

Jingly Bells

Book 4:
A California Belly Dance Romance
Holiday Novella

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The Sultan's Tent bar thumped and buzzed like a hormone-fueled frat party. A party where a girl could dance and drink and lose herself without even trying. A party that could make Tilly Bennett forget every reason she hated Christmas.

At least that was her plan.

She sat back on her barstool and soaked in the madness around her until her friend returned, emerging from the crowd with two martini glasses rimmed with crushed candy canes.

Abby sloshed one of the milky white cocktails when she handed it to Tilly. "This place isn't usually such a zoo. But I know the bartender. He'll take care of us."

Tilly stared at the creamy drink. A sick feeling clawed up the back of her throat. "I don't mind the zoo, but I'm not sure about *this*." She set the glass down and slid it back to Abby. "You can keep mine. I'm going to stay away from eggnog for a while."

She'd worked through dinner, helping Abby and her staff transform the Shimmy Shop's studio into a performance space for a couple dozen dance students and seating for their friends and family. The only thing she'd had that resembled food since breakfast was the eggnog chilling in the studio's mini fridge. Somehow, she'd managed to drink her way through a whole quart. The thought of one more drop made her stomach somersault.

"It's not eggnog." Abby sipped from hers. "It's melted ice cream with vodka and something minty. He called it a Christmas Wish. You should try it."

Tilly lifted the glass, but her attention skipped across the room to a guy in a thousand-dollar suit moving in on a career girl in a tweed mini dress. While Abby had been getting drinks, Tilly watched Shy Guy hover, trying to catch the girl's attention. She pegged him as a bashful, corporate type.

She'd been rooting for him to muster the courage to speak to the girl and now—finally!—he was striking up a conversation. The young woman swayed and giggled and twirled her California blond hair. Tilly silently urged him on. Someone should get a happy ending tonight.

He inched closer and pulled a sprig of mistletoe from his breast pocket.

That's when Tilly saw his wedding band. Its glint hit her like a brick of *deja*

vu. Christmas was about to claim another casualty, and it didn't feel any better knowing this time it wouldn't be her.

She reached into her red leather clutch and found the hotel key card she'd picked up an hour before. She rubbed it between her fingers like a worry stone, letting its smooth, solid surface soothe the pain that always returned this time of year.

"Do you really hate it?" Abby reached across the table to retrieve the martini glass. "I can ask him to make something else."

Tilly pulled her hand from her purse. "No, I'm sure it's fine." She turned her back on the couple and ignored the urge to march over and smack Shy Guy. She took a drink instead. It actually was good—sweet and minty with a coolness that gave way to a slow burn that melted her anger into a gooey pool of who-cares-anyway. She sipped again and nodded. "It's really good."

Abby lifted a thumbs-up sign to the long and lean hottie darting like a ping-pong ball behind the bar, trying to keep up with the thirsty eve of Christmas Eve crowd. "It's a winner, Marco," she hollered over the booming dance music. "Thank you."

Marco raised two fingers to his lips and tossed a quick kiss in their direction. "*Grazie, bella.*"

Tilly straightened and eyed Abby. Maybe Shy Guy wasn't the only one lining up mistletoe mischief. "Flirting with the Italian import? Better hope Derek doesn't find out."

Abby sputtered into her cocktail. "Marco? No way. He flirts with everybody. It's part of his charm."

Tilly wished she could reel back the accusation. "I don't know why I said that. Christmas makes me a little crazy."

"I think Christmas makes us all a little crazy." Abby winked and clinked her glass with Tilly's.

Tilly was working up a better explanation when the crowd parted and Melanie appeared.

"You didn't start the party without us, did you?" Melanie grabbed an empty stool from a nearby group and dragged it to the table. Behind her, three student dancers followed. Like Tilly and Abby, they were still in stage makeup and some combination of costume pieces and street wear.

"It took forever to get through the valet line." Melanie glanced back over her shoulder. "I thought Janaya was right behind me."

"Did I hear my name?" Janaya and her hot-pink dreadlocks swished into view, along with a few more student performers. When the greetings died down, Janaya threw her arms around Abby. "An after party was a fantastic idea. Thanks, boss."

Abby squeezed her. "It's the least I could do. You guys worked so hard to pull off the showcase. I'm beyond grateful, especially to Melanie and Tilly. I have no idea

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why either of you would work through your Christmas vacation, but we couldn't have done it without you."

Melanie dropped her head back and sighed. "Honestly? It feels good to be home. Being on tour is great, don't get me wrong, but I'm happy to be back in Orange County, even if it's just for a few days." She leaned over and jabbed at Tilly's shoulder. "I don't know how you do it. You've been touring for three years, practically non-stop. It's only been a few months for me, and I'm about to lose my mind. New York, London, Milan—so many great places, but they're becoming one, big, messy blur. How do you keep your sanity?"

"What sanity? That's the first thing to go in this business." She tipped her glass and drowned the uncomfortable knot in her throat.

An awkward silence settled on the table.

Melanie stared at her with wide, troubled eyes. "Please tell me you're joking."

"Of course I am." Her forced laugh uncorked a collective sigh of relief from the dancers around her, all except Melanie. There was something tender and raw in her expression that reminded Tilly of herself that first year, before the glamour of the traveling dancer's life wore off.

But those were her mistakes, not Melanie's.

Tilly locked on her friend's gaze. "Life on the road has its challenges, sure, but it has rewards, too. The fans. The perks. The parties. You can't let yourself forget that you're doing what thousands of girls dream of doing." It was the speech she told herself when the doubts set in.

She wished she still believed it.

"You're right. You guys are so lucky." Janaya flipped her dreadlocks over her shoulder and scooted her stool into the conversation. The students behind her murmured and nodded.

Abby leaned forward. "I'd say we were the lucky ones this week. We couldn't have pulled off this show without the extra help. So let's start this party off with a toast to Melanie and Tilly, our visiting Belly Dance Divas." She lifted her glass.

Melanie threw up her hands. "Wait! I need a drink. Who else?" She took a quick tally of raised hands. "Hold on, Ab. I'll be right back."

When she was gone, the attention returned to Tilly.

Abby rose and stood beside her. "I'm not kidding. The holiday show couldn't have happened without your help. With rehearsals, with classes, and with the costumes. I still can't believe you whipped up eight costumes in two days out of a single bolt of white stretch velvet."

The costumes. They'd been the highlight of the week. "I told you I love to sew. I'll take any opportunity I can to get behind a sewing machine. Teaching that beginning class was a first, but I enjoyed it, too. More than I thought I would."

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Janaya slapped her hands on the table. “You’ve never taught beginners before? Ever? But you made it look so easy.”

“I think you’re just being kind, but thank you. I had a great time. I’m even a little sad it’s over.”

Abby snapped back from another conversation. “It doesn’t have to be. You can come back any time. It’s not usually this crazy, and I promise I can find something better than my couch for sleeping arrangements. I know I must owe your family a huge apology for monopolizing your time this week.”

Tilly toyed with the stem of her glass and stared into the pool of white. “You don’t owe anyone anything. Trust me.” The truth of that tugged at something deep inside her, a loose thread she knew it was best to ignore.

Abby seemed too caught up in the moment to notice. “Think about the offer. We’d love to have you back.”

“What offer?” Melanie returned to the table empty-handed. “Please tell me you aren’t trying to lure Tilly away from the Divas the day before World Celebration?”

The annual multicultural show at the Orange County arts center was where the Divas debuted as a fledgling dance company four years before, and it was a sentimental favorite for the group’s director.

“Garrett will kill me if she goes AWOL on my watch. He already hates me.”

“Whoa, back up,” Abby said. “I’m not asking anyone to leave the group. I’m just saying we’d love to have her back at the Shimmy Shop in the future. Maybe for a workshop between tours? Or anything Tilly wants to do.”

“Thank goodness.” Melanie dropped back into her seat with her usual, dramatic flair. “Then, go ahead. Continue. Tilly, what do you think?”

A half-dozen heads swiveled her direction. She didn’t have an answer. It wasn’t something she’d considered, but it was tempting. “I might be. Maybe a costume design workshop?”

Melanie scoffed. “Costumes? Seriously? You’re a principal dancer in the Divas, and you want to teach people how to sew?”

“It’s not just sewing. It’s about imagining a look and bringing it to life. I’d almost forgotten how much I enjoyed that until I worked on the dresses for the Nefertiti routine this summer.”

Melanie’s dark eyes widened. “The turquoise and gold dresses with the lattice straps? You made those?”

“Designed them, too. And the *assuit* combo I wear in my second-act solo. I’d do more, if Garrett would let me.”

Melanie snorted. “Why doesn’t he? Those Nefertiti costumes are miles better than anything our costume department comes up with.”

“Our seamstresses can barely keep up with repairs. He usually hires out the

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designing, but I know what you mean. I tried to talk to him about a few other ideas, but he's so busy."

"Busy. That's one way of putting it. I don't think he's spoken a word to me since he hired me."

Abby nudged Melanie's elbow. "Do you think that might have something to do with all the drama over your audition? It's probably better for you to stay off his radar for now anyway."

"It wasn't my fault." Melanie huffed and scratched at a groove in the tabletop. "But you're probably right."

Abby touched Tilly's arm lightly. "You can make costumes for us any time. For our showcases, for our boutique, whatever you want."

Behind Abby, Tilly spied Shy Guy shuffling toward the door, head down and shoulders hunched. She spied Miss Flirts-a-lot laughing and twirling her hair in a corner with someone new. She smirked. Maybe there wouldn't be any Christmas casualties tonight after all. Was it a sign? She laid her hand on her clutch and thought of the hotel room waiting for her at the end of the night. Maybe this year really would be different.

When she noticed Abby again, she was staring at her with her head cocked in a bemused sort of way.

"Why do you look like you just won the lottery?"

Tilly could feel her smirk stretching into a full-blown grin that tingled all the way down to her toes. "I don't know. I guess it's just been a great day. Good friends, a good show, good everything."

Marco approached the table, balancing a platter full of Christmas Wishes. Damn, he looked even better up close. Wide, tawny eyes, a sexy half-smile, and the kind of scruff that begged to be touched.

"Ladies, your drinks have arrived." There was that accent again, setting off a thousand tiny butterflies inside her. He put down the platter in the center of the table. "May I get you anything else?"

Maybe it was his accent or those full, pouty lips. Or maybe it was the Christmas Wish that made her lower her lashes and offer up her own sexy half-smile. "You know what they say. Flattery can get you everywhere."

If her flirtation surprised him, he didn't show it.

"I hope that's true, bella." He brought his palms together and raised his gaze to the heavens. "I pray—"

"Uh-oh." Abby stopped dispersing cocktails to the dancers behind her and fixed him with razor stare. "That sounds like you want something."

He clutched his heart and pretended to stagger. "I can hide nothing from you, bella. Yes, I have a question. Or perhaps you can call it a favor."

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“A favor?” Tilly leaned forward. “Now this is getting interesting.”

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