

# CHAPTER 1

## The Day Of

The wandering beams of the searchlights competed with the reflection of the early October moon on the lake's surface. Rachael paced the small cabin, her shoulders hunched and arms hugging her body. The chill in the room sliced through the sweater she barely remembered putting on. She stopped at the panoramic window, drawn by the lights. They moved so slowly. The blazing lights cut through the darkness, dramatizing everything in their path.

Police Officer Cross's tone was sharp. "Mrs. Benson, please sit. Any information you can give me will help us find your husband."

Rachael sighed and dropped into a worn armchair covered in a vibrant pattern of palm trees—a jarring contrast to the warm tones of the log cabin that had once belonged to her grandparents. But surely her down-to-earth grandparents would never have purchased such gaudy furniture. It clashed with everything she knew about them. Feeling the officer's eyes on her she shuddered. "Why is it taking so long?" The bitterness in her voice surprised her.

"I understand *your* frustration, ma'am, but please keep in mind we're dealing with an extensive area. Our search and rescue team has covered the bay and is moving to the open waters. We'll keep expanding the search radius if necessary. Now, if you could please tell me again—when did your husband leave?" Officer Cross reclined into the sofa, tugged at a navy pant leg, and crossed her legs.

Rachael tried to gather her thoughts, which had scattered like debris in a hurricane. "Uh, it must have been close to four p.m. He wanted to do some fishing before it got dark. Before the bugs came out."

"Ha, a smart move to get home before the swarms descend. So, he left about six hours ago? Was this a normal routine for him?"

"Tonight was the first time he went out alone." Her voice caught on the last word. Alone. She pushed away the last image she had of her husband.

Officer Cross glanced up from her notepad. "You usually go with him?"

"Last night was the first time he wanted to go fishing, and I went with him. It was boring, so I decided to stay in the cottage this evening." She rubbed her arm and was soothed by the action and the soft fabric of her sweater.

The police officer turned her gaze back to her notepad. "Yeah, fishing isn't for everyone. I don't blame you for wanting to stay in the cottage. It's cozy. How long have you been on the island?"

"Four days. We got here on Saturday."

"How familiar is your husband with the boat he's using? With boating?"

"I guess not too familiar with that one, but his parents own a cottage, and he grew up with high-performance ski boats."

The policewoman glanced out at the blackness, her voice softening. "Lucky guy. I never learned how to waterski, even though I grew up near here."

"Neither did I. Not in the cards for someone raised by a single mother." Rachael nodded knowingly but her heart was warmed by the thoughts of the extended family who had helped raise her.

Officer Cross leaned in a bit, her tone wrapped in a new warmth. "I was raised by a single mom, too. She worked hard, cooking in a local restaurant to support my brothers and me. We were townies, looked down on by the rich summer crowd." She shook her head. "They live in a different world. What does your mother do?"

"She was a teacher. She's retired."

"Ah. A world away from your husband's upbringing."

"You could say that."

"Pretty hard not to resent those who've been handed everything in life."

Rachael rubbed the back of her neck and stared at the black hole of the wood stove. The awkward silence building in the cabin prodded her to respond. "It wasn't like that. Brandon was generous. He never lorded his money over me."

"I would understand if you resented his privileged and pampered upbringing. There were and I guess still are times I want to smack the entitled brats around here. Did you ever want to smack your husband?"

Rachael felt her body recoil, before she recovered and turned her gaze to the north side door. Her mind struggled to find a response before she settled on an abrupt "No."

"Is there a spotlight on the boat?" Cross continued her questioning.

"A spotlight? No, I don't think it has any lights."

"You said you tried to call your husband?"

"Yes, but he didn't take his phone with him." She pointed to an end table by the sofa, the latter upholstered in the same garish palm trees as the armchair. Rachael traced a finger across the outline of a palm tree on the arm of her chair jarred by the design choice as much as Officer Cross's questions.

The officer stared at the sleek iPhone. "It's odd he didn't take it. Phones are like appendages these days."

Rachael shrugged, stood up, and retreated to a dark corner of the cabin. In the shadows, she hoped the twitching muscles of her hands were hidden. She noticed that the crisscrossing searchlights had slipped into the distance.

"Mrs. Benson, please have a seat." Officer Cross tapped her pen against her notebook in a staccato rhythm.

Rachael slunk back into the light and slumped onto the armchair. She clasped her hands and rested them on her lap.

"Is this your first time on the island?"

"Yes." She rubbed her hands down her thighs.

"How about your husband? Is he familiar with Possum Lake and its numerous bays and inlets?"

"No. It's his first time, too."

"Did he take a map with him?" Cross kept up the barrage of questions.

"I don't think so." Happy that she could answer honestly, Rachael matched the quick pace of questions with brief answers

"It'd be easy to get disoriented on this lake."

Rachael tugged at the hem of her sweater and didn't respond.

"How is your relationship with your husband?" Officer Cross crept into the subject Rachael wished to avoid.

"Fine." Her eyes wandered around the cabin.

"How long have you been married?"

"A little over three years." Rachael forced a lightness into her voice hoping it would send the message that it was a happy marriage.

"Three years and you describe your relationship as fine." Officer Cross's pen slipped from her grasp. It clattered on the wood floor and rolled towards Rachael.

"Well, you know how it is. The old seven-year itch is now the three-year itch. Plus, with the stress of Covid, it's been difficult the last year." Politeness forced Rachael to pick up the pen and reach out to the officer.

"Thanks." Cross smiled, leaned forward, and held onto one end of the pen. "Does Mr. Benson hit you?"

Like a spigot opening, Rachael felt the blood drain from her body. She sank into the chair and her eyes darted toward the door. "No!" Her voice was the squeak of an off-key trumpet.

"He doesn't physically hurt or abuse you in any way?" Cross stared into her eyes.

"Of course not." The squeak disappeared, but the tone remained an octave too high.

"How did you get the bruises on your arm?"

"What?" Rachael gasped and wondered when she had carelessly pushed her sleeve up. She pulled it past her wrist before crossing her arms. Her gaze flicked to the door.

"The bruises on your arm?"

"Oh, those. My God, they're weeks old. I don't remember. I bruise easily."

Cross's phone chirped. She plucked it from a pocket and glanced at the screen.

Rachael shot forward in her chair. "Did they find Brandon?"

"No, not yet." Cross slipped the device back into her pocket. "Before your husband left, did you argue or fight?"

"No." Rachael glared at the officer. "Why would you ask that? He went fishing and didn't come back."

"Maybe he was mad and just left. Maybe he drove into town to blow off steam."

"I told you I took the speed boat and drove around looking for him. I checked the marina and the parking lot. Our car was still there, and the fishing boat wasn't. Do you think I'm a complete idiot?" Her voice now blared.

"No, of course not." The officer's words were dismissive.

Rachael took several deep breaths, brushed invisible dirt from her leggings, and cursed herself for getting angry. "I apologize for the outburst. I'm on edge. Why isn't there any news?"

"As soon as there's information regarding your husband's whereabouts, they'll tell us." The officer scanned the room.

Rachael wondered what she saw. The cabin was neat and orderly, devoid of the usual clutter from a vacation: sunglasses, sweaters, coats, books, to name a few. Was it too neat?

"Man, I wouldn't tolerate abuse from anyone, let alone my husband. I'd show him more than the door." Cross announced as she leaned toward her as if she was sharing a secret.

Rachael folded into herself. Her secret was a heavy load threatening to overwhelm her.

"I'd look the other way if a wife took action to stop a beating."

Sighing, Rachael once again stared at the north side door.

"So, you've been here four days. October is an odd season to come to a summer retreat."

"Both Brandon and I are teachers, and our schools are on a break. There was a huge influx of students and a shortage of teachers. They made a mess of balancing the class sizes. Now they need to shuffle students between classes and schools. We thought a little solitude might help us prepare for the busy term coming up." Stop talking, she scolded herself and crossed her arms across her chest.

"Ah. It is quiet. It seems there's no one else in this arm of the lake."

Rachael shifted in her chair, tugged on the sleeve of her sweater again, and, afraid of withering under the officer's sharp gaze, refused to make eye contact.

"I suppose being young on a secluded, remote island offers plenty of opportunity to—shall I say—reconnect."

Rachael felt her face burn and her mind tumbled over appropriate responses before deciding to remain quiet.

"But too many hours together without distractions could be a lethal mix."

Rachael jumped up. Fleeing to the far side of the cabin, she clutched her arms in front of her like a shield.

The officer veered into a new topic. "Do you know your husband's passcode?"

"What?" The question frayed the edges of Rachael's fragile composure. Her question was a mere croak.

"For his phone. Do you have the passcode?"

"No, why?"

"Cell phones often hold secrets. There might be something that could help us determine where your husband has gone."

"I—I don't know his passcode." She paced in tight circles, keeping a distance from the north door. "For Christ's sake. He went fishing."

"I'm just trying to gather as much information as I can." Officer Cross raised her hands in a gesture of contrition. "Is it possible Mr. Benson met with foul play?"

"What the fuck? Now you're suggesting he was murdered."

"That's a leap. I never said your husband was murdered. Considering he comes from money, it's not unreasonable to think he might have been kidnapped."

"Kidnapped!" Rachael's composure cracked. Her voice was a notch below a screech as she clung to the explanation. "It never occurred to me. But you could be right." She stopped pacing and stared into the blackness beyond the cabin's lights. In the window's reflection, her face appeared gaunt, her eyes dark empty pits.

The sound of an approaching boat overtook the stifling silence. Rachael's heart pounded in her chest.