

Sun of Sunnyville Excerpt

She cracked the door open and called out, *Mom?* It sounded funny to her ears. It felt oddly inappropriate to enter her mother's house unbidden. The same mother whose house she routinely ran in and out of as a girl.

She stepped inside, calling out again. *Mom?* She hadn't told her mother exactly when she'd arrive—maybe Alice was on the back porch she glanced at the back of the house? She stepped on neatly trimmed grass at the side of the house to have a look. The sliding glass doors were shut on a modest back porch. Perhaps, she thought, her mother was on an errand, shopping in anticipation of company. No, her mother would never leave a house unlocked.

She returned to the side door and let herself into the kitchen. From the adjoining den she could hear the television—faintly at first and then an uptick in volume with a commercial. She entered the den and there, curled up on the floor, lay her mother. From that moment it seemed she'd been catapulted to another world altogether, everything suspended as if time itself had frozen and she'd entered a space where it was truly an abstract. She started towards the body and stopped. Then she tore herself from the house as if it were a sort of darkness itself, as if there may be more horrors to encounter if she lingered any longer.

At the same time Lily Westfall was shuffling across Fairway Drive in the Meadowbrook subdivision to fetch what she knew most likely was a clump of junk mail and advertising flyers from her compartment in the shared box. Out of habit she looked both ways, although the speed limit was ten-miles-per-hour, traffic scarce. She'd just turned to look both ways when the young woman came running down the road haphazardly at her, mouth agape and arms flailing. Lily knew instinctively this young lady did not belong on Fairway Drive. The scene made no sense to her bewildered eyes, failing eyes that made everything blurry. She shot a glance across the road and saw with no small measure of relief that her neighbor Ed, beset with what she deemed to be early onset Alzheimer's and prone to odd and aberrant behavior, was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm sorry!" the woman's shrill cry stabbed the humdrum of a sleepy neighborhood and Lily squinted at a pasty white face stretched in fear.

"It's my mother! Up there." She kept pointing up the street behind her, lowering her voice when she came up so close that Lily could feel the warm breath on her own cheeks. "She's on the floor. Out cold," she panted, "I don't know what to do."

“Did you call nine-one-one?” Lily gaped as the stranger clutched her elbow, brushing at strands of auburn hair and nodding with such force as to shake beads of sweat from her face.

“Yes, yes! Can you come with me, please! I-I don’t know what to do.”

“Well *honey*...” Lily stuffed the mail back into the tiny compartment and speed-walked in her blue polyester pants and floral-print blouse, hand on hip, trailing the woman all the way up to the driveway and through the garage into a single-level house exactly like that of her own. She’d never had occasion to enter anyone else’s house on the street. There were days when this saddened her, days when she reflected wistfully on a childhood spent running with playmates through familiar houses, over thresholds that parents crossed regularly to gather the way adults did. Nowadays everyone seemed more and more to just keep to themselves.

“In *here*.”

The woman pointed to what Lily knew would be the den. She squinted and froze at the sight of a woman curled up on the floor. The television was on when whatever happened, happened—a commercial for Medicare part B insurance blared while she knelt over an elderly woman. No pulse. Long ago she’d had staff-training in CPR in a pediatrician’s office, but had never been taken to task. Her memory had been razor-sharp until recently and she worried that she may have forgotten the procedure. She pulled the woman onto her back. But when she attempted resuscitation, the nose she pinched was stone cold, the open mouth frozen in place. She nonetheless pressed the side of her head to the woman’s chest and it was as lifeless and still as the floor itself.

The young woman collapsed to the floor and knelt beside her inert mother, running her fingers over the face as if to summon a mask to animation. Lily knelt at the other side of the body, as the young lady took a purpled hand in hers only to watch it thump lifelessly to the floor when she released it. Lily wrung her hands, frozen in place beside an elderly woman she’d only glimpsed occasionally from her driveway, thumbing the cold wrist once again for a pulse. She pushed herself to her feet and glanced around to every corner of the den—which oddly took on high definition, as if someone had dialed up the brightness and contrast, along with a menacing silence and stillness. “I’m sorry,” she said, wringing her hands, frozen in place standing beside an elderly woman she’d only glimpsed occasionally from her driveway, the imploring stare of a complete stranger fixed on her. She shrugged, shook her head once again. “I’m so sorry.”

“No,” the woman rasped. “Please God no.”