

*Plans for a happy class  
reunion turn chaotic.*

## **CLASS DISUNION**

by Margaret Tessler

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Margaret Tessler

# CLASS DISUNION



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## CHARACTERS

Sharon Morgan Salazar—Attorney with MacDougal & Martínez in San Antonio, Texas

Ryan Salazar—Sharon's husband; high-school teacher in Zapata, Texas

Lisette Benavidez—Former classmate murdered nine years earlier

Armando Benavidez—Lisette's widower; prime suspect in her murder

### REUNION COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Jerry Aguirre—Police detective; unofficial committee chairman

Cat Córdova—Sharon's partner on calling committee

Prudence O'Rourke—Prissy know-it-all; in charge of decorations

Chester O'Rourke—Prudence's colorless husband

Marni-Ann LaSalle—Glamorous boutique owner; in charge of dinner dance

Bradley Hermann—"Bradley Studly";  
in charge of reunion video

Scotty Carson—In charge of entertainment  
with help from his wife and daughters

Janna Carson—Scotty's wife

Edie Flaherty—Sharon's friend since first grade;  
in charge of compiling reunion directory

OTHER RECURRING CHARACTERS:

Leo Salazar—Ryan's twin brother;  
attends nursing school in San Antonio

Jeff Valencia—Leo's partner

Marty DiLorenzo—Sharon's high-school boyfriend;  
Cat's cousin

Dave Martínez—Attorney at MacDougal & Martínez

Yolanda Gutierrez—Receptionist with  
MacDougal & Martínez

Andy Estrada—Lawyer-friend who lives in Zapata

Steve Córdova—Cat's husband

Heather & Josh Córdova—Cat & Steve's children

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Alana & Beto Meléndez—Ryan's sister & her husband

Miguel, Gabe, & Carlos Meléndez

Alana and Beto's sons

Donna Roybal—Sharon's friend;

reporter at *The San Antonio Express-Times*

Martha Davidson—Sharon's active 80-year-old neighbor

# CHAPTER 1

The air was heavy and sticky as I turned off at the Jourdanton exit, and I felt I was driving in slow motion. I switched the air-conditioner to "high," then made an effort to focus on the typical April burst of bluebonnets instead of the typical April mugginess.

Now that I was off the freeway and the traffic had eased, I could finally call Ryan. After several rings, his answering machine picked up, which surprised me. He was usually home by now. Instead of leaving a message, I called his cell-phone number. He answered on the first ring.

"Hey, Ryan, where are you?"

"Hey, yourself. I'm almost halfway to San Antonio. Where are you?"

I was quiet a moment. "Just barely off the 410. On my way to see you."

Ryan's turn to be quiet. "Guess I got my weekends mixed up."

"It's not like you to lose track. Something else on your mind?"

"Just you."

Hearing Ryan's deep voice, I could picture him clearly—his rich brown eyes that always had a smile in them, his dark hair, slim build. But besides the usual warmth in his voice, there was a note of worry.

"Tell me," I said.

I heard his intake of breath. "Sharon, have you gotten any weird phone calls lately?"

"Nooooo."

"You're on your mobile, aren't you?"

"Mm hmm."

"Meet me in Three Rivers, okay?"

We said quick good-byes and hung up. Leery of scanners, we made it a point to keep our cell-phone calls simple and innocuous. Only the terminally bored would find anything of interest in our sweet nothings.

It would take me about an hour to get to Three Rivers, and I assumed the same for Ryan, although his whereabouts had been as vague as mine in our brief conversation. I swung off at Poteet and headed for the Dairy Queen in Three Rivers, where we usually stopped whenever we camped nearby. I hoped I'd read his mind about the Dairy Queen.

Sure enough, Ryan was waiting when I pulled up beside him. He left his car and slipped into the passenger side of my Honda.

"Damn bucket seats," he muttered while we reached to embrace each other as avidly as the intervening console would allow.

"Hungry?" he whispered as he caressed me.

"Not for hamburgers."

He grinned and leaned back in the seat. "There's probably a limit to what's allowed in this parking lot."

I leaned over and kissed him again. "So where do we go from here?"

Those teasing eyes. "We could be in Mustang Island before dark."

Mustang Island always conjured romantic memories for us, and there was only one practicality that stood in the way. Neither of us had packed anything, since we kept two sets of everything we needed at both homes.

When I mentioned this, Ryan said if we really felt we needed clothes, he was sure there was a Goodwill Store in Corpus. Meanwhile, he could leave his car at his cousin's



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place in George West for the weekend. I picked him up there, and we headed for Port Aransas and the Moonlit Sands Inn.

\* \* \*

It was well after midnight before we got around to talking about the "weird phone calls" Ryan wondered about. We were snuggled together spoon-fashion, and I'd almost drifted off to sleep when Ryan murmured, "You still awake?"

"Mm. Más o menos." I uncurled myself from his arms and turned sideways, bunching my pillow between my neck and shoulder. "What is it?"

He propped himself on one elbow. "Someone called this afternoon asking for Goldilocks."

"Goldilocks!" I made a face. "Nobody's called me that since grade school."

Light from the full moon splashed its way through the French windows that opened onto the balcony, and I caught Ryan's grin as he eyed me curiously. "You never told me."

I laughed. "I thought I'd lived it down."

"Guess not. I told him he had the wrong number, but before I could hang up, he said that was the number he'd been given to call about the reunion."

"Hmm. I did leave both numbers." Since I was on the planning committee, I was used to getting calls from my old classmates from St. Mary of the Angels School. Still, everyone else had called me in San Antonio rather than Zapata. After all, that's where the reunion was taking place.

"Something about his tone made me wary." Ryan's face mirrored the wariness he felt. "So I said it might be the right number, but he had the wrong person."

"Then what?"

"Then he said, 'Do I get to talk to Goldilocks or not?' I said Goldilocks wasn't home and hung up."

Goldilocks. My blond hair had always insisted on curling without my permission, giving birth to my almost-forgotten nickname. Who could it have been? I wished Ryan had stayed on the line long enough to find out.

"I figured he'd probably try to call you both places," Ryan continued, "but then I began feeling uneasy. He sounded so—I don't know—bitter, I guess. Not like someone calling to have a friendly little chat about your reunion."

"Don't worry, honey. There'll probably be a message on my voicemail when I get back. It'll explain everything, and we'll laugh about it."

\* \* \*

There was no message. Ryan had insisted on following me back to San Antonio Sunday evening, even though it meant he'd get into Zapata late.

"Don't worry," I repeated. "It couldn't have been important."

Ryan looked at me steadily. "I do worry, sweetheart."

We'd had this conversation before. I'd lived alone for ten years before Ryan and I rediscovered each other. But now that we were married, he seemed to think I wasn't safe unless we were together.

"Ryan, just a few more weeks, and we'll have the whole summer."

He held me close. "Till then, do I get to worry?"

"I worry too, you know. I hate for you to be on the road so late. Maybe I should follow you back to Zapata."

The mischief returned to Ryan's eyes. "Then I can follow you back here. We can spend all night driving back and forth."

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"Or you could just call me every five minutes."

"Works for me."

I started counting the minutes, even before he walked out the door.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Summer 2002**

The next few weeks passed without incident, and I put weird phone calls out of my mind. Summer arrived, and with it, Ryan. Whenever Ryan came up to San Antonio, his striped cat Spot stayed with his sister Alana while his nephews took care of the house and lawn.

I lived in a restored Victorian home that had belonged to my grandmother. I wanted Ryan to think of it as "our" home, not just "my" home. But I hadn't been sure how comfortable he would feel with all the gingerbread and antiques.

"I could be happy in a cave, sweetheart," he'd assured me. "If Alana hadn't stepped in, that's probably what our house in Zapata would look like. You know me and my blind eye for decor."

My remodeling skills were probably on a par with Ryan's, but Alana had a natural flair for interior decorating and had furnished his home in his bachelor days. I'd been delighted for her to come up to San Antonio and redecorate our place here too.

Alana was equally delighted, reveling in the antiquity and finding a way of combining it with more modern pieces without losing its inherent charm. She'd brightened the house by selecting crisp lace curtains and white wallpaper with some tiny burgundy and green spriggy things.

Ryan usually taught classes at St. Mary's in June and July; then we'd take off for someplace cool in August. This year my class reunion was to take place mid-August. In the meantime, the planning committee, plus assorted spouses

and significant others, met every couple of weeks for pizza and beer to compare notes.

Shortly after he arrived in San Antonio, I asked Ryan to come with me to a planning session. He agreed good-naturedly, telling me he was only going for the beer, but I knew he was curious.

When we reached Mariano's-Not-On-The-Riverwalk Pizza, it was already crowded, so we had to wait for a booth large enough to accommodate our group, which varied in size from one meeting to the next.

The first person Ryan met was Scotty Carson, and I could feel him sizing up Scotty, wondering just how platonic our friendship had been. I'd told Ryan about my disappointment in not being chosen Juliet to Scotty's Romeo in the senior play.

The drama coach, for reasons known only to herself, said I wasn't "brunette enough" to play Juliet. Apparently this criterion didn't apply to Romeo since Scotty was blonder than I, practically tow-headed. I wondered if the drama coach had ever regretted her decision, since—according to Scotty—the brunette Juliet had the personality of cardboard, and their chemistry fell flat.

Scotty's wife, Janna, a petite redhead with short curly hair, had sized me up several meetings ago and found me harmless. She became even friendlier now that I had a bona-fide husband in tow.

Standing next to them were Prudence and Chester O'Rourke. Prudence, who'd appointed herself in charge of decorations, had been a know-it-all in grade school and was still a know-it-all as she approached forty. She was one of those people, Ryan remarked later, who went out of her way to look old and homely, from her hair tightened into a

mouse-colored bun at the back of her neck, right down to her sturdy black oxfords.

I barely remembered Chester, who was even mousier. Although he and Prudence had six children, I couldn't imagine them lost in the throes of passion—not that I spent any time imagining it.

Chester's pale watery eyes never registered much expression, and I wondered if he blanked us out during the meetings and indulged his own fantasies.

Marni-Ann LaSalle wafted in on a cloud of expensive perfume. Marni-Ann, thrice-divorced, was—in addition to making arrangements for the dinner-dance—on the lookout for Husband Number Four.

I'd always thought her striking, with shiny black hair and eyes in contrast to her ivory complexion. But that took a back seat to her other asset. She was five feet tall and weighed 100 pounds, twenty of it in her bust. She'd worn a size-AA bra all through high school, and was now miraculously—and startlingly—endowed with a size-D cup. Even Ryan, who as a high-school teacher had trained himself, as he put it, not to look below chins, was momentarily transfixed.

I jabbed him in the ribs. He blinked, then looked at the ceiling, then out the window, then caught the mischievous twinkle in Scotty's bespectacled eyes, grinned in return, and shook his head.

At least the ice was broken between Ryan and Scotty. From then on they would exchange a wink whenever Marni-Ann arrived in one of her tight sweaters, and manage to keep their eyes in their sockets otherwise.

In the meantime, Bradley Herman made his flashy entrance. He liked to say his mother had Brad Pitt in mind when she named him, and we'd smile politely and not

mention the fact that Bradley had brown hair and eyes or that he was born before anyone had even heard of Brad Pitt. Still, there was no denying he'd outgrown his adolescent homeliness and become extremely handsome. Problem was, he hadn't outgrown his adolescent behavior.

"Hiya, Sweetcakes!" Bradley swaggered over to Marni-Ann, ogled her cleavage, and brushed his hand across her fanny.

Marni-Ann glared at him, made a sharp retort, and moved her fanny to the nearest seat in the foyer.

"Sharon!" As Bradley strode toward me, I held out my hand at arm's length.

"What's with the handshake?" he asked, ignoring my hand and putting his arm around me. "How's my favorite girl?"

"I don't know. How is she? *Who* is she? By the way," I added hastily before he could make some suggestive comeback or reach for other bodily parts, "I'd like you to meet my husband."

"Husband! Oh, no!" He widened his eyes in mock horror, raised his hands to ward off an imaginary blow, then smirked at Ryan. He didn't offer to shake hands with Ryan either, but at least he backed off.

Ryan looked at Bradley as if he were a bug, and Bradley looked around for another female to annoy. By then, Mariano's had a booth ready, and everyone else had wisely found a place to sit down. We joined them at the table, and I introduced Ryan to the rest of the group, giving him a brief rundown of our various projects.

Bradley, an amateur photographer, had offered to put together a video of the reunion. Scotty, Janna, and their three teen-age daughters had the formidable task of planning activities for the offspring of classmates who

showed up for the Friday-afternoon picnic at Brackenridge Park.

The only other members of the committee who met with any regularity were Cat Córdova, who was helping me contact everyone; Edie Flaherty, who'd cheerfully volunteered to compile all our class notes and photos into souvenir directories; and Jerry Aguirre, in charge of organizing the baseball games.

Jerry was nice-looking in an unassuming way, unaware of his own magnetism, the way women were drawn to the smile that lit up his eyes. Marni-Ann had said—and of course she would have checked it out—that Jerry had an on-again off-again relationship with a beautiful but mysterious woman (Marni-Ann's words). I suspected the mystery was that he hadn't brought her to meetings for our inspection.

Loosely organized though we were, our motley crew found ourselves deferring to Jerry, who had a diplomatic way of keeping our meetings from getting too far off-track. His low-key demeanor was disarming. He'd joined the police force right out of high school and had gradually earned a degree in Criminal Science.

Since there wasn't much to track this particular evening, we devoted ourselves to enjoying beer and pizza, causing Ryan to declare the meeting a huge success.

\* \* \*

It was a Friday evening in mid-June before another disturbing call surfaced. Ryan and I were almost out the door, heading for Mariano's, when it came. Ryan hesitated, wondering out loud if someone might be calling to cancel the meeting.

I nodded. "We'd better go back and get it."



Back in the living room, I answered the phone on the end table. One look at my face, and Ryan knew the call had nothing to do with the meeting. The lines around his mouth tightened as he reached for the phone.

I laid my hand on his arm and mouthed, "Wait." Then I switched over to speakerphone so he could hear too.

"...can't believe it's really you, Goldilocks." The voice was muffled, but the sneering tone barely concealed. "I was beginning to think a hot-shot like you might be too busy running the reunion to take calls from old friends."

"Who is this?" I asked as pleasantly as I could.

"I think you know."

"Sorry, I've talked to so many people lately, everyone sounds alike."

There was a pause, then, "He's listening in, isn't he."

"Why are you calling?"

The caller swore, then hung up.

It wasn't so much the words as the menace in his voice that chilled me to the bone. Suddenly weak-kneed, I sank to the sofa. Ryan sat beside me, gently placing my head on his shoulder, his hands strong and warm.

"You really didn't recognize his voice?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Did you?"

Ryan was silent a minute. "It was the same person who called before—whatever he is."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"I was hoping he'd stay on long enough to get some idea of who he is."

"I guess it was worth a try. But maybe I should answer the phone from now on."

"Maybe," I said reluctantly. Ryan's suggestion made sense, but I wasn't quite ready to say yes.

"Did you notice what the caller ID said?"

"Pay phone. I thought it was someone calling from Mariano's, or I'd have probably let the voicemail pick up."

"Oh. That's right. The meeting."

\* \* \*

We were the last to arrive. I could tell Ryan was preoccupied because he never even glanced at Marni-Ann's sweater—not even during Prudence's lengthy monologue about crepe paper.

"Very good, Pru," Jerry said when she paused for breath. "If you need volunteers, check with Cat or Sharon. They're keeping track of the questionnaires we sent out."

Cat became animated. "As a matter of fact, I got a reply from Valerie Ashe just this morning. She's quite artistic and would be a real asset on the decorating committee."

Prudence's lips puckered as if she'd been sucking lemons. "I'm sorry, Caterina, but I don't believe I can work with Valerie. She joins marches with those Pro Choice people."

Cat stiffened. We all stared at Prudence with expressions ranging from disbelief on Scotty's face to downright disgust on Marni-Ann's. The idea of abortion made me queasy, but so did the fanaticism of overzealous anti-abortionists. In any case, this discussion was out of place. We were here to reunite our classmates, not polarize them.

I pasted a bright smile on my face and kept my voice light. "Oops, we forgot to ask people their political affiliations when we sent out the questionnaires!"

The tension broken, everyone started talking at once. Edie had the final word. "Valerie is a *lovely* person. I'm sure she can be trusted to decorate the ballroom tastefully."

"How many people have signed up so far?" Jerry asked me, deftly changing the subject.

"More than half. And Gil García's coming all the way from London."

"Have you heard from Armando Benavidez?" Prudence asked the question innocently enough, but couldn't hide the malice in her eyes. Another conversation stopper.

"No. I did send him a letter, same as everyone else." I felt uncomfortable making this admission. I knew Armando wouldn't be welcome, and was relieved that he hadn't responded.

Unaccustomed anger flooded Jerry's face. "Let me know if you do hear."

"I will. I don't expect to—and don't really want to. But I didn't feel it was up to me to censor the list."

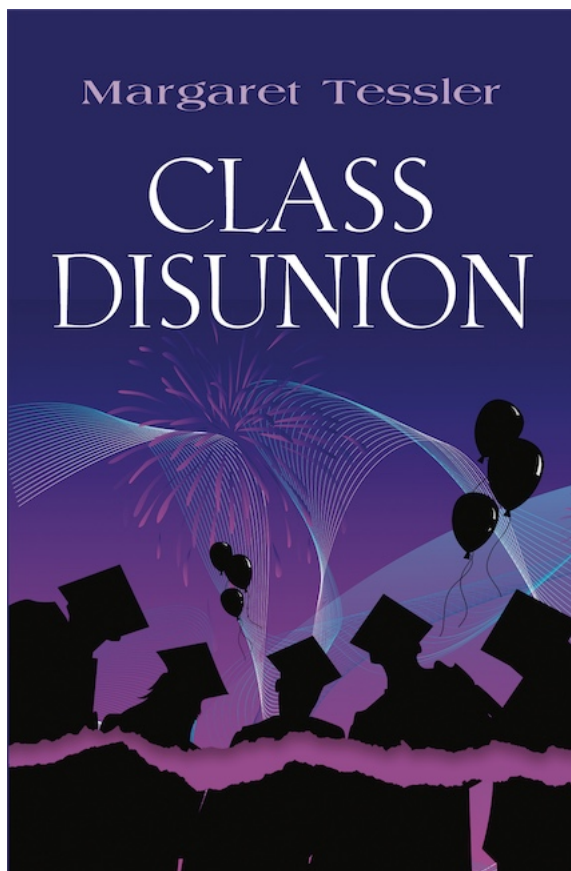
Jerry looked down at his hands, clenched together on the table. "You're right," he murmured finally.

Prudence looked smug. "Of course, just because the police botched the investigation and Armando never got charged, we all know he did it."

"Did what?" Ryan whispered.

I cleared my throat, as if I could somehow clear away a painful memory, then answered softly. "His wife, Lisette, was found murdered several years ago. Still unsolved." And worse, probably forgotten as far as the police were concerned. Priorities shift as time goes on.

Our meetings didn't usually end on a downer, but tonight was an exception, and we were all glad to adjourn. I knew Ryan would like to talk to Jerry about our strange phone calls, but that would have to wait.



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