

ZONDERVAN

The Fall of Candy Corn

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1

Candace Thompson knew she was crazy. That was the only possible explanation for why, once again, she was sitting across the desk from Lloyd Peterson, hiring manager for The Zone theme park. A lot had changed since the day in June when she had been hired to operate a cotton candy machine. Still, sitting across from Lloyd, she felt self-conscious and a bit insecure.

"So," he said, staring at her intently. "You think you can be a maze monster for Scare?"

She nodded. Scare was what they called the annual Halloween event at The Zone. Aside from putting frightening elements in traditional rides, during Scare there were a dozen mazes where monsters did their best to scare park guests as they wound their way through dark and creepy corridors.

"Then show me something scary."

It was eleven in the morning in a brightly lit office. What on earth did he expect of her? She wanted to say something smart. She wanted to say something funny. With horror she realized she didn't have *anything* to say.

"Come on, come on," he said. "Be a monster, jump around, growl, something."

She got out of her seat and did the best growl she could. Unfortunately, she sounded less like a monster and more like a frightened Chihuahua.

"Threaten me!"

She got closer to him than she would have liked, jumped up and down, swung her arms, and pounded her fist firmly on his desk. She could tell by the look on his face that he wasn't impressed.

She growled again and yelled, "I'm going to get you!" She felt like the world's biggest idiot. No one would be scared of a teenage girl, especially not one wearing a gray business suit and sensible shoes.

"Scream!" he ordered.

She threw back her head and screamed her loudest, shrillest scream. That, at least, was easy. It was a game her best friend, Tamara, and she had played when they were little. They had competitions to see who could scream louder or longer or higher.

She screamed for ten seconds and then sat back down in her chair. She expected Lloyd to laugh; she expected him to say something derisive. Instead, he looked at her thoughtfully.

"I have the perfect role for you to play," he said. He wrote something on an orange slip of paper. "You're going to be Candy in the Candy Craze maze."

"Candy?" she asked questioningly. "Am I going to be dressed up like a giant Twix bar or something?"

He shook his head. "Nothing like that. You should be proud; it's our latest maze. The lines for it will wrap halfway through the park."

He handed her a stack of papers. "You can go fill these out. Then Saturday at nine a.m. report to the costume warehouse for your fitting and orientation. At that time you'll also be able to pick up your badge, ID, and parking pass."

"Saturday at nine," she confirmed as she took the stack from him.

“There’s a table—”

“Out in the courtyard,” she finished for him.

Since she was a returning referee—which was the The Zone’s name for an employee—there was slightly less paperwork this time. There was, however, an entire book of rules and policies regarding Scare. She had to sign several forms stating that she had received it, she had read it, she had understood it, and she promised to abide by it. It seemed like the golden rule of Scare was “*thou shalt have no physical contact of any kind with players.*” *Players* was what they called the customers. Touching a player during Scare apparently was grounds for immediate dismissal.

Once she finished filling out and signing all her paperwork, she returned it to Lloyd Peterson.

Checking her watch, she discovered that she still had an hour before she had to meet Tamara for a late lunch. She decided to head into the theme park to see a few friends.

The first thing she noticed when she entered the park was that the Holiday Zone was closed. Temporary walls set up around the area prevented players from going inside or even getting a peek at what was going on.

The Holiday Zone was one of nine themed areas inside The Zone theme park. The theme of the Holiday Zone changed throughout the year to reflect different holidays. It was the day after Labor Day so all the Fourth of July themes from summer were now being replaced with Halloween themes for fall. The transformation would take about ten days, and then the Holiday Zone would be open again for business.

Several key attractions throughout the rest of the park were also closed, getting their Scare overlay. The Muffin Mansion was one of them, she discovered when she went there looking for her friend Becca. The Muffin Mansion was unique in the park because half of it was in the Exploration Zone and half of it was in the History Zone. The Exploration Zone half was located near most of the kitchens, which looked a lot more like laboratories.

There was a small counter where they sold the muffins. The side that was in the History Zone looked like an old-fashioned mansion, and guests could eat their muffins at one of the tables scattered around the parlor. It was from the History side that it got its name. It was from the Exploration side that it got its wild concoctions of muffins and its ever-expanding menu.

She stared for a moment at the construction walls around the building and wondered what the Muffin Mansion would look like when the walls came down. She also wondered where Becca was working while the mansion was getting its Halloween makeover. She glanced at her watch and thought about who else she might be able to track down to chat with.

She knew that two of her other friends, Josh and Roger, had ended their summer jobs and weren't there. Fortunately, both of them were going to be working Scare. They had managed to talk her into joining them. Spending time with them was one of the best perks of working the event. One of the others was that it paid slightly more than her summer job had.

Martha, her former supervisor, spent a lot of time off field in the employee-only areas. Candace wasn't sure if Sue, one of her other friends, had already quit her summer job as a janitor or not. That left Kurt. So Candace made her way to the History Zone.

Kurt was her boyfriend. The word was still exciting and new to Candace. He worked as a mascot, a costumed character. They had met the day she first became a Zone referee and, after some rocky moments, had ended the summer as a couple. She found him dressed like Robin Hood in the medieval area of the History Zone. She had gotten good at recognizing his dark hair and brilliant blue eyes no matter what costume or mask he was wearing.

"Hey, gorgeous!" he said, when he saw her, and he gave her a quick kiss.

"Eeeww!" a little boy holding an autograph book said.

"She's not Maid Marion," the boy's sister protested.

"She's not?" Kurt asked, feigning surprise.

"I don't think Maid Marion has red hair," another little girl commented.

Kurt turned back to Candace, "Away lady, for you are not my dearest love."

Candace pretended to be crushed and put her hand to her forehead as though she might faint. The children laughed at that. "But I am! I am wearing this disguise to hide from the evil Prince John."

"Robin will protect you!" the little girl said excitedly.

The little boy handed Candace his autograph book with great solemnity. She signed Maid Marion's name, and he seemed immensely pleased.

After the children left, Kurt smiled at her. "Nice job."

"Thank you. I'm practicing my acting skills for Scare."

"You signed up?"

"Just now."

"That's great! What did you get?"

"Apparently it's the new maze. I'm playing Candy."

Kurt looked startled, but before he could say anything, he was besieged by several more children wanting pictures and autographs. Soon a line formed. Candace glanced at her watch, and Kurt shrugged and gave her a smile. She waved good-bye and headed for the front of the park.

Twenty minutes later she was sitting with Tamara in their favorite ice cream parlor.

"Want to split the turkey sandwich and a banana split?" Tamara asked.

"Split the split? You took the words right out of my mouth," Candace said.

After the waitress took their order, they discussed the fact that they had only a few hours of freedom left before school started up in the morning.

"I can't believe we only have two classes together this year," Tamara complained.

"At least one of them is homeroom," Candace said.

"Drama should be fun though," Tamara said.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into signing up for that."

"Come on, you're going to be a maze monster. What's a little acting to you?" Tamara teased.

Candace smiled. "I am pretty jazzed about that," she admitted. "I just hope I do a good job. I totally couldn't pull off 'scary' in front of the recruiter today. I should thank you, though. I got a position based on my ability to scream."

"You're welcome," Tamara said. "See, all those hours in the garage paid off."

"You're going to come see me in the maze, right?"

Tamara was adventurous, but she hated anything that resembled a monster or something that went bump in the night. She couldn't stand horror films and hadn't even been able to make it through the old movie *Jaws* the year before without freaking out and vowing never to go swimming in the ocean again.

"I guess if you're going to overcome your fear of mazes enough to work in one, the least I can do is come see you in it," Tamara said with a heavy sigh.

"You're the best."

"I know."

After lunch they did some last-minute school shopping, and each of them ended up with pencils, paper, and three pairs of shoes.

"Seriously, I don't think I can wear these to school," Candace said, pulling a pair of three-inch black heels out of one of the bags.

"Then you can wear them *after* school when you go out with Kurt," Tamara said. "That officially makes them 'school adjacent' and so, school shoes."

"You have messed-up logic, Tam, but I love it."

"Knew you would."

They headed back to Candace's house so she could change clothes before youth group. While Tamara unpacked her shoes

for her, Candace threw on a pair of jeans and a Zone sweatshirt she had borrowed from Kurt.

"You're never giving him back that sweatshirt, are you?"

Tamara said.

"Not if I can help it," Candace laughed. "Besides, it's the duty of a girlfriend to swipe some article of clothing from her boyfriend. It's like a sacred trust. The guy carries around a picture of the girl, and the girl snags his sweatshirt."

"You weren't even cold the other night at the theater when you got that, were you?"

"I'll never tell," Candace said with a laugh.

When they left the house and headed for church, Candace was both excited and a little nervous. Because of her summer job, she had missed out on youth group all summer. Now she was returning and she was officially a senior. It would be her first senior-y thing.

Once they arrived and entered the familiar building, though, she began to relax. The youth building was large and furnished with old beat-up couches, chairs, and plenty of pillows for sprawling on the floor. Almost a hundred people were in attendance. The freshmen were easy to spot with their wide-eyed looks of excitement. They had finally entered the major leagues, and it was a big night for them too.

Candace and Tamara staked their claim to one of the smaller couches just before the youth pastor, Bobby, called everyone together. They prayed and then sang a couple of praise songs.

"Okay, welcome, everyone, to a new year. We're glad to see all you freshers out there. And seniors, congratulations on being the top dogs."

There was a weak yell from the freshmen, which was dwarfed by the shout of the seniors. The sophomores looked relieved that they were no longer freshmen, while the juniors looked enviously at the seniors.

"Make sure you take a fall schedule home tonight. We've got a lot of great events coming up in the next couple of months.

There's the girls' all-night party next Friday night. Don't forget the annual all-church marathon the following Sunday. We'll have a guest band at the end of the month, which I know you won't want to miss. We're also doing something brand new this year. The first Friday in October we'll get on buses and head on over to Scare at The Zone!"

Cheers went up from almost everyone in the room. Candace was stunned. She knew a lot of church youth groups went to Scare, but this was the first year her youth group was planning on it. She began to rethink her employment options. It was going to be weird enough playing a monster on display in a maze without her entire youth group there to see her. Slowly, she sank down lower on the couch, willing herself to be unseen.

Tamara waved her hand in the air, and, before Candace could stop her, Bobby called, "What is it Tamara?"

"I just thought everyone would like to know that Candace is going to be a monster in one of the mazes."

Candace could feel her cheeks burning as she glared at Tamara.

"Hear that everyone? Make sure you come with us to Scare, and you can see Candace at work!"

There were more cheers as Candace sat there in dismay. A freshman girl raised her hand.

"Yes, what's your name?" Bobby asked.

"Jen. How much will Scare cost?" she asked, clearly concerned.

"Well, Jen, that's the best part. This is the perfect time to invite out all your friends—Christians and non-Christians. The entire event, including entrance ticket, transportation, food, and a souvenir T-shirt, is completely sponsored. So it's free!"

And now, with the exception of Candace, there was a standing ovation. Candace just glared up at Tamara. "This is your fault, isn't it?" she asked.

Tamara just smiled innocently. "I have to support my best friend, don't I?"

Candace thought that maybe she could use a little less support and a lot more privacy, but she didn't say so. Tamara's entire family was beyond rich. Tamara and Candace had been friends before either of them even understood what was up with money. Most of the time Tamara played it casual, but every once in a while she did something generous and outrageous. This time her generosity was going to put Candace fully in the spotlight. As cool as it often was to have a friend with money, there was a downside.



"How could you do that to me?" Candace asked when she and Tamara were back in the car after youth group was over.

"I love you, Cand, but if you think I'm going through those mazes by myself, you're crazy. I plan on putting as many bodies between me and the guys in the scary masks as possible."

"But I'm one of the guys in the scary masks! Besides, it's perfectly safe. They're not allowed to touch players at all."

"That's what you say."

"It's true. It says so in the handbook."

Tamara rolled her eyes. "Sure, and how many people aside from you bothered to read it?"

"That's not fair. It's in the pamphlet too," Candace protested.

"Oh, and because it says so in the pamphlet it must be true," Tamara said. "Maybe if they posted it on the Web it would be doubly true."

"Knock it off," Candace said, still irritated and in no mood to play.

"Seriously, you're not worried are you?" Tamara asked, doing her best to stop smiling.

"No, I love being in the spotlight," Candace said, letting the sarcasm flow freely. "Hello! Remember me? Your best friend? I hang around with you so I can be spotlight adjacent, as in, not *in* but nearby."

"Well you need the drama class worse than I thought," Tamara said.

"I don't want to be in the spotlight."

Tamara pulled up in front of Candace's house and parked. "You know," she said, her voice suddenly very thoughtful, "for someone who doesn't want to be in the spotlight, you seem to spend a lot of time in it lately."

"Hello? Not my fault," Candace said.

"I'm not saying it is," Tamara answered, putting her hand on Candace's shoulder. "I just think you seem to end up there no matter what you do. I mean you were a cotton candy operator all summer, and how many times did you name something at the park or win some competition or otherwise draw everyone's attention your way?"

"Too many," Candace muttered.

"Exactly. Stuff like that doesn't just happen. I think maybe God's trying to tell you something."

"Like what?"

"Like maybe you're not meant to live your life spotlight adjacent. Maybe you're meant to be front and center."

Candace was quiet for a moment while she thought about that. It seemed like such a crazy idea. She had always lived in a way that ensured she blended into the background. The thought of standing apart from it was intimidating. Yet, hadn't she done exactly that when she and her team won The Zone Scavenger Hunt? Or the time she stood up for her rights when she was falsely accused at work? That hadn't exactly been blending in.

She shook her head. It was a lot to think about, and the part of her brain that was already freaked out so didn't want to go there. "Maybe it's just coincidence," she said.

"I don't believe in coincidence," Tamara said. "I believe in plans God makes and doesn't tell you about until later."

Candace smiled. "Any chance God plans to make it snow or something so we don't have to go to school tomorrow?"

Tamara looked at the readout on her dashboard. "It's nine thirty at night, and it's still eighty-seven degrees outside. Besides, this is Southern California. When God makes it snow here, it's not a plan; it's a miracle."

Candace couldn't help but laugh at that. "Thanks, Tam," she said after a minute.

"Hey, that's what friends are for," she said with a shrug. "Wanna carpool tomorrow?"

Candace nodded. "You driving or me?"

"I will. See you in the morning."

Once in her room Candace thought about calling Kurt or her friend Josh. Reason won out, though, since she had school in the morning, and calling either of them could result in her being up way too late.

"Morning's going to come awfully early," she confided in Mr. Huggles, her stuffed bear.