

Dr. Pepper
By Michelle Weisblat-Dane
Chapter One
The Memorial

“I loved my sister.” Tears dripped from eleven-year-old Tarra’s eyes. She looked at her mother and father sitting in the chairs in front of her. A slash of light scared the ground from a break in the canopy covering the yard. The faces were shaded but most were still wearing sunglasses against the glare, stared back at her. She continued, “I made this book for her. It’s all the...the things she loved. See here was the picture of us at the beach and some sand.” She holds the book up and tries to show it to every one, then glanced over at the picture of her sister Liz mounted on the easel next to her. She gulped a breath of air and trying to steady herself, she looked for guidance and comfort in her mother’s face. Her mother looked older now, somehow. “My sister would have...” Suddenly she couldn’t contain her sorrow. She threw the book to the ground and ran past the picture of her sister, past the family and friends in the rows of chairs, and in through backdoor of the house slamming the door behind her.

Clair looked at John, tears welled up in her eyes. John looked away from his wife’s eyes and down at his feet. “Maybe she was too young to try and do this,” he said, but his words choked off. He got up, walked past the picture of his daughter, and turned around to stare into his wife’s tears. Not sure what to say, he fumbled for his speech in his pocket. “She not dead.” he blurted out. He was shocked to hear himself say it. It had been a year. There is no way she could still be alive. This memorial is for everyone else, to help them go on, to have closure in their lives. “I prepared this speech,” He continued fumbling in his pocket for the paper. “I know I had it right here... Oh, I’ll wing it.”

“She was a beautiful girl. She was my daughter Elizabeth Taylor Riley.” He stopped and tried to gain composure. “Just 24, not even old enough to know what it meant to live. Her gentle sensitive nature, those beautiful blue eyes, her long brown

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ringlets. It seemed like just yesterday I was pushing her in the swing at the park." *She's not dead*, rung through his head. He looked down at the ground not daring to say another word. Liz's friends and family, his family, dressed in black peer back at him from behind their shades. "What more can I say, we all know why we're here, to say good by to her. Good bye, Liz." He looked back up at her picture. "Daddy loves you." He fought back the tears forming in the corner of his eye. "If anyone else has anything else they would like to say, come up and then we'll get something to eat." He sat down taking his wife's hand as she quivered.

Ted was the first to walk up, clutching her locket in his hand. "I loved her, I wanted to marry her. If I could only go back and tell her how much I loved her." He paused. "Life goes on. I hope she is, too."

Casey, Liz's roommate from college, walked up to comfort him, "It's okay. Liz, we love you wherever you are." Other friends came up one by one, standing next to the blown up picture of her on the wobbly tripod, each saying good bye in their own way. No one paid attention to the blond haired stranger in the back of the crowd who kept his silence.

A large, dark purple tablecloth was draped over an old wooden picnic table at the end of the yard. John wished Clair had chosen something else. It made the table look like a covered coffin. Dishes of different colors and sizes adorned the table with everything from potato salad to chicken to cakes and pies. The dishes of food remained pretty full, no one was really hungry.

At one end of the table were scattered plates with left over food, napkins and plastic utensils. Clair started picking up the trash and placing it in a large black trash bag. Her normally beautiful blue eyes were now red and blood shot hidden behind black sunglasses. Her long red hair previously quaffed on her head now hung down to her waist. She went through the motions but it was as if she was not a part of her body. Some of Liz's friends helped pick up the trash. Ted helped John take down the large canopy rented for the memorial. The stranger picked up the scrapbook and hid it in his shirt as he went about picking up the trash on the ground. Placing the trash in the bag that Clair held open. "Do I know you?" Clair asked trying to make conversation.

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“No Ma’m, I’m a friend of Liz’s from work” The blond hair young man explained.

“That’s nice,” Clair said as if under some kind of hypnotic spell. The lights in the yard suddenly turned on as the last of the sun sunk behind the mountains. John and Ted threw the canopy into the back of John’s new pick-up truck to be dropped off at the rental company tomorrow. “Good bye, Mrs. Riley. Say good bye to the girls.” He waved to her. “Good bye, Mr. Riley” Ted said knowing this was the last time he would see the Riley’s. Although he hadn’t seen much of them the last year he had kept in touch hoping to hear something about Liz. All that was over now as he started to get into his sports car.

“Will do,” She waved back half-heartedly. John and their 15-year-old son Josh finished taking the chairs into the house as Clair said goodbye to the rest of Liz’s friends.

Clair walked in behind John, locking the dead bolt on the back door. A year ago she would never have thought about it. Now it’s automatic. How could her daughter have just disappeared?

They headed for the family room to watch TV, and find Terra asleep on the couch. Obviously, she had cried herself to sleep. John thought to himself that Tarra looked so much like her older sister laying on the couch. She was also the closet to her, even though there was almost 15 years between them. They both liked watching sports together and made a point of getting together to watch the hockey play offs even when Liz no longer lived at home.

“Momma, can I sit in your lap.” Lisa asked. Clair normally didn’t let 7-year-old Lisa sit in her lap any more. She was getting a little bit too big and old to do that, but today had been a hard day on everyone. Clair sat in her Lazy Boy and Lisa grabbed her blanket, curling up in her lap with her thumb in her mouth. Clair had been trying to break her of that but tonight was not the night to chastise her.

“Get up, bone head,” Josh yelled at Terra and threw a couch pillow at her head. “I want to sit down too,” Tarra sleepily woke up and sat up in the middle of the couch. Josh plopped down on the couch next to her as here father sat on the other side of her.

“Is it over with?” Tarra asks as she leaned over to her father and crawled into his arms.

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“Yes dear. TV, on, news” John spoke loud enough for the audio pickups to catch his voice. The TV flickered into life.

“Lights, dim, 50%” Clair said, but her voice was softened by sadness. She cleared her throat and gave the command again. The lights went down about half way, and they sat together, but feeling incomplete, as the TV flashed information and entertainment at them.

Chapter Two

A New Day (One Year Earlier)

Ted awakened to the familiar computer voice saying, “Liz, time to wake up... Liz, time to wake up... Liz, time to...” “Alarm, off” Liz called out. Ted felt her tiny 110-pound naked body shift out of the bed from beside him. He reached out to grab her waist and pull her back, but only managed a pinch on her butt. “Nice try, but I’m going to be late for work as it is,” she said, retreating to the bathroom. He hears, “Shower, on. 100 degrees.”

“TV, on.” commanded Ted still sleepy, he guessed he should have some level of consciousness when she came out. He pulled the covers back up to his neck and moved his pillow so he could watch the TV that was recessed in the wall across from the bed. It was almost too big for the efficiency apartment, but great for watching movies. For the news, though, it can be downright depressing. “It’s going to be cold and rainy today,” he yelled out at her hoping she could hear him over the sound of the running water.

A few minutes later, she came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her head and wearing a white bathrobe. “Did you say it was raining?” she walked into the kitchenette and opened the refrigerator. Pulling out Quickbreakfast, she popped it into the conmic oven. Ted thought the convection microwave oven was more than they needed, but Liz wanted it, and he’d pushed for the larger TV.

“No, I said it was going to rain,” he mumbled. He snuggled into the pillow a bit more hoping she would take the hint.

“Well then, can you give me a ride to work? I really don’t want to have to take the Metro in the rain.” Ted heard her gulping down her protein drink in between going through the dresser for underwear. He groaned.

“You know I have today off, right?” No response. She’d given him time to come to the decision she’s already made for him. “Oh all right,” He threw back the covers, grabbed his sweats, and heads off to the bathroom. Liz went to the closet and tried to figure out what to wear today.

When he got out of the bathroom, she was wearing a pink faux angora sweater and black jeans. A gold heart-shaped locket was around her neck, she wore everyday. Ted stared at her, still a bit sleepy. She was beautiful. Why did she have to go to work today, he would much rather have taken her back to bed.

His tired thoughts trailed off as he grabbed a T-shirt. Liz was in front of her dresser mirror, brushing her hair into a ponytail. Then she reached for her makeup. Quickly she applied blush, lipstick, and eyeliner, one final check and she was ready to go.

“In traffic, there is a bad accident on the 405. They are talking about possibly two dead. We haven’t seen that in some time, Tina.” The news announcer said. Ted glanced at the TV, but the map at the side of the screen didn’t have any indication of problems along their route. “In other news...” Ted grabbed a protein bar and followed Liz out the door. “Room off,” Ted said, and closed the door.

Ted yawned, stepped off the elevator and spotted his red sports car, next to the wall where he left it. He waved his hand over the door handle. A blue scanned light hit his fingertips, read his prints, temperature, and pulse, and the car doors unlocked. Liz opened the passenger door and let herself in. Ted climbed in and caught her giving him that weird look. “What?” he asks.

“It just amazes me sometimes that you can fit in here.” She left it at that, which was just as well. She had never really liked the car, but he’d gotten it before they were living together and he still had control over his own money. Her “amazement” over him fitting in the car was really a thin layer over disapproval of the machismo the car

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represented in her mind. The car meant more than that to him, though. He'd done his research and, in addition to looking like the cars he'd aspired to as a teen, it was one of the safest models out there.

She placed her purse and lunch on the floor of the car between her legs and sat back for the automatic seatbelt to slide into place. "Are we still planning on going to my parents tonight?" she asked as Ted started the engine.

He was confused for a moment, but hid it by wordlessly driving out of the parking lot and into the rain. The windshield wipers started clearing off the water making it possible to see. The noise from the rain and the windshield wipers muffled his voice, but he thought Liz heard his. "Yes, I don't see why not." He took another bite of the food bar, then reached down to switch on the mobile jukebox. Between the weather, wipers, and music it was a bit too loud for any kind of conversation, but he found the music soothing and didn't care. The music was harder than she liked this early in the morning, but she was the one who got him out of bed.

The congestion was worse than usual on the 101 freeway. They were running late and Liz hated being late. "I'm gonna call and let work know I'm on my way," Liz said, as if he could do something about the traffic. Liz slipped out from the shoulder harness to get her cell phone just as Ted saw a break in the fast lane traffic. He speed up and cut over just as the SUV behind him did the same thing. "Shit!" yelled Ted. He tried to gun the engine to stay ahead, but the back end fishtailed on the road. The car slid into the center divider and Liz hit her head on the dashboard. Bouncing off the center divider, Ted fought to maintain control; they skidded to a stop on the center median. Ted looked over at Liz, blood dripping down the side of her face and on to her sweater. "Oh my God! Liz!" She was conscious but dazed and confused. The car's radio cut off and a recorded voice told them that police and paramedic had been called.

Ted kept reaching out to touch her, but kept pulling back, asking if she was okay. She said she thought so, in a thick voice.

"Just stay still. Don't try to move."

After what seemed like forever, flashing lights appeared behind them. Liz's door opened and a man in a bright green suit knelt down next to her and said "Hi, I'm Larry."

"Hi, Larry," Ted said across Liz, feeling inane. Larry looked over Liz first, and then turned to Ted.

"Are you hurt?" he asked Ted.

"No. I don't think so. Is Liz going to be okay?"

Tears began to drip down Liz's face. An overwhelming feeling of grief took over Ted as he felt helpless to do anything. Larry ripped open a white wrapper and took out a sterile piece of gauze, dabbing the cut on Liz's forehead. "It looks much worse than it is," Larry said, "but we'll take her to the hospital just to be sure."

As the paramedics began to remove Liz from the car a policeman taped on the driver side window, startling him. He tried to roll down the window like it was a routine traffic stop, but the electricity was cut off. He opened the car door and stepped out of his car as the officer stepped back. "Can I see your license please?" he asked Ted. Ted took his license out of his wallet and handed it to the police officer. "You know you're really lucky with the new kind of metal in these cars and dividers there really isn't any damage to your car. In the olden days if you had hit the divider like that your car would have been a crumpled piece of metal and the two of you would have been dead."

"Uh, yes, sir." Ted worried he was sounding arrogant. He tried to keep his body from shaking. If he relaxed at all, it felt like his body would just shudder until it fell apart.

"Well I'm going to have to give you a ticket for driving too fast in unsafe conditions," the police officer said while he finished writing the ticket. Ted took the ticket and turned to see Liz being loaded into the ambulance. She'd been strapped down with a large neck brace on. *Oh, god, he thought. I broke her neck. Oh, Jesus.* Before she disappeared into the ambulance he called out, "I'll see you at the hospital! I love you!"

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Ted got back into his car. It started right up. He closely followed the ambulance to the hospital as the rain came down harder now. His thoughts whirled through his head. How badly was she hurt? Reliving the accident over and over in his mind. Was there anything he could have done differently? He parked the car and rushed in to the Emergency entrance catching a glimpse of her as they took her into an examining room. Too stunned and overwhelmed to say anything he followed her into the exam room taking a seat in the corner. Over the next half an hour nurses came and went, attaching wireless sensor pads to different parts of Liz's body and head. Monitors around the room were activated each one showing different readings. The doctor came in for a few minutes looked at her chart, looked at the monitors, looked at Liz, wrote something in her chart, set the chart down and left without saying a word. Ted became more anxious as Liz drifted in and out of sleep. Incapable of finding the right words to say, he gently rested his hand on her shoulder and sat quietly in his chair. He looked out the observation window and saw Clair and John talking to the doctor.

Clair and John walked into the small examination room. Ted tried to sink further into the corner, suddenly becoming more aware of the smell of hospital disinfectant mixed with intense feeling of claustrophobia he began to feel queasy. Or was it a sudden feeling of guilt and fear for having caused their daughter to be in the car accident. It was his fault would John be angry with him and fiscally hurt him. He deserved it.

While Clair ran to her daughter's side and held her hand John stood at the foot of the bed. John looked from Liz to Clair to Ted and back to Liz before speaking, "The doctor said you could have been in much worse shape than you are. It's just a small cut and a slight concussion."

"Here it comes," Ted thought to himself.

John continued turning to Ted, "If you hadn't bought that new car it might have been all over with." The lecture continued for how long Ted wasn't sure but he really didn't need to hear. He knew what was being said he had already thought it out himself.

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He was wrong; it was his fault. The only reason they were alive was the new car and incredible luck. He found him self-nodding yes as he faded back into consciousness.

John looked at Liz “The doctor say you can go home as long as you take it easy. I assume you can get her home ok?” he said turning to Ted.

“Dad can you call my work and tell them I won’t be in today?” Liz softly asked.

“Sure thing angel.”

“And apologize to Terra for me for not being able to come over tonight and watch the game with her”

“She’ll just be happy that you’re ok,” Clair cut in kissing her daughter on her cheek good by.

Ted took Liz home this time taking it slowly and cautiously. As he drove they sat in silence neither one quite sure what to say. Liz watched out the window at the rain. “Well we won’t be going to my parents tonight,” She said breaking the silence and looking over at Ted.

“I am so so sorry” Ted blurted out. “Can you ever forgive me?”

“I don’t blame you. I should have stayed in my seat belt.,” she said with self-disdain in her voice. “Really I should just have taken the metro and none of this would have happened, but noooo I thought I would save time. If I hadn’t you’d still be in bed and I’d be at work.” She went back to watching the rain, following the drops as they slid down the window.

“I said I was sorry”

They walk into their apartment together and Ted locked the door behind them. Liz grabbed a Dr. Pepper out of the refrigerator and walked over to her nightstand and put it down, kicking off her shoes into the corner. She pulled her hair band out of her hair, her brown ringlets fell to her shoulders. She sat her hair band on the nightstand next to her soda. Ted came over, carefully removed her bloodstained sweater over the bandages on her head, and threw the sweater into the corner. She reached around to undo her bra strap. Ted delicately cradled her chin in his hand and looked into her blue eyes still swollen from the crying, then gently he kissed her on the forehead. Moving down to her lips he kissed her with a passion he had never before felt. She was still alive and the touch of her

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lips confirmed it. Her bra fell to the ground as she reached over and pulled his shirt up over his head, licking up his chest to the hollow of his neck. His shirt was thrown on the ground and they kissed again. He put his hand on the back of her head pulling her into him. They continued their kiss while she reached down and felt the bulge in his pants. Unbuckling and unzipping his pants, the pants fell to the ground. Sliding his hands down her back he picked her up, turned, and gently laid her on the bed. He pulled her pants and thong off while licking her from her nipples down to her thighs. Laying on top of her he pulled the covers over them. "Room Lights off," he said and the room went dark.

"Music on, low" she added to mask the sounds of their passion of love making from the neighbors.

They were hot and sweaty. Liz curled up on her side, resting her head on Ted's chest, listening to the rapid beat of his heart. Ted held Liz, his arm wrapped around her, and gave her a light kiss on her forehead. They lay together basking in the warmth of their lovemaking and dozed off to sleep.

After some time Ted woke up. "Music off, TV on sports," He said loud enough for the sensors to hear him but not wake Liz. He reached over and grabbed the now warm Dr. Pepper that Liz had left on the nightstand when they got home.

Chapter 3

It Begins Again

"Liz, time to wake up... Liz, time to wake up... Liz, time to wake up... Liz it's 7:01 A.M. Time to wake up."

"Alarm off," yelled Ted annoyed. "Come on Liz it's time to get up." He gently tugged at her. Liz rolled over, grunting, not being her usual jump-out-of-bed self. "TV on, news," John continued as the TV turned on. "Come on sleepy head. We need to go to work, you're going to miss the Metro."

Liz crawled out from under the covers and walked into the bathroom. She looked at herself in the mirror as she peeled away the bandages. Boy, was her forehead black and blue and did it hurt! She reached into the medicine cabinet, pulled out a bottle, took the cap off and poured two pills out popping them into her mouth. She quickly recapped the bottle. Placing her hands under the faucet, it turned itself on pouring cold water into her cupped hands. She raised her hands to her mouth and threw back the cold water, washing the pills down her throat.

"Shower on, 100 degrees" she raspily yelled and stepped into the shower, letting the warm water wash down her body. Today was going to be a long day she thought. She finished washing, "Shower off." As she dried off and put on her robe, then headed out of the bathroom as Ted came in.

Liz opened the refrigerator, grabbed a Quickbreakfast, and threw it in the conmic and looked at the clock. "7:20! I'm going to be late," she mumbled to herself. "Closet light, on," she said, thinking, "What to wear today? Maybe red to go with the cut on my forehead." She gingerly put on a red silk shirt and some blue jeans, and put her hair up in a ponytail as she did everyday. A twinge of pain ran across her forehead. She applied her make up, trying unsuccessfully to hide the bruises and the damage to her forehead. She grabbed her purse and yelled to Ted as he came out of the bathroom, "I'm late, There's

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food in the conmic. I love you. I'll see you tonight," She shut the door behind her, not waiting for an answer.

Liz walked the two blocks to the Metro stop and waited. She normally would have sat down, but the supposedly indestructible bench apparently wasn't. In fact, two of its legs had collapsed beneath it. "Oh, well, the Metro should be here any moment," she thought tiredly. The Metro squealed to a stop in front of her. The door opened. She stepped up inside and waved her payment card at the electronic conductor. A gate let her enter.

The Metro was full, but a gentleman in a business suit stood up and waved her into his seat. He continued standing, holding on to the bar over her head. The half hour Metro ride to downtown from the valley was much faster than driving and you didn't have to deal with all the congestion on the freeways or "overzealous drivers," she thought bitterly. She arrived downtown at Union Station. Liz passed by all the usual peddlers and homeless people with their hands stuck out begging for creds, as she walked down the tunnel to the main hall. She was so used to this that she barely gave it a second glance.

Exiting the tunnel, she again found herself in a large hall. Along the back wall was a row of original 19th century ticket counters; the middle was lined with rows of wooden chairs. The hall looked as if it hadn't changed in 100 years. Liz decided to take a detour and grab something to eat on her way to work. She glanced up at the sign above the entrance to the tunnel that lead her out to the park and past the fountain to Olvera Street. She stood and looked down the cobblestone road, past the open-air shops with dried flowers adorning the front.

Mexican style items were sold from open-air shops. Olvera Street was an historic recreation of old Tijuana, Mexico. Liz walked past a vendor selling fresh Churros and horchata and decided that these would work for breakfast. Without saying a word she pointed to what she wanted. An Hispanic man dressed in a poncho and serape took the Churros hanging in the portable oven, wrapped it in a large white paper and handed them to her, then filled her a paper cup of white liquid.

“Dos creds,” he said holding up two fingers. Liz fished through her purse and handed him two credits chips. She closed her purse and walked on, pulling down the white paper to expose enough of the Churros to take a bite. The fresh pastry covered in cinnamon almost melted in her mouth; they were much better now than at lunchtime. By then they would have been hard and almost chewy, she thought to herself.

Most of the shops were closed this early in the morning. She continued walking down the "mall" and came to an open shop with a carousel of women's shirts outside. A nice black, soft cotton shirt caught her eye. "It'll go good with my black jeans," she said to herself.

She found the clerk, "How much is it?" she said pointing at the shirt.

The clerk looked at the shirt and said, "Vente creds?"

She stopped and thought about it for a minute; 20 creds was not bad. Looking down at her watch she realized that she needed to hustle if she was going to make it to work on time. "I'll be back at lunch," she said putting the shirt back on the rack and almost running down the rest of the plaza to come out on to Caesar E. Chavez Avenue. A quick jog to her right and then left onto Alameda Avenue and up the two blocks to the triangularly shaped high-rise building she called work. Entering through the large glass double doors, she saw the security guard at a desk with a monitor sitting in front of him.

"Hi Jack," said Liz as she stopped, put her purse down and fished for her badge. Connected to her badge was a lanyard made out of what looked like a shoelace, fondly referred to as the leash. She handed her badge to Jack.

"Hi Liz," he said back as he ran it through a scanner. A picture came up on his screen. He compared it to her and the one on the badge as he did ever morning, "You weren't in yesterday," he said almost asking a question.

Taking back her badge, she put the leash over her head. "Yea, I got in a car

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accident on my way into work," she said carefully rubbing her forehead.

"Glad to see you weren't hurt worse," Jack said sympathetically.

Liz closed up her purse, and placed it in a bucket to go down the security conveyer. She grabbed her drink and Churros and walked thru a body scanner, picking up her purse on the other side. Continuing towards the elevator, she passed a man standing there dressed in military uniform, staring straight ahead, arms behind his back, gun at his side, not daring to move. Liz got chills down her spine every time she walked passed him but "that's what you get for working in a government building" she thought. She stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the second floor. The doors closed and the elevator rose the one floor and opened. In front of her stood her desk, grey metal like all the others. "Dent free and indestructible - meant to last forever, just like the filing cabinets and about everything else in the building," she thought.

Liz stuck the wireless headphones on her head and hit a button on the phone before she could even get a chance to sit down. A beep signaled in her ear. "Good morning how may I direct your call?" she said from rote. "Thank you, transferring you now," she said as she reached over to the phone pad. In the same almost mechanical way she pulled out her chair and sat down, pulled open the large bottom right hand draw and put her purse in it. She slammed the draw shut just as she heard another beep in her ear. "Good morning how may I direct your call?" she said again. "Thank you, transferring you now," she said in a falsely perky voice. She reached over to the phone and without looking pushed several buttons. She then reached over to her keyboard and logged onto her terminal.

"You have mail," the computer chimed in that familiar voice. An email from her father appeared on the screen.

I hope you're feeling better. Would you and Ted like to come to dinner tomorrow night? It is also hockey night. Hope you have a nice day. Dad

Liz quickly typed back a simple "Yes, would love to come, love Liz"

Thirty minutes and several phone calls later a large elderly gentleman in a dark blue uniform stood in front of her desk. On his shoulders were pinned four stars denoting he was a general. Liz took a quick note of this and said, "Yes, General, may I help you?"

"I'm looking for a General Peterson," the general said.

"And whom shall I say is here to see him?" Liz asked politely.

"Tell him General Kasousky. Please."

Liz hit a few buttons on her phone and then into her headset said, "There's a General Kasousky here to see you. Yes, sir."

Liz pointed down the hall "Sir, down the hall to your right and follow the corridor to the end. Room 225." The General went on and Liz continued to answer the phones, doing some filing, and entering information into the computer terminal on her desk. She normally brought her own lunch to work and ate at her desk. This morning she was in such a hurry that she forgot to bring her lunch. She was thinking of going back to Olvera Street and buying that black shirt but decided to just eat something from the cafeteria.

At 11:30 she cleared off her desk, punched a button on her phone that transferred the calls to someone else in the building - she didn't know who - .took her headphones off and pulled her purse out of the drawer. She pulled her payment card out of her purse and then put the purse back in the drawer.

Liz headed to the elevator. Once in the elevator she pushed the button for the basement. The doors quickly shut and the elevator descended. In the basement she headed to the "cafeteria". It wasn't really a cafeteria; actually, it was a large room with about 25 tables in it, each table with from 2 to 8 chairs around it. However, instead of fresh food being served, there was a wall of vending machines. There were 6 in all, and they contained everything; coffee, soda, sandwiches, soup, TV dinners, ice cream and every conceivable munchie or convenience food. Twice a week they would come and refill the machines, which meant that foods like sandwiches were pretty stale on that 3rd

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or 4th day.

She decided to go with a turkey TV dinner. It was a safe bet that no matter how long it had been there, even though it wasn't very good, it couldn't be stale. Next to the row of vending machines, nestled in the corner, were expensive conmic. She placed her TV dinner in one and punched 3 ½ minutes on the pad. It always seemed like it took forever, even with a conmic which cut the cooking time in half. One and a half minutes left to go, and people were already waiting in line behind her, waiting for the "beep" signaling that she, and her food, were done.

It was lunchtime and the room was beginning to show it. People were funneling into the room. Wearing everything from t-shirts to lab coats to military uniforms, with them they brought lunch bags, boxes from home, and bags from fast-food restaurants. Like her, many came to eat out of the vending machine.

"Beep." Her TV dinner was done and she took it out of the conmic. As was usual, it was too hot, so she held it by the edges and sat it on a nearby table. While she let it cool, she stood in line at the soda machine. She bought a Dr. Pepper with her payment card and went back to get her food, which was by now cool enough to pick up. She put her payment card in her pocket picked up her Dr. Pepper and TV dinner. The room was begging to get crowded; she didn't much like crowds, and she would just as soon eat at her desk. She went to the elevator and got on with a couple of other people. She tried to push the button for the second floor, but with the warm TV dinner and soda in her hands she was finding it difficult. A man with blond hair and a uniform recognized her and pushed the button for the second floor and then did the same for the 10th floor for himself. She got off the elevator and went to her desk. She placed the items on her desk wheeled her chair out and sat down. She carefully pulled her hot food tray out of its box. She forgot a fork. Just as she went to get up to go down stairs to get one, she remembered that she had a couple of spars in the bottom draw, were she normally kept her lunch from home.

While she ate her lunch, she realized that she had forgotten to tell Ted that she

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was meeting Casey after work and wouldn't be home for dinner. She reached for her headset and knocked her soda can over. Quickly she grabbed the soda can and up righted it. Soda ran under her phone and down the side of her desk. She opened her middle draw and grabbed some napkins she kept there and threw them on the soda to stop it from spreading and spilling more down the side of her desk and on to the floor. She got up and ran to the bathroom for some paper towels. She got back to her desk with the paper towels to see General Peterson her boss standing over her desk in his military dress greens.

"What happened here?" said the general angrily.

"I spilled my soda while I was eating lunch," Liz said sheepishly. She walked around him and picked up the phone and wiped the underside before placing it down on the other side of the desktop. She finished wiping off her desk throwing the wet paper towels and napkins in the metal trashcan next to her desk.

The General waited for her to finish and handed her a file. He snapped, "don't let it happen again."

"Yes sir general" she replied.

He continued, "I have these notes I need typed up before tomorrow morning's meeting."

"Shouldn't be a problem, I'll have them in you're box before I leave work," she said placing the file on top of the filing cabinet until she finished her lunch. She sat down in her chair and attempted to try and call Ted again. She put her headset on and dialed Ted's cell phone.

"Hi Liz what's up?" Ted asked as he answered the phone.

"I forgot to tell you when I left the apartment this morning that I was going to have dinner with Casey tonight. I'm meeting her downtown after work. I'll try not to be home to late." Liz said.

Ted said sounding angry, "ok is there anything else you forgot to tell me."

"No," replied Liz feeling as if everyone was against her, first her boss now Ted. She continued, "I got an email from my dad this morning he would like us to come to dinner tomorrow night, to make up for last night, besides there is a hockey game on tomorrow night that I want to watch with Tarra. So I told him we'd be there."

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"Did you ever think to ask me first?" Ted complained, "Maybe I already had plans."

"I don't see what the big deal is, besides I always try and watch the hockey games with my sister." Liz continued, "Do you have plans?"

"No but that's not the point you could have asked," Ted said sounding perturbed.

"Can we finish this argument at home later?" she asked feeling her cheeks turning red. She added, "I would like to be able to finish my lunch before I have to get back to work."

"Fine I'll talk to you tonight," he snapped and hung up the phone.

Trying to hold back the tears. She took off her headset and finished eating her lunch in silence.

Chapter 4
Dinner

Liz frantically continued typing, trying to read General Peterson's hand written notes were a challenge, even more so they really didn't make much sense. She glanced at the time readout in the lower right hand corner of her computer it was 5:03. If she didn't get out of there soon Casey would be waiting for her at China China. She had turned off the phones a few minuets earlier so she could continue to type uninterruptedly. 5:11 done. As the printer printed out the notes, She logged out and grabbed her purse. She picked up the print out and dropped it in the General's box and took the elevator to the lobby. She quickly approached the guard handed him her badge and purse. He checked and Ided her and let her on her way. She dashed up Alameda Avenue to Union station to try and catch the metro to China town. She pulled out her payment card as she hit the train doc and slammed it into the conductor just as the doors were about to close. The doors hesitated and the bar went up to let her on. She took it the 10 minutes to the next stop. Got off and made her way to China China a whole in the wall Chinese food restaurant that Casey and she had discovered during collage. She walked down an alley and opened a red wooden door with some kind of Chinese lettering on it. She only recognized it from the unusual half dog and half dragon painted on the front. Otherwise it looked like any other door down the alley. The restaurant was small and only had seven tables. She saw Casey sitting at a table for two in the corner. She put her purse on the back of her chair and sat down. "Sorry I'm late. General Pansy had me typing up notes all day. The phones wouldn't stop ringing and I couldn't leave until I was done," Liz said taking a sip of her tea that Casey had already ordered for them. "Wow! That strong, pass the sugar," not having even paused to let Casey get a word in edgewise.

"What happened to your forehead?" Casey said sounding alarmed.

"Oh that, Ted was Driving to fast in the rain yesterday and I hit my head on the dash board. It's nothing. How's work?"

"Work was ok," Casey said staring down at her tea.

Liz finally realizing that there was something wrong. Just then an elderly Chinese lady came to there table, "Order now please?" Liz suddenly looked down and saw the

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menu sitting on her plate. She opened the menu and glanced down the page. Each Item was written in both Chinese and English. She had learned a long time ago that there was no point in telling them what she wanted they wouldn't understand anyway. So she pointed to a Chicken Egg Foo Young with appetizers and soup. Casey pointed at something Liz didn't know what but it was probably Beef and Broccoli, with all the variety she almost always ordered the same thing. Liz could be surprised but wasn't likely. "So what's wrong?" She tried looking into her eyes to see if there was any kind of hint as to what might be wrong. "Is it Max?"

After a few moments Casey looked up, "Yes its max," tears began to well up in her eye's.

"Go, on what's wrong with Max?" a small Chinese man in a bright red shirt with gold stitching, placed a bowl of soup in front of each of the girls and then bowed and left the room. Casey took a spoonful of soup blew on it and then sipped at it.

Loud music unexpectedly came from Liz's purse."Oh bother, just a minuet," She reached around and grabbed her cell phone out of her purse. "Hi what's up Ted?"

"What time are you going to be home?" could be heard by Casey.

" I don't know, I shouldn't be to long. We just got our soup,"

"I'll see you when you get home then."

"Unless I become invisible," she thought "I love you talk to you later." Liz said hanging up. She wanted to just get this call over with and find out what was going on with Max, Casey's husband. Setting her cell phone down next to her plate, she looked up at Casey " Ok go ahead now, what's wrong with Max?"

Again Casey started to cry," I think he's cheating on me." Tears flooded from her eye's.

"Are you sure?"

" I came home late from work and found someone else's bra under our bed."

"What are you going to do?"

"Probably divorce him." They sat silently. Liz wasn't sure what to say. The Chinese man returned placing on the table rice, appetizers, Egg Foo Young, and as predicted Beef and Broccoli. He refilled their tea bowed and left to help other customers. The room was full now mostly with Chinese patrons. The noise level had increased

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mostly with Chinese, Liz didn't understand it but it gave her something to focus on while she ate. It was Casey that broke the awkward silence. "So. How are your parents?"

Liz was happy with the change of subject "My Mom is doing O.K., but my dad's not doing well with his retirement. He would much rather be at work in the Lab tinkering with something. I'm still glad he got me the Job at his old work place. I think he is kind of envious that I go to work there every day and he stay's home. He's beginning to drive my mom crazy. He needs to find something to do before he and my mom kill each other."

"Your lucky you're so close to your parents."

"Sometimes I wish I weren't" They both giggled Casey new that wasn't true. They finished their dinner in silence and sat sipping their tea. The little man took away their plates and brought their bill. Casey grabbed the check and said, "My treat, you can get it next time."

Liz wanted to say something to comfort her and to get her to talk about Max, but didn't want to push her. Trying to start a casual conversation hoping she might open up, "I was at Olveria Street today and saw the cutest black cotton shirt. It had little embroidered flowers down the front. It will go so well with those black jeans I have and be cool enough for this summer heat." Liz fanned her self for emphasize. Even at almost 7 o'clock it was still quite hot and had been most of the summer. "I still want to go back and get it."

Music erupted out of her cell phone again. Liz looked down at the display "Hi Ted"

"Just wondered if you were O.K.?"

"Yea we just finished dinner I'll be catching the Metro home in a few minuets."

"Then I'll see you about 7:30," Ted said and hung up.

"I love you too," Liz said to a dead phone. She stood up and grabbed her purse. "I need to get home obviously Ted's at home lonely and I should be going. If you need to talk call me. Next time we can wonder around China Town and see the shops." She bent over gave her a peck on the cheek and hurried out the door to the Metro stop.

Liz got home to find Ted on the couch watching a movie. The lights in the apartment had been dimmed and the light from the refrigerator, when she reached for the Dr. Pepper was almost blinding. She sat down on the couch and snuggled up next to him.

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“Have a nice dinner?” Ted asked without taking his eyes off the TV.

“Yes.” Liz said really not wanting to get into the topic of Casey and Max divorcing.

A few minuets later Ted looked at Liz and said “I missed you.”

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Chapter 5

Daddy's little girl

They drove up to her parents place and got out of the car. Walking up to the house Liz looked at Ted with a scowl on her face. They had argued in the car all the way to her parents. Ted had not wanted to come and he had made it quite clear.

Just then, Clair answered the door, "Come on in you two, Terra's waiting for you in the family room, the games on." Terra was sitting on the couch.