

## PROLOGUE

Alek Spray started his evening by detonating a miniature nuclear weapon in a Las Vegas casino. Now things were getting worse.

Sweeping the unconscious woman into his arms, he took off running across the rooftop toward the helicopter. Her midnight-blue beaded evening gown dragged through the mounds of snow built up on the roof's surface. The wind whipped her blonde curls across Alek's eyes, competing with the blowing snow to block his vision. Despite these obstacles, he hurtled forward, carrying her through the snowstorm, 25 stories above the Las Vegas Strip.

*This is a job for an action hero, not a physicist,* Alek thought.

Swirling snow swept from the helicopter's rotor blades, cutting the visibility to nearly zero. Alek reached his destination, boosting the unconscious woman into the helicopter with the help of the man inside. The two exchanged a few words, shouting over the noise of the rotor blades. Then Alek spotted the red-haired woman emerging from the door of the hotel. He ran back across the slippery rooftop to grab a stack of laptops from her. Together, they made their way to the helicopter, struggling against the buffeting wind and the stinging cold.

Alek strained to see in the almost total whiteout. His heart pounded and, despite the freezing temperatures, he found himself bathed in sweat. His feet slid on the icy rooftop, and he almost lost his balance. *Get a grip; you've got to get her to a hospital,* he told himself as he clutched the laptops to his chest.

They had nearly reached the helicopter when three men burst out of the door onto the rooftop, guns drawn. As a bullet zipped past his head, Alek felt grateful for the blinding storm thwarting the shooter's efforts. He remembered how, not that long ago, he had been happy. He had found someone he loved and was ready to make a plan for the rest of his life. How quickly everything had changed.

Alek and the redhead shoved the laptops into the helicopter. Another shot whizzed past him, and the redhead turned and fired back.

"Get in here!" Alek shouted, grabbing her shoulder. "Shut the door. Come on, let's go."

As the pilot struggled to lift off in the storm, Alek remembered the words of his boss, Harold Percy, the distinguished older man who was now shouting instructions at the helicopter pilot.

Percy had told him, "Technology is a knife. A knife can butter your bread or slit your throat. Our job is just to build the knife."

The physicist shook his head at the memory as he reached out to stroke the unconscious woman's cheek. Would things have turned out differently if he had never built the knife?