



Dying for a Dance
By Cindy Sample

CHAPTER ONE

I didn't think my night could get any worse. But when I stumbled on a dead man with my broken shoe heel stuffed in his mouth, I realized it definitely could.

I was valiantly attempting to learn the choreography for my best friend's New Year's Eve wedding. Although Liz envisioned a bridal party version of *Dancing with the Stars*, after tripping my instructor for the

third time in ten minutes, I decided the routine looked more like *Dancing with the Dorks*.

My twenty-one year old Vietnamese instructor, Bobby Nguyen, epitomized a ballroom dancer—tall and slender, graceful and flexible. Despite his attentive coaching, I remained cardboard stiff and clueless.

“C’mon, Laurel, remember what I told you,” he said. “Bend your knees and make your thighs do the work.”

I glanced down at my thighs. Obviously work wasn't included in their job description.

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The mirror-lined walls of the Golden Hills Dance Studio reflected my image multiple times. Shoulder length reddish brown hair grazed my aqua V-neck sweater. Black tummy tuck jeans provided much needed slenderizing, and my brand new silver shoes almost made me look like a dancer. Presentation is everything, especially when you have no clue what you're doing.

Frank Sinatra's version of "It Had To Be You," wafted from the speakers. Dimitri and Anya, a pair of instructors, glided by, their synchronized movements mesmerizing to watch. I eyed them with envy. If I wanted to look as graceful as a gazelle, I had to stop charging around like a rhino on roller blades.

Bobby positioned himself with his head held high, shoulders down, right arm resting in the middle of my back. Per his instructions, I thrust out my chest, sucked in my stomach and tightened my butt.

"Let's do it," I said.

Bobby's soft tenor intoned the fox trot count in my ear. "Slow, slow, quick, quick."

I repeated it to myself...slow, slow, quick, quick... ACK!

The stiletto heel of my right shoe slipped out from under me and I slid across the waxed floor, crashing into Dimitri and Anya with all the grace of a defensive linebacker. Bobby rushed over to assist me as I attempted to extricate myself from the tangle of arms and legs.

"Sorry." I shot an apologetic smile to the instructors.

As they rose to their feet, I overheard Dimitri refer to me as a "klutzsky." I had a feeling the words Anya muttered in Russian didn't translate into "nice

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dancing.” The couple disappeared from the dance floor, probably in search of safer terrain.

My thirty-nine year old body hadn’t done the splits in at least thirty-six years. With Bobby’s assistance, I struggled to my feet.

“Are you okay?” My teacher’s eyes had darkened with concern. Dance protocol recommends that you keep your partner upright, at least most of the time. I swayed to the right and discovered that my heel was no longer connected to my right shoe. My one hundred fifty dollar investment in dance footwear had just gone down the proverbial drain.

“I’m okay, but my shoe isn’t.” I glared at the offensive heel lying a few inches away. “Bobby, this just confirms I’m not meant to dance the wedding routine.”

“No, all it confirms is that we need to practice more. Remember, you’ve only been dancing for a couple of weeks. Do you have other shoes you can wear to finish our lesson?”

I nodded. “I came right from work so I’ll change into my black heels.”

Bobby gave me a sympathetic hug and I waltzed—okay, I still didn’t know how to waltz—so I clumped through the enormous dance studio toward the back of the building where the cloakroom and the studio owner’s offices were located. As I walked past the office, I heard raised voices from behind the closed door.

Crack! The sound of a slap reverberated from the room.

Dimitri, the dance teacher I’d crashed into earlier, stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind him. His elegant hand didn’t quite cover the scarlet mark on his high Slavic cheekbone. He scowled at me then rushed away.

This studio was proving to be more drama-filled than the daytime soaps.

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I entered the cloakroom, dropped my broken overpriced shoes into one of the small cubicles assigned to footwear, slipped into my black faux leather pumps and headed back to the main dance floor for more foxtrot torture.

Forty uncomfortable minutes later, my private lesson with Bobby was over. My bunions ached and my toes hurt from being stomped on multiple times—by me.

I entered the cloakroom and exchanged smiles with an attractive dark-skinned student named Samantha. She zipped up her jacket, picked up her shoe tote, and exited the room. I buttoned my black leather jacket and grabbed my purse. That's when I discovered my dismembered shoes had disappeared. I looked inside every one of the tiny cubicles and pawed through the oversized gray wastebasket outside the door, in case someone had accidentally thrown them away. *Nada.*

My silver shoes had danced off without me.

I couldn't believe someone had taken them. Liz's wedding was only three weeks away and now I would have to buy a new pair instead of merely repairing one shoe. At this rate, I would need a second job to pay for the honor of serving as matron of honor.

As I left the studio and walked through the parking lot, my mind rapidly calculated my additional wedding expenses.

I barely noticed the pink and lavender cotton candy clouds stretched across the twilight sky.

I did notice the man lying on the ground, a pool of blood under his head.

My silver heel jammed into his mouth.

I definitely noticed him.

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