

# Chapter 1

There were six of us in the beginning. Three men and two women, and Dr. Sayer. *Jan*, though some of us never learned to call her by her first name. She was the psychologist who found us, then persuaded us that a group experience could prove useful in ways that one-on-one counseling could not. After all, one of the issues we had in common was that we each thought we were unique. Not just survivors, but *sole* survivors. We wore our scars like badges.

Consider Harrison, one of the first of us to arrive at the building for that initial meeting. Once upon a time he'd been the Boy Hero of Dunnsmouth. The Monster Detective. Now he sat behind the wheel of his car, watching the windows of her office, trying to decide whether he would break his promise to her and skip out. The office was in a two-story, Craft-style house on the north side of the city, on a

woody block that could look sinister or comforting depending on the light. A decade before, this family home had been rezoned and colonized by shrinks; they converted the bedrooms to offices, made the living room into a lobby, and planted a sign out front declaring its name to be “The Elms.” Maybe not the best name, Harrison thought. He would have suggested a species of tree that wasn’t constantly in danger of being wiped out.

Today, the street did not look sinister. It was a sunny spring day, one of the few tolerable days the city would get before the heat and humidity rolled in for the summer. So why ruin it with ninety minutes of self-pity and communal humiliation?

He was suspicious of the very premise of therapy. The idea that people could change themselves, he told Dr. Sayer in their pre-group interview, was a self-serving delusion. She believed that people were captains of their own destiny. He agreed, as long as it was understood that every captain was destined to go down with the ship, and there wasn’t a damned thing you could do about it. If you want to stand there with the wheel in your hand and pretend you were steering, he told her, knock yourself out.

She’d said, “Yet you’re here.”

He shrugged. “I have trouble sleeping. My psychiatrist said he wouldn’t renew my prescriptions unless I tried therapy.”

“Is that all?”

“Also, I might be *entertaining* the idea of tamping down my nihilism. Just a bit. Not because life is *not* meaningless—I think that’s inarguable. It’s just that the constant awareness of its pointlessness is exhausting. I wouldn’t mind being oblivious again. I’d love to feel the wind in my face and think, just for minute, that I’m not going to crash into the rocks.”

“You’re saying you’d like to be happy?”

“Yeah. That.”

She smiled. He liked that smile. “Promise me you’ll try one meeting,” she said. “Just give me one.”

Now he was having second thoughts. It wasn’t too late to drive away. He could always find a new psychiatrist to fork over the meds.

A blue and white transit van pulled into the handicap parking spot in front of the house. The driver hopped out. He was a hefty white kid, over six feet tall with a scruffy beard, dressed in the half-ass uniform of the retail class: colored polo over Gap khakis. He opened the rearmost door of the van to reveal an old man waiting in a wheelchair.

The driver thumbed a control box, and the lift lowered the chair and occupant to the ground with the robotic slow motion of a space shuttle arm. The old man was already half astronaut, with his breathing mask and plastic tubes and tanks of onboard oxygen. His hands seemed to be covered by mittens.

Was this geezer part of the group, Harrison wondered, or visiting some other shrink in the building? Just how damaged were the people that Dr. Sayer had recruited? He had no desire to spend hours with the last people voted off Victim Island.

The driver seemed to have no patience for his patient. Instead of going the long way around to the ramp, he pushed the old man to the curb, then roughly tilted him back—too far back—and bounced the front wheels down on the sidewalk. The old man pressed his mittened hands to his face, trying to keep the mask in place. Another series of heaves and jerks got the man up the short stairs and into the house.

Then Harrison noticed the girl. Eighteen, maybe nineteen years old, sitting on a bench across from the house, watching the old man and the driver intently. She wore a black, long-sleeved T-shirt, black jeans, black Chuck Taylors: the Standard Goth Burka. Her short white hair looked like it had been not so much styled as attacked. Her hands gripped the edge of the bench and she did not relax even after the pair had gone inside. She was like a feral cat: skinny, glint-eyed, shock-haired. Ready to bolt.

For the next few minutes he watched the girl as she watched the front of the house. A few people passed by on the sidewalk, and then a tall white woman stepped up to the door. Fortyish, with careful hair and a Hillary Clinton pantsuit. She moved with an air

of concentration; when she climbed the steps, she placed each foot carefully, as if testing the solidity of each surface.

A black guy in flannels and thick work boots clumped up the stairs behind the woman. She stopped, turned. The guy looked up at the roof of the porch. An odd thing. He carried a backpack and wore thick black sunglasses, and Harrison couldn't imagine what he saw up there. The white woman said something to him, holding open the door, and he nodded. They went inside together.

It was almost six o'clock, so Harrison assumed that everyone who'd gone in was part of the group. The girl, though, still hadn't made a move toward the door.

"Fuck it," Harrison said. He got out of the car before he could change his mind, and then walked toward the house. When he reached the front sidewalk he glanced behind him—casually, casually. The girl noticed him and looked away. He was certain that she'd been invited to the group too. He was willing to bet that she might be the craziest one of all.

The van driver was walking out as Harrison was walking in. Harrison nodded at him—or rather, gave him what he thought of as the *bro nod*, that upward

tip of the chin that American men used to acknowledge each other. The driver frowned as if this were some breach of protocol.

So, Harrison thought, the driver was an asshole to everybody, not just his riders.

Dr. Sayer was standing outside a room on the ground floor of the house, like a teacher welcoming students on their first day. She was dressed like a teacher, too, in a sweater and skirt, though Harrison towered over her. She was barely over five feet tall, with skinny arms and toned legs, but a surprisingly stocky torso. He thought of several unkind comparisons—Mrs. Potato Head, or a cartoon M&M—and was happy she couldn't read his thoughts.

"Harrison," she said. "I'm so glad you came. Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine." What had she seen in his face? His judgment of her? His annoyance with the driver? He'd have to watch himself with the doctor. Maybe with the whole group. "I told you I'd come, so I'm here."

His tone was still too sharp, but Dr. Sayer let it pass. "Go ahead and take a seat," she said, indicating the room. When Harrison had met with her before, it was upstairs, in what he took to be her usual office. He supposed she needed a bigger room for the group. "We'll start in a few minutes," she said.

He hesitated, and she tilted her head questioningly.

He thought about telling her about the girl outside, then thought better of it. “Okay,” he said. “See you on the other side.”

The three people he’d spotted entering the house were seated on one side of the circle. The man in the wheelchair had lowered his mask. Harrison realized with a start that the man had no hands; the arms ended below the elbow and were covered by what looked like white athletic socks.

Harrison raised a hand in greeting—and immediately felt self-conscious. Look, *I* have hands.

“Hi there,” the old man said. The woman in the pantsuit smiled warmly.

The guy in the sunglasses seemed not to notice him from behind those shades. He was only in his twenties, Harrison realized. Maybe as young as the girl outside.

There were six chairs, including the wheelchair. A notebook and pen sat on one, reserving it for Dr. Sayer. The only two spots remaining had their back to the door, one next to the doctor’s seat, across from Stevie Wonder. The other was next to Ironside—and he couldn’t choose the one not next to the disabled guy without looking like a dick. “I’m Stan,” the old man said.

Before Harrison could answer, the man in the glasses said, “I think we should wait.”

Stan said, “For what?”

“Until everyone gets here.”

Harrison turned to Stan. “I’m Harrison.”

The woman glanced at the man in the sunglasses, hesitated.

“And you are?” Harrison asked the woman.

She seemed embarrassed. “I’m Barbara.”

Harrison extended a hand. “Nice to meet you, Barbara.”

Mr. Sunglasses opened his mouth, then shut it. That silenced everyone for several minutes. The fifth seat—sixth counting Stan’s wheelchair—remained empty.

This room, Harrison guessed, had once been the sunroom of the house, and before that, an open porch. The psychologists had done their best to disguise this, laying down rugs and hiding many of the windows behind Roman shades, but there was still too much naked glass for a private therapy group. Outside was a small backyard walled by arborvitaes. A peeping tom would have no trouble hiding back there. He wondered if the doctors had thought this through. And then he wondered what the collective noun was for psychologists: a shortage of shrinks? A confession of counselors?

Dr. Sayer came into the room. “I think this may be it for today.” She picked up her notebook and sat down.

“Were you waiting for a blonde woman?” Harrison



asked. Everyone looked at him. “I saw someone outside.”

Dr. Sayer thought for a moment, then looked at her wristwatch. Harrison thought, Of course she’s a clock watcher. A requisite characteristic for the profession.

“I think we should get started,” she said. “First, call me Jan. Some of you have known me for over a year, but some of you I’ve only recently met. We’ve all talked individually about why you might find this group useful. Each of you has had experiences that have been discounted by other therapists. Sometimes your friends and family don’t believe what happened to you. Many of you have decided, reasonably enough, that it’s not safe talking about your experiences. This group is that safe place. We’ve all agreed that what is said here stays in the strictest confidence.”

No one spoke. Harrison stole a glance at the others, and they were all concentrating on the doctor.

“Think of this place as a lab,” said the doctor—*Jan*. “You can experiment with honesty, with sharing your feelings, even really negative feelings. If you try that out in the real world—well, watch out. Feelings get hurt, there are misunderstandings—”

“You end up in the loony bin,” Stan said.

Jan smiled. “But here, it’s your job to give real feedback, and to take it. There’s no other place where you

can be so honest, yet still have people show up every week.”

“A dinner party for gluttons for punishment,” Harrison said.

No one laughed. *Uh oh*, he thought.

“Why don’t we go around the room and introduce ourselves,” she said.

“They already started,” the man in the sunglasses said to the doctor. “Introducing themselves.”

“That’s understandable,” Jan said.

“My name is Stan.” The old man coughed hard and then cleared his throat. “You probably already know who I am—can’t hide these stumps.” He grinned, and his teeth seemed too big and too white. “So . . . yes. I’m the man who survived the Weaver family.”

Harrison thought the man’s age was about right for that. Barbara, to Stan’s left, nodded. The man in the sunglasses said, “I’m sorry, who?”

Stan twisted in his chair. “The *Weavers*,” he said, louder. Still Mr. Sunglasses didn’t respond. “The Arkansas Cannibals?”

“Never heard of them.”

Stan looked exasperated. “The Spider Folk?”

“That was a long time ago,” Harrison said. “He may be too young.”

“1974! And you’re as young as he is,” Stan said. Harrison thought, no, actually. The sunglasses man was probably five or ten years younger than Harrison,

mid-twenties maybe, though that pudgy body made him look older. Or maybe Stan just couldn't judge the age of black people.

Stan mumbled something and pushed the oxygen mask to his face.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Sunglasses said. "I just don't—"

"It was the biggest story of the year," Stan said. He'd pulled down the mask again. "I was on *Merv Griffin*."

"Maybe you should go next," Harrison said to the man in the glasses. He still hadn't taken them off, despite how dark and bulky they looked. They looked more functional than fashionable. Was he blind? Maybe Harrison should be nicer to him. After too long a pause, Harrison added, "If you don't mind."

The request seemed to flummox the sunglasses man. "She's next to him," he said, indicating Barbara. "It's not my turn."

"Oh, I can go," she said.

Harrison looked at the man in sunglasses and thought, Really? You need to go in *order*?

Something must have shown on Harrison's face, because the man said, "My name is Martin."

"Hello, Martin," Barbara said. She held out her hand, and he took it hesitantly.

"Do you want me to talk about my history?" Martin asked Jan. "Why I'm here?"

“Whatever you’re comfortable with,” the doctor said. “You can—”

Martin jerked in his chair. He was looking over Jan’s shoulder with an expression of shock. The doctor turned.

The blonde girl stood in the doorway. She seemed to feel the group’s gaze like a harsh light. She endured it for a moment, then walked into the room, eyes down and face closed, and took the last seat, between Harrison and Dr. Sayer.

“Thank you for coming in,” the doctor said.

She lifted her eyes from the floor. “I’m Greta.”

Harrison, Barbara, and Stan responded in AA unison: “Hi, Greta.”

They went around the room, introducing themselves again. When it was Martin’s turn, he could barely speak. He seemed unwilling to look at the new girl.

Stan said, “Have *you* ever heard of the Weavers?”

Greta moved her head a fraction. Nope.

“Jesus Christ,” Stan said.

The next hour was filled with the polite conversation of people tiptoeing around each other. Martin had stopped talking, Greta had never started, and Stan wouldn’t stop. Harrison was entertaining fantasies about turning down his oxygen supply.

Jan said, “We’re almost out of time. I’m wondering if people want to share their impressions. How’s it going for you? What do you think of the others?”

The others? Harrison wasn’t about to touch that one. Jan had said that they were all trauma survivors, with similar experiences. If they’d gone through a fraction of the shit that Harrison had, that had to be Very Special Trauma indeed. It was pretty obvious why Stan was here; he was an old-school victim who’d never gotten tired of showing off his stumps. Barbara had said little about what had happened to her, only that she’d been attacked, and she’d been seeing Dr. Sayer since the ’90s. She seemed to have come to terms with it. She was calm, soothing, a natural nurse. Greta, however, was in no shape to help anyone. She was shell-shocked, probably less than a year from whatever supernatural shit went down. And the black kid with the glasses—Martin—Harrison had no idea what to make of him.

And how about the good doctor? He’d only had two sessions with her, after she’d contacted him about joining the group. She’d said she believed his story, which made him think she was lying. *He* wouldn’t believe his story.

“I think it’s going about like I expected,” Harrison said. Meaning: nowhere.

Barbara said, “I was wondering about Martin. He never seems to look at Greta.”

“Who can tell?” Stan asked. “He’s wearing those damn shades.”

“You do seem to be hiding behind them,” Barbara said gently to the young man. “I’d like to know what you’re thinking, but I can’t tell.”

Harrison suddenly realized what was going on with the glasses. He leaned forward. “Hey. Martin.” The boy didn’t move. “*Martin.*”

Martin hesitated, then swiveled his bug-eyed face in Harrison’s direction.

Harrison said, “Are you recording this?”

Martin sucked in his lip but did not turn away.

Harrison said, “You’re wearing some new kind of Google glasses.”

“It’s singular,” Martin said.

“What?”

“Google *Glass*,” Martin said. “And no, these aren’t them. They’re actually made by a startup company called—”

“Take them the fuck off.”

That *fuck* went off like a little bomb. They’d been so polite so far.

Martin didn’t move. No one spoke for a long moment, and then Stan said, “What is he talking about? *Who’s* recording this?”

“I’m not recording anything,” Martin said.

Harrison had put his hands on his knees, shifting his weight. Everyone in the circle tensed. Greta,

next to Harrison, made a small sound too quiet for anyone but him to hear. Dr. Sayer watched him, but made no move to stop him.

Harrison was annoyed. *What?* Leaning forward was not an act of violence. It signified, if anything, the mere willingness to take action. Or perhaps the first move in a sequence: one, Harrison jumping to his feet; two, reaching for doughy, defenseless Martin; three, ripping the glasses from his fucking face.

Harrison leaned back, closed his eyes, and breathed deep. “I would *appreciate* it if you took off the glasses, Martin.”

No one spoke. Harrison finally opened his eyes.

Martin was gazing at the floor now. “Dr. Sayer said I could leave them on,” he said in a small voice.

Barbara frowned. “Is that true, Jan?”

“I said that he didn’t have to take them off to attend the group,” Jan said. “He promised me he would not make any recordings, or share what happens here—the same agreement I made with all of you.”

“I gave my word,” Martin said.

“And I took him at his word,” Jan said. “However, I did tell him that the group might want to discuss his wearing of them.”

“I don’t want a camera in here,” Stan said.

Martin made no move to remove the glasses.

Jan said, “Greta, do you have some thoughts on this?”

Harrison watched her without making it obvious that he was watching. She was not a *beautiful* girl—there was something slightly asymmetrical about her features—but she was striking.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” she said.

“Martin,” Jan said. “How are you feeling about this feedback?”

“I don’t appreciate the hostility,” Martin said. “What about Stan and his mask? Are you going to ask him to get rid of his wheelchair?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Stan said.

Barbara said, “Do you feel like you *need* the glasses?”

Stan made a derisive sound in the back of his throat.

“I don’t appreciate the bullying,” Martin said. “From him.”

“Me?” Harrison said.

Barbara smiled thinly at him. “You do seem a bit angry.”

“I’m not angry.” Everyone was looking at him, even Greta. “I’m not!” he said. What the fuck had happened? They were just talking about Martin’s glasses, and now they were turning on *him*. “Is this about the swearing? I apologize for that.”

“It’s not about the swearing,” Barbara said. “You seem annoyed that you’re in here. With us crazy people.”



“That’s not accurate,” Harrison said. “Jan says we’ve all experienced trauma. I’ll take her at her word.”

“You don’t have to take her word,” Stan said. “Not about me.”

“What’s yours, then?” Martin said to Harrison. “Your trauma. You haven’t said.”

“He’s Jameson Squared,” Greta said.

Shit, Harrison thought. A fan.

“Who?” Stan asked.

“Jameson Jameson,” she said. “From the kids’ books. The boy who kills monsters.”

Barbara looked surprised. She’d heard of him. Martin was more stunned. “I thought those were fiction,” he said.

“They are,” Harrison said.

Greta said, “Except they’re based on a real kid who survived Dunsmouth. Harrison Harrison.”

They stared at him.

“*Fiction*,” he said. “Completely made up.” Then: “Almost entirely.”

Greta was the first to flee the room when the time was up. Harrison followed her, but by the time he got outside she was gone, into the night. She couldn’t have gone far, he thought.

The transit van was waiting for Stan. The loading door hung open, and the young driver was working

the controls to bring the lift down. The man glanced up as Harrison approached, and Harrison gave him the bro nod again. The driver turned back to the controls.

Harrison walked toward his car, then stopped and turned back. "Excuse me," he said.

The driver looked over his shoulder.

"I gave you the bro nod," Harrison said.

"The what?" The lift clunked down, and the driver stepped back from the lever.

"Twice now," Harrison said. "You're supposed to nod back."

"What the hell are you talking about?" the kid asked.

"The rules," Harrison said. "Cowboys tip their hats at each other. Detectives tap their fedoras. But since we're hatless these days, all we've got is the nod, and returning it isn't optional."

"Are you—?"

"Say 'crazy' and I will beat you to death with Stan's wheelchair."

The kid blanched.

"I'm kidding." Harrison showed his teeth. "You've got four inches and a hundred pounds on me, nobody's that crazy. Now let's practice. Ready?"

Harrison demonstrated. "Tilt the head back, keeping eye contact, but not in a challenging way. Then back level. See? Now you."

The kid stared at him. Then his head tipped back, ever so slightly.

“We’ll work on it,” Harrison said. He clapped the driver on the shoulder, making him flinch. “But I think we’ve made excellent progress.”

He noticed Martin standing in the light by the house door. He’d been watching the whole exchange through his black glasses, perhaps even recording it, despite what he’d promised the doctor. Harrison threw him a bro nod, and Martin nodded back.

“See?” Harrison said. “Martin gets it.” He started for his car and turned again to the driver. “One more thing. Use the fucking access ramp. It’s right over there.”

He walked to his leased car—he still could not recall what color it was without concentrating—and had just put the key into the ignition when a face appeared at the window. He startled, then laughed to himself.

It was Greta.

He turned the key to get power, and pushed the button to lower the window.

“Were you really there in Dunnsmouth?”

“It was a long time ago,” he said.

“Ten years,” she said. “That’s not so long.” She looked to the side. She made no move to leave.

He didn’t know what to do with his hands. Starting the car would be rude. Sometimes with crazy people you just had to wait.

After a time she said, "Are you coming back? Next week?"

He hadn't decided yet. The meeting had gone better than he thought it would. They'd already found out his not-so-secret identity, and here he was, still breathing. "I suppose so," he said. "Yeah."

She nodded. She seemed relieved.

He said, "Do you need a ride or something?"

She said, "Do you still kill monsters, Harrison Squared?"

"Look, I don't know what you've read—"

"Yes or no?"

"Sorry," he said. "I don't do that anymore."

"Too bad." She stepped back from the car, then turned and strode across the street. In a moment he lost her in the dark.

Yep, he thought. Definitely the craziest of us.

The rest of us were not so sure. By the time of the last meeting, five months later, we would still not be able to decide, even though there were fewer of us remaining to compete for the title.