

Every Girl's Dream

By

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A Mediator Short Story (Book 5 ½)

There I was, in a long white Jessica McClintock dress and orchid wrist corsage, moonlight playing on my hair and a pair of strong arms encircling my waist, while a masculine voice gently whispered my name: “Susannah.” My dance partner’s breath was soft against my cheek. “Susannah...”

Yeah. In my dreams.

In real life, the voice calling my name wasn’t a bit masculine. That’s because it belonged to a twelve-year-old boy.

“Uh, Suze? Yeah, there’s something seriously wrong with these cannolis.”

I tore my gaze from the whirling couples before me and looked down. Instead of the total hottie in a tux I’d been imagining, standing beside me was my redheaded stepbrother, holding a tray of Italian pastries.

“Kelly’s really mad,” Doc—known as David to everyone but me—said. “She says they’re like deformed, or something.”

Kelly was right. The cannolis *were* deformed. As vice-president of the sophomore class, and reluctant chairperson of the junior/senior prom committee (I had been appointed to the position when no other sophomore volunteered), I had tried to cut corners, using Doc’s seventh grade Home Ec class as caterers. This was what I got for my efforts: deformed cannolis.

Not that I cared. Especially considering the fact that I was the only sophomore girl in the entire school, practically, who had not been asked to this particular dance. This dance I was chairperson of. What did I care about the stupid refreshments?

Oh, all right already. I cared.

“Suze, are you insane?” Kelly Prescott came stalking up, the skirt of her Nicole Miller evening gown shimmering in the moonlight that poured into the Mission’s fountained courtyard.

“You actually expect people to *eat* those?”

I looked down at the pastries, which were supposed to be tube-like shells but which looked more like pretzels.

“Are there any more cannolis, or are these the last batch?” I asked Doc.

“Um,” he said, looking nervously at Kelly, who, being the most beautiful girl in Carmel, California, considered the two of us, mere mortals, complete freaks. She was right about one of us. And it wasn’t Doc. “There should be more.”

“Fine,” I said. I took the tray of cannolis from him. To Kelly I said, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it. Go back to your date.”

Kelly’s date, senior-class president Greg Sanderson, was standing beneath a nearby palm tree, tall and coolly handsome in his tux. He was one of the best looking guys in school, so it was only fitting that he’d asked Kelly, though a lowly sophomore, to his prom....

Still, he’d only done so after his original date, Cheryl McKenna, unexpectedly, well....

Died.

But hey, it was Greg. What kind of fool would turn down an invitation to go to prom with Greg?

I’ll tell you what kind: me. Not that he’d asked me, of course. But if he had, I’d have been forced to decline. Because my heart belongs to another. For all the good it does me.

Giving Kelly a smile she didn’t deserve, I whisked the offending pastries back to the Mission Academy’s kitchens. Built something like four hundred years ago by Franciscan monks, back in the days when three foot thick walls and giant oak beams overhead were not

considered decor don'ts, the Mission, now a school, had updated the appliances—and added wiring—so that as I entered the kitchen, I could see my reflection in the huge Subzero fridge at the far end of the room. And let's just say I was not thrilled by what I saw.

Oh, the long white dress was fine. With my shoulder-length dark hair and the corsage—bought for me by my stepfather—I looked like a girl from another time.

The problem was the reflection I saw alongside mine. And that was the reflection of someone who really *was* from another time.

I whirled around fast to face him.

“What,” I demanded, “are you doing here?”

I'd nearly dropped the cannolis. He took the tray and set it gently on a nearby counter. “Hello, *querida*,” he said, with a smile. “Nice to see you, too.”

It was the smile that did it. The smile that, each and every time I saw it, caused something inside of me to wilt.

Because even though he's been dead a hundred fifty years, Jesse is still the handsomest guy I've ever seen.

And I've seen a lot of them. Guys, I mean. Because, like the kid in that movie, I can see dead people.

Only unlike that kid, the ghosts don't scare me. One of them I sometimes think I might even love.

Okay, I'm pretty sure I *do* love.

Not that I'm about to let him know it. Because what kind of guy—even a dead one—could possibly ever love a freak like me?

But that doesn't mean I can't dream.

“I happen,” I said, looking away from Jesse’s shrewd, night-dark eyes—not to mention the place where his old-fashioned shirt fell open to reveal a set of abs Greg Sanderson would have envied—“to be extremely busy right now.”

“Oh, I can see that, Susannah,” Jesse said.

“I mean it,” I said. “I don’t have time to chat. I am in charge of making this prom a night these people will always remember.”

Jesse was leaning against one of the countertops, his arms folded across his chest. “*These people*,” he echoed, with another one of those smiles. “But not you?”

“It’s not my prom,” I said, with a shrug, trying not to notice how darkly tanned those arms of his were against the whiteness of his shirt. For a ghost, Jesse is extremely buff.

“So that means no dancing for you?” he asked.

I froze with a tray of fresh new—undeformed—cannolis I’d just removed from the fridge in my hands.

“Dancing?” I could feel heat rushing into my cheeks. He isn’t, I told myself sternly, asking you to dance. He’s just asking in general. Don’t get your hopes up.

It was too late. Already, in my mind’s eye, Jesse and I had joined the other couples out in that moonlit courtyard, those strong arms of his circling my waist, his soft breath against my cheek...

“Yes, dancing,” Jesse said. “Surely even in the twenty-first century, people still dance.”

I drew in a breath, wondering even as I did how I was going to reply.

I never got a chance to find out. Because before I could say a word, I saw her.

“Greg?” she called. “Greg? Where are you?”

My jaw dropped. I’d have recognized that lustrous blonde hair anywhere, but the

hospital gown was a dead give away. No pun intended.

“Oh, *no*,” I said.

Cheryl, hearing my voice, came to stand uncertainly in the kitchen doorway. Her lovely, blue-eyed gaze was hopeful as she looked at Jesse and me.

“Hello,” she said, in the dazed but polite manner so often employed by the recently dead. “Have you seen my boyfriend, Greg? He was supposed to bring me here tonight, only he never showed up. He must have forgotten.”

Jesse and I exchanged glances. His was unreadable. Mine, as I was able to see only too well in my reflection in the fridge, was miserable.

Well, and why not? Seeing Cheryl like this was just further proof of my freakishness.

“Cheryl,” I said, putting down the tray of cannolis. “Listen. Greg didn’t forget to pick you up.”

Cheryl blinked like someone waking from a dream. Perhaps that’s what death is. Who knows? Well, Jesse knows, only he won’t tell me.

“He must have forgotten,” Cheryl said. “It’s prom night.”

“I know, Cheryl,” I said, gently. “It is prom night. And Greg is here.”

Cheryl’s lovely face lit up. “He’s here? Where? Oh, I’ve got to find him.”

She turned to rush from the kitchen. I stopped her. The spirits of the dead are without matter—to everyone but freaks like me, of course. To us, they are flesh and bone—or, as in Jesse’s case, muscle and mysterious smiles.

“Greg’s here, Cheryl,” I said. “But...he’s here with someone else.”

Cheryl’s eyes filled instantly with tears. “But that can’t be,” she said, her voice rising slightly. “He asked *me*. Months ago.”

“I know, Cheryl,” I said. “But Greg had to ask someone else because you...well, you died, Cheryl.”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t,” she said. “That’s ridiculous. I’m not dead. Look at me. I’m standing right here. I am not dead.”

“You’re standing right here in a hospital gown,” I pointed out. “Cheryl, I’m sorry, but you died of a burst appendix two months ago. If you go out there now—if you try to talk to Greg—he won’t see you. He can’t. I can only see you because...well, because it’s what I do. But the truth is, Cheryl, you’re dead.”

I saw it—the horror as my words sank in—spread across her lovely features.

And that’s when she went mental.

Could you blame her? She’d been eighteen, and in love. She’d had everything to live for...college, career, marriage, kids...and now....

Well, now it was all gone.

“NO!” she screamed, her lovely face contorting into a mask of rage and despair. “NO! I don’t believe you! You’re lying!”

She wrenched free from my grasp.

“You’re just jealous, that’s all!” she screamed. “Jealous of me!”

That’s when she brought both fists down into the tray of cannolis, sending its contents flying.

And not the deformed cannolis, either.

“Stop it!” I yelled, stepping forward and seizing her by both wrists. No matter how much she contorted her body or kicked out to be free, I wouldn’t let her go. Not this time.

“You are dead, Cheryl,” I said. “Do you hear me? *Dead*. It’s not fair, but it’s the way

things are. I wish you had gotten to go to your prom. I know it's every girl's dream to go to prom with the guy she loves. But Cheryl, Greg has moved on. It was hard for him, but he did it. It's time you did the same."

Something in my words—maybe the assurance that Greg had not had an easy time coping with her death, for all Kelly Prescott might wish otherwise—drove all the fight from her. She sagged against me.

Then, a second later, I heard her murmur, "I really am dead, aren't I?"

And then she was gone. Just like that.

Jesse, who had not stirred the whole time from the spot he'd been standing, confident I could handle Cheryl myself, was grinning.

"It's every girl's dream to guy to go to prom with the guy she loves?" he echoed, not just one, but both inky black eyebrows raised.

"Don't start with me," I said. I tried to hide my suddenly flaming cheeks by scraping away what was left of the cannolis, and replacing them with the contents of an upended bag of chocolate chip cookies. "I have things to do."

"Oh, yes," Jesse said, getting out of my way as I stormed past him. "I can see that."

If I'd hoped the night air would cool the fire in my face, I was disappointed. I was still feeling strangely flushed when I found Doc out in the courtyard, and shoved the tray of cookies at him.

"Suze, these aren't cannolis," he said.

"I know. There aren't any more cannolis."

"I thought there was a whole—"

"Not anymore," I said, shortly, and turned away because I saw Kelly glaring at us from

over Greg's shoulder. Whatever had happened now, I did not want to know. Because it could not possibly be as bad as what had happened to poor Cheryl McKenna, dead at eighteen.

Or to me, born a freak who can see ghosts.

But when I ducked into the shadows of the Mission's open-air corridor, hoping to escape, for a moment, the music and laughter, I found that I was not, in fact, alone at all. Jesse had followed me.

"You never answered my question," he said, in a voice that was soft as moonlight. "Do people in the twenty-first century still dance?"

My heart beat thundered in my ears, far louder than the slow music. "Um," I said, barely able to swallow, my throat had gone so dry. "Sometimes."

"How about now?" he asked.

And then his strong arms were encircling my waist, his breath soft against my cheek as he gently whispered my name: "Susannah. Susannah...."

The End