into Tessa's heart. "I could really

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do with your advice. I miss you so much.” A tear threatened to drop from her cheek.

“‘til tomorrow, Mum.”

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