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HADLEY

Her watch says 12:52, which means eight minutes remain to get the cupcakes. Plenty of time, yet Hadley feels her pulse ticking. She looks at the two women in front of her and wills the line to move faster. She doesn't like to be late.

The woman at the counter is struggling to make her decision. "So, the special today is strawberry cheesecake?" she asks for the third time. She is older, with silver hair and a bend in her spine.

The salesgirl, perhaps sixteen, offers a patient smile. "Yes, but if your granddaughter just wants plain strawberry, we have that as well."

"She told me strawberry," the woman says, her voice unsure as she clutches her purse tight against her, a frayed black bag possibly as old as Hadley.

Impatience bleeds from the woman directly in front of Hadley, midforties and professional, her arms folded across her chest and her Prada wallet held at the ready, the blush-painted nail of her index finger tapping against it.

Hadley's phone buzzes, and she looks down to see a text from Frank.

Truck ok? Mercedes will be dropped off this afternoon. How u holding up?

"The cheesecake one is very pretty," the grandmother says. "She's six. Did I mention it's her birthday?"

The Prada woman rolls her eyes. The grandmother did mention it is her granddaughter's birthday. She also mentioned she is turning six and that they're celebrating with a picnic in the park beside her daughter's apartment. Her daughter is bringing pizza, and the grandmother is supposed to bring a Sprinkles cupcake for dessert.

Hadley wants to tell her she should buy the original strawberry cupcake, not the special. If it's what her granddaughter asked for, then it will be what she's expecting, and anything other than strawberry will be a disappointment.

Strawberry has always been Mattie's favorite as well. "Stwawbewwy, pwease," she used to lisp when asked what flavor she preferred for cake, ice cream, or Jell-O. And Mattie would have been terribly let down if she'd been given strawberry cheesecake, especially on her birthday.

"The cheesecake is really good," the counter girl says, trying to be helpful. She holds up the special. The pink frosting is decorated with red sprinkles and has a ruby-red candy in the shape of a strawberry on top. The strawberry cupcake literally pales in comparison—cream frosting, no sprinkles, no candy on top.

Hadley returns to her phone and pecks her answer back to her husband.

Truck is fine and I'm ok as long as I don't think about it.

She feels the lie in her chest as she presses send.

Frank's text is instant. Hang in there. Love u.

Prada woman lets out an audible groan, and the grandmother glances back to see her laser glare.

The grandmother returns to the salesgirl and stutters, "F-fine. That's fine. I'll take the special."

She shuffles to the register as Prada woman shakes her head and steps to the counter. Succinctly and rather loudly, she rattles off her order as if demonstrating how cupcake ordering should be done. The grandmother stands a few feet away, her face pinched, clearly uncertain of her decision.

Hadley's phone buzzes. Love u!!!

"Can I help you?" the salesgirl says.

Hadley feels Prada woman watching, judging her on her cupcake-ordering ability. She tucks her phone in her pocket and recites sharply, "Two dozen chocolate marshmallow, two dozen strawberry, one dozen red velvet, and one dozen vanilla." She just stops herself from looking at Prada woman for her approval.

The grandmother is counting out the exact change from her purse as the girl at the register smiles patiently, and Hadley thinks kindness must be the number one job requirement for applicants, and she wants to commend the manager on her hiring. *This would be a lovely first job for Mattie*, she thinks at the exact moment she realizes that, God willing, she and Mattie won't be anywhere near this place when Mattie is old enough to work.

Hadley whispers to the girl at the counter, "Please add two strawberry cupcakes, each boxed separately."

Her phone buzzes again, but she ignores it. She doesn't want to slow down the cupcake-purchasing flow by not being ready when it's her turn to pay. She imagines Frank staring at the screen of his phone, gripping it in both hands, his thumbs poised and his brow creased as he waits for her reply.

Prada woman marches past with her cupcakes, her nose in the air, and Hadley takes a small measure of delight in the smudge of lipstick on her collar, knowing lipstick, especially red lipstick, is very difficult to get out.

Hadley pays quickly, glances at her watch, and hurries from the store. She is now two minutes behind schedule, but she can make that up if she cuts through the minimall instead of waiting for the light.

As she scans the parking lot, she sees the grandmother just climbing into her car.

"Excuse me," Hadley says, hurrying up to her.

The woman looks up, and Hadley startles at the remnant of beauty in the old woman's face. Her vivid blue eyes are framed by magnificent cheeks that still glow pink, and for a flicker, Hadley is reminded of her mother.

"The girl in the store asked me to give this to you," she says, holding out one of the strawberry cupcakes. "She wanted to make sure your granddaughter got the cupcake she wanted, and she felt bad that you had to choose."

The grandmother's remarkable eyes grow large. "She did?"

Hadley nods. She has always been a marvelous liar.

Relief floods the woman's face to the point of her eyes growing misty.

"I hope your granddaughter enjoys it," Hadley says and then hurries away, her heart filled with the wonderful feeling you get when you know you've done something right.

Her phone buzzes again, and she pulls it from her pocket as she races to Frank's truck, the bags of cupcakes thumping against her legs.

LOVE U????

Where the hell are u?

I said I LOVE U.

LOVE U. LOVE U. LOVE U!!!!

With a deep breath, she types, Love you too. I just needed to pay for the cupcakes.

He emojis back a happy face and a heart, and she closes her eyes, lets out a slow exhale, then climbs into his truck to drive to Skipper's school for his going-away party.