

DYING for a DATE

A Laurel McKay Mystery

By

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Other Books in the Laurel McKay series

Dying for a Dance
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CHAPTER ONE

If I'd known my clothes would be covered in blood by the end of the evening, I probably wouldn't have agonized over my wardrobe selection. But as I prepared for my first date since my divorce, my fashion choice seemed of monumental importance.

Sweaters, slacks, and skirts were strewn across my bedroom, but I still couldn't decide what to wear. After negotiating my curves into a Spanx tummy control item smaller than my fist, I gazed in dismay at the mess on my barely visible bed.

Too short. Too long. Too boring. Too sleazy.

The bright red numbers on my digital clock glared at me. Less than five minutes to get my butt out of the bedroom and into my car. I zipped up a mid-calf black skirt, buttoned a long-sleeved white blouse and tucked it into the waistband. The mirror above the dresser reflected its disapproval of my selections.

"Nothing looks right," I sighed. "I either look like Betsy Banker or Bimbo Barbie."

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Jenna, my sixteen-year-old daughter, slouched against the door. "You're kind of old to start dating again."

Old? Since when was thirty-nine considered over the hill? According to *Cosmo*, thirty-nine was the new twenty-nine.

My teenage critic flopped on my bed, turning the mountain of castoffs into a wrinkled puddle. I didn't need Dr. Phil to tell me that some passive aggressive behavior was going on.

I put my hands on my hips and glared at her. "Look what you did to my clothes."

Jenna slid off the bed with a martyred sigh and disappeared through the doorway.

Seconds later a powder blue cashmere sweater sailed across the room and smacked the back of my head.

The loan of the sweater must be Jenna's way of apologizing. Unfortunately it was a gift from her father. No time to ponder the psychological ramifications of wearing an item purchased by my ex-husband for my first date in seventeen years. I slipped the sweater, designed for a smaller frame than mine, over my head and stared at my reflection. Between the tight sweater glued to my chest and the long black skirt on my chunky five-foot-four frame, I'd invented an entirely new look—Bimbo Banker.

I stepped into my new three-inch heels. At least my shoes looked hot. The only reason I was in the middle of a clothing meltdown was that Liz, my best friend, had talked me into joining a dating service called the Love Club—the safe alternative to online dating. As far as I was concerned, there was only one safe alternative.

Not dating.

I flew down the stairs then paused to peek in the family room. Red and gold strobes of light swirled over Jenna's auburn curls. Tucked into a chair, iPod earbuds in place, my daughter attempted to concentrate on her book, *The Joy of Calculus*, while her seven-year-old brother Ben and his best friend battled it out with their Jedi knight laser swords.

A grapefruit-sized lump lodged in my throat as I gazed at my children, re-evaluating my decision to start dating. Was I looking for a partner, or a male role model for my son? If I met

someone would it harm the close relationship I had with my daughter? Did I really want to find Mr. Right?

Or just Mr. Every Other Saturday Night? Meaningful questions which I needed to ponder when I had more than thirty seconds to spare.

Fifteen minutes later I walked into Leonardo's, a Tuscan-themed restaurant in El Dorado Hills, an expensive residential enclave located thirty miles east of Sacramento. I'd lost the battle with a stubborn gas nozzle and reeked of gasoline.

I darted into the ladies room to wash the pungent smell from my hands. After tracing lipstick over full, non-collagen-enhanced lips, I peered in the mirror. Another one of those mysterious silver strands had appeared in my copper-streaked bob. I yanked out the wiry culprit, took a deep breath and threw open the door.

The smell of garlic mixed with flowery perfumes greeted me as I click-clacked across the terra cotta tiles to the reception desk. The women milling around the lobby were all taller, slimmer and better dressed than me. Any minute now the El Dorado Hills fashion police would hand out a fashion citation.

"My name is Laurel McKay," I said to the size zero hostess who was barely larger than the menu she held. "Do you know if Garrett Lindstrom has arrived?"

An arm snaked around my waist. "Laurel, sorry I'm late."

I squirmed away to get a better look at my date. This guy chose me? Garrett was even better looking in person than on his DVD. Over six feet tall, with dark brown hair and designer wire rims—a Clark Kent look-alike clad in a black shirt and slacks.

The hostess led us past a three-piece jazz combo to an intimate corner table. My heart pounded in rhythm with the bass player as I folded the white linen napkin on my lap. Garrett

bore an amazing resemblance to the intrepid journalist/superhero. Thoughts of the two of us soaring over city skyscrapers flitted through my brain.

“Do you like to fly?” I asked, still hung up on the Clark Kent likeness.

Garrett looked surprised. “Uh, yeah, I enjoy flying. My accounting practice keeps me busy, so I haven’t traveled much. How about you? Taken any exotic vacations recently?”

It took me all of three seconds to contemplate the exotic trips I’d taken in my lifetime. “The kids and I went to Disneyland two years ago.”

Garrett gave me a blank look and I mentally slapped myself. Nothing like mentioning Mickey Mouse on a first date to bring the conversation to a crashing halt.

Our waiter appeared before I could embarrass myself further by elaborating on the joys of riding in oversized teacups. He leaned over and lit the small candle on our table. “My name is Aaron. Can I tell you about tonight’s specials?”

Garrett winked at me. “I think my date is pretty special, but let’s hear about yours.”

My cheeks flushed tomato soup-red. It had been years since anyone paid me a compliment. My self-esteem, which had been non-existent since my ex-husband moved out, jumped up a notch.

Once we placed our orders, the silence engulfed us. Silence is never golden in my world. I rushed to fill the gap with anything I could remember from my Accounting 101 class. “Garrett, I’d love to learn about depreciation.”

I really needed to find a *Dating for Dummies Guide*.

Ten minutes later when our entrees arrived, he was still discussing depreciation methods. The glow of meeting my superhero dissipated, as Garrett morphed into an IBA—Incredibly Boring Accountant. When he lined up his dining utensils to display the merits of straight-line

depreciation, I could see the writing on the spreadsheet. There would be no second date.

I peeked at my watch. If we skipped dessert I could make it home in time to watch *CSI*. It crossed my mind that I might not be ready for dating if the thought of viewing dead bodies on television was preferable to being out with a live male.

I tuned back in to hear Garrett say, “If you structure it right, it’s like getting free money.

Free money? My ears perked up at his statement but my eyes were diverted by the mocha-and-cream confection placed between us. I could always make time for tiramisu.

Once the server cleared our plates and brought the bill, I was ready for the evening to end. Garrett insisted on pulling my chair back for me as I rose from the table. What nice manners...hold on, did his hand graze my right breast?

Nah. Wishful thinking. It had been years since anyone grazed on any part of my anatomy.

The brisk night air felt refreshing after the garlic and basil scents of the restaurant. As we walked through the parking lot, I pawed through my purse. Lipstick, pepper spray, melted gummy bears. No keys and no phone. We approached my car and I peered in the window. The keys dangled from the ignition, right next to the cell phone hanging from the charger.

Some mother I was. Dating was already proving to be too much of a distraction.

“Garrett, my keys are locked inside the car and my phone is in there too. Can I use your cell to call AAA?” I shivered as the cool night air penetrated my lightweight sweater.

He pointed to a large sedan a few spaces away. “It’s getting cold. Why don’t you make the call from my car?”

Good idea. I slid into the soft leather bench seat of his roomy beige Lincoln Town Car. My date had excellent taste in vehicles. Garrett slipped into the driver’s seat and handed me a slim metal phone. I dialed AAA and gave the dispatcher our location. I hung up, turned and...

Thunk.

My head smacked the passenger side door as Garrett thrust himself on top of me. His cell fell out of my hand. My purse flew over the headrest and into the back seat, sending the pepper spray out of reach. My right elbow smashed into the windshield as I struggled to push him off. He grabbed both wrists with a vise-like grip, and covered my face with wet sloppy kisses. The door handle pressed into my back as my superhero transformed into Dr. Evil.

Garrett finally relaxed his hold on my arms and shifted his attention downstream.

Adrenaline surged through my body as anger replaced fear. I grabbed the first thing I could find then raised my right arm.

Crack!