

Decisions  
By  
James Knipp

Amanda stood at the corner, watching traffic barrel through the intersection: rattling pickups, their sides more epoxy than steel, a sleek Porsche sweeping through the yellow at breakneck speed, anonymous sedans, ditto cars, each looking more like the last, bunched up on the red side like greyhounds at the starting gate.

The only car she didn't see was Mark's. The powder blue beetle, a hand-me-down from his Army-bound older brother, was conspicuous by its absence. Amanda craned her neck, peering through the traffic on the opposite side of the street. Still nothing.

Fear bloomed in her belly and she swallowed it. He wouldn't abandon her. Not here. Not now. They were Mandy and Mark, Glendale's cutest couple, and they would be together forever.

A horn beeped behind her. Amanda turned and her tremulous, hesitant smile vanished as an SUV, yellow with fog lamps, roared away from the corner. The driver - a young man wearing a grey tee-shirt and sunglasses - blew her salacious kisses as he passed.

She dug into her purse and pulled out the iPhone her father had given her last Christmas. He'd had it engraved: "For my Princess."

Would he still call me that now? She wondered. Would I still be his princess if he knew?

She pulled up Mark's avatar and hit the green send button. The phone rang once, twice, and suddenly Mark's voice invited her to leave a message.

She paused, letting the silence spin for what seemed infinity. Two rings. Two rings meant he had screened her, purposefully sent her to his voicemail. The fear returned, and with it the acid taste of anger.

"Mark, where are you? This is your problem too."

She stabbed the end button and shoved the phone back into her purse. Across the street, the reinforced glass doors in a non-descript building opened, and a young woman, not much older than Amanda herself, exited. A man followed and as they walked down the pavement, the woman's shoulders began to shake. The man put his arms around her, bent to whisper something in her ear, and led her to a car.

Amanda's throat tightened. Mark really wasn't coming. There would be no arm to comfort her, to give her strength, to help her make this decision. The anger, really only a brittle, caustic shell around the fear that was now circling her insides like

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some small, untamed animal, broke. Unchecked tears welled from her eyes and tracked pathways down her cheeks.

"I'm alone," she thought. "I have to do this by myself."

Her phone, muffled within the depths of her purse, began to play music, and relief coursed through her, making her knees waver. She searched frantically and pulled the phone out with shaking hands, her relief turning to dread when she recognized the music, some old Madonna song, and the picture of her father, the grease covered overalls as much a part of him as his kindly, tired smile and calloused hands.

"I can't," she thought, her thumb hovering above the red key that would shunt her father to voicemail, just as Mark had done minutes before.

She suddenly remembered her twelfth birthday, when she had backed his beloved Mustang into the old maple tree that had stood sentry by their curbside for decades. His anger had been thunderous, Zeus-like, and had vanished like a summer storm when she had sobbed, "Daddy, do you still love me?"

He had dropped to his knees and brushed her tears with those marvelously gentle hands.

"There is nothing you can ever do to make me not love you," he had murmured.

Amanda paused a moment longer, Madonna continuing to sing from within the cradle of her fingers. She took a breath, shifted her thumb from red to green, and brought the phone to her face.

"Daddy," she said, her voice a fluttering whisper. "I need you."

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