

The Survivors' Club

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So, this pneumatic blonde practically leaps at me as I walk into the hotel function suite. She's waving her arms and squealing an introduction in a high-pitched nasal whine. I have to stifle a snigger as she tells me her name is Candy. She's like a five-foot-nothing self-propelled stereotype, shoehorned into less lycra than the average swimsuit model.

I smile and shake her hand as I wait patiently to get a word in.

"So, yah," she says, "I was at Camp Comanche in '02 – you know, the Hatchet Jack thing?"

I think about this for a moment. Hatchet Jack was that caretaker – the one who had a thing about collecting the heads of the summer camp supervisors. By the time I recall this, Candy has launched into a graphic description of how she alone managed to escape the killer and bring him to justice. Sounds like bullshit to me.

"So what about you?" she asks, finally pausing for breath. "Who did you survive?"

I pause. Ok, so I knew that this question would come up multiple times during the weekend, but I still feel a little unprepared. It was all so recent, you know?

"I was at the Macefield Prom. You know, the one in the news a few months ago."

"OMG!" she says. Actually like that. Ohh-Emm-Gee. "That's so amazing! That guy killed, what, twenty people in one night?"

"Twenty two," I correct.

"How did you escape?" she asks, her eyes like saucers.

I repeat the story I told the police.

"Wow! Hiding for all that time! You must have been terrified!" I see the usual look of disgust in her eyes as she pictures me hiding in the store cupboard while people were being slaughtered like cattle within a few feet of me. I don't give a shit.

"You do what you have to," I say brusquely. I glance around the room. There are about fifty people present; some of them seem as animated and excited as Candy; some are nervous, withdrawn. One girl sits on her own in the corner, her dark hair hanging down over her face as though she's trying to hide. I wonder what her story is.

“So,” I say, “this is my first time here and I don’t know anyone. How does it work?”

“Well,” Candy says, “we just kind of chat informally for a bit until everyone’s here and then we have a talk by our founder. For the rest of the weekend we have workshops and stuff. The timetable is on the noticeboard.” She points across the room.

“Who’s the founder?” I ask.

“Oh I dunno his name,” she squeaks. “Some bigshot shrink. That guy who was trapped in his own psychiatric ward when the patients got out.”

“Robert Kleiner?”

“Yeah, that’s him. He’ll talk about, like, whatever, and then he’ll get one of us to tell their story. Hey, if this is your first time, I should introduce you to some of the regulars.”

“Yes, that would be good,” I say.

I flinch as she grabs my hand, but manage to stifle it. She drags me over to a pair of women who are talking excitedly by the bar. One of them, a tall redhead, seems to be recounting something involving a knife to a shorter dark haired girl. She makes exaggerated stabbing motions in the air.

“Laurie! Jolene! Guess who I have here?” She pauses for a moment and then turns to me, with no sign of a blush. “What’s your name?”

“Josh,” I answer. “Josh Scott.”

“It’s Josh Scott!” she says. The sighs of “Ohh!” and “Ahh!” fail to disguise the blank looks. They’ve no idea who I am but that’s ok I don’t know who they are either. The difference is, I don’t really care.

“He’s the guy from the Macefield thing! Remember? The guy who hid in the cupboard?”

All of a sudden I gain a deeper insight into Hatchet Jack’s motivations. Light dawns in the girls’ eyes and one of them breathes “Wow! That was, like, twenty people, right?”

“Twenty two. So what’s your story?”

“Uhh, I’m Jolene,” says the redhead. “My friends and I were abducted by that weird inbred cannibal family.” I nod attentively as she details her escape. She spends a significant part of her monologue describing the hideous ways in which her friends met their untimely end. I offer sympathies for her loss.

The dark haired girl speaks next. She introduces herself as Laurie and immediately regales me with a convoluted tale of hockey masks, gardening implements, and lots and lots of blood. Her eyes are glittering with excitement as she demonstrates the killing blow she used to decapitate the frenzied deformed kid who’d been stalking her and her friends all summer. I try my best to remain focussed on her story, but I worry that the deep twist of revulsion that sits in my stomach is showing on my face.

I nod at the girl sitting alone in the corner. “Who’s that?” I ask.

“That’s Sandy. She doesn’t talk much,” Candy answers. A look passes between the three women. Was that a suggestion of an eyeroll from Laurie?

“I’ll just say hi,” I say. “Nice meeting you.”

“Sure,” says Candy, pouting a little.

Candy, Sandy, Jolene and Laurie, I think. It’s like a b-movie script gone mad.

I walk through the yapping crowd, occasionally nodding and smiling in response to interested glances. The girl is sitting at a small round table, a glass of fruit juice untouched before her. I clear my throat and she looks up.

“Hi,” I say. “My name’s Josh.”

“Sandy,” she answers, her voice barely audible.

“Do you mind if I sit down?”

She shrugs, so I sit. She’s pale and pretty and very nervous; she picks distractedly at her fingernails. She interests me.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you seem a little out of place here,” I say.

“Why?” she asks. “It’s a support group. I need support.”

I think about this. “Well, yeah, that’s what I thought too. A support group for the survivors of violent crime. That’s why I’m here, but...”

She looks up at me. “But?”

I shrug. “I dunno just seems a bit more like a social club to me.”

“The Survivors Club,” she smiles briefly. “Yeah, it can get like that sometimes.”

It occurs to me that she hasn’t asked who I survived or how many of my friends were killed. The silence between us is uncomfortable and I wrack my brain trying to think of something to say. I decide to be upfront and ask her what brought her here when I’m saved by the bell: there’s a squeal from the PA system and a bass thumping as a microphone is tapped. A mellifluous voice bids us all good evening, and I turn towards a small podium in one corner of the room. A middle aged man in a rumpled suit is standing there beaming at the crowd. The good doctor, I assume.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for coming. As most of you will be aware, this is the fifth meeting of the Victims Support Group. We have a great weekend of workshops and therapy sessions lined up for you, but to kick things off I’d like to share with you an inspirational story from one of our founding members. Please give a warm welcome to Jason Boyd.”

There’s a smattering of applause as an athletic looking young man steps up to the podium. He introduces himself and begins talking. My attention drifts within seconds and his voice becomes a background drone. I sneak a glance at Sandy. She has a look of complete boredom on her face. I lean towards her.

“Don’t you think it’s a little weird?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“The way they seem to enjoy telling their stories so much. Almost like they’re bragging they were more clever than everyone else, even though they really just got lucky.”

She shrugs again. “It’s just their way of coping. They’ve triumphed over adversity doesn’t really matter if they did it through violence, or running away.” She pauses. “Or hiding in a cupboard.”

I smile. “You heard about that, then?”

There’s no returning smile. She seems quite insightful. I’ve no idea what she’s been through and get the impression she’s unlikely to talk about it with a stranger. Which is a shame, really, as she’s probably the only person in the room I’m interested in hearing about. Still, there’s plenty of time over the weekend to get to know her.

The guy on the podium is still droning on and making hacking gestures. I glance around at his spellbound audience and note the sparkling eyes and the the looks of bloodlust on their faces. I’m sitting in a room full of monsters. The knot of disgust tightens within me. They’re all so proud of themselves. It’s not such a big deal to survive something. Anyone can do it. Admittedly, it helps when you’re the one doing all the killing. It’s going to be a fun weekend.

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