

Name: Maddie Thompson

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The Candy Kingpin

The day after halloween is a chaotic one, especially on the battlefield of a third grade playground. The sandbox kids are burying and then rediscovering their spoils of war from the night before, the kids on the basketball court use Twix bars and Sour Patch Kids as leverage to draft stronger third graders to their teams, and the kids who use the swings are blissfully unaware of the chaos happening around them, only focused on keeping their seat on their swung throne.

In the humble opinion of Harriet Telgimier, his elementary school peers were focused on the wrong things. They were focused on the short-term, the immediate gratification of a fun size candy bar. But Harriet knew there was more at stake than a half melted Snickers bar and an opened bag of Skittles. When he looked out onto the playground of Springfield Elementary post Halloween, he saw the beginnings of something great, something to control. And so his empire started.

Phase One of his operation began with begging his mother to take him to the CVS on the corner of the street with the police station and the Mexican restaurant his dad used to take him to after baseball games, where his dad would talk about the latest scheme he had started, or would tell him stories about his days working with a crime family in the city. His mother was understandably confused with his insistence to go to the store, but following his father and her

husband's death, was more excited by the notion her kid was interested in something other than sitting in his room reading and solving puzzles. When they got to the store Harriet immediately made a bee-line to the candy aisle, basking in the discounted bags of candy, all his for the buying. When his mother saw the bags of candy he had bundled into his arms, along with the crumpled up ten dollar bills in his jeans pocket, things started to make even less sense.

“You wanted to come to CVS just for candy?” She asked her son, who was strolling towards the checkout counter. He nodded and continued to ignore her presence, he had more important matters to attend to.

“Sweetie, didn't you just get a lot of candy from trick or treating? Why do you need more?” She asked as he loaded up bags of chocolate, fruit chews, and sour candies onto the conveyor belt. He had never been a kid obsessed with sweets, only the occasional candy bar or cookie snuck into his lunchbox. It made him a dentist's dream, and Halloween's aftermath easily manageable his whole childhood. The only exception had been Baby Ruths, both his and her husband's favorite. Something in her heart cramped at the thought. Harriet had not asked for one since his father passed.

“Because I need it for a school project, I'll pay for it all by myself Mom, don't worry about that,” he said, brushing her off. The lady at the checkout counter chuckled when she saw the 10 year old boy at the register, confused mother in tow.

“Well young man, I see someone got paid.” She smiled while checking out the items, putting them into a thin white plastic bag.

“Less paid and more gifted,” Harriet said while sliding the bills to her across the counter smoothly, fanning them out as he did. His mother watched this interaction, trying to understand what her son was getting at.

They drove back in silence, Harriet counting his stock and his mother watching the road, glancing over to him every few minutes to see if his demeanor had changed. The first time he had asked to go out since his dad died, and it had been a CVS candy run, spending the money he got from pitiful neighbors and aunts at the funeral. When they entered the driveway of their house, he said nothing as he walked out and went straight up to his room, CVS bags in tow. She supposed this was just some weird, juvenile way of dealing with grief, the counselor she had made Harriet see did say something about strange actions and isolation in kids dealing with the loss of a parent, so she shrugged off the actions, going to the kitchen to make dinner and hope that her son is okay.

The next day at school, Harriet began to acquire his power. A couple of handshakes, some Hersheys exchanged for a few favors, and the enterprise was up and running. It only took a few kids learning about Harriets stash to let the word get out, and a week after Halloween his first major opportunity struck.

What's magical about the day after Halloween is the plentiful mountain of candy you can look over through the night, you wake up the next day to a Gobstopper, and a box of Nerds. You get a Snickers in your lunch box and a RingPop with dinner, but slowly and surely that collection thins out, and you're left with a cold, dead, candy-sized hole in your heart, and it's at that point, when you begin to get desperate.

The candy-less hysteria hit the halls of Springfield Elementary soon enough, and people caught whiff of the one kid who was handing out candy in exchange for favors, money, diplomatic immunity. Harriet was flooded with requests and offers within a matter of days, his recesses were filled with bargaining with the desperate and poor, begging for any scraps he could throw at them. In exchange for a steady supply of Milky Ways, he contracted the biggest and

meanest kid at the school, James Barre, to be his bodyguard, protecting him from any of his past bullies and people willing to beat him up for a hint of sweet treats. He set up shop behind the slides, towing his backpack stuffed with his supply behind him. Harriet's empire had grown further, enrolling the younger 2nd graders to collect payments for him, paying off the 5th grade hall monitors to look the other way when he conducted business on the older kids hall, even getting Turner Verri, the smartest kid in the 3rd grade math class, to do his calculations for him in exchange for immunity from merciless teasing by the rest of their peers. Harriet had the connections, the resources, the power. He was a king amongst these kids. He wondered if this is how his Dad felt when he ran his schemes. He wondered if his Dad would be proud of him.

Harriet hadn't even noticed when weeks had gone by, or when the weeks turned into months. He worked mercilessly at his trade, making deals and steady alliances, keeping a constant flow of customers satisfied, and keeping teachers off his back now that their pity for him after his dad's death was fading. Suddenly it was Christmas time. He had become the most popular kid in the third grade, and arguably the most sought after kid in all of Springfield Elementary. His empire spanned across every hall, every classroom, he had twenty kids working under him, listening to his every will. He was a candy kingpin, and he showed no signs of slowing down. His mother kept asking him questions about his social life and school, delighted to learn of his new "friends" and that the bullying from before had come to a stop. She began awarding him after the counseling sessions he was forced to attend, bringing him to the grocery store and giving him his pick of any sweet in the store. His operation was running like a well oiled, chocolate coated, machine.

That was, until Christmas break, when kids' minds drifted from candy and towards whatever Santa would bring them in the coming weeks. Business started to get slower and slower, until finally, James Barre had stopped showing up to work.

“I just don't care about candy anymore, I'm a changed man. I can't keep doing this,” James said, and then went on to punch Harriet in the stomach just to let him know where they stood. Things weren't looking good and Harriet began to get desperate, fun sized candy bars and mixes of Skittles and M&Ms were not satisfying the people anymore. The operation, Harriet feared, may have to go full size.

Which brought him to the same CVS. He took deep breaths, in and out like his dad used to tell him to do before a game, and walked into the store with one intent, he was going to steal as many king sized candy bars as possible.

Obstacle number one was the security cameras throughout the store. They looked over everything, from the pharmacy to the groceries, giving him only a few spots he could avoid being seen. Taking this in stride, he wore a different jacket than usual so the surveillance wouldn't recognize him, hood up and all, like a true criminal mastermind.

Walking around the store, Harriet faced his second issue: How to steal the items? Wearing the large coat definitely gave him pocket room to store a couple of King Sized candy bars, but not nearly enough to make as big of a splash as he needed to to keep his enterprise booming. The solution to this was to bring a bag of some sort, but not something too suspicious. The answer came to him while sitting in his bedroom, concocting his plan: his backpack. It was perfect! He'd go into the CVS looking like a cold little kid who just got out of school. No one would suspect a thing when he walked out with a bookbag full of treats.

He made his way to the candy aisle as he had done months ago, this time, his head full with anxiety as he began to inconspicuously shove full size candy bars into the abyss of his bag. Chocolate bars, Skittles bags, gummy bears all made their way in, causing minimal crinkling due to the hoodie he had shoved in the pocket to keep them quiet. It was working! He was going to get away with this! He was so caught up in the glee of his success that he didn't even notice the police officer wandering through the aisles, spying on his thievery.

“Young man, what do you think you're doing?” The police officer said, and Harriet whipped around to face him, guilt painted all over his face as his eyebrows jumped to his forehead and eyes widened in surprise. He was caught red handed, there was no way to get away from this. Was he going to go to jail? Did they do that for shoplifting? He was too young to go to jail! He would never survive!

In a fit of pure fear and fight or flight reflexes, he picked up the bag and ran, faster than his legs had ever taken him before. Aisles of brightly colored cards and skin care products blurred by him as he took off, ignoring the shouts of protest coming from the officer behind him. He had almost made it out the doors, the outside world greeting him with its sunny rays and chirping birds when he felt something tug on to the back of his hood, dragging him down. His bag went flying and he fell to the ground watching the evidence against him spill out around him. He looked behind and saw the lady from the register, all those months ago, staring at him with the most disappointed stare he thought could exist. It was over. His empire had fallen.

The police officer brought him to the station, not like it was a far walk, and had him sit on a hard plastic chair while his mom was notified of the situation, and made to come pick him up. Harriet picked at the skin around his fingers in dread of what was to come, he couldn't see his mom disappointed in him again. He couldn't do that to her.

“You know, we all do stupid things, kid,” The police officer next to him said, catching him completely by surprise.

“What?” Harriet responded dumbly.

“When I was thirteen I tried to run away from home. I don't remember why, probably something about not liking the dinner my Ma had cooked or something silly along those lines. I was just so mad all the time. My Dad had left the house for good a couple months before, and nothing felt like it was okay anymore. So I packed up my backpack and I snuck out the backdoor. The police found me pretty soon after, my mom had called them the second she saw I was gone. I was so afraid of what she would say, how upset she would be, but when I saw her she just ran to me and gave me the tightest hug of my life, wrapped me completely in her arms and stroked my hair. She was just glad I was okay.”

“Oh,” Harriet said. Seconds later, his mom came bursting through the doors of the station, with tears in her eyes, searching frantically around for him. When she saw him she ran forward and pulled him into an embrace, warm and comforting as she pet the back of his head, crying into his shoulder muttering “Thank God you're okay. Thank God.”

Things weren't all fixed after that. For starters, he had to put away every single piece of candy he took off the shelf at the store, as well as apologize to every kid he had scammed under the watchful eye of his teachers, who had officially banned any sort of mafia-like proceedings. But on the brighter side, Harriet began spending more time with his mom, coming out of his room and going to the backyard to throw a ball around, help her cook dinner, or watch movies on the couch together, snuggled beneath a blanket.

“I know I probably shouldn't say this,” his mom confessed one night, while they watched *Oceans II*, “but he would've been so proud of you. Of your mind, of your heart. Sometimes, when I look into your eyes, all I can see is him.”

Harriet didn't know what to say, so instead of replying, he curled up closer to her on the couch, wrapping his arms around her, ignoring the tears making their way down his cheeks. His mom hugged back, and they stayed like that for a while, movie all but forgotten. When he pulled away to wipe his tears off with the sleeve of his hoodie, his mother got up and walked into the kitchen, returning with a shiny object in her hand. She handed it to him and he saw the label, a Baby Ruth. He began to smile and unwrapped the candy bar. It tasted like home.