

*Shimmy
for
Me*

Book 1:
A California Belly Dance Romance
Novella

DEANNA CAMERON

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| 1

“IT’S ONLY SEX,” Abby Anderson said, keeping her focus on the mirror propped on the desk in front of her and the black eyeliner wand in her hand.

In the corner, Melanie flipped through a tattoo magazine. “It’s about time. How you managed to go a whole year is a mystery to me.”

“It’s not like I planned it. It just happened. I’ve been busy.”

Busy working two jobs—three if you counted the belly dance studio that was consuming every spare minute and dollar she had. It didn’t seem possible that so much time had passed since her ex had given her the ultimatum: him or the studio. He didn’t understand how she could leave graduate school and the prospect of a comfortable career to devote herself to what he considered a dead-end business. That’s when she knew he didn’t understand her—and he never would.

Most days, she was too busy to think about her wreck of a love life. Today she could think of little else.

May 1. Seeing the date on the calendar had brought it all back. That last terrible fight. All the awful things he’d said to her. She knew they weren’t true. Pursuing her passion didn’t make her selfish. It didn’t mean she was damaged goods.

She’d find love again. Eventually. But tonight it wasn’t love she was after. She just wanted to think about something besides that brain-dead temp job at the newspaper, the skimpy dance tips she earned at the restaurant, and the studio that sank her deeper into debt every day, even if it was the only thing that could still make her smile.

She wanted to remember how it felt to be touched. To feel lips pressed to hers, hands on her waist, maybe a caress or two. All the belly dance writhing and grinding in the world wouldn’t scratch that itch.

Shimmy for Me

She needed a man.

“Do you have someone in mind?” Melanie asked, distracted by the full-page photograph of a dragon tattoo she was holding beside her miniskirt-exposed thigh.

“No one in particular.” Abby smoothed a thick layer of smoky eye powder over her lids with her fingertip, then double-checked the crimson silk blooms and rustic Middle Eastern pendants pinned to the scarf knotted around her head, leaving her thick batch of braids, leather strands, and long pheasant feathers to hang freely over her shoulder. She tucked in a few extra hairpins, then turned around. “Maybe that guy at the window table who always slips me his phone number with his one-dollar tip.”

“Are you serious? He’s got to be ninety years old.”

Abby chuckled. “I know. I’m kidding. There’s never a shortage of flirts looking to score with the belly dancer, though. I usually ignore them, but tonight, who knows? Can you help me with my straps?”

Abby turned her bare back to her friend, who set aside her magazine to untie the halter’s plum-colored straps. She tugged them tighter.

“Good?” Melanie asked.

“No. More.” Abby squeezed the sides of her top, which consisted of more old coins and cowrie shells than fabric, until cleavage filled the deep V of her neckline.

Melanie tied the knot, inspected the front, and nodded. “Nice,” she said. “The costume looks great with the tattoo.”

Abby’s fingers brushed the inked swoops and swirls that curved around her belly and disappeared beneath the waistband of the low-riding harem pants and all the belts, scarves, and tassels tied around her hips. The tattoo—a belated birthday gift from Melanie—was already two weeks old, but still sensitive to the touch. “It is nice, isn’t it? Tell your boyfriend he does good work.”

“No way,” Melanie said. “It would totally go to his head. He’s already impossible.”

A pounding on the door interrupted them. “Two minutes,” said a deep, accented voice.

“Okay, that’s my cue to leave,” Melanie said. “I’ve got to get on the road anyway if I’m going to get to Hollywood before the show. The 405 will be a parking lot if I don’t get moving.” She pulled out her key ring, detached one of the keys, and set it

on the desk. “Thanks again for letting me get some practice in at the studio. I locked it up. Oh.”

Abby stopped dabbing at the color on her lips. She knew that tone.

Melanie pulled a folded piece of pink paper from her purse. “This was taped to the studio’s door when I got there.”

Abby took it. “Past Due: Warning” was stamped in thick black letters across the top. Her gut clenched. She wasn’t surprised, but that didn’t make it any easier. She pushed the paper into her bag. She wasn’t going to think about it tonight.

Melanie bit her lip.

“It’s nothing,” Abby said, forcing a smile. “It’s already taken care of.”

“Really?” Melanie asked, cautiously. “Because if it isn’t, if you need help—”

“I don’t need help,” Abby said. “Honestly. It’s fine.”

The last thing she needed was pity.

Two angry thumps on the door.

“Okay, I’m really leaving now.” Melanie leaned over and kissed Abby’s cheek.

“See you tomorrow.” Abby watched her friend leave, then reached into her bag. No. She let go of the paper and pushed the bag away. Forget about the notice. Forget about the studio. Forget about her ex and the cold bed she crawled into every night.

Focus on tonight.

Abby looked into the mirror.

Zenina looked back. Part tribal belly dancer, part vaudeville chorine, part silent picture vixen. She had drawn from her favorite inspirations to create her performance persona. Her alter ego. Her dance self.

Three angrier thumps rattled the door.

“I’m coming,” she hollered. This was it.

Three hundred and sixty-five frigging days. It was a long time. Too long.

“You can do this,” she whispered to her other self. “It’ll be just like any other performance.” *Only better.*

By the time she took her place on the small stage, the lights were low, and a slow, snaky melody had filled the restaurant’s main room. She was only a silhouette to the roomful of diners, holding her pose like a living statue. She usually closed her eyes

Shimmy for Me

during this prelude and focused on the energy of the music and the audience.

Not tonight.

In the darkness, her gaze roamed. She wanted a good view before the stage lights came up to brighten her, and blind her.

Nearly every seat was filled. A good draw for a Thursday night. Mostly couples, some groups. But it was the single men she searched for. The ones who sat on the fringe to watch.

Would it be the college jock tipping back beer in a bottle? The shy guy in the Oxford shirt fidgeting with his soda straw? Maybe the older...

A Suit at the bar caught her eye. One hand wrapped around a highball glass, the other tugging at his tie. Calm. Confident. And sexy as hell. The way his gaze locked on her made her tingle in all the right places.

He was the one.

Shimmy for Me

Turn the page to start reading the preview:

Dance with Me

A California Belly Dance Romance Novel
Book 2

By DeAnna Cameron

| 1

THE MAN IN vintage tuxedo gazed down at the belly dancer with bedroom eyes and crooned as she pressed her shimmies against him. A warm flush came over Melanie, as though she were intruding on a private moment, not one played out for a movie camera more than sixty years ago.

“Aren’t those black-and-white films great?”

Melanie spun away from the television at the sound of her friend’s voice and nearly knocked a box of hip scarves off the glass display case. She adjusted it back in place and composed herself.

“Sorry.” Abby snickered. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“You didn’t,” Melanie grumbled, returning to her task of folding the scarves into tidy squares and stacking them beside the cash register. “I thought you were in the dance room, helping Janaya with the class.”

“She wants to try teaching on her own.” Abby grabbed a bag of chandelier earrings that needed to be organized.

Melanie’s eyes widened. “It’s only her second week. Is she ready?”

Abby shrugged and continued hanging the dangling earrings on the revolving floor stand. “We won’t know till she tries. Honestly, I’m happy for the break. I feel guilty leaving you up here to work on the boutique by yourself. You should at least let me pay you.”

“No way. After all the free studio time you’ve given me, it’s the least I can do. Besides, the less time I have to spend at my mom’s place, the better.”

“So what’s that like, living with your mom again?”

“Hell.” Behind her the musical number on the screen came to an end, leaving a

silence in the shop that made her uneasy. She turned and clicked off the television, happy to do anything but meet the questions she knew she'd find in her friend's expression, if she dared to look.

"What happened between you and Chet anyway?"

There it was, the question she'd been avoiding all week.

"You know, the usual," she mumbled and grabbed another wad of chiffon and jingly beads from the box. As she folded the chiffon with laser-sharp focus, her arms prickled from Abby's glare. She peeked upward.

Abby was not only staring, but her lips were tucked in that stubborn expression that said she was not going to let the topic go.

"It didn't work out," Melanie said, feeling partly ashamed and partly irritated. "It wasn't anyone's fault. It was just over. Where should I put these?" She held out the stack of neatly folded scarves like an offering.

"That shelf," Abby said, pointing to the far wall. "Next to the veils. Were you the one who broke it off?"

Melanie finished arranging the scarves and tossed the empty box across the room. She frowned at the pile of them mounting in the doorway. "I should probably take those out to the trash bin."

Abby folded her arms over her chest, obscuring most of the hot-pink "Shimmy Shop" logo she had screened onto teeny-tiny black camisoles. Her personal version of a uniform. "Uh-uh, you're not going to change the subject this time. Tell me what happened."

Melanie sighed. She ran a perfectly shaped red fingernail along her bottom lip to fix a nonexistent lipstick smudge, patted the tube curl of her honey-brown bangs, and nudged the scarlet silk rose over her ear. Yeah, she was stalling. What was the point of hurrying when she knew whatever she said next would be followed by a lecture?

Abby still had that look.

"Here's the thing," Melanie said. "I'm happy to help you get the boutique ready, but can we cut the talk about ex-boyfriends? It's kind of a buzzkill."

Abby shook her head. "Oh, no. Not when he just became an ex-boyfriend a week ago. After two years together, you better believe you are not getting off that easy."

"What?" Melanie cried. "Chet and I were together for a year. A year and a half,

tops.”

“I was talking about you and me, bonehead. We’ve been friends for two years.” She waved her fingers at Melanie. “You wouldn’t let me get away with that crap. So spill.”

Melanie leaned back against the counter and stared out the plate-glass window that looked onto the parking lot. “It wasn’t a big deal. He just got too serious.”

“Serious? How serious? Did he propose?”

Melanie could hear the excitement in Abby’s voice. Why did females always get batshit crazy when you mentioned marriage?

“Holy crap. He proposed and you dumped him?”

Why did it sound so much worse when Abby said it? It didn’t matter. Once she got past this conversation, she never had to talk about it—or think about it—again. “I told him from the beginning I didn’t plan to get married. I don’t want kids, I don’t want any of it. I was honest.”

“I know, but c’mon,” Abby said. “I didn’t think I wanted those things either, but then I met the right guy, we started spending time together, and nature took its course.”

Melanie blinked hard, stopping the eye roll that ached to be rolled. “Maybe for you,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy for you. If Derek makes you happy and you want that ‘till death do you part’ thing, great. It’s just not for me. There are too many places I want to go, and too many things I want to do. Tying myself down to one person for the rest of my life just isn’t one of them.”

Abby cocked her head. “This is because of Belly Dance Divas, isn’t it? Was he trying to talk you out of auditioning?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Melanie wiped imaginary dust off the counter. “The important thing is now I’ll have more time to rehearse. After work, before work—if Deffner isn’t watching, maybe during work, too.”

“As if you need it,” Abby said. “I don’t know anyone who puts in more hours on the dance floor than you.”

Melanie forced a smile. “If only that were enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind,” she said.

Shimmy for Me

“So does that mean the geisha girl tattoo is off?”

“Yeah, that’s history,” Melanie said.

Actually, that was the hardest part of the breakup. Losing a boyfriend was one thing, but losing out on free ink from one of the best tattoo artists in Orange County was another. She rubbed at the mehndi-style lotus he’d given her on her last birthday. A tribal-inspired match for the rose and hibiscus flowers she’d gotten as a high school graduation present to herself.

He’d promised a geisha girl on her back to tie into the cherry blossoms on her thigh for her birthday, but that was still months away. Even if she offered to pay, that deal was more than likely off the table.

A blur of motion in the parking lot caught her eye. She watched a blazing yellow Porsche coupe screech to a halt.

“Uh-oh,” she said. “Here comes trouble.”

TAZ ROMAN PULLED his Porsche 911 Carrera S into the dance studio’s parking lot and killed the engine. He sat, paralyzed. His sister’s words swarming around in his brain like angry bees.

“You need to settle down,” she pressed through the Bluetooth speaker. “You need to have some focus in your life and grow up. You’re not a kid anymore. By the time Dad was your age, he had a whole orchestra. He and Mom were at the height of their careers.”

“What’s your point?” Taz growled.

“That you’re wasting your time with the Belly Dance Divas. You’re the best thing in that show. You’re a Roman. You should be the headliner.”

He touched his temples and stared into the glare of sunlight glancing off the car’s hood. He measured his words carefully. “You haven’t even seen the show.”

“I don’t have to. How could I, knowing you were so close to striking out on your own? But you had to go and let that snake Garrett weasel his way into the deal—”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” His heart thumped the way it always did when they argued. He tried to be calm. He tried to breathe. He tried not to care.

Shimmy for Me

“Don’t I?” she needed. “I know what I see when I look at a Belly Dance Divas poster: I see his name splashed over everything, like he’s the reason the show’s so successful.”

Taz closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “My name is there, too.”

“It’s at the bottom. Underneath the dancers. I guess that shouldn’t surprise me. From what I hear, you’re beneath quite a few of those dancers these days. No wonder—”

“Enough,” he said, his knuckles burning white on the steering wheel. “Stop pretending you’re my mother. Just because she’s gone”—after all these years he still couldn’t bring himself to say *dead*—“doesn’t mean you get to fill the spot.”

There was a silence. Then a meek, “I’m sorry. I just worry about you. When I was there, I knew what was happening. You said you’d come to New York to visit, but you haven’t come since the wedding. It’s been two years. You can’t blame me for worrying about my little brother, especially when I hear what’s happening with the show and these girls.”

“You don’t have to worry,” he said. “It’s a good show, and I’m in a good spot, whether you want to believe it or not.”

“But you need someone to take care of you. You need someone who understands you and your talent and can look out for you. Someone like Tamara, who—”

“Stop,” he blurted. He wasn’t going to think about her. Not now. Not ever. He’d walled off that part of his life a long time ago. It was better that way.

Gina perked. “Oh?”

In that one syllable, he heard the conversation pivot.

“Is there someone new?” she coaxed. “Someone special?”

There wasn’t anyone remotely close, but he heard opportunity in her tone. If he told her the truth, she’d go right back to haranguing him. But if he didn’t...

“Yeah,” he lied. “I’ve met someone new.”

“Why didn’t you say so? Do I know her? Is it serious? How serious?”

Even with three thousand miles between them, her giddiness radiated loud and clear.

“Well, you know...” He cracked a grin, relieved to be off the defensive.

“It is serious. I can hear it. I want to meet her. You know what?”

He heard the flutter of papers at the other end of the connection. “Todd’s going

to a work conference next week, so I'm coming to California. No reason to stay in this penthouse all alone for a week, not when I can spend quality time with my little brother and his new girlfriend."

Sudden panic set in. "You can't," he said.

"Why not? I'll stay in my old room. It'll be just like old times." She paused. "Unless she's living with you. Is she living with you? She is! You devil! You should have said so."

He made a face. Was this getting better or worse? "I didn't want to say anything until—"

"Until you knew it was going to work out. I get it. Well, I'm sure it'll be fine. It'll be better than fine. It'll give me a chance to get to know... what's her name, anyway?"

He froze. Then he said the only thing he could think to say. "What?" he bellowed. "You're breaking up. I'm losing the signal. Are you still there?"

She repeated herself, but he wasn't listening. He tapped the phone's screen and ended the call. Then he tore away the Bluetooth ear piece and threw it against the windshield.

What the hell had he just done?

MELANIE PUT DOWN the scarf she was folding and stared out the window again at the yellow Porsche. "Is he just going to sit there?"

"What do you care?" Abby asked, her head buried in a box of circle skirts. "I thought you couldn't stand him."

"I don't care. It's just weird. Sitting out there when it's got to be ninety degrees. Whatever happened to June Gloom? This heatwave sucks."

"Maybe he's on the phone. Maybe he's talking to Garrett about the tour." She stood up and gave Melanie a long, loaded look. "Or maybe they're talking about the auditions. You know, you might want to be nicer to him this time. He might be one of the judges."

The car door swung open and Melanie saw his shoulder-length mane of tawny-brown hair emerge first. Then the rest of his lean, six-foot-and-change frame appeared. A

leg clad in distressed jeans, slung low and snug on his narrow hips. A tanned and rippled chest flashing through a white, open shirt. A chest that was nearly as famous as his talents with a drum.

Melanie dropped her glance to the new batch of scarves and tried to ignore the jingle of the bell when he opened the door.

“Taz, it’s great to see you,” Abby said, sliding aside the mountain of empty boxes blocking him from the boutique. “What brings you by?”

Melanie nearly gagged. Abby was laying it on thick. Just because he strutted around like some kind of celebrity didn’t actually make him one. She stared harder into the mound of chiffon.

“You said you’d like to stock the Belly Dance Diva CDs in your shop, so I brought you a box.”

You’d think he was doing them a favor, not the other way around. What a jerk. It was always the same with hot guys. They look good, but their attitudes suck.

Abby didn’t seem to notice or care. “Absolutely,” she said cheerfully, relieving him of the box he had tucked under his arm. “I’m so glad you remembered. We’re hoping to open in a couple weeks, and I know these will go fast. Some of the students are already asking about them.”

“I also snuck in a stack of Pandemonium Ball flyers. It’s almost sold out, but there might be a few tickets still around, if anyone’s interested.”

“Are you going?” Abby asked.

He nodded. “The Divas are cosponsoring this year, so I’ll be playing. You going?”

“I wish,” Abby said. “All my money’s going into this place, but I’m hoping to attend next year.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You should. It’s a good time.” He scanned the room, taking in the stacks of boxes, and the shelves slowly filling with merchandise. “Your place is looking really good. Are you planning something for the grand opening? I heard the showcase last month was a big hit. I’m sorry I missed it. Did it…”

What he was trying to ask without actually asking was obvious. Why did that kind of cowardly hesitation always annoy the hell out of her?

“The bank won’t be swooping in to close her down any time soon,” she

blurted, “if that’s what you mean.”

Abby shot her a horrified look. Taz looked at her like she’d materialized out of thin air.

“What she means is,” Abby continued, “the studio’s business is great, and it will get even better as soon as I can find a day manager to oversee the boutique and our online shop.”

Down the hall, the dance room door opened, followed by a stampede of bare feet and dance shoes. Melanie checked the wall clock. It was break time for the class. She braced herself for what was coming.

Then, right on cue, a squeal: “Taz!” A girl with a curly mop of red hair rushed up to him. “Oh my God, Taz Roman, what are you doing here?”

Curly was quickly joined by a dozen of the girls and women who made up the Saturday morning belly dance class.

Sheesh. You’d think he was Brad Pitt for belly dancers.

When he explained he was dropping off CDs, it set off another round of squeals. “If we buy one, will you sign it?”

“Of course,” he said, with that toothy celebrity smile of his. “I’d love to.”

That was an understatement. You could see it in the way he basked in the adoration. Puh-leez.

“Ladies, let’s give him some room. Okay, who wants one?” Abby counted the hands—which was all of them—and pulled out fourteen CDs. “He’ll sign them and then you can pay after class. You don’t want to waste your class time.” She exchanged a look with Janaya, who was an accomplished performer but was obviously still learning how to keep a class full of pheromone-surging females under control.

To his credit, Taz worked fast, and he charmed every one of those giggling students as he did it.

When they were finished and back in the dance room, Abby gathered up the CDs and set them beside the cash register.

“That was very generous of you,” she said to Taz. “You made their day. Didn’t he, Melanie?” She bumped Melanie with her hip when she didn’t get a response.

“Hey! Ow. I mean, yeah, that was pretty cool of you.” She made a face at Abby.

Shimmy for Me

Taz didn't seem to notice. He was standing at the window, staring at the parking lot.

"Actually, they made mine," he said. "It's been an epically bad day so far."

"Girl trouble?" Melanie asked with a smirk. It was supposed to be a joke because—c'mon, this was Taz the Romancer. Everyone knew the only trouble he had with girls was fitting them all into his limited schedule.

So it took her by surprise when he said, "Yeah, you could say that."

"Seriously?"

Abby slanted her a hard look that screamed, "Shut up."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Abby said, using her sweetest, most sympathetic voice. "I didn't know you were seeing someone."

He ran his fingers through his hair, brushing it back over his shoulder. "I'm not. It's my sister."

Melanie choked. Not a small, polite hiccup, but something loud and nearly obscene. Abby just stared.

"That came out wrong," Taz said, almost laughing. "I'm not seeing anyone, but my sister thinks I am. Now she's coming out to meet her."

"To meet the girlfriend who doesn't exist?" Melanie asked.

He nodded. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but she's been on my case about everything lately, including settling down. She misunderstood something I said. It just seemed easier to let her believe I had met someone. Until she said she was coming out to meet the mystery girl. Now I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You could try telling her the truth," Abby offered.

"I know. I should," he said. "And I will. I'm just not in a big hurry. She's difficult under the best of circumstances. This is going to—"

"I don't see the big deal," Melanie interrupted.

Two pairs of eyes shot her direction.

"What? Like you couldn't find someone in a heartbeat who was willing—eager even—to pretend she was your girlfriend?"

His expression twisted. "Yeah, maybe too eager. I wouldn't want to give someone the wrong idea, even if she was doing me a favor. Besides, she'd have to be convincing. My sister's pretty sharp. She's got the brains in the family."

Shimmy for Me

That wasn't a surprise.

"But," Abby said, "what if this mystery girl were getting something in return?" She turned to Melanie.

Instinctively, Melanie shook her head. She didn't know what was brewing beneath that black ponytail, but she knew that devious look. She knew that tone.

Abby continued. "If she were getting something in return, she'd be motivated to make it convincing."

Taz looked curious or confused—it was hard to say which. "Something like what?"

Crap. Melanie's heart raced, and her palms burned. She would have made a run for it if there wasn't an obstacle course of boxes between her and the door.

"I was just thinking that Melanie here..."

"Oh no," Melanie groaned aloud. "You are not going to do this. Not now." She stared at her friend, hard and with what she hoped was threatening malice.

Abby ignored the protest. "Melanie," she repeated emphatically, "is planning to audition for the Divas in a couple weeks. And I'm sure it would be a big help to have someone who knows the ropes offer a little coaching beforehand. Would you consider that a fair trade?"

Melanie glanced around at the cash register, the scarves, the jewelry display, looking for something to hurl at her friend to end this embarrassment. Instead, she hurled her words. "Honestly, you can't expect him... or me... or—"

"Hold on." Taz cocked his head to the side and stared at Melanie. "If you're serious, you'd be kind of perfect. My sister would hate you."

"Hey," Melanie cried, "you don't have to be mean."

He threw his hands up in defense. "I'm not. I mean it in the best possible way. It's just your tattoos. She can't stand them, especially on women. If I know her, she'll back off the minute she sees you. I think it might work."

"What about the coaching?" Abby piped up.

"I can't promise you a spot or anything," he said, "but I've seen what Garrett and his choreographers tend to like and not like."

Abby's face could hardly contain her grin. "What do you think, Melanie? You'll do it, right?"

Shimmy for Me

Was she serious? They both seemed to think this stupid scheme could work.

Taz turned to her with a big, goofy grin. “C’mon, Melanie,” he cooed. “Wanna be my pretend girlfriend?”

Shimmy for Me

Books by DeAnna Cameron

THE DANCER CHRONICLES

[The Girl on the Midway Stage](#)

[The Girl on the Vaudeville Stage](#), available September 2016

CALIFORNIA BELLY DANCE ROMANCE SERIES

Book 1: [Shimmy for Me](#) (25,000-word stand-alone story featuring Abby and Derek),

Book 2: [Dance with Me](#) (52,000-word stand-alone story featuring Melanie and Taz)

Book 3: [Another Dance](#) (10,000-word sequel story featuring Melanie and Taz)

Book 4: [Jingly Bells](#) (35,000-word stand-alone story featuring Tilly and Marco)

Box Set: [California Belly Dance Romance Collection Books 1-3](#) (*Shimmy for Me*, *Dance with Me*, and *Another Dance*)

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