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*The Summer of Cotton Candy*  
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# 1

Candace Thompson wondered where her life had gone wrong. Maybe when she was fourteen, she should have babysat her bratty cousin when her parents asked. Maybe when she was seven, if she hadn't locked the teacher out of the classroom, this wouldn't be happening to her. No, maybe her life went all wrong when she was three and she knocked down the girl with the pigtails who had stolen Mr. Huggles, her stuffed bear. Yes, the more she thought about it, that must have been the moment that started her on the path that led to the special punishment she was now suffering.

It was the first day of summer vacation, but for Candace, it might as well have been the last. She sat in a dark dreary office, signing away her freedom. The decree had come down from her father: she had to get a job. No job, no cash. No cash, no movies or hanging with her friends. It didn't matter to him that if she had a job she wouldn't have time to do the things she would need the money for.

She took a deep breath as she finished filling out the last form and handed it across the desk to the recruiter, Lloyd Peterson, a strange-looking man in a frumpy brown suit whom she was convinced had to be a perv. Hadn't she seen him on

*America's Most Wanted?* She slid down into her seat, willing herself to be invisible, or at least small enough to slip away unnoticed.

"Candace," he mused, "can I call you Candy?"

"Well . . ." She was about to say no. She hated that name.

"Great. So, Candy, what makes you want to work for The Zone?"

She didn't want to work for The Zone, she just wanted to enjoy her summer like everybody else. Her father had put his foot down, though. According to him it was time she learned the value of work and earning her own way. She had chosen to work for The Zone because she had absolutely no skills, and working for a theme park seemed more interesting than flipping burgers.

She sighed and squirmed, refusing to meet the recruiter's eyes. "I've always dreamed of working for The Zone. I want to be part of the excitement and help people enjoy themselves more." It was her rehearsed answer, and she held her breath, hoping he would buy it.

He stared at her for a long minute before nodding. Picking up a bright blue folder on his desk, he flipped it open and cleared his throat. "You realize, of course, that if you wanted a summer job, you should have started applying months ago, right?" he asked, staring at her over the tops of his glasses.

She slunk farther down into her chair. She licked her lips when she realized he expected an answer. "No," she said.

"No? No? Well, you are wrong. In order to get a good summer job, you should start applying at least in March."

*March! All I could think of in March was holding out until spring break without going postal.* Her eyes were now nearly level with the edge of his desk. "I just thought, you know, The Zone needs a lot of employees."

"You are correct, but most of our summer positions have already been filled."

He stopped and stared at her. She wasn't sure what he expected her to say, but she was beginning to have the sinking

feeling that her summer would consist of asking people if they wanted fries with their meal.

Just as she was about to get up to leave, sure that the interview had come to an end, he spoke. "We do, however, have two openings."

She sat up. "What are they?"

"The first is janitorial."

"You mean those people who go around sweeping up after everyone?" *That might not be so bad. At least I could keep moving, and nobody ever pays attention to them.*

He raised an eyebrow. "Some of our janitorial employees do that, but not this position. This one is cleaning up the women's restrooms."

Candace's stomach turned. In her mind she pictured the high-school bathroom by fourth period, and that was only with a few hundred users, not thousands. There was no way she was going there.

"Um, and the other one is . . .?" she managed to ask as diplomatically as she could.

"Cotton candy operator."

"I'll take it!" she exclaimed, more loudly than she had meant to.

"Good!" Lloyd stood up and opened a drawer in one of his many filing cabinets. He pulled out a stack of papers two inches thick and slammed them down on his desk right in front of her. The desk continued to shake for a moment as though there had just been an earthquake. "Fill those out."

"Now?" she asked, her mind boggling over the enormity of the task. She moved slightly so that she was eye level with the stack, and she could feel her hand begin to cramp up in premature protest.

"Yes, now. You can, however, use the table in the courtyard if you'd be more comfortable."

The word *duh* came to mind, but she bit her tongue and kept it to herself.

"Yes, sir, thank you. I'll do that," she said instead, scrambling to her feet and grabbing the stack of papers. She made her way out of the room as fast as she could, taking a deep breath once in the hallway.

*The hallways around this place are roomier than the offices,* she thought to herself as she immediately began to feel less claustrophobic. She turned around, not sure which way the courtyard would be. She hadn't seen one on her way in, so it must be in the other direction.

She came to a T in the hall and craned her neck to the right. All she could see that way were more offices, so she turned to the left . . .

. . . and ran straight into a six-foot wall.

"Umph," the wall gasped as Candace's papers went flying in all directions.

"I am so sorry," Candace said, realizing that the wall she had run into was actually a guy, a *big* guy, a guy with muscles she could see through his shirt. She looked up and forgot what she was going to say next. She was staring at the Lone Ranger. He stood there, larger than life in pale blue, complete with boots and gun belt. Black wavy hair shone from underneath a white hat pushed far back on his head. A black mask covered part of his face.

All this was not what stopped her in her tracks, though. What took her breath away and caused her to stare like an idiot were his eyes. He had amazing eyes that were bright blue and crackled like lightning. He stared right through her, and her heart began to hammer.

"|—|—"

He smiled at her, and she felt dizzy. "Are you lost, my lady?"

She nodded, still unable to look away from those piercing eyes.

"Here, let me help you," he said, bending down.

For one dizzying moment his face came close to hers, and she thought he was going to kiss her just like in some movie.

Instead of kissing her, though, he knelt down and began picking up her papers.

*Idiot*, she said to herself, feeling her cheeks burning. Her knees began to buckle, and she covered it by quickly dropping down to her knees and scooping up some of the papers that had managed to spread themselves across the width of the hall.

"I'm such a klutz," she said.

"Not at all. How could you expect to run into something when you're not looking where you're going?"

She glanced up quickly, stunned at the rebuke. Then she noticed that he was grinning from ear to ear. They both burst out laughing.

"That should do it," he said finally, handing her the last sheet of paper. His fingers brushed hers, and she felt her stomach do a flip-flop.

"Thanks."

"So, where are you headed?"

"Um, um," she stammered for a moment, her mind going completely blank.

"I take it you're filling these out?" he said, tapping the stack of papers.

She nodded, relieved as she remembered, "Something was said about a courtyard that had a table."

"I'll show you where it is."

She fell into step with him, and he led her down the corridor. They made three quick turns in a row and arrived at a door leading out to what truly was a small courtyard.

"There you go," he said, holding the door open for her. She walked outside into the sun and plunked her papers down onto a table.

"Thanks."

"I live to serve."

She couldn't think of something witty to say, so she just stared at him.

He winked at her. "I'll see you around."

Then he turned and left. She sank down into the chair, her knees feeling weak. "Who was that masked man?"



Four hours and three phone calls to her father later, Candace finished filling out the application. She stacked up the tax forms, identity forms, nondisclosure forms, noncompetition agreements, and receipt-of-employee-handbook forms. And with a snort, she put the background check and financial disclosure form on top of the whole stack. She was seventeen, and she had no finances to disclose. She'd had a momentary panic about the background check until she realized they were looking for things like a criminal background or drug use and wouldn't be interested in the fact that she'd had detention twice in seventh grade.

She flipped back through the employee handbook. It was over a hundred pages long. After reading through it, she realized that The Zone had a policy and procedure for absolutely everything. They even had three different emergency-evacuation plans, depending on whether it was fire, weapons problems, or natural disasters. Clearly the people who worked on the handbook were paranoid, and now, after reading it, so was she.

She dragged herself to her feet, her stomach angrily reminding her that lunch had been hours before and she had missed it. She miraculously made her way back through the maze of corridors to Mr. Peterson's office. He was speaking on the phone, so she stood in the doorway until he looked up and saw her.

He hung up the phone. "Come in, Candy. I take it you're done?"

She nodded, handing him the stack.

"Excellent. Well, I'll take a look at all these. I'm sure they're in order. Let me just get copies of your driver's license and social security card."

She fished them out of her purse and handed them to him. He left the office for a minute and then returned with photocopies. He handed her cards back to her.

"Okay, you'll start orientation tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yes, is there a problem with that?" he asked sharply.

"I just thought I'd have a couple of days before—"

"Tomorrow's our last orientation class for the summer. It's either tomorrow or never."

Never *wasn't* an option, no matter how much she wanted it to be. A vision of a certain masked man flitted briefly through her mind. Then again, maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all.

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow is fine for me," she said.

"Report to the lobby at seven forty a.m."

There went any hope she had of sleeping in, probably forever. She sighed and nodded.



"What do you mean you have to be home early tonight?" Candace's best friend, Tamara Wilcox, huffed over the phone. "I thought we were hanging out?"

"We can still hang. I just need to get some sleep. I have to start work early in the morning," Candace explained. She flipped onto her back and braced her legs against the wall next to her bed.

There was only silence on the other end of the phone.

"Tam, you still there?"

"Uh-huh. Meet me at Starbucks."

"Can't. I'm getting a job to earn summer spending money, and Dad won't give me an advance."

"I'm buying. Just get your butt over here."



Ten minutes later Candace was sitting down at a corner table where Tamara was already waiting for her. Without a word, Tamara slid a grande hot chocolate with a shot of raspberry across the table to her.

Candace blew through the tiny opening in the lid like she always did. Tonight, though, the whistling sound it produced didn't make her smile. She was too busy trying to avoid looking at the daggers in Tamara's eyes.

"So, you're ditching me for the summer?"

"No, just five days a week. I should be free evenings and weekends."

"Did they guarantee that?"

"Well, no, but they said it would likely be that. They couldn't expect me to work during church, you know?"

Tamara crossed her arms over her chest, a sure sign she wasn't buying it. "And what about youth group? Even if they don't make you work Sunday morning they're going to make you work Friday nights."

"I should be free evenings," Candace said, slinking down into her seat and hating that she was repeating herself. Somehow, it sounded less plausible than it had earlier in the recruiter's office.

"And if you're not? It's bad enough you're going to be blowing off church and youth group, but what about me? I'm your best friend. What kind of summer am I going to have without you?"

"Come on, no matter what hours I get, it will only be thirty-five a week. We can still do all kinds of stuff. And I'll have the money to pay for it," Candace said with a sigh. It was amazing sometimes how Tamara could turn anyone's pain into her own.

Tamara uncrossed her arms and leaned forward, tapping one perfectly manicured nail on the table. "You know, if money is the issue, I can take care of that."

Candace stared at her. Tamara was rich. Her whole family was. Her monthly allowance was more than some people made in a year. Candace knew she was serious, and it was a tempting offer.

"I can't," she said at last, tears of frustration filling her eyes. "My dad would kill me."

Tamara sat back, a disappointed look on her face. "Oh, is he pulling that rite-of-passage, learn-the-value-of-work crap on you?"

Candace nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Yeah, he'd freak if I backed out. And I don't think you're prepared to pay for my college tuition."

Tamara laughed. "Would it get you to bail on this whole Zone thing?"

Candace scowled. "He's my dad. What can I do?"

"Nothing," Tamara said, shaking her head. "Parents are so much work."