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DELIA  
LATHAM



*Jingle Belle*



ONE LITTLE JINGLE.



THAT'S ALL SHE WANTS FOR CHRISTMAS.

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## **Jingle Belle**

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Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

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## **Jingle Belle**

Delia Latham

# 1

Nick Santini's foot was buried in his mouth clear up to the ankle. His efforts to correct the problem only made it worse.

"Perhaps inexperienced is the wrong word choice. It's just that I need someone who has been working in advertising longer. Someone with a feel for this market. There is someone like that employed here, I presume?"

Still bad. He needed to stop talking. Everything he said came out wrong.

First, the beautiful face across from him turned to white ice. Then, an expensive ink pen she was trying to cap landed hard on the surface of the table and shot toward him like a grounded bullet. He caught the thing before it could slide off the edge, but something told him that little rescue didn't earn him any points.

Belle Knowles leaped to her feet and tossed the trendy eyeglasses that usually perched on the tip of her perfect little nose onto the conference table. For a moment, she stood there, shaking, in a pair of fancy red heels for which she'd probably laid out at least two hundred bucks. Her large, almond-shaped eyes flashed green fire beneath a mass of curls the color of vivid flames.

Nick watched through a narrowed gaze.

Fury clearly had the lady by the throat, but his own anger, if unleashed, would make hers look like a child's tantrum. He managed to keep his lips sealed only by exerting the iron control he'd practiced for years.

"You, Mr. Santini, are the rudest, most arrogant, chauvinistic, and condescending man I have ever had the misfortune to meet. I don't like you—and I've no doubt the feeling is mutual—but I had hoped we could both be professionals and manage to work together long enough to make this project a success."

She slapped shut the presentation folder in her hand, whirled, and strode to the door. After jerking it open so hard it bounced against the wall, she sent one withering glance back at him. "I was obviously wrong. I'll get Cameron to assign your account to someone else."

Then she was gone—mesmerizing eyes, copper-colored hair, long legs, and all.

Probably for the best. Belle Knowles's beauty took Nick's breath away, but she was right—he didn't like her either.

So why was he on his feet and charging after her willowy figure before the door ever closed?

"Ms. Knowles, wait. Please...allow me to apologize?"

She stopped dead still and executed a slow, graceful pivot to fix him under a look of blatant disbelief. Nick cringed. Was it really so hard for her to imagine him admitting any kind of fault?

*Be honest with yourself, Nick. You don't even believe you're doing this.*

"I'm listening, Mr. Santini." Ice edged Belle's voice, sending an unpleasant shiver down Nick's spine. Despite his general disapproval of the lady, from the time their meeting began until he'd started dismissing her ideas, her voice had flowed over his senses like warm butter on a loaf of hot garlic bread.

And exactly where had that errant thought come from?

"I'm sorry, Ms. Knowles. Please...come back inside. Let's talk about it. I—" He paused, surprised at what he was about to say, but it was true. Anyone capable of this passionate outburst had the fire, the spark needed to get his restaurant off the ground and into the public's eye. "I don't want anyone else on this account." The weak grin he dredged up felt out of place on his lips. "Cameron tells me you're the best. As far as I know, he's never been wrong about such things. So, please...forgive me for being a stubborn, hardheaded Italian."

Her sharp gaze raked his face, inch by painful half-inch. Nick had no doubt she'd turn and walk away for good if she thought she spotted any duplicity on his part. Well, he was not being duplicitous.

This gorgeous, confident, successful woman was pretty much everything he disliked in a female, but he needed her to help him get Santini's Italiano started off on the right foot in Pohnono, Oklahoma.

Until now, each of the half-dozen existing Santini's restaurants had been strategically placed in large cities throughout the mid-West. Opening its doors in a place like Pohnono, where folks kept

mostly to themselves and held to the “old ways” of a hundred years past was a risky venture. But the gears of progress churned on, and whether the townsfolk liked it or not, Pohono was caught up in the forward motion.

Besides, the mid-sized town’s close proximity to Tulsa worked in Nick’s favor, making it feasible that a dining establishment of superb quality might draw attention from that population as well.

Santini’s Italiano was that kind of restaurant. A place customers wanted to visit, because the food and the service were *that* good. A quality dining experience.

As each other’s sole siblings, Nick and his brother, Alex, had worked hard for years to make Santini’s a household name. Their efforts had paid great dividends, and every location so far had been highly successful.

Opening the newest branch in a smaller town like Pohono was risky, but they hoped to draw customers from miles around. Definitely as far away as Tulsa, and hey—why not dream big? Oklahoma City wasn’t even out of the question. A hundred miles wasn’t too far to drive for a celebratory night out, was it?

But first things first. They’d gotten a late start on the Pohono project, after an unexpected trip to Boston when their mother had a stroke. The visit to their hometown had become an extended stay when, once released from the hospital, she experienced a series of mini strokes. As busy as they needed to be in Pohono, neither he nor Alex was willing to leave until they were certain their mother’s health was no longer at risk. She was alone except for them, having lost their father when Nick and Alex were young boys.

Now, with Santini's grand opening only six weeks away, time was running out to create a buzz that would draw folks inside the doors to see what all the hoopla was about. Once they visited, they'd be back. As far as Nick was concerned, that was a given.

But getting those frenzied shoppers into the restaurant in the middle of December, during the frantic holidays, would require a little of the season's own magic. He and Alex hadn't given the fact that they'd be opening the Pohonan location smack in the height of the Christmas season a lot of consideration until they received the latest demographics for the area, and the problem became painfully clear. They'd need a small miracle to make their grand opening event any kind of success.

Cameron Hilliard owned the public relations and advertising firm in the hallway of which Nick now found himself facing an irate Irish beauty. His best friend since college, Cam had guaranteed Nick that Belle Knowles could come up with a commercial jingle catchy enough to capture anyone's imagination—even stubborn Pohonans who didn't "cotton" to anything new. Cam considered the fiery redhead the best jingle writer in the industry, bar none. If his old friend awarded Belle that kind of trust and respect, the woman had done something to earn it.

Nick needed the best. So yes, he would apologize, even if he didn't think he'd been wrong to cross the lady. He'd grovel, if it meant success for Santini's. They had no time to waste.

He pulled in a deep breath and offered a genuine, eyes-and-all smile. "I'm really, truly sorry, Ms. Knowles." He narrowed his eyes, tilted his head toward her and allowed his lips to quirk

sideways. For whatever reason, the crooked smile almost always won the ladies over in an instant. “Forgive me?”

~\*~

Belle detested the man in front of her and, worse, her feet hurt.

The fancy stilettos pinching her toes and wreaking agony in her ankles were not her style. But how does one tell a little sister she adores that she won’t wear the birthday gift for which that sister just paid—in Belle’s opinion—a couple hundred dollars too much? Katie had driven all the way from Oklahoma City to be with her on her birthday, and then stayed overnight. Her sister’s sweet but unrelenting insistence prompted Belle’s decision to don the bright red torture devices this morning.

They’d said goodbye in front of Belle’s house—the one thing she had no problem whatsoever spending her hard-earned money on. She had every intention of dashing back inside to change shoes after their goodbyes, but Katie had dragged the farewell out far too long. By the time the younger woman finally hopped into her little sports car and drove away, waving and hollering “I love you” at the top of her healthy young lungs, Belle had had no choice but to jump right into her own vehicle to get to work on time.

Aching feet did not make for a smooth temperament—and neither did Nick Santini.

How dare the man think he could tell her how to do her job? If he could write jingles, he wouldn’t be paying the Hilliard Agency—ergo Belle—to do it for him.

She’d been prepared to tolerate the guy for Cam’s sake. When her boss called her into his office just a week ago to discuss the

Santini account, he'd warned her that his old friend could be "a little over the top at times."

*"He's a good man, Belle. A Christian. Nick's just accustomed to getting what he wants and doing whatever is necessary—within legal and moral limits, of course—to get it. He has no patience for incompetence and doesn't make the slightest effort to make people like him just for the sake of...well, being liked. His bluntness can come across as rude."*

*"Sounds like your friend could use a little attitude adjustment, and maybe a bit of personality, as well."*

Cam laughed. *"Oh, Nick has personality when he cares to. He was the envy of all us other guys at school. We took turns watching the girls we liked vying for his attention. Thing is, though, he didn't unbend even for them. If anything, their blatant flirting achieved the opposite of the desired result. As far as I know, Nick only dated one girl during the entire four years at Boston University."*

*"So he's a narcissistic jerk?"*

Cam hiked an eyebrow. *"He's neither, and I think you'll know that the moment you meet him."*

Eyeing Belle through narrowed eyes, he'd chuckled. *"And I wouldn't advise airing your opinion to Nick's face."*

*"Of course not."*

And she hadn't, but she'd come close before she stormed out the door ahead of him just now.

And yet here he stood, offering a seemingly sincere apology for his abominable behavior, while she reined in her anger and teetered on hateful high heels that threatened to break her ankles and throw her right into his arms.

Belle blew out a gust of air and, with her anger cooling, almost grinned when she imagined it blazing like a dragon's breath. She hoped her eyes glittered too, so the arrogant Italian could see how furious he'd made her.

She must have stood there thinking a lot longer than she realized, because Nick's expression went full circle, from apologetic to doubtful to irritation and back to apologetic.

He seemed to find it hard to maintain that demeanor.

"Ms. Knowles...?"

Consciously ignoring the agony in her southern extremities, Belle marched past him and back into the conference room, tossing words over her shoulders. "If we're going to work together, you should call me Belle." She stopped and turned her head to shoot him an impatient look. "Well, are you coming or not?"

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