She stood there, wearing daffodil yellow flats, a bright sundress, and her brunette curls draping her shoulders. He thought she might’ve been beautiful with the sun shining, but it was night, and she was on his front doorstep, arms crossed, slouching and shivering from the cold.

Nick gasped, “Maddie.”

It wasn’t until she was inside sat by his fire that she managed her first words, a ‘thank you’ when he handed her some hot tea. Her voice sounded unsteady though, and he thought it best to calm her down, “If you want something stronger than tea, I know a couple of mixed drinks.”

“No I don’t want any,” Maddie responded. Nick turned, and though Maddie’s head was hung he could tell she was scowling. After a drink of the tea, though, she relaxed, “Thank you though.”

“Sure thing,” after a pause, Nick answered, “Do you mind if I…?”

“Oh!” Maddie turned to him with a surprised look that passed into a smile, “No, please. I just don’t drink anymore, but I’m sure anyone could use a drink after the shock I gave you just now.”

“You’re not wrong, so I think I will,” Nick turned, grabbed a liquor bottle, and poured some over ice. He thought a talking Maddie was better than a silent one, so he asked, “If you don’t mind, was there a reason why you stopped?”

“Yeah, a guy I met; he didn’t drink, and I had been wanting to stop,” She hesitated a moment, took another sip, then continued, “we started dating, and I never told him. I never had to, because with my roommate’s help I managed to cut it cold turkey then.” Once Maddie realized she had been staring at Nick’s bottle, she whipped her head back to the fire and kept her gaze there for a while. Nick was glad she was still being honest with him, “He’s actually why I’m in town; we had dinner with my mom tonight.”

“Oh yeah? Good, I bet she’s been missing you.”

“Hmm, she did hug me when she saw me. That was nice, but she didn’t like Matt very much. That’s the guy’s name. I knew she wouldn’t though, I guess. I knew she wouldn’t like Matt very much. That’s the guy’s name. Once I introduced him she went back to trying to put me on a sly guilt trip for ever leaving in the first place.”

Grinning, Nick asked, “You brought a guy home you knew your mom wouldn’t like? Sounds like you were asking for it.”

Maddie didn’t laugh or look annoyed. Her eyes were fixed on the fire, “I don’t know, maybe I thought it could have worked. Have you ever made a mistake on purpose? Chosen the one of two paths, because it felt more… familiar, even though somehow you knew it was wrong? Maybe there’s a word for that.”

“Could be, but I don’t know it. I don’t really know what you’re talking about either,” Matt said, looking at Maddie, trying to catch her eye. Failing this, he sighed, and they both sipped their drinks, “What happened, Maddie?”

She didn’t curl her hair for him, nor did she choose a bright dress just to wear it at night. Her gaze broke, and her body tensed. It slowly relaxed though, as her trembling voice asked, “Could I tell you the story?”

I suspect Nick guessed at the veiled urgency, but he sat back and listened.

She asked with a familiar light in her eye, and for a moment Nick was reminded of the Maddie he knew - she was like a vision of the Maddie he’d thought he would know when he was a kid. But she hadn’t seen him since they were kids; she didn’t curl her hair just for it to get soaked; didn’t wear a light dress just for the night to hide it. There was some urgency, and Nick knew it could be dangerous to play along. But he did, “Fine, tell me a story.”

>-------<

A hung silence filled the void between them. Matt shifted in his seat. He was uneasy. Her eyes were fixed on the exit. She must have been sitting that way for 30 seconds before he leaned forward, resting his hands on hers. She let go of the paper fortune she had been crumbling, and let her hands sit on the tablecloth instead. Her gaze dropped, then drifted to him. She realized that she was trying to break up with him – trying to find a reason. She had been scared, but as she looked at Matt in his wrinkled button-down, and his big green eyes, he looked genuine. Looking at him, she felt so calm, so comforted. Even if he didn’t mean it, she took her chances.

“Okay, I believe you,”

He smiled, “You sure Maddie?”

“Yeah, I am, because I love you too,”

Feeling her fiancé’s hand on hers as he got into the Uber reminded her of the warmth of that moment. She smiled at him again, and when he had gotten on his seat belt and noticed her, he smiled back, “You in a good mood?”

“No, but I’m glad you’re here,”

He nodded, “It’s good we’re doing this. I know it’s been a long time, but you’re much older now,”

“I know. You’re right,” She looked outside at the passing scenery. As some minutes passed it grew more familiar. “How’re you doing? Are *you* feeling alright for this?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah I think I feel fine. If I’m worried I guess it’s for you,” he squeezed her hand. He stopped himself short of making a joke about how expensive the uber ride was. Didn’t really feel right in front of the driver. Also if he did she’d probably offer to pay for part of it, and he was planning to take care of it. Soon, they were at the foot of a long circle drive, with a single house at the distant top.

While they were still a long way off, a figure stepped onto the porch. Maddie noticed this, figuring that her mother heard the car from in her house. The Uber stopped just before the porch, and the couple got out on either side, with Matt circling around. Hand on hips, Maddie’s mother waited for her daughter to come to her. Maddie stepped up the old wooden steps. Standing before her mother, wearing daffodil yellow flats, a bright sundress, and her hair’s curls over her shoulders, Maddie looked up, “Hi Mom. Thanks for having us over,”

She threw her arms around her daughter, and kissed her.

“Hi Rose, your house is beautiful.” Matt said, walking up behind them. Maddie stepped back from Rose, who turned toward him.

“Oh, Matt, welcome! Thank you for saying that; I’ll admit it hasn’t been so easy taking care of it all *alone*,” Matt’s fiancé rolled her eyes and stepped in the door, “Good timing by the way, the sauce is just about ready.”

<------->

Dinner was shrimp alfredo, set in Rose’s dining room. Matt thought this was unexpectedly ornate. While her kitchen felt cramped even with just 3 people grabbing dishes and was floored with linoleum (‘easy to clean!’ Rose had noted), and Rose’s living room sported a well-loved recliner and sofa, their colors dull with overexposure to the sun, her dining room was elegant. Eight high-backed chairs sat comfortably around a long wooden table. A china cabinet sat on one end, and a window on the other let in golden sunlight that gave the crystal a warm sparkle. Their party of 3 sat around one end of the table. Rose’s usual eating table (a squat wooden piece in that small kitchen) wasn’t large enough.

“Maddie’s dad was in charge of this room. I compromised that he could have this room any way he wanted, if I could design the rest. It should’ve been obvious to me back then how different we were,” Rose scooped some white sauce over her noodles. Matt noticed his fiancé staring off out the window. Seeing the sunset’s rays reflecting off her eyes, he thought she must have taken after her dad. “Oh, I almost forgot the wine. Do you two have a color preference?”

This caught Maddie’s attention, “Actually, none for me, thanks though Mom.”

“Oh, okay, no worries darling. How ‘bout you Matt?”

“No, I’ll pass tonight too. Thank you for the offer though,” he responded.

“Oh alright, I guess I’ll stay sober too then.” Rose reached for her water.

Swallowing his bite, Matt asked, “So you got to design the majority of the house? Sounds like a good deal. Is that why you’ve stayed here all this time?”

“Oh, yes, that’s part of it. The area’s also nice. I get along well with most of the neighbors.” Rose went on to talk about the Beale’s, Robertson’s, and Adam’s. Anna Willis also lived alone, and had been in the area longer than her. Dave Greenlaw didn’t much like his wife, but they’d agreed to stay together until the kids were out, which they almost were. Rose liked the area because no one lived very far, but everyone preferred to live far enough away that you couldn’t see another house standing on your porch.

Maddie was considering walking to the kitchen for seconds when Matt finally saw an opportune end of that conversation, “Rose, thank you again for having us over. We’ve, um, actually been looking for a chance to come over,” Maddie cocked her head and smiled at her fiancé. She reached out a hand to grab his on the table, “so we could tell you in person that we’re, engaged.”

A look of surprise flashed over Rose, “Oh, congratulations you two. Oh my,” Her eyes glanced quickly at her daughter. Resting on a napkin, Maddie’s left hand realized its nakedness and hid itself under the table. Her right started to get clammy holding Matt’s. “Well I’m so happy for you! Oh, I am glad we used the nice room for dinner now.”

Matt’s hand held Maddie steady. She set her eyes on it, and took a slow breath “Thanks Mom. I wanted to tell you sooner, but I also wanted to tell you in person. I’m sorry it’s so late now, but I’m really glad tonight worked out,”

“Oh, darling,” Rose got out of her seat to hug her daughter, “you don’t have to be sorry about nothing now, I’m just so happy for you.” After a moment, Rose said, “And, lucky us, I think I have some dessert as decent celebration, Matt could you find it? In the fridge?”

“Sure thing,” he squeezed Maddie’s hand again, gathered their plates, and found a pudding pie Rose must’ve saved from some event.

<------->

Their dessert conversation was filled with talk about Maddie and Matt’s relationship: how they met and how he popped the question. The young couple also admitted that, while a fun feature, they didn’t much care for the alliteration of their names and would try to avoid drawing attention to that whenever possible. Lying, Rose assured them that would get better with time. While Matt was washing dishes in the kitchen, the mother and daughter talked on the couch in the living room.

“Oh, and, you know, I do still have my wedding dress,” Rose noted.

Her daughter raised an eyebrow, “You can’t be serious. Why?”

“I don’t like to remember the man from that day, true, but I do like to think about the girl. It was a big moment for her,” Rose looked down at her hands on her lap, “You’re welcome to use it, if you’d like.”

Maddie put her arm around Rose, “Thank you, Mom, I really appreciate it. From what I remember though I’d have to hem it? You were taller than I am.”

“Yes, true, the alterations you’d have to do would be expensive, but cheaper than a new dress.”

“I suppose,” Maddie laughed, sitting back in the couch, “maybe weird to say, but I haven’t put much thought into my ideal white dress. I’ll probably check out new dresses though, to see if anything strikes me. You never know.”

“Honestly I didn’t know what I wanted either, I took a lot of help from my friends and my mom,” Rose’s gaze again fell, “How would you pay for a new dress, honey?”

Maddie raised an eyebrow at this, more suspiciously this time, “Um, I don’t know,” she decided to take it as an innocent question, “I guess I’d need to go to the store to see prices first, to see if buying one is even reasonable. Like I said, I haven’t really put a lot of thought into that part.”

Rose nodded, “Yeah, smart,” she paused. She adjusted to sit up tall and face her daughter, while keeping her feet planted on the floor, “Honey, where’s your ring? You don’t have one, do you?”

Maddie pushed herself up. She looked over at her fiancé, but he couldn’t hear or see them while he was washing dishes. She slouched, while her eyes fell to her knees. “No. I don’t,” Looking back at Rose, Maddie could tell this topic wasn’t going to be dropped, “Well? It’s what you’d expect. But so what if I don’t like him because he’s got money?”

“Sure, so what,” Rose mimicked, “So, what do you like him for then?”

Maddie’s brow furrowed, “What’s this coming from? What’s wrong with him?”

“Oh come on, nothing’s wrong with anyone, but that doesn’t mean it works with any two people either. Let me tell you marriage may be easy, but making it last is hard. And for how nice you two seem together you haven’t said a word making me think you like each other.”

“Well I’m not going to end up like you. It’s going to be a *catholic* wedding. I’m taking a vow.”

“Maddie, for god’s sake the ceremony isn’t going to be what matters in 10 years. You’ve got to love each other,”

Maddie took a second to find the words. She closed her eyes, “I do love him. Sure, I’m not like him, but maybe someday that’ll change, and that’ll be for the better. But for now when he’s around me – you can’t imagine the comfort he gives me. Things seem quieter, and I can see so clearly. No one knows what love is exactly, but you have to bet on something, right? And this is a good bet.”

Though she was proud of her response, Maddie sat hunched forward, clutching a couch pillow so tightly that her knuckles were losing their color. Rose maintained her posture, but her eyes narrowed. “Don’t say you don’t know what love is,” she said under her breath, as Matt was walking in.

He stood in the doorway, “I finished with the dishes, but wasn’t sure where they go… is everything alright?”

“Yes, it’s all fine, thank you for doing that,” Rose said, “Matt, has Maddie ever told you the story of her first crush?”

>-------<

By now Maddie had moved away from the fire to the counter; she was sweating. Nick crouched by the fire, tending it, “Your Mom told Matt about us?”

“Only what she knew, which wasn’t a lot. But it was how she ended it. She said, ‘whenever I think of that story, I smile a little. It reassures me that my girl knows good from bad, and will stand up for herself when she needs to.’ And she looked right at me and said, ‘That’s why I love her.’”

Nick poked at the log to break it down faster and help the fire burn out.

In a low voice, Maddie said, “I change my mind; I’ll take that drink.”

“Maddie”

“Don’t get up, I can get it myself,”

“Maddie, you’re sober now. You’re clean.”

She poured a shot.

“Maddie, stop.”

She put it too her lips and threw her head back.

*Clang!* Nick threw the poker down, “Maddie! Tell me what happened! Where is Matt?”

Maddie slammed the glass on the counter, shattering it. “Damn it! I’m sorry, but what does it matter? It’s the same thing again. She didn’t even see my first punch coming, and I kept hitting her until she was on the ground bleeding. And you know what? I didn’t even realize it until I looked up and saw Matt. Damn it! Damn it!”

Maddie was sweating now, and stood at the counter to escape the heat of the fire, which Nick had been tending until this moment. He looked back at her. He set down the poker, and stood, drawing himself up to his height. His mouth was half open, and his eyes alarmed, as if he was about to ask an urgent question.

“She told our story, Nick. From when we were kids”

He slowly closed his mouth, and the alarmed look passed, “Oh”

“At least, she told what she knew. Thankfully, for Matt’s sake, she didn’t know all of it. But it was how she ended it. She said, ‘whenever I think of that story, I smile a little. It reassures me that my girl knows good from bad, and will stand up for herself when she needs to.’ And she looked right at me and said, ‘That’s why I love her.’”

Nick looked hard at Maddie, who was looking back, not right at him, but at his glass. Both stood silent for a moment, until Maddie spoke, “I’ve changed my mind, I’ll take that drink.”

“What happened, Maddie. Why are you here. Where is Matt.”

Maddie responded quietly, “Please, just give me a damn drink.”

“Maddie. What happened.”

Maddie’s eyes broke from the glass and shot at Nick, and her voice filled the room, “What, you know what happened! I called the bitch a liar and punched her. And when she fell on the ground it felt like I couldn’t stop for a while. And when I did I looked back for Matt.”

At the last word her voice faltered, and quieted, but continued, “And he was afraid. He was so afraid… of me. As I tried to reach for him he put his hands over his face and shrunk away. So I ran out the door, without him. But it was so cold, and *dark*, that when I heard him walking up from behind me I turned and said I was sorry, so sorry, and pleaded for help, but before I could get half that out he had slammed the door and thrown the bolt. For a minute or so I pounded on that door begging for him so hard I got splinters… but I tired, and got uneasy with the night behind me like that, and I heard no response. So I sat with my back on the door looking out into the black. I only have had two choices, and now I knew I couldn’t take the one. I didn’t know if Matt would call the ambulance or the cops, but either one would have questions I didn’t want to answer, and an uber wouldn’t beat them – where would it take me anyway? So, I walked here.

Besides, where would it take. So, I walked here – where else would I go Besides, where would an uber take me anyway.

I thought to walk here.

Besides, where would it take me.

Maddie had a knee-jerk response “No I don’t want any,” then, after a drink of the tea, “I bet you could use a drink though after the shock I gave you just now.” Thank you though. Oh, but feel free to have some without me though.”

“You sure you don’t mind?”

“No, please. I’m sure anyone could use a drink after the shock I gave you just now.”

“You’re not wrong, so I think I will,” Nick turned, grabbed a liquor bottle, and poured some over ice. He thought a talking Maddie was better than a silent one, so he asked, “I’m surprised you don’t want one though

If you don’t mind, was there a reason you stopped?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Let’s hear a little about Matt though; he’s the first guy you’ve brought home, right?”

She stood there, her eyes pleading, but when she opened her mouth nothing came out.

“Do you want to come inside, warm up?”

Once she was inside and sat at his table, Maddie managed a ‘thank you’, though her voice was shaky, and Nick thought it best to calm her down, “Here’s some water, but do you want something stronger? I know a couple drinks I could make you,”

“No I don’t want any,” she quickly responded, then after a drink of water, “But I don’t mind if you have some. I haven’t had any in several years now.”

“You sure you don’t mind?”

“No, please. I’m sure anyone could use a drink after the shock I gave you just now.”

“You’re not wrong, so I think I will,” Nick thought a talking Maddie was better than a silent one, so he asked, “Was there a reason you stopped?”

“Yeah, a guy I met; he didn’t drink, and

“Yes, it’s all fine, thank you for doing that,” Rose said, “Matt, has Maddie ever told you the story of her first crush?”

Alarmed, Matt set a towel back down on the counter, “Um, I don’t know. She’s told me about some guys from high school, but I don’t know if any of them were the first.”

“I guess she hasn’t then, because Maddie found her first love early. She was in second grade when she started playing with a boy named Nick after school,” Rose got up and walked to the pitch black window. Matt quickly replaced her on the couch. He tried to exchange a worried look with Maddie, but she didn’t raise her face, “She’d sit at the window, looking for his bike at the foot of our drive, then she’d take hers out. They’d stay out the whole afternoon, sometimes hardly making it back before our streetlights came on,” Rose turned from the window, and Matt returned her look, politely following the story, “I wondered what they were up to, but didn’t bother with it much; this was happening shortly before I filed for my divorce. If my child was out of the house and happy, that was probably the best place for her to be. Besides, I knew the parents, and I knew my girl; she could handle herself. And it turns out I was right! One day, this Nick character got too frisky, and Maddie knocked his lights out,” Maddie reached for Matt’s hand, “He spent that night in the hospital recovering from the whupping he got,” Maddie felt Matt’s interest in the story shift from polite to serious, but she also felt warmth returning to her hands, “She visited him the next morning, but that ended their relationship pretty quick,” Maddie heard her mom chuckle, and her fiancé start to tense, but she just lifted her gaze and stared straight ahead of her, “anyways, whenever I think of that story, I smile a little. It reassures me that my girl knows good from bad, and will stand up for herself when she needs to. That’s why I love her.”

*That lying bitch.*

Maddie sprang up, threw down Matt’s hand with her right hand then landed a punch with her left. Rose staggered. Her right hand struck. Rose’s shoulder hit the recliner as she fell. “You lying bitch!”. Two more blows landed. Blood stained the carpet. Seeing this, Maddie’s fists skipped a beat, and they trembled.

“Let’s go,” She picked up her phone. Two steps toward her man. She held out her hand. But Matt did not grab it. Hands over face. He sat back in the corner of the couch, and his once pretty green were eyes afraid. ‘Oh, no’ Maddie breathed, and her trembling worsened.

Leave the house. 10 quick steps. Step out on the porch. Reach for phone. But she was trembling too badly to use it. She paused, and turned as she heard footsteps behind her, “Matt, I’m so sorry, but please, help…”

*Bang*. The door slammed. *Clank*. The bolt jumped. *Thud*. Her fist pounded wood. She turned, leaned back against the door, and slid down until her knees were at her head. Tears welled in her, and she was sniffling.

The night was silent, but she expected she’d hear sirens before long. Maybe the police, maybe just an ambulance. But either way someone with questions. She stood, and ran into the night.