

Chapter One

ALONE

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Rick hadn't noticed how big the desk was when he'd first entered the room. Towering in front of him like an evil mass of stone, the desk occupied an uncomfortable amount of space in the room that seemed to displace air that was needed for breathing. The room itself, because of its sheer size should've had a spacious feel. It was dimly lit and filled with elongated shadows. Through the haze from the lone desk lamp, everything looked gray and was covered in shades of pitch black. Rick sat in front of the desk in an uncomfortable wooden chair, while the shadow clad man behind the desk creaked gingerly in a monstrous black leather one.

During the awkward silence that blanketed the room, Rick Morgan, a thirty-five year old software engineer, thought about his wife and three boys. The boys that were actually his wife Tera's from her first marriage, but Rick couldn't have loved them harder if his own life had depended on it. His family grounded him and gave him strength and his devotion to Tera and the boys was unshakable.

But now, in the glare of the desk lamp, Rick was having trouble remembering how he'd even gotten there in the first place. Oh, he remembered the officers and their polite request.

"We'd like to invite you down to The Board to ask you a few questions, sir."

And he remembered the look on Tera and the boys' faces when he reassured them that it was all a mistake—an awful, dreadful mistake that would be cleared up in no time. He'd kissed Tera gently on the cheek and smiled, in turn, at each of the boys as the two men urged him out the door with a firm but decisive grip on the back of his arms.

Now, in this room with the desk and the light and the shadows, it was not feeling like a mistake. This was feeling like anything but a mistake. Rick had been questioned by four different people in the last twenty-four hours. He'd made statement after statement and spent most of that time alone in an empty interrogation room. Now, he'd been in this office for, what seemed like an eternity, without the man uttering more than a few words.

The husky built, sandy haired man just kept looking through the single file folder that was open on the center of his desk. Occasionally he'd make an 'Umm' sound while flipping between pages. The shadows from the lamp chiseled and deepened the man's already rough looking features. The aberrant lighting made it hard for Rick to guess the guy's age, but he figured he must've been in his mid forties. The cold outline of his face was blocky and stern and it gave Rick the willies. In fact, Rick figured that it was probably part of the guy's job description to make people feel uncomfortable.

"This was a professional interrogator it was his job is to make people nervous and keep them off balance," Rick thought as he shifted uncomfortably in the wooden chair and continued to study the man's face. And as far as Rick was concerned, he was doing a pretty good job of it right now. Rick cleared his throat and tried desperately to get comfortable in the wooden chair, but it felt like it was made out of the same hardened

material as the surface of the massive desk.

The man looked up at Rick and then smiled, ever so slightly. Then he slowly and deliberately poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher that had been hiding just out of sight in the darkness. He raised the glass in front of his face, admiring the way the condensation shimmered in the harsh glare from the lamp and then quickly drank its entire contents in one fluid motion. Returning the glass to the surface of the desk with an overly animated gesture, the man locked eyes with Rick until he forced him to look away in discomfort.

“Mr. Morgan,” the man spoke as he snapped the file folder shut with a flourish. “I’ve been looking over your statement and I think I’m about ready.”

Rick didn’t understand the interrogator’s statement, but the pompous air of the announcement made him nervous. “Ready for what?” Rick thought.

The interrogator tapped his index finger rhythmically on the surface of the desk and studied Rick’s face carefully. All of sudden the office seemed much smaller. Rick took a deep breath and tried to talk but his voice cracked and nothing audible came out.

The interrogator poured another glass of water from the pitcher and then slowly took a sip as he continued to study Rick’s face. Still holding the glass in his hand, the interrogator leaned back in the big leather chair, making it creak and pop like a Chinese New Year. Then he swirled the glass of water in front of him. It was obvious that he was trying to bring attention to it. And even though Rick could see exactly what the man was trying to do, he couldn’t help but fixate his gaze on the sparkling glass and think about

just how dry his throat really was. He found himself thinking about how his tongue was trying to stick to the roof of his mouth and how he didn't seem to have enough saliva to swallow.

"Even before we complete our investigation, it's obvious to me that your story's not going hold up." The interrogator leaned forward and picked up the file folder, then opened it sharply. "Your whole statement revolves around the claim," the interrogator looked up at Rick then returned his attention to the open folder, "that you had no idea about who your employers actually were or what their motives where."

Rick nodded and, again, tried to speak—and, again, could only manage a small croak. He swallowed hard and pushed out, "eehmp...yes, sir. I had no idea...sir."

"Yes, yes, Mr. Morgan," the interrogator cut in abruptly, "I've heard this version of your story and, if you'll pardon my candor, It's just a little hard for me to swallow." The interrogator snapped the folder shut and stood, leaning forward with his open hands flat on the top of the desk.

"Unless you can give me something," the interrogator pushed the file folder gently forward with one finger, "other than this cock and bull story, then I'm afraid our conversation is over." The interrogator's face was cold and lifeless as he spoke.

Rick felt his life unraveling before him. Felt like a ball of precious yarn at the mercy of a playfully sadistic cat. He was sure that the office was much smaller now than when he'd entered. The air was heavier too—musty and warm. He could feel the sweat uncontrollably seeping from his pores. The sandy haired interrogator seemed bigger. The

desk seemed bigger. And now Rick was feeling nauseous.

If he failed to get a grip on this thing, there would be no second chance. Second chances and The Board of Policy were not generally used in the same sentence. No, this was it.

“Get a hold of yourself, Rick,” he thought hard to himself.

“Are you feeling okay Mr. Morgan?” the interrogator continued. “You look...pale. Is there anything I can get for you?” he said, sounding more like a maitre d’ at an expensive restaurant than an officer of The Board Of Policy.

Rick thought about the boys and for the first time, what it would be like not to ever see them again. How empty his existence would be without his family. How complete he was when he was with them and how utterly frightening the thought of losing them was.

Without knowing the exact details, Rick did know that he was mixed up in something he shouldn’t have been. The problem was that his statement was actually true. He didn’t know who or why or what. But now Rick hated himself for not asking any of the questions that had been nagging him all along. Nagging questions about what he’d been asked to do and why.

But Rick’s occupation was dealing with security. Software and systems security. And in that business, he was constantly dealing with people that were suspicious and careful and...well, secretive. To that end, there were always things that he wasn’t told. He was almost always working on a need to know basis. So this particular job hadn’t really seemed that out of the ordinary. And with the money as good as it had been, Rick had

probably chose to remain ignorant. Had chose not to ask too many questions—but at what cost?

Rick literally could not imagine life without Tera and the boys. The thought was too overwhelmingly horrifying to comprehend so he would tell this man anything and everything he could to get out of this place and back to his family. Anything.