

PROLOGUE

AS A HINT OF PINK streaked across the horizon, lighting the indigo sky with the promise of dawn, Alek pulled his dirty white Ford Focus to a stop and sat behind the wheel, the engine still running. From his position on the empty road at the top of a hill, he gazed down at the nondescript stucco house standing alone on the edge of a cul-de-sac in the shallow valley below.

Alek shivered. Why had he driven here in the middle of the night, in the darkness, without telling anyone, without making a plan?

His stomach clenched as he thought about the two men who he believed lived inside the two-story, tan house on the dusty street. *What am I doing here?* Alek thought. *I'm a scientist, not an action hero.* But being a scientist also meant being a problem solver. Alek worked as a physicist at Los Alamos National Laboratory, the United States Department of Energy lab that gave birth to the Manhattan Project and was now one of the largest science and technology institutions in the world. For most of his adult life, scientific research had occupied the majority of his time. Since the accident, however, work had become Alek's obsession, driving him to seek answers in a relentless effort to overcome his guilt and grief. Alek's work had also driven him to this spot on a hill looking down at the house where the stolen components of his research and experiments might be concealed. He had to find the answers. *None of this makes sense.*

Alek knew that the two physicists, his employees, had rented a house on the outskirts of Altavaca, New Mexico

about a year ago. A suburb of Albuquerque, Altavaca consisted largely of abandoned real estate sold to unsuspecting East Coast buyers who came to New Mexico dreaming of the Land of Enchantment, and who left when they couldn't find jobs. The house below looked desolate, half abandoned. Wind-swept tumbleweeds lingered on the street. If this were the land of enchantment, the spell cast was a curse.

Alek reflected on how less than 24 hours ago he had discovered that two of his employees had vanished. The men... their research... their knowledge... all had disappeared. *I must find out why.*

Alek shifted the car into park and flipped on the radio, hoping to distract himself with some meaningless background noise. On the early morning radio newscast on New Mexico's News Leader 77KOB, the anchor rattled off headlines. Alek sat in the car, trying to work up the courage to move forward. Should he knock on the door and risk a confrontation? Should he try to find a way to sneak a look through a window to see if anyone was home?

Alek's mind drifted back to a time when he had lived in a similar stucco house not far from here. Back then, life had made sense. Before the accident, before his marriage ended, he had felt anchored. Now he felt alone and adrift. Alek shook his head, trying to focus on the present. He had to move on.

Something in the distance caught Alek's eye. Leaving the car running, he opened the door and got out, craning his neck in an attempt to identify the flash of red.

That's when it happened.

A blinding sheet of light shattered the darkness. The house below exploded, painting the sky with a blast of intense white light. Slammed back against the car by a wave of pressure, Alek found himself breathless in the brilliance of the blast, baffled by the eerily soundless explosion. He realized that his car had joined in the silence. The engine had stalled, the radio had quit playing,

the car's headlights and dashboard indicator lights had gone out.

Giving himself a shake to clear his head, Alek slowly lowered himself into the driver's seat. He turned the key, trying the ignition, but nothing happened. The dark grey dawn reclaimed the New Mexico desert as the unexpected brightness began to fade.

Alek squinted, trying to see the stucco house, his destination. It was... it was no longer there. Nothing remained but swirling dust. Where the house once stood sat a shiny footprint. It looked as if the desert sand beneath where the house's concrete slab foundation had once been somehow had turned to glass. Overwhelmed and dazed by the implications, Alek wondered if he had just watched years of research vanish in an explosive burst of light.