

CHAPTER ONE

Sandra Leigh hadn't felt the phantom pain for several years—the perception of discomfort in a limb that was no longer there. But after receiving a phone call from her sister two weeks ago, the ghostly ache of her severed left ring finger had returned.

Hey, Sissy. William and I are renting a house with Emalyn for the weekend. We'd love for you to join us, Carrie had said in her normal chipper tone.

Was the pain telling her something? Perhaps a warning that she wasn't ready for a weekend excursion with her family just yet. Should she have declined the invitation and stayed hidden in the mountains of West Virginia, at the Compound, where she was safe from... well, everything since the attack?

Now, sitting in the rear seat of her brother-in-law's Toyota Sequoia, heading to the rental home Carrie had booked for their weekend gathering, these questions floated through her mind as she tried soothing the tingling sensation away from what remained of her finger.

Her brother-in-law, William, was driving, and Carrie, her elder sister of ten years, sat in the passenger seat. Beside Sandra, her fifteen-year-old niece, Emalyn, scrolled through her phone.

What were you thinking, Sandra? You're not ready for this.

The suture scar across the tip of her nub wiggled like a worm on a hook as if confirming her thoughts.

“I’m so glad you decided to come, Sissy,” Carrie said, turning in the passenger seat, her Carolina-blue eyes twinkling with excitement, looking forward to their weekend.

This was the first time they had done anything together as a family since *he* attacked her while on the way to Carrie’s house.

West Chester University, where she was studying music education, focusing on piano, had ordered all students and staff to return home in March 2020, fearing the threat of spreading COVID-19.

Nearly an hour into her two-hour drive, the driver’s-side rear tire of her Toyota Corolla blew, leaving Sandra stranded in the middle of nowhere. Not knowing how to change a tire, she contacted AAA on her cell phone, feeling lucky to have gotten a signal at least. The operator told her they were sending someone out to make the repairs.

Five minutes later, the swirling yellow lights of an approaching tow truck cut the night. Relieved, knowing the tire would be fixed and she’d soon be on her way, Sandra had gotten out to greet the repairman.

But when the tow truck door opened with a rusty reeeek, and his snake-skin boots hit the frozen ground, Sandra felt a shift in the air that raised the gooseflesh from her toes to her scalp and caused a fear-hardening of her nipples.

Something wasn’t right.

“You the one who called about the flat tire?”

“Me too,” Sandra replied unenthusiastically, trying to suppress the horrible memory of that night unfolding in her mind.

Carrie smiled reassuringly as if she understood Sandra’s hesitation to participate in the family trip.

You don’t.

The sunlight breaking through the dense forest canopy caught Carrie’s gold wedding band and cast a circulating light that made Sandra squint. The tingling sensation intensified as if a thousand tiny needles were simultaneously jabbing the tip of a finger that was no longer there—a memento of *their* night together.

Mixed feelings of irritation, envy, and sadness tightened her chest. She’d never be able to wear a wedding ring—not like an ordinary wife with all ten fingers, not like Carrie could.

Averting her gaze to the Mudmaster GG1000-1A5 watch strapped to her left wrist, Sandra saw it was almost noon. They had been in the car for about two hours. The watch's compass told her they were heading northwest to Little Hope, Pennsylvania.

The ride had been uneventful and quiet, which Sandra was thankful for. She didn’t want to discuss what had happened, and she especially didn’t want to discuss her life over the last five years living and working at the Compound.

But you’re going to have to. You know that.

She did. The subject would come up this weekend. How could it not? It was the elephant in the room.

“Mom.” Emalyn spoke for the first time in over an hour. Sitting forward, she pushed her round glasses up the bridge of her nose and fidgeted in her seat. “How much longer until we get there?”

“Five more minutes, hon,” Carrie replied in a teasing, breathy mom tone.

She winked at Sandra playfully.

Emalyn rolled her dark eyes and sat back in the seat with a sigh, blowing a tuft of her curly brown hair out of her face. She scrolled through her phone several times before tiring of whatever had held her undivided attention for most of the ride and shifting her bored gaze to the passing forest.

Emalyn appeared very attached to her phone. Sandra wondered why Carrie, an elementary school teacher, wasn’t putting a stop to it. She had to know phone addiction was a real thing, something Sandra had learned from experience once she gave up using one herself.

In Sandra’s five-year absence, Emalyn had turned from a chubby-cheek ten-year-old child who loved drawing and coloring, chicken nuggets with ketchup, and *Percy Jackson* into a budding young woman she didn’t recognize and no longer knew. Her niece had spoken little during the drive, and the space between them had filled with an uncomfortable heaviness, like sitting next to a stranger on a tour bus.

Hell, you are practically strangers at this point.

This bothered Sandra. She had been close with her niece, nearly inseparable, before leaving everything—family, friends, school, her life, what was left post-attack—behind to join the Compound.

According to Carrie, Emalyn's recollection of the loving, caring, always-there Aunt Sonnie—a nickname given to her when Emalyn was learning to say Aunt Sandy—was vague. To expect Emalyn to welcome Sandra back into her life as if nothing had changed between them was unrealistic.

And everything had changed. Sandra knew that happy, fun-loving, liberal college girl who was so optimistic about her future, looking forward to maybe playing piano for a symphony (if she was lucky) or teaching in a classroom like Carrie (if she wasn't), had died that cold March night along the side of the road.

Can't play or teach piano with only nine fingers.

She took a deep breath that rattled in her throat and looked out the window, hoping to quell the thoughts from her mind along with the irritating phantom pains. A metal For Sale sign at the mouth of a stone driveway caught her attention. A magnetic SOLD! was stuck across the front.

The colonial house sat partially hidden in dense woods about fifty feet from the main highway. The home wasn't quite dilapidated, but it needed serious rehab. She wondered how much the buyer had paid for it, knowing the work needed to make it livable.

Twenty-five yards further up the road, she saw another For Sale sign with another magnetic SOLD! across the front. This home was a double-wide trailer about to fold in on itself. Then, across the road, she saw yet another For Sale sign by a dirt driveway. This property was also marked SOLD!, though the house, a rancher, appeared in better shape than the previous two.

Why were so many properties sold on this stretch of the highway? Had the pandemic hit the area hard? It was possible. Many people had lost their homes while the world was shut down.

“You said this place was outside of a town called Little Hope, but you never said how you found it,” Sandra said, looking away from the rancher as they passed.

“Online,” Carrie replied, sweeping a long strand of auburn hair behind her ear. “A website called R&R.”

“R&R?”

“Rest and Relax,” Carrie said. “It’s like Airbnb, but the site focuses on families looking for houses big enough to vacation together.”

Hearing that Carrie had used a website to rent the house gave Sandra the heebie-jeebies. Corporations couldn’t be trusted to keep personal information from falling into the wrong hands.

“William chose the house. I can’t wait for you to see it, Sissy.”

Carrie’s blue eyes flicked to her husband with tender admiration. Even after fifteen years of marriage, her sister still swooned over William. Carrie’s wedding ring caught the sunlight again, pulling Sandra’s eyes back to it. The tip of her ghost finger twitched. She rubbed the nub, reminding her of its absence... of everything *he* had taken from her.

“I thought if there were any chance of getting you to come along this weekend, it would have to be somewhere remote, private,” William said, shifting his dark brown eyes onto Sandra in the rearview mirror. At forty-seven, he was strikingly handsome, with short gray hair and a stubble of matching beard growth that she wasn’t used to seeing him with.

“We’ll be alone up there, surrounded by woods with hiking trails.” He glanced at her in the mirror again and smiled.

Was he looking for her approval? A pat on the back for thinking of her and her growing distrust of civilization since the attack? Not knowing how to respond, Sandra just nodded.

A *ding* on William's cell phone caused him to shift his gaze to the center console, where his mobile rested in the cup holder. The GPS map was open on the screen, leading the way to their rental home.

"Can you check that?" William asked.

"I *am* happy you decided to join us, Sissy," Carrie said again, picking William's phone up.

How Carrie kept saying *Sissy* rubbed Sandra the wrong way. There wasn't necessarily a fakeness in her cadence—it was what Carrie had always called her, but now it felt forced, like her sister was tiptoeing around something.

Is she wondering if I'm... mentally stable?

By the fall of 2020, while the rest of the world was worrying if they were next on the virus's hitlist, Sandra had grown increasingly paranoid, convinced *he* was coming for her.

He was still out there, free to roam the desolate highways looking for other stranded females. *His* essence had invaded her like a malignant organism—a constant presence in her mind, leaving her to wonder why she'd been chosen to be *his* victim as if she were picked from some fucked-up lottery drawn by the devil.

She had quit college in the spring and had gone completely dark by that summer, deleting her social media accounts, closing her emails, and dropping her phone carrier so *he* couldn't track her down using the phone's GPS.

She didn't know if *he* had the skills to hack into her digital life, but she couldn't take that chance, and she didn't trust Facebook, Google, or Verizon to keep her personal information safe from a savvy and determined psychopath looking to hunt her down. She even considered changing her name for an extra measure of protection.

This consuming obsession, which had caused her to lock herself away in the guest room of her sister's house with the shades drawn, had finally led Sandra to seek professional help to deal with the emotional fallout of the attack. She couldn't deal with the mental torment and the fear of *him* for the rest of her life.

Using Carrie's laptop (so she didn't leave a digital footprint of her own), she started an online search for therapy centers. That's when Sandra had stumbled across what she knew immediately was her salvation.

The Compound—an unconventional rehabilitation center in the hills of West Virginia operated by ex-Navy SEAL Joel Conrad.

When she told her family of her plans to join the Compound, they objected to what they considered her rash decision. Janis, her mother, was certain the Compound was some militia group looking to overthrow the government to keep then-President Trump in power, which Sandra found asinine but something her faux-liberal-minded, CNN-watching mother would say and believe.

Carrie and William begged her not to leave, offering to let her live with them and pay for therapy for as long as needed. But she couldn't stay. If she did, she risked herself, and more importantly, her family's lives, positive that when *he* found her, *he'd* kill all of them.

Carrie dropped the phone into the cup holder, snapping Sandra back to reality. She shifted in her seat uncomfortably and felt the Smith & Wesson Model 442 revolver tucked into the rear of her pants press against her spine.

She'd never be helpless to defend herself again.

"Everything okay?" William asked with a concerned glance.

"It was Devin." Carrie shook her head, frustrated. "He said they got hung up but are on their way."

William had a twenty-three-year-old son from a previous marriage. From her chat with Carrie about the trip, Sandra knew that Devin and his girlfriend were also joining them for the weekend.

She didn't know the girlfriend's name and didn't care enough to ask. She wasn't planning on spending time with them anyway. She had other priorities this weekend, like rekindling her relationship with her sister. And especially with Emalyn.

It was why Sandra had decided to come along, despite her fears, the anxiety running the gamut, and the persistent phantom pains. The attack hadn't just affected *her* life but the lives of those around her, too.

Well, except for maybe her mother, who didn't seem too bothered by the whole ordeal. Then again, she never made that much of a fuss over anything that happened in her second daughter's life, including when it was almost taken.

"It's already noon. That means they won't get here until..." Carrie trailed off.

William shook his head but didn't say anything—the silence of a disappointed father. Carrie took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

Sandra looked out the window and saw another SOLD property, though there was no house in sight, and again found it weird that so much land had been sold off.

“Mom, I have to pee.”

“Five more—”

“Mom, I really have to go,” Emalyn whined.

“Well, you're in luck, kiddo,” William said. “We just arrived in Little Hope.”

A one-way stone bridge was quickly approaching. Beyond it, Sandra saw a town tucked into the forest hills. A small sign on the bridge's right side read:

WELCOME TO LITTLE HOPE.

As they crossed the bridge, Sandra glanced into the creek gully. Four scruffy-looking boys stood on the bank, watching the Sequoia enter the town with stares so unwelcoming that her nub began to thump as if it were a warning.