

CHAMPAGNE FOR CHRISTMAS

By

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Champagne for Christmas

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*For Marilyn Lee, a supportive, loyal, dear friend since childhood and a woman
who appreciates good champagne.*

*With appreciation for your love and support to: Jimmy Blackman, Diana Finegold,
Sally Gallagher, Lisa George, Jane Gerard, Catherine Harding, Larry Joachim,
Robie Lord, Katherine Tate*

Chapter One

The sultry August air felt heavy around Nina Wells, and it quickly melted the ice cream in her sundae. Gazing up at the clear night sky to look for the Big Dipper, Nina dribbled fudge sauce on her white tee shirt. She reached for a napkin, realized she'd forgotten to take one, and doubled back to the ice cream stand before the stain set.

She rushed up to the tiny counter with the napkin holder right as a tall, good looking man holding a double mint chip cone turned. They collided. His ice cream fell onto her chest, causing her to gasp at the shock of cold against her skin. She looked up into his light brown eyes as she reached for the melting ball of ice cream. He grunted and slipped one arm around her to keep her from losing her footing. She stood wobbling, mesmerized by him; he was almost a whole foot taller than she with light brown hair and shoulders a mile wide. Nina shifted the ice cream ball from hand to hand, not knowing what to do with it.

"I don't think you can put that back on the cone. Maybe the garbage?"

He suggested with a grin.

Nina jerked back to reality and stepped toward the garbage, tossing what was left of the melted ice cream ball in.

"I'm so sorry. I'll buy you another one," she said, reaching for napkins to wipe her shirt and hands.

"It was my fault...completely. You don't have to buy me another. I still have one scoop here and I'll just..." he said, approaching her with napkins in his hand, then stopped his hand in midair, color suffusing his face.

"It's okay. I've got this. Get your other scoop," she said, raising a hand to stop him from wiping her shirt.

The young woman behind the counter offered him a replacement scoop free. Nina sat down at the picnic table set up for people to eat outside. After a good look at her shirt she knew it was finished. The tall attractive man joined her.

"At least let me pay for a new shirt," he offered, sitting down next to her on the bench.

"It's okay. I had a spill on it already. That's why I was coming back and got in your way," she said, finishing the last of her sundae.

"What flavor?" He asked.

"Mint chip...is there any other?" She laughed.

"Not for me."

Nina's gaze was drawn to his mouth, then his tongue, as he licked the cold confection off the cone first, then off his lips. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip unconsciously in tandem with him.

Wonder what it would feel like to kiss him.

"I'm Nina Wells," she said, offering her hand, when she could take her eyes of his mouth.

"Clint Hayworth."

He shook her hand.

"You look familiar," she said, admiring his physique with hooded eyes.

“I’ve seen you, too...in the garden? Next door?” he asked, taking his gaze away from his ice cream.

“You’re renting the Willis place?”

“Thinking about buying it, too.” He stopped eating long enough to shoot her a confident smile, his gaze resting on her face before sweeping over her chest and back again.

“It’s a lovely house. The neighborhood is terrific, too. Lots of space and nice people.”

“Then why did I see a ‘for sale’ sign in front of your place, too?”

“Oh,” she said, coloring, “I’m alone now...and it’s kind of...I’m not...”

“Not used to taking care of it by yourself?”

She nodded. *Why am I still embarrassed about being a widow? It’s not a personal failing.*

“Have you owned it long?”

“Since my son was eight...fifteen years.”

“You have a twenty-three-year-old son?” His eyebrows shot up and he stared at her.

She nodded forming a weak smile and trying to hide her nerves.

“You don’t look old enough.”

“Looks can be deceiving.”

Nina crumpled up her sundae cup and moved to the trash can to discard it.

“Not in my book,” he said, giving her figure the once-over as she moved across his path.

“Where is your son?” Nina asked, changing the subject to hide her discomfort at his close scrutiny.

“He went back to his mother’s place.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” She put her hand on his forearm.

“I’m used to it by now...” He rubbed his hand over his two-day growth of beard and closed his eyes for a second. “I lied. Not used to it at all. Hate it, in fact.” He took a big, loud bite of the sugar cone, crunching it between his teeth.

“My son lives in Seattle. Has for three years. I’m not used to him so far away and probably never will be.”

“Can I at least buy you a cup of coffee to make up for the shirt I wrecked?”

He finished his last bite of the cone and turned to face her, holding her gaze as a seductive smile inched across his face. She swallowed, and her pulse kicked up.

“Why don’t you come over and I’ll make us both some coffee. Some company in my too-quiet house would be welcome.”

“Great. Meet you there,” he said, finishing the last of his cone.

Nina returned home, arriving before Clint. She ducked into the bedroom to change. While she had her shirt off, she faced the full length mirror on the back of the closet door. She looked at herself with a critical eye, her gaze roving over her form from head to toe. Trying to be objective, she admitted she didn’t

look too bad. True, everything may have been a touch lower than it was ten years ago, but she still looked good.

Rummaging through her drawer, she found a raspberry tee shirt, rather low cut and slipped it on and faced the mirror again.

Don't be ridiculous! He's gotta be at least eight years younger than you! Grow up! Still, he's so handsome and sexy.

But she brushed her dark, straight hair, refreshed her make-up, emphasizing her large clear blue eyes and inched the neckline of the shirt a little lower, giving her cleavage more exposure. *Nothing wrong with flirting. I need practice and he's perfect since he'll never be interested in me!*

She descended the stairs quickly, a new lightness in her step and got busy in the kitchen. While she was rummaging through the refrigerator for something more than coffee to serve, she heard the buzz of the doorbell at the back door. It was Clint and all of a sudden her heart was racing and her mouth felt dry.

"Coffee smells great," he said, sniffing the air as he walked into her kitchen. He stopped and looked around. "My kitchen doesn't look anything like this. This is awesome," he said, running his hand over the granite counter top and checking out the pristine oak floor.

"We—I mean, I renovated the kitchen last year."

"I love the light green on the walls," Clint said, his gaze traveling from the recessed lighting to the country artwork, finally settling on her.

He looked her up and down, sizing her up, then his brown eyes lighting up when they met hers. She fidgeted with the hem of her tee shirt, her gaze dropping to the floor trying to remember why he was there, totally discomfited by his appraisal.

"Coffee?"

"Coffee! Yes...it's ready," she said, glancing at the pot.

"Can I help?" He stepped closer.

"Got it."

Nina took out two mugs with flowers painted on in pastel colors and put them on a tray with a matching sugar bowl and a small pitcher of milk.

"Sit over there," she suggested, pointing to the snug booth carved into the corner alcove.

Clint followed her instructions. Nina poured the coffee into the mugs and took the tray over to the table, concentrating on keeping her hands steady and wondering why she was so nervous all of a sudden. *This isn't a date! He's a neighbor. You're being friendly, neighborly. It isn't a date...is it?*

After moving the mugs, milk and sugar to the table, Nina slipped into the booth opposite Clint, raised her mug, looked up at him and asked, "At the risk of being mundane, what do you do, Clint?"

"I teach English, high school English. But I'm here this summer to write a play," he admitted, lowering his gaze to his coffee mug.

"A play! How fabulous!"

He looked up at her, surprised.

"That's wonderful. I'm an actress. What's the play about? Can I read it?"

Can I help by reading aloud? It would be good practice for me.” She realized she was babbling and suddenly became shut up. Clint’s smile seemed to reach from ear to ear, making him even more attractive. “I haven’t finished it yet, but sure...I’d love to have you read...maybe even help me write?”

“I’m no writer,” she said, looking down at her mug.

“I don’t know if I am either,” he laughed.

“Tell me what it’s about.” Nina sat back, relaxing her body against the booth and settled her gaze on his face.

“The story is about a man and woman getting a divorce. They have a child, who is manipulating them, trying to get them back together by behaving badly, pretending to be sick...” he paused.

“Is it working?”

He nodded, bringing his mug up to his mouth for a sip before continuing.

“She’s making them work together to get her back on track and while they are, they fall in love again.”

“What a lovely story.”

He looked down at his mug, raised it to his lips again and drank. She watched his face carefully.

“None of this is based on real life, is it?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Six months ago, when I got the idea, I wished it was, but now I know it can’t be so...no, not based on real life.”

“Can I read the part of the wife or am I too old?”

“Nothing old about you,” he said, sweeping his gaze down to her waist and back to her eyes, lingering on her breasts for a moment.

His eyes connected with hers producing a spark of electricity in her, heating her cheeks. While his gaze held hers, he slowly smiled as if seeing her for the first time. Feeling a spark of desire from him, she blushed deeply and her mouth went dry as his gaze settled on her lips.

“Ice cream?” she asked him, feebly.

“Mint chip. All because of mint chip,” he said, covering her hand with his.

Clint stayed talking with Nina until eleven o’clock. Afterward, she left the dishes and went straight up to bed. Her dreams were filled with images of him, producing a restless night.

It was ten o’clock before Nina could pull herself out of bed. Clint Hayworth kept her awake but not with sexual satisfaction as a result. She smiled at herself and shook her head. *Am I too old for these kind of fantasies? I guess not.*

By 10:30 she was ready to run errands but stopped when she opened the front door. There was a small package wrapped in brown paper from a grocery bag. She sat on the stoop and opened it up. Inside was a sky blue tee shirt. She checked the label in the back of the neck and son-of-a-gun, it was in her size.

A small note fell out as she unwrapped it.

Please wear this tonight at a barbecue at my place. Popping a cork at six

sharp. Hope it's your size, it's your color.

Clint

She held up the shirt and looked it over. It was almost the exact color of her eyes...in fact it was exactly like one she had been eyeing in Mimi's, a posh clothing boutique in Oak Bend. Clint must have been up early.

When she arrived at his house at six sharp, he threw open the door and his gaze went right to the shirt.

"Amazing. It fits."

"My size and my color."

"Same color as your eyes. Come in."

He threw the door open and stepped back. Nina followed him through the living and dining room and out to the deck in the back. A bottle of wine stood open and breathing while the scent of marinated chicken cooking slowly on the grill made her stomach rumble. Clint poured Cabernet Sauvignon in two glasses.

"Prefer red wine. Hope you don't mind, I know it doesn't go with chicken."

"Cab is my favorite."

He raised his glass in a toast. "To mint chip lovers everywhere and lovely ladies with blue eyes."

Nina blushed as she drank, enjoying the wine as much as his toast. She put her glass down and moved closer to Clint, eyeing his broad shoulders and chest outlined so perfectly by his snug tee shirt.

"Can I read your play?"

"I thought you'd never ask." He reached behind a chair, pulled out a dogeared hard copy of his play and offered it to Nina. She took the play from him, sat down and began to read.

That was the last dinner Nina ate alone for the next two weeks.