

Keeping Sunny Safe

By

Mariella Starr

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# Prologue

*Bakersfield, California, 2005*

“Momma, why do we have to leave again? I don’t wanna leave.”

The woman sitting beside the little girl in the car was distracted and driving too fast. She kept looking in her rearview mirror. “Hush, Sunnydae. Momma’s doing what we need to do. We’re leaving because I need to keep you safe.”

“I like living in Bakersfield, Momma. I like my school, so why do I have to leave all my friends again?”

“Friends don’t give little girls a black eye!”

“Cody started it! He hit me first!”

“Yes, he did. However, his mother blamed you and complained to the school who contacted social services,” her mother answered nervously. “A woman called me and said she wanted to talk to us, but I can’t talk to her.”

“Why not? My teacher, Mrs. Jenkins, saw Cody hit me first. She can tell everyone he’s lying and we won’t have to move again!”

“Sunnydae, please. Momma is already upset. I don’t need you complaining. I’m taking you somewhere you’ll be safe.”

“Where’s that?” the little girl demanded in a peeved voice. “We keep moving and moving. You say it’s safe and then we have to move again. It’s not fair, Momma. Nowhere is safe!”

The woman pulled off to the shoulder of the road and cupped her daughter’s face in her hand. “Sunnydae, you are my life. I will do anything to keep you safe. You have to trust me, honey. We’re moving to a place called the *Community* where men and boys are taught to take care of women. The men there are not like the ones I have been dating. They are responsible men who look out for their families and children. Everyone loves and helps each other. It will be a little different for a while, but you’ll get used to it.”

“How different, Momma?”

“You’ll see, sweetheart. Different is not always a bad thing except some people misunderstand being different. We’ll meet very nice people who will help us. You’ll see. It will be a good place to live. There should be a little house waiting for us, if it’s still standing. My grandparents lived there and it’s where I grew up. My grandparents weren’t part of the Community, although we knew almost everyone there. People will remember me. I know Jacob will remember me and he is in a position to help us.”

# Chapter One

*Westview Valley, New Mexico, 2016*

Sunnydae Brightman felt empty inside. Her life was a lie and her future unknown. All she had left was a determination to get on with it. Her boots made loud echoing clicks on the old scarred linoleum-covered floors. It was probably the last time she would ever be in this house. The bungalow seemed smaller and shabbier now with the worn secondhand furniture gone and the windows bare of curtains. She had spent the last eleven years living in these four rooms, which had originally been built by her great-grandparents.

The small frame house with its patched tin roof, shabby peeling paint, and leaning front porch steps was empty. It was clean, though. Sunny had made sure of it and knew her momma would have been proud of her efforts. They had lived in shabby apartments and places little more than shacks over the years, but their homes had always been clean. Momma took pride in keeping what little they had spotless.

Sunny looked around at what most people would write off as uninhabitable. Only Momma's compulsive habits of cleanliness had made the place livable—that and not having anywhere else to go.

There was not much to show for their last decade in Westview Valley. The things they had decided to keep had already been boxed and stored at a friend's house. Only a few things were worth keeping and then only for the memories.

The truck horn sounded and Sunny blinked her eyes several times to stop the tears from falling. She turned to face the door and an uncertain future. Her little sisters, Cassie and Sarah Rose, were already waiting in the truck. Cassie was seven and Sarah Rose was five. Both her sisters had long, pale-blond hair falling naturally into curls, and they both had light blue eyes. Everyone referred to them as *those pretty Slater girls*. If anyone talked about her sisters, it was usually accompanied by a smile. Her little sisters had that effect on people.

Sunny thought it unlikely her friends smiled when they talked about her. She was liked and she was attractive. Some strangers had even mistakenly assumed she was the mother of her two younger sisters. However, most people either shook their heads in pity or nodded in her direction as an unspoken gesture of encouragement.

Her hair was a shade darker than her sisters, although it bleached out in the summer from spending so much time outdoors. It used to be long, hanging down her back in a sheaf of gold reaching her hips. It was what the women called her *crowning glory*. A few months ago she had cut it short and now the darn stuff curled uncontrollably all over her head. She tousled the short curls with her fingers recalling how many of the women had clucked their tongues in disapproval. Miss Addy, who did hair for the women in the valley who dared go to her, said women paid a fortune to have curls like Sunny's. She didn't care. It was her hair and no one's business but hers.

Life in Westview Valley, New Mexico, revolved around religion. The only actual church building left standing had started out as a sanctioned Church of God, but somewhere along the line, it had gone rogue. The members, at least the women and girls, wore long hair and even longer skirts down to their ankles. Their church doctrines were strict and old-fashioned with just

about anything modern or fun considered sinful. They called their church the Fellowship of Faith, themselves the *Fellowship*.

The other local religious faction was the Community, a group of families who lived on a property outside of the crossroads and they kept to themselves. They followed the directives of their Bishop and referred to themselves as the *Followers*. The two religious groups got along well enough. In a place as small as their little speck in the universe, everyone had to get along and help each other in order to survive.

The horn honked again and Sunny stepped out on the porch, shaded her eyes, and dropped her sunglasses into place. Whereas her sisters had her mother's pale blue eyes, Sunny had overheard her mother telling someone she had been branded with her father's eyes. They were soft sea foam green and she had never met another person with the same color.

Sunny knew she drew the attention of the local men, especially since she did not dress like the wives of either the Fellowship or the Community. She did not intentionally dress in jeans and tee shirts to be flirtatious. She simply stood out among the majority of women who covered themselves from head to toe, dressing as if they were still in the 1900s. Sunny was her own person who had been raised by her mother, Mary Elizabeth, to think for herself. She had never understood completely why her mother had come to live in an area so profoundly religious, strict and where the people of the Community believed in polygamy.

Blonde, green-eyed, and with a figure that drew men's attention, Sunny had heard enough whistles and catcalls to know men appreciated her well-shaped butt and tiny waist, even if they did claim to be God-fearing men. She wished her boobs would grow a little bigger to balance her out. Otherwise, she was quite happy with the person she had become and she ignored most of the male attention.

She had no time for a boyfriend, even if she had wanted one. Her job was to take care of everyone. There were a few guys she did not mind giving a second glance if they were unaware she was looking. She had lost her virginity at eighteen to a boy she had known since middle school, but she never admitted it to anyone. He had left the area after graduating from high school and she had been too busy to worry about dates and boyfriends.

"Sunny!" A shout from Cassie made her step off the porch.

It was time. They were moving on. If she delayed anymore, both religious sects would be pounding on her door trying to induct them into their way of thinking. There was nothing wrong with either of the groups' beliefs, although Sunny knew they were not for her or her sisters.

She got in the truck and stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray as Cassie glared at her. Cassie hated that Sunny smoked, but Sunny figured she was entitled to at least one vice. Momma had claimed Cassie had a righteous streak in her.

Cassie only wanted what was best for everyone. At seven, her little sister could not be the best judge of things. Cassie was a sweet child most of the time, as was Sarah Rose. It was Sunny's job as their big sister to take care of them. She adored her little sisters, except sometimes in the dark recesses of her mind, Sunny got tired of being the one who had to hold it all together, all the time.

"Okay, *Fuzzies* we are on our way," Sunny declared in what she hoped was a cheerful voice. Both her sisters looked back at their little house as they drove away, but they did not cry. Sunny thought it was brave of them. She wanted to bawl her eyes out and she was twenty-three. No, she corrected herself. She was twenty-two, born in 1994. Sunny had not told anyone about her personal discovery among her mother's things.

Mary Elizabeth's grandparents had lived in Westview Valley as part of a commune of free-spirited young people who thought they were creating a war-free zone of paradise where they could practice free love and take their drugs of choice without interference from the law. The commune had been started in the early 1960s. During the next several decades, those same young people had grown up, disbanded, and moved on with their lives in the outside world. Only a few had remained in the valley. Sunny's great-grandparents were the last original members of the commune and they had raised their granddaughter there, Sunny's mother, whom they had loved and cherished. They were the last of the original commune to leave, removed only by death.

The commune land eventually had been sold to a group of people wanting religious freedom to create what everyone loosely called the Community. These people wanted to be left alone with their beliefs in a man having more than one wife.

Although Sunny's mother, Mary Elizabeth, had been born two generations too late to be a hippy, it had not stopped her from adopting the core values of the free lifestyle of her grandparents. She had only returned to the Community with her daughter in tow because she knew there was safety within the ranks of the friends she had left behind in the area.

Sunny was actually named Sunnydae Brightman, a name she had cursed as a child. Nevertheless, she had lived with the name for seventeen of her twenty-two years and it was part of her identity now. Her mother had branded her with the silly name, but she had also raised her to see the good and bad in most situations. Sunny had strong survival instincts and a shrewd awareness of what was happening around her. She was not as tough as she pretended to be, but she could pull off a good bluff.

She drove the eight miles to the crossroads of Westview Valley. It was all that was left of the original town and it didn't qualify as a town, anymore. The only map it qualified to be on was the county tax assessment map.

They stopped by José Langtree's gas station to top off the tank before leaving. This part of rural living Sunny would not mind leaving behind. The closest town of any significance was Hobbs, another forty miles away. That was where they went for grocery shopping, pharmacy needs, banking, and to find anything else people needed. People who chose to live in Westview Valley wanted the security of its isolation. Sunny had made up her mind, that she wanted more.

José came out of the station. He hugged her one last time and handed over a small grocery sack.

"Some candy for the girls," he explained.

Sunny and her sisters waved at a few more people as they passed them. Saying good-bye to everybody you knew was terrifying. It was also necessary.

Mary Elizabeth Slater, their mother, had been buried ten days ago. Sunny had no idea how long her mother had been sick before finally admitting her illness, and by then, it was too late. She had a highly aggressive form of bone cancer, which had already progressed to stage four before she had been diagnosed. Whatever her reasons, Mary Elizabeth had accepted her fate. She had ignored most of the medical advice and refused the doctors' plans for treatment. When she had finally told Sunny about her cancer, it had already spread throughout her body. Even though she had no desire to delay the inevitable, the last eighteen months of all their lives had been grim. Mary Elizabeth had been horribly sick and her health had continued to deteriorate until, at the end, she had been bedridden.

Mary Elizabeth said she was too tired to keep trying and told Sunny she knew her younger daughters were in good hands, those good hands being Sunny's. Sunny responded in the

same way as always by continuing to care for her mother and sisters. She had assumed the role of the responsible one in the family early on in her childhood. She had learned how to deal with a childlike mother who would take their last bit of money and go to the store for food, only to return with kites and candy. It might have been fun when Sunny was six, but it was more often harrowing and traumatic. Sunny soon became the one who paid the bills and made sure there was food in the house. She had learned early about food banks and homeless shelters offering free meals nightly. They had frequented both far too many times before moving to the valley.

Sunny was scared. Too many people were asking questions beginning with the hospice homecare staff. Now, social services were poking around. When Sunny had been younger, before they moved to the valley, drawing the attention of social services usually meant moving somewhere else. Everyone was asking how Sunny would provide for her sisters. How would she manage to work and support them, and afford daycare? Did her mother have a will? Did she have life insurance? Did her sisters qualify for social security survivor benefits?

There were too many questions. Sunny's answers were similar to ones her mother had always given. Those vague answers had never been enough for Sunny, even though she now found herself parroting them. Mary Elizabeth merely said she would manage and provide. Her mother had not managed anything. Sunny had done the managing. She had also done a good portion of the providing since she was a teenager.

Then there was Bishop Jacob Atkins from the Community who had been her mother's friend since childhood. He had hovered around the perimeter of their lives for years even after assuming the title of leader of the Community after the death of his father, the original Bishop. He and her mother had an unusual friendship since Mary Elizabeth was not an official part of the Community. Now, Bishop Atkins suggested it might be time for Sunny to make a commitment to the Community and take a husband or he could select one for her. He had suggested a home placement for her sisters, as a newlywed husband would not want the burden of another man's children.

Sunny was not about to become a first, second, or even a third wife, the maximum number the men were allowed to take. Neither were her sisters, if she had anything to say about it.

She had already turned down two marriage proposals, both from men who came from large families and were members of the Fellowship of Faith Church in town whose strict beliefs chafed her. Their minister ruled his practitioners with faith-based, Bible-thumping fear. He preached that men were the leaders of their families and women were to be obedient and faithful. They followed strict guidelines for their daily activities and any deviations were met with discipline applied to both wives and children. Sunny thought it strange the men never seemed to do anything wrong.

Why Mary Elizabeth had settled them in an area where people wanted to set back time was a mystery to her daughter. Her mother flaunted every rule of both religious factions. She was her own woman except she had what her daughter considered some major flaws. Her mother could not live without a man in her life and she was incapable of seeing men's faults until it was too late.

Mary Elizabeth viewed marriage and live-in boyfriends as her support system. Sunny's first stepfather had entered her life at six and was gone before she turned seven. Four more stepfathers had appeared and disappeared over the next fifteen years. Each was the love of her mother's life until suddenly they weren't and they went away. Sunny had lost count of the live-in boyfriends. Her mother had been a serial wife and girlfriend. When times were tough, Mary

Elizabeth went looking for a man to solve her problems. Unfortunately, her choices did not have any staying power.

Sherman Slater was number six on the marriage register. He had been killed three years earlier in a truck accident. Coincidentally, it had been around the same time when Mary Elizabeth had begun to show signs of being ill. Sherman had driven a big rig, hauling goods from coast to coast. He was not often home, but he was good about sending money regularly for his wife and two daughters.

He came home less often after he figured out Sarah Rose was not his daughter, although when he did come to visit, he treated both girls the same. Sherman, despite her mother's problems with him, had turned out to be the pick of the litter when it came to husbands and boyfriends. He loved the girls. Even after he found out Sarah Rose wasn't his, he claimed them as his, and he wanted what was best for them. Sunny wasn't sure who was Sarah Rose's biological father, but she had her unconfirmed suspicions. Her mother said it was no one's business except her own. Since her little sisters were nearly identical, Sunny suspected the same man had fathered Cassie. If she were right, it could complicate matters considerably.

Mary Elizabeth and Sherman were already separated when he was involved in his fatal accident. Biological father or not, Sherman Slater had left an insurance policy and girls qualified for his Social Security survivor benefits. They kept their mouths shut about the possibility of a different paternity. The money had provided a subsistence income after Sunny had been forced to quit her two part-time jobs and stay home to nurse her mother and care for her younger sisters.

Mary Elizabeth was an outsider to both religious groups, but the people of Westview Valley were good folk who had tried to be helpful after she got sick. The church ladies and neighbors brought food to the house and the women organized a schedule, so several times a week someone would come to visit and give Sunny a break. These women allowed her precious time to get herself and the girls out of the house for a while, and sometimes for her to pick up a few hours of work.

Sunny steered her old truck northeast towards the closest interstate still sixty miles away. Cassie opened the plastic bag José had given them and pulled out a handful of the chocolate candy bars to put them in the small cooler sitting on the floor of the truck cab under their feet. The old truck did not have air-conditioning and the candy would have melted into liquid chocolate in a matter of seconds in the 100-degree-plus temperatures. Then, before Sunny could stop her, Cassie tossed something out the open window. Small packages bounced on the pavement in the side view mirror and Sunny slammed on the brakes. It was not a good reaction when you were driving a truck with a camper on top.

"Darn it, Cassie," Sunny yelled putting the truck in reverse. She scrambled all over the deserted road to find packages of cigarettes. She slammed into the truck angrily and stuffed them into the glove compartment.

"Cassie, if I had a corner in this truck your nose would be in it," Sunny warned.

Her little sister stuck out her lower lip in a pout. She was a stubborn child and there was no shaking her loose when she set her mind on something. Cassie did not want Sunny smoking, so she had taken to stealing the cigarettes and destroying them. Sunny was not stupid and knew the long-term effects of smoking. Still, dang it, she had little else in her life to cling to. She felt she was smart enough to know when it was time to quit.

Sunny drove five miles past the crossroads turning onto a dirt road leading to Cole Elkman's place. Cole lived outside of what used to be the town. He did a little ranching, but mostly earned his living welding and building sculptures out of junk metal. Sunny drove slowly

and carefully down the rutted lane. Even so, the old camper on top of the truck bed rocked dangerously. She pulled up and parked in front of the farmhouse.

Cole Elkman was the closest thing Sunny had ever come to having a father figure. He was not her father, of course, and he had never pretended to be her parent. He was simply a nice guy who liked helping kids and had been there every time she needed him.

Sunny met Cole when she and a bunch of little boys were throwing rocks and breaking windows in one of the old deserted storefronts. Cole had caught them red-handed and taken each of them to their parents. The valley was the kind of place where misbehaving kids were not ignored. It was an old-fashioned kind of place; where children referred to adults as sir and ma'am. Cole set up a work schedule so the kids could earn enough to have the windows replaced despite the building being deserted. They learned the hard way that willful destruction of property came with a lot of trouble and sore backsides.

After Sunny had gotten over her resentment and sore backside, she had fallen into her first male crush following Cole around like a lovesick puppy. After she realized she was a kid and he was not interested in her, she tried to set him up with her mother.

Cole did become a good friend of the family, although his main interest was keeping Sunny out of trouble. Since he had known most of Mary Elizabeth's husbands and boyfriends over the years, he had elected himself as Sunny's mentor. By the time Sunny was twelve, she was doing odd jobs at his place and had accumulated a strange assortment of skills. She could change oil and brakes, rotate tires, and do most maintenance needed to keep their vehicles going. She could weld the hell out of anything. She could also do hair, waitress, and work as a cowhand, if necessary.

She unhooked Sarah Rose from her car seat and set her on the ground. Both Cassie and Sarah Rose made a run for Cole as soon as he came out of the house and he lifted both girls, one in each arm. He was a big man with a friendly face—tall and sturdily built. He had wavy dark hair and glasses resting on a slightly crooked nose. He would never tell Sunny the why or how of it, only that it had been broken twice.

After hugs, Cole sent the girls out to the shed behind the house to see a new batch of puppies. He gave Sunny a genuine hug and she hugged him back. They said nothing for a few seconds and then both of them grinned. She had already said her goodbyes, but could not drive by his place without stopping once more.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Cole asked for the umpteenth time. "You don't have to leave. You and the girls can move in with me."

"Part of me wishes I could stay," Sunny admitted. "The other part says I need to go. I want to meet my father. Since Momma wouldn't tell me anything about him, he is virtually an unknown."

Cole sighed. "I guess it's your right. Everyone should know their parents, both their momma and daddy. If it doesn't work out, I want you to come home. I'll take care of everything."

"You have taken care of everything since I was a kid," Sunny replied before taking a deep breath and asking, "Do you know who fathered Cassie and Sarah Rose?"

"It wasn't me, Sunny. I know you wish it were so, but I am not their father. Mary Elizabeth never told me, although I did know it wasn't Sherman. Your momma and I were friends, and friends only. I swing the other direction."

“I knew it wasn’t you, although I thought she might have told you. I wondered about the other thing, but it wasn’t any of my business,” Sunny admitted. “It’s a hard road to travel with all the Bible thumpers around here.”

“I never figured it was anyone’s business. Your momma guessed. Women pick up on it faster than men.”

“How’s that?”

Cole smiled. “If a man isn’t interested in a drop-dead gorgeous woman, she generally figures out why.”

Sunny laughed and hugged him again.

Sarah Rose came running. “Sunny, can I have a puppy? Please? Please? Please?”

Before she could voice a denial, Cole interceded. “Baby girl, they’re too young for me to let go of them. You’re going to be traveling for a spell and the puppies aren’t ready to leave their momma yet.”

Sarah Rose scrunched up her face as if to cry, but did not. “Okay,” she responded thoughtfully before running around the house to return to the puppies.

“Wow, she doesn’t usually give in so easily,” exclaimed Sunny.

Cole was watching the five-year-old running through the tall grasses. “She’s young, but she understands about losing a momma. Is she still crying at night?”

Sunny nodded yes. “I guess it’s to be expected for a while.”

Cole gave Sunny a stern look. “I think you are too young to be taking off on your own. This trip could be a wild goose chase.”

“I have to go,” Sunny replied. “I need to find out. I am the grown-up in this equation and I have to do what I think is best. I need to meet him and find out what happened.”

“I want your promise,” Cole admonished sternly. “I want your word of honor that if your daddy is not a good man, you will call me and hightail it out of there. Mary Elizabeth didn’t always use sound judgment in picking her companions.”

Sunny didn’t take any offense at his censoring words. She had thought the same thing a million times herself. “From all accounts, he is a decent guy,” she reported. “Momma said he was a good man. She said what happened between them didn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Don’t think for a minute I haven’t noticed you won’t give me his name. How can I trust a man who does not see or support his kid for years? It’s not right, Sunnydae!”

“It wasn’t his doing. It was hers. Momma wouldn’t let him know where we lived. She said she was sorry, but she still thought it was the right thing to do,” Sunny lied. “There must have been real hard feelings between them when they divorced.”

Cole chewed on her words, making no further comment. They had already spent too much time arguing about what she was about to do. They walked toward the truck and Cole popped open the hood to inspect the engine carefully. He was a worrier, not necessarily about the truck. He had rebuilt the engine only a few months before. He would never have let her drive something if he did not think it was safe.

Sunny called for the girls, and Cassie and Sarah Rose came running. Cole kissed the girls and gave them hugs before Sunny buckled Sarah Rose into her car seat and settled Cassie safely in the front.

Cole hugged Sunny, kissed her on top of her head, and hugged her tight.

She turned away and quickly got behind the wheel. If she did not leave soon, she would say *to hell with it* and stay. She could burst out crying any second. It took every bit of her willpower to put the truck in gear and drive off.