

THE RED UNICORN CANDY STORE

By Katie Cross

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THE magical Red Unicorn Candy Store was no ordinary candy store.

It had lollipop trees and barrels of chocolate chips and star-shaped jellies, just like any respectable candy store. Piped frosting decorated the windowsills, and sprinkles covered the ceiling in a dizzying array of colors. The Red Unicorn Candy Store soared ten stories into the sky. Anyone who wanted to could go inside and lick the walls; they tasted like sour apple suckers. Caramel held it all together, of course, as nothing held candy together better than hardened caramel.

But the Red Unicorn Candy Store had something no other candy store in the land had: the Red Unicorn Horn.

It hovered above Marshmallow Mountain which is exactly what it sounds like: a monstrous pile of marshmallows held together by white fondant—rotating and swiveling without ceasing. Rumors about the horn swirled around town like wisps of cotton candy. Most people thought the Red Unicorn Horn was just a big piece of candy made of sugar and spice and everything nice. Which would have been fine, except for the other rumor.

The Red Unicorn Horn is powerful, they said. Filled with magic, unpredictable. And it never stops moving.

Mr. Thomas took care of the Red Unicorn Candy Store, but in truth, the candy store ran itself. No one could own such a place, so Thomas simply made sure the cogs worked smoothly, the children didn't get sour tummies from too much candy, and the gold coins were kept safe from thieves. But he had nothing to do with the constantly full vat of jelly beans, or the coconut grass that grew bright green and fresh every morning.

Despite working in a world of sweets and sugar, Mr. Thomas looked skeletal. His knobby elbows stuck out of his skin, and his spindly fingers moved like the legs of a spider, but he had a head of bushy white hair, a jolly face, and a deep laugh. All the

children adored Mr. Thomas, which is why the Red Unicorn Candy Store permitted him to stay.

Mr. Thomas loved living in the massive house of sours and sprinkles. The Red Unicorn Candy Store provided him with warm meals and a cozy bed to sleep in at night. Everything would have been perfect—except for one naughty child.

Jeremiah Reed.

Jeremiah Reed had cheeks so round that his face seemed stuffed with bowls of sweet jelly, the red color seeping through his skin in a permanent blush. Mr. Thomas had never seen a more sluggardly, peevish boy in all his long life. Unfortunately, Jeremiah's mother was a sickly woman, and, fearing her son would have a willowy, bendable frame like her, she gave him all the pastries and muffins he wanted.

Of all the bad children in all the candy stores in all the world, none were as greedy or mischievous as plump Jeremiah Reed.

“Clean it up!” Jeremiah would command after knocking over gummy worm farms—glass jars filled with crumbled cookies that looked like dirt.

Sometimes the floor would absorb the candy and the jars would refill immediately, but other times the spilled goodies remained for Mr. Thomas to clean up and then charge Jeremiah's weepy mother, who never seemed to notice her son's mischievous antics.

Sometimes Jeremiah would squash chocolate-covered straw berries and sword fight with pastel candy sticks until they shattered. No matter how much Mr. Thomas pled and implored, Jeremiah insisted on swimming in the steaming river of hot chocolate, drawing rude pictures on the walls with strawberry sauce, and sculpting houses out of blocks of fudge. He would finish eating his way through the store, waddle out plump, sticky, and satisfied, and his mother would leave a handful of gold coins on the gumdrop desk.

One particularly bleak winter day, when the snow fell with the kind of fat flakes that stick to your eyelashes like powdered sugar, Mr. Thomas looked up from his desk made from stacks of penny candy (the store often changed the flavor of the desk in the middle of the night) to find a little boy crying in the middle of the candy cane path.

“Hush, now,” Mr. Thomas said, rushing to soothe the lost child. “There, there. The store knows where your mother is. It will find her. You just have to tell me your favorite candy.”

“P-peanut b-b-butter c-cups!”

“A wise choice. Look!” Mr. Thomas said, pointing to the red-and-white striped path. “Follow the cups, and you’ll find your mama. You won’t get lost here, poor child.”

A peanut butter cup appeared on the candy cane path ahead of the little boy, and then a second cup. A trail sprang up that led to the left. It wound around the field of gummy bears, the small city of taffy buildings, through the twirling display of bubble gum suckers, and headed toward the window. A woman with bright red hair just like the child’s stood at a display of chocolate-covered cherries.

“Mama!” the boy cried, and, plucking up a cup or ten, he scampered to her side.

Mr. Thomas straightened with a smile that quickly turned dark for Jeremiah Reed had just toddled into the Red Unicorn Candy Store and shoved a little girl into a display of sugar wafers.

“Oh, dear,” Mr. Thomas muttered, and a nearby cup of black licorice sticks began to shake. He glanced at them and sighed. “I agree. This won’t be pretty. He seems to be in a very bad mood.”

To say Jeremiah Reed was in a surly mood that day would have been like describing the sour powder tubes as sweet treats. He’d eaten an entire gingerbread house for breakfast—which is what nasty, wolfish children like to eat—but he’d wanted to eat a plate of cashew brittle instead.

“I’m thirsty!” Jeremiah bellowed and stormed over to steaming river of hot chocolate. When he reached for a cup off the wall, the cup moved to the side, narrowly avoiding his fat fingers. He tried again, but the cup disappeared in a poof of cocoa powder. Turning bright red, Jeremiah slammed both hands into the wall, hoping to grab at least one cup, but all of them scattered and flew away like porcelain birds.

“Fine!” he yelled. “I shall just drink it with my face!”

Then piggish Jeremiah Reed plunged his face into the river of hot chocolate and gulped until his stomach hurt.

Mr. Thomas ran over to stop Jeremiah, but he arrived too late. “Jeremiah!” he called. Now the entire river of hot chocolate will have to be replaced. No one will drink if it’s had your face in it. What a terrible little boy.”

“It doesn’t taste like peppermint!” Jeremiah screamed, his face reddening beneath the hot chocolate oozing off his skin. “I want peppermint!”

Many customers lately had complained that the rare, sweet taste of peppermint hot chocolate they couldn’t find anywhere else had disappeared from the store. It was a special peppermint flavor, of course. A super-secret Red Unicorn Candy Store trademark. Mr. Thomas couldn’t figure out how to fix it, and the store didn’t seem inclined to change, so he simply had to reassure people that it would return when it was supposed to return.

“Well, too bad,” Mr. Thomas said to Jeremiah, setting his hands on his hips. “You can’t have everything you want. The store won’t let you.”

A tower of bright yellow cupcakes hopped up and down in agreement.

“Then I want the Red Unicorn Horn!” Jeremiah cried in his nasally, high-pitched voice. Mr. Thomas grimaced and stuck his fingers in his ears to muffle the horrid sound. Jeremiah pointed into the air. “Give me the horn.”

“No. The store will not let you have it.”

“Yes, it will! I always get what I want!”

“You certainly will not have it,” Mr. Thomas replied with exaggerated force. “The store does not like greedy children.”

Jeremiah glared at Mr. Thomas with beady eyes. “I deserve it! None of your other candy is good. I’ve eaten it all. Who cares about you, anyway? I’ll just get it myself.”

“The last little boy to go after the Red Unicorn Horn said the same thing, but what he found was not what he expected.”

Jeremiah set his chubby fists on his hips. “I’m better than him!”

“He died.”

“I won’t! Now give it to me!” he bellowed, the collar of his shirt sticking to his second chin, which still dripped with hot chocolate.

Mr. Thomas glanced to the top of the store, past Fudge Hall on level three and the Powder Room on level seven, until he saw the bright red horn at the very, very, very

top of Marshmallow Mountain. It seemed to wink and wave, beckoning Jeremiah to come closer.

“Are you determined?”

“Yes.”

“Then you may go after it, Jeremiah,” Mr. Thomas said, hanging his head. “But you must heed this warning: the Red Unicorn Horn is not a candy. Going after it will put your very life in jeopardy.”

Jeremiah glared at him.

“I’m going!” he declared, all three of his chins wobbling. “And no candy store is going to stop me!”

Tall tubes of red bubble gum balls suddenly opened, spilling the treats all over the floor around Jeremiah’s feet.

Mr. Thomas sighed. “Yes,” he agreed out loud. “This is going to be a mess.”

Mr. Thomas watched Jeremiah begin his ascent of Marshmallow Mountain from the balcony of the second floor, where the Cookie Room displayed thousands of the scrumptious desserts. From red velvet to chocolate chip, from peanut butter to macadamia nut, every single cookie stayed warm.

“He’ll never make it,” Mr. Thomas said sadly, watching as Jeremiah tried to struggle over a particularly sprawling marshmallow boulder below. He’d been climbing for twenty minutes and had only made it ten feet. A warm chocolate cookie floated to Mr. Thomas’s side. He took it with a grateful smile. “Thank you. This does make me feel better.”

Just then, a puff of powdered sugar exploded from the crack between two marshmallow rocks, temporarily blinding Jeremiah. Startled by the unexpected explosion, he rolled backward and bounced down two more boulders.

“Oh, dear,” Mr. Thomas said, chewing through the delicious cookie. “It’ll take him ten more minutes to climb back up.”

Because of Jeremiah’s short, squishy legs, most of the boulders were too big for him to climb, but he still managed to cut a gradual upward path around the mountain.

Mr. Thomas walked the path beside the caramel apple wall, which curved upward along Marshmallow Mountain, following greedy Jeremiah's slow progress. A crowd of children followed Mr. Thomas, as they usually did.

"He can't do it!" declared a little girl through her last mouthful of cake-batter fudge. Another square of fudge appeared in her hands—the Candy Store agreed with her sentiments—and she squealed in delight.

"Much too big." agreed another boy before stuffing chocolate-covered cinnamon bear in his mouth.

Jeremiah's sweaty hands on the sugary boulders created a white, sticky film that covered his wrists and arms as he grappled up the mountain. By the time Jeremiah reached Fudge Hall, the crowd of children had doubled. Mr. Thomas followed dutifully along, mumbling sad exclamations to himself with every step Jeremiah took.

"It won't end well," he'd say, then pat a child on the head and keep walking up the spiral candy wall.

"Look!" called a little boy. "'The fudge is melting!"

Indeed, the fudge rocks on Marshmallow Mountain were melting. And the small stream of caramel that trickled through the rock field had become stickier than ever. Boulders of fudge melted as soon as Jeremiah approached, and soon he had to wade through a thick mire of chocolate sludge that was occasionally filled with nuts.

"He'll never make it to the fifth level," Mr. Thomas told a nearby parent. "The pretzels are just too difficult, I think."

Two chocolate-dipped pretzel sticks appeared to both Mr. Thomas and the parent in reassurance.

This Jeremiah Reed was a sad business, indeed.

Jeremiah, however, surprised everyone by not only wading through the thick sludge, but eating it along the way as well. Even he had to keep up his energy, after all.

But by the time he made it to the Pretzel Maze on Marshmallow Mountain, he collapsed to his knees in exhaustion.

"He's going to quit!" the parent said, waving the pretzel stick. "Look! He can't go on!"

"Give it up, Jeremiah!" Mr. Thomas called through cupped hands. "The Candy Store won't let you win! You continue at your own peril, silly boy!"

Jeremiah's face scrunched into a determined frown. He slowly pushed to his feet again and started to clamber over, between, and through the pretzel maze. Hiking through crumbling pretzels is awkward enough when you're healthy, but when you're Jeremiah Reed, it's downright dangerous.

"Well," Mr. Thomas said to himself, slowly walking past Pretzel Village on level six and up the ramp to the next level, "he'll certainly never make it through the Peppermint Stick Forest on level nine."

A nearby tree of peanut brittle branches gave a little shake in agreement.

Jeremiah Reed trudged onward until he stepped into the red-and-white swirls of the Peppermint Stick Forest and began his final ascent of Marshmallow Mountain. By this time, Mr. Thomas stood on level nine, very near to the Red Unicorn Horn. It sparkled and twinkled and shone in a very becoming way.

"No," he sighed, his hands folded behind his back. "This is bad."

This time, the Candy Store had no comfort to give him, and it rained black sugar crystals instead.

Unfortunately for Jeremiah Reed, the red-and-white pillars of the Peppermint Stick Forest stood very close together, forcing him to push past each stick with his hands until peppermint sludge covered his shoulders, arms, and very dimpled elbows.

"Stop now!" Mr. Thomas called. "The Candy Store will not let a human boy touch the horn!"

"I will not stop!" Jeremiah cried weakly. His legs were covered with so much candy that he couldn't bend his knees. "I will have the Red Unicorn Horn!"

"No, Jeremiah. You shall not."

Jeremiah reached out, but his arms had turned into literal sticks of peppermint. He kicked and sidestepped and danced his way through the Peppermint Stick Forest until his legs stuck together. Then he hopped, nudging each striped peppermint candy aside with his head.

By the time he reached the top, Jeremiah had nearly turned into the fattest peppermint stick ever seen. Except for his eyes, mouth, what little brain he used, and the weak pulse of his fading heart, Jeremiah had become a massive piece of hard, stubborn candy.

“Cherry!” Jeremiah shouted, half-mad with fatigue and sugar and desperation. “It’s going to taste like cherry. No! Strawberry. It’ll taste like strawberries.”

Inch after miserable inch he hopped until finally he reached the top. With the last of his energy, Jeremiah leaped for the Red Unicorn Horn. But it was too late. His brain hardened to sugar, his eyes faded into stripes, and his heart gave a final minty beat.

The gargantuan piece of peppermint that had once been Jeremiah fell into a pool of hot chocolate that bubbled and gurgled at the very top of the mountain. The peppermint stick rolled and tumbled and turned in the hot chocolate, leaving a milky white foam. Since it was too big to roll down the river of hot chocolate, it remained in the pool, bobbing in place, flavoring the chocolate liquid with the sweet taste of peppermint.

Mr. Thomas shook his head.

“It happens every time. Their greed is always greater than their common sense.”

A bright red cherry sucker appeared in the air next to Mr. Thomas. “Yes,” he agreed. “Things will be better around here from now on. Now I shall have to go comfort Mrs. Reed.”

In the meantime, the Red Unicorn Horn continued its constant vigilance atop Marshmallow Mountain, never ceasing, never stopping.