



*Champagne
For
Christmas*

Jean Joachim

A New York Nights Novel

CHAMPAGNE FOR CHRISTMAS

By

Jean C. Joachim

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Champagne for Christmas

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Dedication

To my readers.

May you always find true love and drink champagne at Christmas

Thank you for buying and reading my books.

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Prologue

The day before Christmas, New York City

Wrapped in a luxurious mink coat and nothing else, Nina Wells stood, alone, on the terrace of her lavish New York City apartment, watching snowflakes fall. Even the Christmas lights, blinking at her from Fifth Avenue across the park, didn't melt the frost surrounding her heart. The wind gathered strength, whipping tiny, icy bits into her face, stinging like a million needles. The blowing sent the chill factor plummeting down to zero. With a little shiver, she flipped up the collar to cover her bare neck.

Will I ever see Clint again? Probably not. A heavy sigh escaped her lips. *I'm too old for him, anyway. How stupid to fall for a younger man. I should've known better.* She blew out a breath then returned to the warmth of her tony place.

A widow for only three years, she wasn't used to being alone on the holidays. Even her huge Christmas tree, decorated with ornaments lovingly collected from her past and winking lights in red, blue, and green, wasn't festive enough to cure heartbreak.

Nina slipped on sweats, as the freezing temperature outside had cooled her apartment, too. After building a healthy fire, she wrapped her hands around a cup of hazelnut hot chocolate and curled up on the sofa, tucking the mink around her like an expensive blanket.

As cold as it was in New York, the opposite had been true on the day she had met Clint. Snuggling down on the sofa, she remembered as if it was yesterday, not four months ago.

Chapter One

August, Pine Grove, New York in the Catskill Mountains

The sultry, August air hung heavy around Nina, quickly melting the ice cream in her sundae. While gazing up at the clear, night sky to look for the Big Dipper, she dribbled fudge sauce on her new, white T-shirt. She pursed her lips. *That's what I get for not paying attention.* With a disgusted sigh, she reached for a napkin before realizing she'd forgotten to take one. "Damn," she muttered under her breath and doubled back to the stand before the stain set.

She rushed up to the tiny counter right as a tall, good-looking man holding a double scoop cone turned. They collided. Half of his cold treat fell onto her chest, causing her to gasp at the shock against her skin. She looked up into his light brown eyes as she grabbed at the melting ball.

He slipped one arm around her waist to keep her from losing her footing. She stood wobbling, mesmerized by him. He was almost a whole foot taller than she was, with thick, straight, brown hair and shoulders a mile wide. Nina shifted the ice cream from hand to hand, not knowing what to do.

"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 trashcan, tossing in what was left of the melting mess. "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 anything. Besides, I still have one scoop here. I'll just..." he began, approaching her with more napkins, and then stopping, his hand in midair, color suffusing his face.

Nina had raised a hand to halt his actions. "It's okay. I've got this." The young woman behind the counter offered him a replacement scoop for 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 ruined.

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 his lips. She ran her own tongue over her bottom lip unconsciously, in tandem with him. *Wonder what it would feel like to kiss him?* "I'm Nina Wells." She offered her hand, as soon as she could rip her stare from his mouth.

He shook it. "Clint Hayworth."

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

"I've seen you, too...in the garden? Next door?" he asked, looking 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's terrific, too. Lots of space and nice people."

"Then, why did I see a 'For Sale' sign in front of your place?"

"Oh." She could feel the heat of her blush. "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...seventeen years."

"You have a twenty-five-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 trashcan to discard it.

"Not in my book," he said, giving her figure a frank once-over as she crossed his path.

“Was the boy helping you in the garden your son?” Nina asked, changing the subject to hide her discomfort at his scrutiny.

“Yes. Cory.”

“Where is he?”

“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 fingers 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 the last bite of the cone and turned to face her, holding her gaze as a seductive smirk 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.

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 rather low-cut raspberry T-shirt and slipped it on, facing the mirror again. *Don’t be ridiculous! He’s gotta be at least ten years younger than you! Grow up! Still, he’s so handsome and sexy.*

She brushed her straight, dark 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.*

With a new lightness in her step, she descended the stairs and got busy in the kitchen. While she rummaged through the refrigerator for something more than coffee to serve, she heard the buzz of the bell at the back door. The sound started her heart racing, and her mouth dried out like a leaf of lettuce in the sun.

“Coffee smells great,” Clint 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 ran his hand over the granite counter top and checked out the pristine, oak floor.

“We—I mean, I renovated it last year.”

“I love the light green on the walls.” His gaze travelled from the recessed lighting to the country artwork, finally settling on her.

“My husband didn’t like green, but I did. Do, I mean.”

He moved away. “You’re married?”

“Was. Henry died.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Long time ago?”

“Just three years. Some days, it feels like yesterday, and sometimes, it seems like forever.”

Clint eased up next to her, slipping his arm around her for a brief squeeze.

The warmth of his touch sent a shiver of pleasure down her spine. “You?”

“I’m divorced. My ex found a rich guy, took my son, and moved to a fancy neighborhood.”

“What a shame.”

“Yeah. I hate sharing him. But I’m stuck.”

His gaze traveled her length, sizing her up, his brown eyes glowing when they met hers. She fidgeted with the hem of her T-shirt, her gaze dropping to the floor, trying to remember why he was there.

“Coffee?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Coffee! Yes...it’s ready,” she said, glancing at the pot.

He stepped closer. “Can I help?”

“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 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 cups, milk, and sugar to the table, Nina slipped into the spot opposite Clint, raised her drink, 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 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 clammed 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, glancing down.

"I don't know if I am, either." He laughed.

"Tell me what it's about." Nina sat back, relaxing her body against the seat.

"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 beverage 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?"

"There's nothing old about you," he said, sweeping his stare down to her waist and back to her eyes, lingering on her breasts for a moment.

His gaze connected with hers, producing a jolt of electricity in her, heating her cheeks. 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 cardboard as his stare settled on her lips.

“Ice cream?” she asked him, feebly.

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

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

It was ten o'clock the next morning before Nina could pull herself out of bed. Clint Hayworth had kept her awake with heat that didn't lead to sexual satisfaction. She smiled and shook her head. *Am I too old for these kind of fantasies? I guess not.*

By ten thirty, she was ready to run errands, but stopped when she opened the front door. There was a small package wrapped in brown paper on the stoop. She sat down and opened it. Inside was a sky blue T-shirt. She checked the label on the back of the neck, and son-of-a-gun, it was her size. A small note fell out as she shook it.

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

Hope it's your size. It's certainly your color.

Clint

She held up the top 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.*

Her pulse pumped faster all day as she prepared for her date with Clint. *Is it a date or just a barbecue between neighbors?* She fought her nerves by keeping busy, First a manicure, followed by a long bath and lotioning her body with her favorite scented cream passed the time.

Dressing was easy –she'd wear shorts and the shirt he gave her. Sitting at her dressing table, fretting over how much makeup to apply, she laughed. *This isn't a date. He's much younger than*

I. He's only asking me to apologize for wrecking my shirt. Get a grip. I'm too old for him anyway.

She opted for less-is-more and applied a bit of blush, mascara and lipstick. A final look in the mirror surprised Nina. Anticipation of a wonderful evening with an attractive man heightened the color in her cheeks. She looked good. Nina smiled as she descended the stairs.

When she arrived at his house, he threw open the door, and his gaze went right to her shirt. "Amazing. It fits."

"My size and my color."

"Same color as your eyes. Come in."

He's observant.

He 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 into 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. Dinner was delicious. Nina enjoyed being a guest and Clint was a good chef. He waited on her, removing empty plates and placing new ones before her. She ate up the attention.

They chatted about their lives, filling in the background of who they were. Nina explained all about Pine Grove as she had lived there a long time. Clint ranted on about the restrictive high school English curriculum. As they finished the meal, Clint poured the last of the wine.

Putting her glass down, she moved closer to Clint, eyeing his broad shoulders and chest, outlined so perfectly by his snug T-shirt. "Can I read your play?"

"I thought you'd never ask." He reached behind a chair, pulled out a dog-eared hard copy, and offered it to her. She took it, sat down, and thumbed through until she found the first page. Clint paced as she slowly absorbed the text.

She glanced up more than once to spy him chewing on a thumbnail or clenching his jaw. "Find something to do, Clint. You're distracting me."

“I can’t. I’m too nervous. You’re the first person to read it, besides me.”

“I love it, dear man. Really. I’m totally engrossed and, frankly, annoyed as hell that your pacing is disrupting my concentration.” She smiled at him.

Clint burst out laughing. “If you put it that way... Okay. I’ll do the dishes or something.” He left the room.

Nina let out a sigh and went back to the manuscript. After two hours, she slapped it shut. She raised her gaze to find Clint sitting on the edge of a chair nearby. It was nine o’clock, and the sun was setting. She stood, stretched, and joined him.

“Well?” Sweat had formed on his upper lip.

“I love it.”

“You do?” he squeaked.

“I do. But it needs work.”

“Oh?” The eager enthusiasm on his face slipped off.

She put her hand on his arm and squeezed. “Every play needs work, darling. That’s the theater.”

“You know where it’s weak, don’t you?”

She nodded.

“Will you help me? I’ll pay you.”

Nina laughed. “Of course, I’ll help you and, no, you won’t pay me. I’d be thrilled to be involved. This story is wonderful, and the characters are great. But they need a bit more depth. It needs more humor.”

“When can we get started?”

“How about now?”

His face lit up again, looking more handsome than ever. “You really like it?” He touched her shoulder.

“I do,” she said, settling into a chair next to him. “Do you have this on computer?”

“Yeah. I’ll get it.” Clint brought his laptop out to the deck while Nina lit some candles. He opened the document. “Where do you want to begin?”

“Let’s begin at the beginning.” She chuckled.

He cringed. “That bad, huh?”

“Not at all. But there are a few things you might want to add.”

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

“Oh, God, Nina. It feels like it’s a hundred and ten. The City is a friggin’ oven. I’m melting,” her friend and agent, Fran, whined over the phone.

“It’s warm here, too, but nothing like that. Do you want to come up?”

“I’d love to. Herb is on a plane to London, and I’m rolling around in this cavern like a lost marble.”

“When can you leave?”

“How about ten minutes ago?”

Nina laughed as she hung up. She pocketed her cell then headed out to her garden. Wearing only a pair of shorts, Clint stood in the sun, watering his lawn. Nina stared boldly at his broad shoulders and muscular back as she tiptoed closer. His waist was slim, his butt cute enough to squeeze. His powerful thighs barely fit in the Bermudas. His gorgeous body took her breath away.

“Hi,” she said, sneaking up behind him.

He jumped, swinging the hose around as he turned, dousing her head and chest by accident. She gasped as the cold water hit her warm skin.

“I keep messing you up. Sorry,” he said, turning off the spray. “What’s up?” He reached in his pocket and produced a handkerchief.

She plucked it from him and wiped down her face. She pursed her lips as she watched him stifle a chuckle. “Funny?” Her brow wrinkled.

“You gotta admit…”

Swiftly, she snatched the hose and squirted him, laughing as his mouth fell open. “Now, that’s funny.”

He grabbed her around the middle, picking her up and tickling her. Nina squirmed and squealed, kicking her legs, but he was so tall that she couldn’t reach the ground.

Then, he put her down, cupped her chin with his palm, and ran his gaze over her chest. The cold water made her nipples harden. She noticed he didn’t raise his eyes. Glancing down at her T-shirt, now soaking wet and totally transparent, she blushed and covered her chest with her arms. “Enjoying the view?”

“Absolutely.” He chuckled, before dragging his stare up to her face.

“I won’t be able to work on the play for a few days.” She shook off droplets.

“Oh? How come?” He frowned.

“My friend, Fran, is coming for a visit.”

“It’s funny you say that, because my son, Cory, is coming tomorrow for a week, too.”

“Then, it’s not a problem.” *I’ll miss you, but not telling you that.* She relaxed her stance.

“Works out perfectly. Except we lose a week.”

“We’ll make it up. Work twice as hard. See you in a week, then.”

“And I promise not to hose you down.” He smirked. “Maybe. That view...”

She punched him in the shoulder. *If I get any hotter around you, I’ll need it.*

Nina returned to her place and checked out the guest room, making the bed and placing fresh towels on the bureau. When she was finished, she moved to a shady spot on the deck and wrote a shopping list. Grilling was the only way to cook in the heat. She looked forward to Fran’s visit. She had been lonely since Henry’s death. .

At five o’clock, Fran’s BMW pulled into Nina’s driveway. Standing at the picture window, Nina spied the tall, lanky blonde pluck a small suitcase from her trunk and march up the front steps. The women hugged before Fran stepped inside.

“It’s so much cooler up here.” Fran put her bag down to take the glass of mint iced tea Nina offered. “This is delicious,” she said.

“Made with fresh mint.”

“Oh? Are you growing things? Did you break the black thumb spell?” Fran put the drink down and opened her valise.

“It’s from the garden next door. Grown by my neighbor.”

“Isn’t she lovely to share?”

“He.” Nina sipped her tea, avoiding Fran’s gaze.

“He?” Fran stopped what she was doing and cocked an eyebrow at her friend.

“Come into the guest room.” Nina tried to lead Fran away, but she was having none of it.

“Who? Is he cute?”

Sensing she was blushing, the petite woman turned toward the deck. “It’s lovely outside.”

“Where? Which side?” Fran pushed through the back door and stood on the deck, shading her eyes with her hand. After scouting around, she spied Clint, weeding in his garden. “Holy shit,” she whispered. “That him?” She nodded in his direction.

“It is.” Nina waved at him, and he returned the gesture, standing up and slapping his hands together to remove the dirt. He wasn’t wearing a shirt.

“Oh my God. Nina! You’re living next door to that Greek God? Crap. He’s gorgeous.”

“I know. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

After a brief introduction, Fran stayed, touting Nina’s good qualities, much to her friend’s embarrassment.

Yanking on the blonde’s arm, Nina spoke up, “We really have to go, Fran.”

“Wait a sec. One more thing.”

Clint’s gaze met Nina’s. “I’d love to stay and talk, but Cory’s bus arrives in half an hour, and I need to change.”

“Oh! Of course, of course. Sorry to keep you,” Fran babbled as Nina led her away. “Who’s Cory?” she asked when they were out of earshot.

“His son.”

“That amazing man has a son? Shit. He’s married?” Fran rested her hands on her hips.

“Divorced.”

“Ah, then there’s still hope. Though, he looks a lot younger than you.”

“Stop it. No match making. Time to unpack.” Nina pushed her friend into the guest room and sat cross-legged while Fran hung up her clothes.

“I have something for you.” She pulled out two bottles and handed them to Nina.

“Oh my God! Peach champagne and whipped cream vodka! How wonderful. Thank you so much.”

“Couldn’t be a girls’ weekend without peach champagne.”

Nina put the liquor in the refrigerator and made a salad. The women finished the pitcher of iced tea. As Nina was filling it again, she heard a car door slam. Curiosity drove her peek out the window.

Clint retrieved his son’s bag from the trunk. He put his arm around the teen’s shoulders, and they walked inside. Nina noticed Cory was built like his father, but he hadn’t filled out yet. She

couldn't see his eyes, but his hair, a slightly lighter color, flopped over his forehead just like Clint's. *He'll be handsome someday, too.*