

TROUBLED SOULS

exclusive free preview

written by

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O N E

The soft flesh of the neck tasted like warm honey on his thin, pursed lips as Brandon Kramer nuzzled hungrily along his date's throat. Amanda Beyer had avoided his advances since the second semester of their sophomore year of high school, perfecting the art of playing hard-to-get and making him question his worth. Now that they were seniors, she had finally agreed to *one* date with him and insisted it be on a night when every one of their classmates—expressly her circle of friends—was occupied by the first week of studies. Only once she was confident no one of importance would see her had she agreed to meet him—*not* ride with him—to see a roaming carnival that had made a surprise stop in Red Bat, Nebraska.

A person, even a teenage girl, could only adjust their hair and put on fresh lip gloss so many times before stalling became evident. The strangeness of the carnival workers, with their bleary-eyed stares and incoherent meandering, had stricken Amanda with a desire to leave, and she had finally allowed the date to get underway if only so it would end sooner. She had faked a couple of restroom breaks and even returned to

her car for a jacket, all to keep from having to be seen in public with Brandon. She had allowed herself forty minutes before *remembering* the non-existent quiz she had to prepare for before second hour of the following school day.

Amanda, like most people, dreamed of getting out of Red Bat, so she was more than a little taken by the notion of any person, let alone an entire group, willingly setting up shop in the dwindling town. Since the seventh grade, she had looked down on the *little people* of Red Bat as though they were some lost cause she could take pity on. In many ways, Amanda had it all: beauty, brains, popularity, wealth, success, and all before her eighteenth birthday. There were, of course, whispers of her viciousness, and that she consumed less-popular friends and local boys and spat them out like lukewarm water.

She had even floated a rumor that she had a college boyfriend from Omaha whom she spent the summer with when, in truth, she had been sent away to stay with her great aunt while her parents sought counseling for her father's philandering ways. It was their strict new set of rules that prompted her to agree to the school night date, to start her new makeover as a genuine hellcat who refused to conform. Brandon was a bit of a creeper, she thought, but there was the obvious temptation to give him a thrill and then drop him hard. It would make her date want her even more; which would make her want him even less.

Now she was the teen making out on a ride surrounded by small children and disapproving mothers who, without a doubt, would phone

their complaints to her parents. Pressing her foot against the outer rail of the sleigh-shaped merry-go-round car, she smiled as though approving of Brandon's prowess when, in truth, she had practically forgotten his name. Allowing a laugh to escape her lips, she arched her brow as the smiling teen chuckled along with her and then rolled her eyes as though he were capable of understanding the joke. Not surprisingly, he silenced his laughter with another string of kisses to her throat.

Fluttering her eyes, Amanda's muscles played pin cushion to imaginary needles as she veered away from Brandon's roaming hands. She had moved his creeping hand away from her inner thigh for the second time in as many minutes and interlaced their fingers together as though it might salve his desires. Instead, he went for full mouth-on-mouth contact, which she deftly avoided by letting loose of his clammy hand and brushing away her hair to expose more of her neck to him. With a twist of her hip, she showed the dangling jewelry from her navel piercing, which her parents still did not know about, and shut her eyes in anticipation.

Suckling her slender throat and inhaling the scent and flavor of her skin and hair, Brandon responded to her warming reaction with a bold move he had only dreamed about before tonight. As he squeezed the buoyant underside of her left breast, Brandon felt a sharp pain in his ear, elicited by Amanda's scream of disapproval as she reared back and prepared to slap him across his smirking face. Before she could react, however, long, bony fingers clutched Brandon's head and twisted it from

his body the same way a person might remove the lid from a plastic bottle. His blood gushed from the torn open jugulars and cascaded across her face as his left eyeball struck her lap.

Following the bony hand along its equally skeletal forearm, Amanda saw a jutting elbow, like the thumb of a bat's wing and long, gray hair that matted the bicep of the intruder. The white bulbs of light along the canopy of the merry-go-round reflected in the red pits of beastly eyes as flesh and blood dripped from spiny fangs that curved nearly an inch from gum to tip. Though children squealed and hollered, Amanda could find no voice at all, as the creature stared straight into her eyes. She saw her reflection in his red pits and reacted solely out of instinct by slapping him instead of Brandon.

Relying on a few years of gymnastics training, Amanda vaulted backwards out of the sleigh and ran counterclockwise, against the natural direction of the ride. Hurdling over a twin set of bobbing motorcycles, she dropped to one knee as another creature soared overhead and tackled a shrieking soccer mom. Jumping onto the back of one of the carousel horses, she spun around on the pole and struck the pursuing beast. With a solid blow to its chest, she felled the creature and continued spinning until her feet touched down on the horse's pink saddle.

Selflessly, she plucked a girl with copper braids and a lilac sundress off a one-eyed pony, holding her securely in one arm and leading them both to safety. The girl screamed in terror at Amanda's blood-stained

face and wriggled free of the teen. Dismissing the brat with a snarl, Amanda turned to stare head-on at the same creature she had most recently dropped. With a forceful shove, the creature pushed against Amanda's shoulders and flung her from the carousel, where she struck the ground and rolled across the trampled prairie grass.

Stopping face-down in the grass, dust and trash, she lifted her face and stared at the dull reflection of carnival lights in the shiny black faces of two polished shoes. Gray slacks with a slim pinstripe ascended towards a belt that matched the shoes and a three-button vest fitted firmly against a light blue button-up shirt. A gentleman older than Amanda stared down at her and then towards the shrill howl of the approaching beast. Slicing upwards with an axe, the man severed the creature in two, sending a wave of blood and ash across Amanda.

Dragging his forearm across a triangular chin, sporting an unkempt, almost bushy beard, the man hid the smell from his nostrils and knelt down to tend to Amanda. Gleaming blue eyes, kinder than she had ever seen, conveyed words he never vocalized, and he reached out to help steady her. Shivering and adrenalized, she took in the sight of more than two dozen creatures feeding and slaughtering carnival-goers all around them. Bewildered, she looked at the man, who seemed immaculate, besides the blood, and tried to place him.

"You're that old professor, aren't you?" Amanda exclaimed in confusion.

"Old?"

Shuddering over the memories of the past few minutes, Amanda squealed and smoothed the fabric of her yellow cotton top.

“Are you all right?”

“I—no, how the hell could I be?! Now everybody’s going to know that I was here with *Brandon Kramer*,” she cringed.

“I meant to say ‘Are you *hurt*?’”

“Oh,” she sighed and pawed around at her body. “No.”

Before taking her next breath, Amanda gasped painfully and her entire body contorted fiercely enough to produce bone-crackling noise. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head as a guttural howl resonated from the pit of her stomach, causing her frame to shudder. Gurgling and crying, the teen slumped forward until her head struck the hunter and then she fell sideways into a pool of soda and dust. Unable to grieve for her, the man she referred to as a professor clutched his axe and ran in the direction of the fray. Dodging whining toddlers separated from their parents, he watched as the creatures abandoned children and dragged off adults.

Near the tow-hitch of a turned over concession stand, a man of intimidating stature lay passed out on the ground. Believing him to be of use as a hunter, the professor knelt beside him and shook the man’s torso as if to stir him from heavy slumber. A drop of blood splashed down from the hunter’s weapon and onto the face of the unconscious man, a bead trickling slowly into his mouth. Wide-eyed, the hunter watched the

man with the full knowledge that he should not stay and yet could not look away.

The flesh around the man's eye socket deepened in pallor to the color of a plum, the veins of his face rising to the surface and descending his neck like vines of ivy. His relaxed lips began to swell and wrinkle as curved fangs erupted from his mouth and dug into the flesh of his face, producing a ring of blood. The professor backed away from the man as he sat upright and dug his abnormally bony fingers into the dry earth. A raucous growl whined with intensity, like the call of a beast identifying its territory.

Not allowing the man to have the chance to succumb to monstrosity, the professor reared back with his axe and swung from overhead until he split the man's skull like a melon. As others like him attacked the corpse of their kindred creature, the professor watched in horror and backed away from the sight of their feeding. Covering his mouth with the back of his wrist, the hunter clutched his axe and began lashing out at them with wide blows, striking them down in their depravity. For those who had been merciless, he himself showed no mercy and no remorse as he laid waste to as many of the beasts as he could find.

Stumbling over the stake of a vinyl tent, he lashed out angrily, cutting away the structures and relics of the roaming band of beasts horrifying his town. His rage for all the carnage bested him and he took to chasing down beasts in aisles and alleys between the tents, trailers and amusement park rides. For several bloody minutes, the professor went to

war against a creature he had only believed to be of myth and now could never forget. With every swipe of his axe, he suppressed the innocent memories that fueled him in his daily life and relied on the primal instinct he felt for all the wrong he had suffered.

When there was none left to kill, he felt the awkwardness of silence and the coldness of breath on his neck. Turning, he stared at a creature that towered over him and blew putrid breath into his face. Angrily, the beast drove him away with a blow to his chest until the hunter found himself clumsily entwined with the wrappings of a carnival tent. The beast laughed and watched the hunter struggle to free himself, too much a warrior to take an easy kill. Only the explosion of propane tanks alarmed the beast and sent it running away without the kill as the hunter rose to his feet.

Fire raged and reflected in the hunter's placid blue irises, a strand of dark brown hair dangling from his classic, if not disheveled, hairstyle and dissecting his features. Mortified, he stood lock-legged and shell-shocked as the misshapen creatures dragged and tugged the wounded away. All was suddenly and eerily peaceful as the beasts dissolved into the darkness. Only the cheery tune from the merry-go-round punctuated the air. There would be no covering up this mess, no sweeping it away as had been done so many times in the past.

A sprinting survivor struck the hunter's shoulder, causing him to bob in the wake but not upsetting him at all as he watched the man run for freedom. A hot dog wrapper drifted in the arid night sky, floating to the

ground with a single corner lit in flame. A neon sign announcing the carnival fluttered and swayed, random bulbs flickering in and out of service. Over the music, the brakes of a pickup squealed and a wiry teenage girl with blonde hair and startled eyes yelled out the passenger window.

“Come on, Dad, we gotta go!”

Looking at the frightened teen, the hunter realized the wisdom of her words and, with his bloodied axe at his side, rushed for the getaway vehicle. The rear tires smoked against the downed vinyl tent as the teen floored the gas pedal and vaulted the truck out of the carnival grounds like a proverbial bat out of hell.



T W O

The howling that stole away the night hushed with the new day's sun as the heat from the neighboring sand dunes swept over the plains and rustled the long blades of prairie grass. A feral cat watched from a distance, its ears perked and its senses keen enough to dash away in the opposite direction of settlers. A passenger train moved towards the West, though it seemed miniature in scale from such a long way away. All was quiet other than the plotting of powerful men who feared the truth might be made public or that they might actually have to get their hands dirty.

The Sheriff of Red Bat squinted into the midday sun as a whirlwind of sand blew along the earth and smacked the side of his squad car, leaving red blotches as a testament to the previous night's events. The Mayor, who stood beside him, had imposed a curfew throughout the town, and most parents had stayed home from work to watch over the children they had kept out of school. Though the teenage girl who rescued the hunter could not hear the words of the two men, she was certain that it all boiled down to posturing. They were both determined,

if not helpless, and wanted to assert the weight of their offices upon the hunter whose help they had come to rely on.

Little would come of all of this, she knew, because nothing ever came of anything in the town she deemed the bane of her existence. One of the cooks from the nearby diner had spoken, with the expertise of a gossip, about the *drug addicts* who were terrorizing good, hard-working people and their innocent children. No justice would come for the dead, at least not publicly, and the families of the victims would shrink away in exile until they were either forgotten about or had left the county altogether. Sighing from the weight of it all, the freshly-scrubbed girl slumped onto her stool and spun around whimsically for there was nothing else to do.

Hanna Davies had decided that seventeen was the most meaningless age of all. She was old enough to drive, not that Red Bat offered much to see, a border town near the Sandhills of Nebraska, but she was too young to set out on her own as an adult. The town itself had all but withered long before unspeakable horrors, thanks in no small part to the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway, which led travelers towards progress and sophistication and away from the lackluster community. Hanna hated that she could relate to the town so well.

On a desk calendar given out by the local bank, she used a red felt tip pen to slash away one more day until her next birthday, which fell brutally not for another three-hundred and twenty-two days. Crossing her vibrant blue eyes in disbelief, she tilted her head back and counted

the plastic stars she had stuck to the ceiling tiles somewhere around her four-hundredth day of utter boredom. From her perch, she could see the northern face of the bank that distributed the calendars and half-expected creatures to stagger across the drive-thru lanes. Ignoring the check-in counter of the Dune Springs Motel, she peered out across the asphalt lot as the Sheriff crossed arms and stiffened his posture for another few seconds before his weakened core brought him back into a jiggling slouch.

Until she caught a glimpse of herself in the office windows, Hanna had not realized that she had assumed the same posture. Clumsily unfolding her arms and shaking her cumbersome, fidgety hands, she wriggled the similarities away and leaned forward until she could dig her elbow into her knee and rest her chin in her hand. She was supposed to look semi-professional in her lime green ringer with white stripes and a pair of shorts that were long enough to keep her stepfather's blood pressure from surging. Instead, she frowned over her wardrobe and the plastic name tag pinned to her shirt that, as far as she was concerned, drew attention to her cruelly small chest while broadcasting her name to every *creeper* who came into the office.

Rarely, in fact only eight times in fifteen days, had anyone she did not know wandered into the Dune Springs Motel at all. The motel, which took its name from an aquifer that dried up in the late 'sixties or early 'seventies—depending on which aging local one listened to—had become as invisible as Hanna felt most days. There were other sources of

income for the family, fortunately, but she often wondered how much longer the place would be able to stay open for business. Her stepfather, Gary, would always say that he could not give up on the place since he bought it for such a low price.

In truth, the town had become a place where people stayed only because they *wanted* to be forgotten by the world. It was no different for Hanna, except that she had not been born in Red Bat or even in Nebraska. For most of her life, she had been a happy-go-lucky California girl who thought she would never see anything but ocean. Someone had a loony sense of humor, planting her smack dab on the tail end of sand dunes. Any time she thought about complaining, though, she remembered the sacrifices her stepfather had made for her and decided she could make due there for another year or so.

Gary was a good man who had proven himself a worthy guardian long before the night he rescued Hanna from one of the *creepers* of Red Bat and became a monster hunter. Displaying a knack for it, he met the mayor and the sheriff, both of whom had called upon him only when it came to protecting the town. Last year, one-fifth of the town budget had gone to her stepfather for the duties he performed in an unofficial capacity. Often he talked about moving somewhere nicer, someplace safer. Were he not such a fan of Westerns, he might have turned his back on defending the town.

For the most part, Hanna ignored what happened at night and only wanted to leave Red Bat when she was bored. After all, what did she

know about a nicer, safer life after all she had been through? So they stayed, day after day and week after week, making the most of their lives there and pretending the past was packed away in some boxes in their storage shed. She hoped that a better sort of excitement might come her way, not that she minded driving at breakneck speeds around swarms of maniacs that wanted to tear her throat out. *Who would mind that?*

For now, she was stuck being a part-time assistant manager at the Dune Springs, the full-time maid and the girl who spent two summer breaks catching up on school credits in order to graduate in the coming spring. Blowing air until her cheeks popped out from her face like a chipmunk's, she drummed on her tummy and flopped her feet to and fro as the momentum made the stool rotate almost three-hundred full degrees. Only when she heard the door of the Sheriff's squad car close did she straighten her posture and pull herself over to a stack of paperwork and algebra homework.

On the pegboard in front of her, she caught a glimpse of a family portrait taken three years earlier when they never staged their smiles. She thought Gary might have been wearing the very same vest he had on in the photo. She refused to look at herself in the photo but could not keep from looking at the one who held her so lovingly in that moment—forever captured. With wide eyes, Hanna stared at a familiar face and trembled.

Her mother Cara was a beautiful woman, full of radiance and warmth that could be felt in all that she touched. Apple cheeks and a

button nose were traits she gave to her daughter, along with sparkling eyes and cascading blonde hair. Those who came into the office often found a way to comment on her mother's beauty and to compliment Hanna for all the ways she took after her. Her mom was adventurous, witty, beautiful, funny and all of the things that Hanna someday hoped to be. Even so, she was not sure how she felt about the photo anymore.

"Hanna Marie," her stepfather called out as he entered the office. "Have you seen my—"

Hanna held up a twenty-four inch long, mahogany mason's level without raising her head to look at him.

"—mason's level."

"You're welcome."

"Don't be superior. I still have pictures of you in head gear and fanny pack."

"And yet *I'm* the one holding the level."

Bobbing his head from side to side, Gary swiped the tool from her and tucked it safely behind his back as he struck an awkward pose.

Pretending to be disinterested, she asked, "What did *they* want?"

"Never you worry your pretty little head about that."

"Was it about Amanda and Brandon?"

"Did you know them?"

Shrugging awkwardly, Hanna averted her eyes the way she always did when conversations risked vulnerable admissions.

“Amanda’s parents are still searching for her,” Gary confessed openly. “Sheriff Harper and Mayor Shipley stopped by to ask me what I thought they should tell them and if I had any idea about what the town’s next move should be.”

“They can’t find her?” Hanna asked, circling back to the grisly facts.

Solemnly, Gary answered, “No. I saw several people being dragged away. Maybe she was one of them.”

“But last night you said that she was dead and that only the live ones were being dragged off,” Hanna reminded him.

“Did I? Well, it all happened so fast. Maybe they slipped one by me in all of the confusion.”

Judging from the worried look on Hanna’s face, Gary knew she did not buy his lie.

Shifting the conversation onto better ground, he said, “The Sheriff’s a good man. He’ll figure out what’s going on.”

Snapping out of her daze, Hanna rolled her eyes and proved her stepfather was rapidly striking out in the credibility department.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked. “He’s an oaf.”

“Do you think he knows that one of these days he’s going to have to surrender his badge to you for doing his job for him all of the time? Maybe you could pin it on your vest and walk around like a cowboy. Oh! One of the guests left a cowboy hat behind. It’s a little stained,” she gushed facetiously, “but you would be *so* handsome!”

“And here I told him I knew nothing about the delinquent—his word—who jumped the curb and destroyed a park bench last night.”

In disbelief, she asked, “He said I was a delinquent?”

“Aha! I told you that you took that turn too fast.”

“Drive like,” she reduced her voice to a hush, “*hell*. That’s what you said to me.”

“I never!”

“You did so!” She cried.

“Well,” he said innocently, “if I did say something so atrocious I’m certain it was due to delirium brought on by your calling me Dad last night.”

“Did not,” she claimed.

“Heard you,” Gary said and mimicked her dramatically. “‘Come on, *Dad*, we gotta go!’ That’s what you said. *Dad*.”

“Shut it,” she gasped. “You obviously aren’t a very good influence. What kind of a professor lets a teenager getaway with saying ‘we gotta?’”

“Oh no. No cheapening the moment by drawing on my weakness for proper grammar,” he insisted.

Swooning as though love-struck, Gary clutched his chest dramatically enough to capture his stepdaughter’s attention. Redirecting his eyes from her face to the sky, he burst into song and danced out of the office and into the parking lot. Blushing and shaking her head, she searched the lot to ensure none of the patrons were around to witness his lunatic antics.

“Come on, Dad!” he shouted to the sky and began singing again as he ran with the wind and made like a bull charging.

“Such a freak,” she groaned.

Wide-eyed, she could not help but giggle at him a moment before shaking her head and tending to an order form.

“She called me ‘Dad’!” he shouted again from the opposite end of the motel yard. “I—*Dad*—am—the victor!”

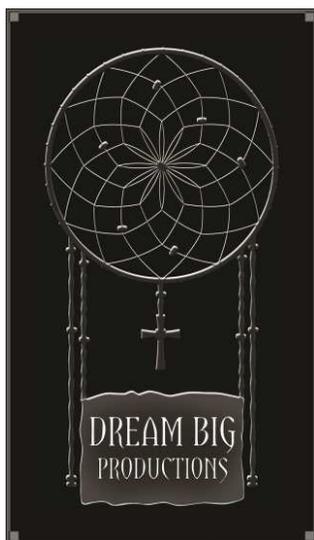
She knew the routine, how he felt bad about having subjected her to what happened last night and for not knowing what to say to a teenager when the world did not make sense on any level. He used his humor like an eraser, scrubbing away the bad things and the horror that frightened them both more than they let on. He had been doing it without fail for two years. She got it, his brand of parenting, and she loved him a little more for it all. Still, Hanna wondered how many more times they would have to repeat the routine, and when despair would visit them again.

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coming November 2012

exclusive free preview

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Troubled Souls

Print edition ISBN-13: 978-0-9829604-6-2

Digital edition ISBN-13: 978-0-9829604-8-6

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