

Black Widow White Lies is a mystery set in idyllic Chama, New Mexico. While vacationing there, Sharon encounters a mysterious stranger who bears a striking resemblance to an old enemy. Sharon must untangle the convoluted chain of events that follows.

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**BLACK WIDOW
WHITE LIES**

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Chapter 1

Spring 2003

What began as a romantic holiday for two somehow evolved into a family vacation for twelve adults, seven kids, one golden retriever, two schnauzers, one tiger-striped cat, and one hamster. By Salazar standards, this was actually a small group, but since it wasn't an "official" family reunion, we managed to keep the numbers down.

My name is Sharon Salazar. My husband, Ryan, and I live in San Antonio, Texas. Nearly all hundred-fifty or so members of the Salazar clan live in Zapata, a small town two-hundred miles farther south. All three members of my immediate family live over a thousand miles away.

Ever since Ryan and I had spent a few days cross-country skiing in Chama, New Mexico, we'd talked about going back the following summer to ride the Cumbres-Toltec narrow-gauge train. We'd fallen in love with the town and were giving Ryan's sister and her husband—Alana and Beto Meléndez—a glowing report one evening while playing cards at their home.

"Where is Chama?" Beto asked.

"It's kind of a remote little village in northern New Mexico, just a few miles south of the Colorado border," Ryan said.

Alana raised an eyebrow. "Remote? As in dirt roads and no electricity?"

I laughed. "Hardly. It's quaint in some ways, but has all the modern amenities. Better than that, it's almost

completely surrounded by mountains—the scenery's gorgeous."

"A mountain hideaway," Alana said, a wistful look in her deep brown eyes. "Imagine. Cool summer breezes."

Since summer temps were frequently in the 100s in Zapata, the cooler weather must have sounded especially appealing. Ryan and I exchanged glances. He winked as if we'd read each other's minds.

"Why don't you come with us?" I asked.

There was no one else I'd rather invite. Alana—good-hearted, spirited, and beautiful—was truly a sister to me. Beto reminded me of a lovable teddy bear. He called himself a computer nerd, downplaying his technical skills.

Alana frowned. "Oh, Sharon, I don't know...."

"Got a better offer?" Ryan teased.

"Ay, Corazón." Beto's gray eyes twinkled behind his rimless glasses. "How long since we took a vacation?"

"Even longer for Amá and Apá," Alana replied.

"Well, let's ask them too!" I blurted out without stopping to check Ryan's radar before including his parents.

Ryan raised his arms over his head and clasped his fingers together, cracking his knuckles. "Whose deal?"

"Or maybe next time," I murmured as I dealt the cards for our next round of rummy.

"No, you're right," Ryan said, grinning at me as he picked up his cards. "They deserve a getaway, and I'd like a chance to do something for them. Problem is...."

Alana rolled her eyes. "Tía Dippy."

Epifiana Jiménez, "Tía Eppie" when we were being respectful, was one of Amá's older sisters. The oldest of the trio was Tía Marta, who had never married and was as set in her ways as Tía Eppie was unconventional.

Tía Eppie, a.k.a. Tía Dippy, not only had a bizarre sense of style, but a wide range of opinions that she delighted in sharing with everyone. Actually, all three sisters, all in their late sixties, were highly opinionated and bickered with each other constantly. Yet they were practically inseparable since Tía Dippy, newly widowed and lacking someone to argue with, had recently moved back to Zapata.

Amá wouldn't want to leave Tía Dippy alone. "*Pobrecita*," I could hear Amá saying. "Poor thing. She can't help herself. She's still grieving."

If tales were true, Tía Dippy was glad to be free of her hard-to-please husband, and after a month or so of self-imposed mourning, seemed to be coping nicely. She'd traded her widow's weeds for shimmery blouses made of colorful scarves, miniskirts that revealed scrawny black-stockinged legs, and a dozen jangly bracelets.

"Look," I said, "your folks can come along in that brand-new motorhome that sits in their carport. If they decide to invite Tía Dippy...." I shrugged.

Alana brightened. "That's true. That Winnebago fits any number of people. And Apá's been looking for a chance to take it a little farther than Port Isabel."

We gave up focusing on our cards and began figuring the logistics of our proposed trip. The more we talked, the more enthusiastic we became.

"It's going to be so much fun," Alana said. "Nothing can spoil it—no matter who shows up."

Nothing. Nothing but a convoluted chain of events that threatened to turn our holiday upside-down. And the person who "showed up" unexpectedly was at the root of the trouble.

* * *

After many phone calls, a few meetings, and much discussion, our ideas blossomed into concrete plans. When I called Wendy Johnson several weeks later to make reservations at their B&B in Chama, she sounded distracted.

"Is everything okay?" I asked. It was easy to picture her clear green eyes and her light brown hair that framed a heart-shaped face. But I had a hard time matching the strain in her voice with her friendly disposition.

"Mm. Yes." She hesitated. "Everything's fine."

"Would another time be better?"

"Oh, no," she answered quickly. "We'd love to see you. Bonsall and I are still talking about how much we enjoyed your last visit."

I smiled. "So are we."

"How many did you say?"

"Too many altogether. But only four of us will be staying with you. The others will be staying at a hotel or at the RV park up the road. The kids want to camp near the train."

"That'll be fun. And that's a nice campground too—right by the river."

After ending our call, I still felt vaguely uneasy. I hoped whatever was bothering Wendy would resolve itself by the time we got there. If not, maybe it was something she'd feel more comfortable discussing in person.

Chapter 2

Summer 2003

Four months later, on a sultry morning in mid-July, Ryan and I headed northwest from San Antonio on I-10. I cranked up the A/C a notch. Despite its color, our little white Accord was no match for the sun.

And despite the muggy beginning, I was excited about our trip. Everyone else lived in Zapata and had left from there a day or two earlier. We'd all arranged to meet in Carlsbad to visit the caverns before traveling farther.

"When you agreed to marry me," Ryan asked as we hummed down the highway, "did you stop to think you'd be marrying a whole family? My whole crazy family?"

I looked up from the roadmap I'd been trying to refold and laughed. "Well, since we were in second grade the first time you asked me, I probably took it for granted."

Ryan chuckled. "Good thing you had all that time to think it over."

Although we'd grown up together, I had moved away when we were teen-agers, and we'd lost touch with each other till a few years ago when we were both in our mid-thirties. The connection we'd felt as children was quickly rekindled, and we were married shortly afterwards.

Ryan didn't mention that marrying into *my* "whole family" was relatively easy. I was an only child whose mother was as detached as Ryan's was nosy. I liked my stepfather, but since he and my mother lived in Minnesota, visits were infrequent. My biological father had recently moved to

Florida, making it hard for him to interfere in our lives, even if he'd been the type.

I gave up on the map and stuck it crookedly in the side pocket. "I suppose it helped that I practically grew up in my best friend's big noisy family.... And yours too," I added.

"Is that the real reason you married me?" Ryan glanced over at me, his brown eyes warm and teasing. "The nutty in-laws?"

"Yeah. You had nothing to do with it," I teased back.

He tried to scowl, but his grin got in the way. "I'll ditch this trip then, and leave you to 'em."

I reached over and patted his arm. "You can't do that. Think how disappointed Tía Dippy would be."

"Okay, I'll tag along. But only for Tía Dippy."

I laughed and blew him a kiss. "Touché."

* * *

Alana and Beto's two oldest sons had stayed home to manage Beto's computer business. So Carlos, the youngest son, was allowed to invite his cousin Omar Meléndez to come with them. The boys, both ten years old, had also brought along their respective pets—Carlos's cat, Spot, and Omar's golden retriever, Digger—thanks to Amá and Apá, who had brushed aside Alana's objections and offered to let the pets stay in their RV once we all arrived in Chama.

The largest of the families in our group—another cousin, her husband, and their five children—were also the most adaptable. They were traveling in a fifth-wheel trailer ingeniously designed to convert dining and living areas into bedrooms when needed.

They'd been through Carlsbad Caverns before, so agreed to look after Spot and Digger while the rest of us took the tour. They had their own pets, two schnauzers named Yippy

and Yappy, and a hamster named Derek. While Spot accepted Digger and might have been curious about Derek, he took an instant dislike to the schnauzers. Spot hissed, bopped Yippy on the nose, and promptly disappeared under a recliner, where he stayed till we returned.

The next morning, we drove the short distance to Roswell. Carlos and Omar had begged the grownups to let them explore the UFO museum. I guess it was worth the trouble, since they both claimed an uncanny ability to spot alien lifeforms all the way to Albuquerque, the next stop on our itinerary.

Our entire group (not counting the menagerie, of course) converged for dinner at Papa Nacho's, a homey family restaurant Ryan and I had discovered on our last vacation. Over chips and salsa, we revised our travel plans. Ryan and Alana's parents had generously invited both Amá's sisters to travel with them in the motorhome. But Tía Marta and Tía Dippy wanted to visit several art galleries in Santa Fe, and—in a rare moment of solidarity—decided to rent a car in Albuquerque the next morning and re-join us in a day or two.

"I hate to be a killjoy, but there's no place to return rental cars in Chama—and no bus service either," I said.

"You could take our tow car," Apá said, referring to the 1976 yellow Volkswagen they pulled behind their motorhome.

Amá's eyes glazed over, maybe at the thought of Tía Dippy behind the wheel of their vintage car. She quickly recovered and agreed to the plan. "We won't need it till we get to Chama."

"And Marta is a good driver," Apá added smoothly, "so I know it will be in good hands."

After dinner, with modified plans in place, we all headed for our respective hotels and RV parks, where we would spend the night before continuing on toward Chama. Before going our separate ways, Ryan and I caught up with Alana and Beto outside the restaurant. The kids, who'd been taking turns checking on Digger and Spot, ran ahead to the van.

"I'm glad our tías found something they could agree on," Ryan remarked.

Alana nodded. "Breaking up their trip should give the folks a sanity break. I don't know how Apá holds up with all their clucking and cackling."

Beto put his arm around Alana. "Now remember, Corazón. You promised not to worry about those things. Apá can hold his own."

"Good advice," Ryan said.

"Definitely," I added. "Worrying is against the rules."

A voice inside my head, shrieking like a broken car alarm, tried to make itself heard—something about "best laid plans." I told it to be quiet, and it faded away to a dull whine.

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