

WELCOME!
TO THE
!! SNEAK PREVIEW !!
OF
FOR ALL WE KNOW

By Natalie Karstedt

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SCROLL DOWN AND
TAKE A PEEK:



FOR ALL WE KNOW

CHAPTER 1

“Lily, what was your mother like?”

All I could do was squeeze my head harder when Annamarie Dalton asked me that question. Because I couldn’t believe anyone would ask such a thing at Mom’s funeral. Because hearing people talk about my mother in the past tense made me sick. Because I was still shocked; still panicking; still sitting on the farthest-from-the-casket couch not believing that what happened actually happened. What Mom *was like*, obviously, *was dead*—and the last thing I wanted to think about, while trying to not vomit, was how to bullet-point all the things I was going to miss.

“Would you like some company?” Annamarie asked next.

Of course, I didn’t know her name was Annamarie until she sat down and started jabbering at my hanging head. I didn’t know I’d be seeing a lot more of her. I had no idea that the half-whisperer making me sicker than I already was, was no ordinary funeral-day well-wisher. When I stopped squeezing my head so I could squeeze my gut, she said that she’d never met my mother. When I didn’t answer, she told me that she was the new social worker at my high school; that her name was Annamarie Dalton; that she had two first names because her parents couldn’t decide on just one—and that everyone called her “Annie”—like I cared.

My mother is in a coffin with the top down! I wanted to spit at her flat-shoed, little feet since those were the only parts of her I could see with my eyes at knee level. *Who cares about how you got two first names?* And who, I wanted to know after I wrestled back the urge to scream myself blue, sent a counselor over to evaluate my mental state? Quite the joke if it had been Dad, since it was him, not me,

going off the deep end. Dad used to be the calm one, the voice of reason, the sanest person in the family. For as much of my sixteen years that I could remember, he'd been my best listener, my advice-giver, the only shoulder I wanted to cry on when Tommy Vandenhoven dumped me for a cheerleader. But ever since a speeding car sent Mom catapulting into eternal rest, he'd become something I couldn't even describe. I'd never seen my father's dark side before Mom died. I would've never guessed he even had a dark side before I saw him slash one of Mom's paintings with a steak knife, tell a boy scout who came to sell Christmas cards to "Leave us the god hell alone!" and smash an intruder ant with a hot-off-the-stove, scrambled-eggs-still-in, iron frying pan.

But worse than all of that, my father seemed to stop loving me and my older brother, Wesley. He wouldn't talk to us after the police gave us the news about Mom. He wouldn't cry with us or even hug us. Not once.

While I side-eye glanced over my shoulder to get an update on the traitor's current mental state, Annamarie began laying out her recent history—going on about how she was hired three months ago, that she moved to Iowa from Chicago for the "small-townishness of Sycamore," and that my dad was on the panel that hired her. I nodded only to let her know that I wasn't deaf.

"Are you okay?" she threw out dumb question number three. But I couldn't even nod to answer that one. It was just too stupid of a thing to ask. My hair hung in strings because I didn't have the strength to blow it dry that morning. I wasn't talking. I was folded in two. I was so far from *okay* I could no longer see land and I was pretty sure it was plain freaking obvious.

As I sniffed back a surge of tears, Annamarie grabbed a few tissues from the gold box on the end table and laid them in my lap. While I blew my nose, wiped my face, and repeated the process two more times, I told myself to force out a few measly words so she didn't think I was mute. Besides, she knew my dad. Someday, I might run into her at school. She was being polite and I was being a jerk, and she apparently had no intentions of leaving.

"My mother was...complicated," I finally blurted out, not sure if the word even fit, but it was better than the slew of not-so-flattering group of adjectives that first jumped to the tip of my tongue.

Angry, stubborn, and difficult all popped into my head so fast I had to press my lips together to keep the stampeding herd in my mouth. But I couldn't say that "everyone loved Mom" because they didn't. I couldn't say, "She was the nicest person you'd ever want to meet" because she wasn't. Those are the usual things people say about someone who dies, but Mom was no Ms. Congeniality. She liked protesters, rebels, and atheists. She hated priests, racists, and rules. I knew "complicated" was a lame way to describe her, but it was the best description of my mother I'd probably come up with maybe ever—so I switched focus to dumb question three, told "Annie" that I was "okay," and ordered the God who took my mother to make the social worker go away—because he owed me.

But all the life-wrecking, jerk-of-jerks Lord made Annie do, was re-situate herself on my couch. She smoothed her happy yellow skirt. She sighed. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. When she grabbed a Kleenex for herself and started dabbing at her nose, I started kicking myself for saying, "complicated." Why didn't I just say Mom was a good watercolor painter? Or that she was kind to insects, willing to spend half an hour swishing a hornet out of the house rather than killing it?

"My mom liked teaching little kids," I lifted my head and tossed out before guilt swallowed me whole, hoping to create a nicer picture of Rachel Packard in Annie's mind. "She read books to kindergarteners at the library. She always made the kids laugh because she talked with her hands a lot...and her eyes. They were a weird, intense green, sort of a mesmerizing."

"My father was a hand-talker," Annie said while pulling a hair tie from her purse. With fingers trembling like she was long overdue for a drink or a cigarette, she worked on gathering her thick chocolate hair into a ponytail, fumbling around with the procedure for so long that I almost grabbed the yellow tie and her hair and did it for her. While watching her fuss and fidget in my peripheral vision, I wondered why she looked just as bloodshot-eyed as me, Dad, and Wes.

"All that hand-flailing used to drive my mother nuts," Annie thought I should know after the hair reorganization was over, "and if there was one word I'd use to describe him, it would be "confusing."

"Is he dead?" I asked as I sat up straighter. After catching our reflection in the mirror across the room, I took note of Annie's petite-ness. I only weighed about a hundred and twenty pounds, but I

looked bulky compared to her. I also noticed that both of our faces were waxed-paper-white blotchy, our four eyes were puffed, and our four lips were so pale they were almost not there.

“Both of my parents passed away when I was thirty-five,” she said before meeting my gaze in the glass. I re-hung my head and asked if they died at the same time.

“Pretty much...only two months apart. My dad had a heart attack, and then Mom slipped in the grocery store and fell on the back of her head. Someone dropped a carton of eggs on the floor and then kicked the carton under the shelf. Mom slipped on the slime of a broken egg.”

Never expecting the cause of anyone’s death to be an egg, I gulped back a laugh and whispered, “Wow.”

“I know,” Annie said. “Who would’ve thought, right? My mother never did like being alone though, so I guess she decided to up and leave just as soon as she could find a way out.”

Our red eyes met head-on then—hers softening with missing her mom I supposed; mine squinting to keep them from rolling. *Did she seriously think her mom had a choice in her own “upping and leaving?”*

But I didn’t pry into Annie’s business like she was prying into mine—because the priest my father called in from who-knows-where—to do a prayer service my mother would’ve had my dad’s head for—decided to walk over and bless me with more company.

“Hello, ladies,” the roly-poly reverend sang out. After winking, he reached out to shake our hands, offering me his right and Annie his left. While she returned his hymn-like hello, I looked the other way.

“Would you like to read the Lord’s Prayer at the opening of your mother’s farewell, Lillian?” the Father asked after finishing with my couch mate. It only took him a couple of seconds to get that sing-song question out, but in that blip of time, I saw my mother step in front of his face—saw her green eyes catch fire and heard her creamy voice curdle while slowly and firmly, telling God’s rosy-cheeked, smiling deputy, to “save his damn prayers for the brainwashed.”

“I don’t want to read any prayers,” I said as soon as Mom left. “And my name’s not Lillian. It’s Lily.”

“Would you like to read a passage from the Bible then, *Lily*?”

“God, no,” I shot back without thinking about who exactly I was talking to.

“All right then my dear,” he stiffened up. “But remember, the Lord has not abandoned you. Have faith in God for we know not his intent in taking your mother back home. His mysterious ways are hard to understand, I know, but have faith my dear...have faith.” And with a pat-a-pat-pat on my shoulder, his holiness moved on.

“Have faith?” I scoffed, loud enough for only me and Annie to hear. In what? The God who stood back and watched a car ram the life out of my mother? The God who let her die in a pile of wet bushes and then let the scum driver get away? God was a jackass as far as I was concerned. If he could part the Red Sea, arrange an Immaculate Conception, yack with Moses through a burning bush—he surely could’ve yanked Mom out of the path of a speeding car. But apparently our Savior was too busy on October 9th to do any saving, too busy basking in mystery and glory.

Annie cleared her throat. I looked up at the ceiling fan and waited—thinking that if she opened her mouth and told me to keep the faith too, I might just lose it and rip out her ponytail. But what she said was, “I have a hard time with the faith thing too,” and while keeping her head down and her hands folded, she added, “You know Lily...sometimes it makes me feel better to think there’s no God at all up there pulling the strings. Maybe, unconsciously, on some other level, we choose our own life circumstances and our own life missions. I mean...maybe we leave exactly when and how we want to.”

I never saw that coming. “Is that what you thought when *your* mom died?” I had to ask.

“Oh, no—not at first,” she admitted. “But later, that possibility actually brought me a lot of peace—as if the person who dropped the eggs did Mom a favor. You know... created a way for her to leave because she was ready to go. I couldn’t stop blaming until I looked at things from that perspective.”

I had to turn away again after that; had to close my eyes to keep them in their sockets and clench my teeth so my lower jaw wouldn’t fall to the earth’s core. When I re-gathered my wits, I whipped back

around and squealed under my breath, “The driver did my mother a favor? A favor? Ramming someone with a car and driving off is a *favor*?”—too pissed to care if she was dad’s friend, the school principle, or the Queen of England.

“I just thought that if you looked at things from another perspective that—”

“Jesus Christ!” I jumped in before she said more and I said something a lot worse. And then I jumped to a stand, marched out of the funeral parlor’s double doors and joined the crowd outside. My brother’s entire basketball team was out there, and football team, and cross country team. My friends were outside too—on the lawn, on the steps, in the parking lot—as if no one under the age of eighteen could stand to be in the same room as the dead person.

As I rushed to the porch railing, I hard-bumped elbows with Barry “Bear” Blair, my brother’s best friend. “Sorry Bear,” I said as I grabbed onto the iron bar and hung my head over the fence. “I feel like I’m gonna barf.”

“Then let’s leave!” my brother chimed in from the stair landing below. After throwing his still-lit Camel into a rose bush, he added, “I can’t fucking stay and do this shit anymore. I gotta go.”

“What do you mean you gotta go?” I called down to him. “You can’t *go*.”

“I don’t wanna sit through any more of this funeral crap, okay?”

“The service is in five minutes, Wes. Don’t make it worse for Dad by not showing up.”

“Like he’s made it easy on us the past few days? Did you hear him bitchin’ at me this morning ’cause he couldn’t find his goddamn umbrella? How am I supposed to know where Mom kept his stuff?”

After Wes was finished griping, Barry’s mother came over to say her sympathies. His dad stepped in behind her and patted my shoulder while passing on a sad-eyed hello to Wesley. After they left, Bear started crying.

“This shouldn’t have happened, Lil,” he said. “I just can’t believe...I just can’t. This shouldn’t have happened.”

I laid a hand on Bear’s arm to offer what measly comfort I could dredge up, but he backed away and re-entered the funeral home without acknowledging my effort, hands deep in his pockets, arms stiff as

steel rods. Bear was going to miss my mom. When things weren't good at the Blair home, my mother had been his mother too.

"It's raining," I said to Wes after Barry left.

"So?"

"So we should go in."

But instead of climbing up the steps, my brother turned away and bolted toward the sidewalk.

"We-e-e-es!" I called after him. "Where are you going?"

When he didn't turn around, my best friend, Renee, slid in beside me and yelled, "Wesley, come back here this instant!" But my brother just kept on running, dodging a dog and disappearing around the corner by the Walgreens.

The rain came down harder.

Everyone outside went in.

While I tried blinking away the shock of my brother's abandonment, Renee took my hand and led me through the double doors Tommy Vandenhoven held open.

"Looks like the prayer thing is gonna start, Lily," Renee said. "You should probably go sit by your Dad. He's up front there."

I lifted my head to see where she was pointing, but before I saw him, I saw *her*. I saw Annamarie lay a hand on my father's shoulder—which at first, didn't strike me as too awfully horrid as I was inwardly cussing out Wes. But when Dad seemed to have no problem whatsoever giving the new social worker a hug—I let go of Renee's hand, ran to the bathroom, locked myself in a stall and sobbed out my soul while Renee stood outside the door and sobbed too.