

# **DYING for a DUDE**

A Laurel McKay Mystery

**Cindy Sample**

## **Other Books in the Laurel McKay series**

*Dying for a Date (Vol. 1)*

*Dying for a Dance (Vol. 2)*

*Dying for a Daiquiri (Vol. 3)*

## CHAPTER ONE

Inch by inch the vise tightened until I cried out, “Stop, stop, you’re killing me.”

My nemesis pulled even tighter. “I’m going to finish this if it kills *me*.”

“But,” I said, gasping for air, “I can’t breathe.”

“Oh, suck it up, Laurel,” said Liz, my best friend. “If women in the nineteenth century managed to wear this apparel, certainly a resilient twenty-first-century woman like you can handle it.”

With a final yank, she finished tying the laces and stepped back to look at her handiwork. I pressed my hands against my ribcage and glared at her.

Liz shoved me in front of her full-length bedroom mirror and beamed her approval at me. “You’ll knock those cowpokes dead.”

I stared at my reflection. The bright red feather tucked into my copper-colored curls, fluttered whenever I moved my head. The feather matched my crimson lipstick and the satin skirt that swished against my fishnet-covered legs. Unfortunately, the black bustier she’d purchased from Hangtown Hannah’s consignment shop barely covered my ample chest. This outfit was a wardrobe malfunction just waiting to happen.

“Now I know why historical romances always refer to heaving bosoms.” I winced as one of the stays pricked my tender skin. “I’m about to heave my breakfast.”

“Well, luv, you’re the one who is always complaining you need to lose weight,” Liz said. “This could be the answer to your dieting prayers.”

I groaned in response. A week living on cabbage soup, the latest Hollywood diet fad, would be preferable to another minute in this getup.

“Wait until Tom gets a glimpse of this outfit.” Liz’s hazel eyes sparkled brighter than her diamond stud earrings.

As I pictured my six-foot-three boyfriend, I sensed my cheeks turning the same color as my skirt. I shook my curls and the scarlet feather floated down to the floor. “I’m not sure how Tom will feel about me flaunting my, um, assets in public.”

“Oh, bother. He can’t bloody complain if it’s for a worthy cause.” My British friend’s accent always intensified when she grew excited. She bent down, retrieved my feather and shoved it back into my hair. “The Sassy Saloon Gals raise a wagonload of money for the annual Wagon Train event in June. It’s too late for me to find another replacement. Think of it as your public duty.”

That worked for me. But would it work for Detective Tom Hunter, the head of homicide for the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Office? He served the public by solving murders. I sensed his definition of community spirit might not include me exposing a substantial amount of my soft tissue to the residents of Placerville, our small town located in the California Gold Country between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe.

“So how are things going with you two lovebirds?” Liz asked. “Is it a match made in heaven?”

I shrugged because I wasn’t certain how to answer my friend’s question. Technically, our relationship was a *match made in homicide*, since the detective and I had met the previous fall when I became a suspect in a double murder investigation. Once he’d solved that case, we’d begun dating. But between Tom’s burdensome profession and the responsibility we each had of raising our children, our date nights were limited.

I smiled in anticipation of our impending date this evening, envisioning a night of mutual

community spirit, an event that occurred far less frequently than we desired.

My fingers fumbled with the long laces of the corset. “Would you help me get this contraption off?”

Liz began the tedious job of untying the garment. She had only loosened a portion of the strings when the singing of my cell phone drew my attention.

“Hold on. It’s my grandmother’s ringtone.” I ran to my oversized canvas tote, which perched on her nightstand, successfully discovered my phone beneath the clutter and hit the answer button.

“Laurel, it’s your Gran,” said a quavering voice.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“No, it’s not. You need to come here. Now.”

“What’s the matter?” My heart and mind raced as I worried what new calamity had beset the eighty-eight-year-old woman on the other end of the line.

“Your mother’s disappeared,” she said.

“What?” I shrieked.

“I was watching her and then she vanished.” The sound of fingers snapping demonstrated her point. “Just like that.”

And just like that the dial tone buzzed in my ear. Gran had disappeared as well.

I tried calling her back but only got a busy signal. My grandmother doesn’t believe in newfangled things like Caller ID or Call Waiting. She’s also the proud owner of what is probably the last rotary wall phone in the county, and possibly the country. After five frustrating attempts to call her back, each busy signal increasing my anxiety, I finally gave up.

“Sorry, Liz,” I apologized as I threw my cell into my purse and hooked it over my shoulder.

“Gotta go. Gran needs me.”

I raced out of Liz’s bedroom and flew down the stairs. It took me less than a minute to back down the driveway of her Mediterranean style home and head toward the freeway.

Liz and her husband, Brian, reside in Serrano, an affluent El Dorado Hills community located thirty miles east of Sacramento, close to her plush Golden Hills Spa. Since my grandmother lives in the former gold rush town of Placerville, I had a twenty-minute drive “up the hill” as we locals refer to it. As you drive east from Sacramento, the hills increase in size until they eventually become the Sierra Nevada mountain range. As my car sped up Highway 50, the fresh late snow on the distant mountains reminded me of dollops of whipped cream.

Halfway to Gran’s house, I realized I’d been so concerned about her and Mother that I’d neglected to change out of my saloon girl outfit. At least, I could breathe with ease since Liz had loosened the laces.

I arrived at my grandmother’s pale blue clapboard Victorian in nineteen minutes flat. A fire engine and a rescue vehicle parked on the pine-tree-lined street did nothing to relieve my anxiety.

I pulled my twelve-year-old hybrid behind my mother’s new SUV. No bird would dare relieve itself on her gleaming white vehicle, although winged creatures love to decorate my periwinkle Prius.

I zipped down the sidewalk, wondering why Gran thought Mother had disappeared since her car was parked in the driveway. I stood on the front porch and stabbed at the doorbell repeatedly. The peal of chimes echoing through the house while no one appeared at the door only ramped up my concern. I finally pushed on the heavy oak door, and it squeaked open.

I sniffed. No smoke that I could discern, which was a huge relief. My heels clicked and

clacked on the scuffed wooden planks as I zipped through the rooms calling out to my grandmother. Although my eyes and ears didn't detect anyone inside the house, my nose discovered treasure in the kitchen.

A fresh-baked peach pie rested on the royal-blue-tiled countertop next to two empty cups and saucers. One cup bore an imprint that had left many a rose-colored lipstick stain on my own china, confirming that Mother and Gran had chatted over coffee. But where was Mother now? And why was the fire department here?

I shoved open the screen door leading to my grandmother's back forty. Technically, her property comprised only ten acres, but it was still a large parcel of land, especially this close to the Placerville city limits. Rows of fragrant pink, peach and red roses lined the graveled paths throughout her garden. Unfortunately, this was not the time to stop and smell the roses.

I shaded my eyes from the afternoon rays and eventually spotted some figures clad in navy-blue uniforms standing near the back property line, at least two hundred yards away. I darted through the star thistle and headed in their direction.

Ouch. The destructive yellow weeds ripped through my fragile stockings, leaving untidy black strings hanging down my calves, but my concern for my mother's well-being took precedence over any damage to my costume.

Breathing heavily from my trek, I finally reached the group of people standing in a semi-circle around a large hole partially covered with worn wooden planks. I exhaled a sigh of relief when I spied my petite grandmother alongside the men. Gran and I used to be the same height and weight, but lately she seemed to be shrinking and now stood a few inches shorter than my five foot four and a quarter. Gran's natural hair color remains a mystery, even to me, since the woman is addicted to wearing wigs in every color and style. She could be Cher, Dolly Parton or

Lauren Bacall on any given day of the week.

Today her carrot-colored curls resembled a cross between Lucille Ball and Bozo the Clown. I tapped her on her shoulder. Gran jumped and whirled around. Her faded blue eyes, under orange-penciled brows, widened when she recognized me.

“Gran,” I said, “what happened?”

“Laurel, thank goodness you’re here.” She introduced me to the men who shifted their gaze from the gaping hole in the ground to me. Their four pairs of eyes zeroed in on my loosened bustier, which now exposed letters A through C of my double D’s.

I hitched up the garment and scowled at the men. My grandmother stared at me.

“What on earth are you wearing? You look like a hussy.” She cocked her head. “Or a Kardashian.”

“It’s a costume. I’ll explain later. Where is Mother, and why is the fire department here?”

“Is that you, Laurel?” A disembodied voice drifted out of nowhere.

I swiveled my head to the left then to the right. I looked up toward the cloudless blue sky. Nothing. Only one direction remained. I inched closer to the opening in the ground and peered down. Way down into coal-black darkness where a pair of eyes gazed back at me. Did a wild creature fall into the hole?

My breath caught as my brain finally caught on.

I leaned forward and cried out, “Mom?”

