

## PROLOGUE

Two hours into his flight, Sam had dozed off.

The flight attendant lightly touched his shoulder to wake him, informing him that the captain received an urgent message about the Future Trust Gala and that Sam should turn on the news.

He dialed Hunter, and it went directly to voicemail. Same with Lincoln. But Sam felt that familiar trigger. It brought the emotion back from the day that he heard that his son might've been on that train.

"Have them turn the plane around," Sam told the flight attendant.

"I will let the captain know your request, sir."

Suddenly, the live stream on his computer went black, and a count-down appeared on his screen: 90 days | 2160 hours | 129,600 minutes and the phrase *Time to Play*.

Upon landing, Sam received a report from Pandora that everyone from Platinum Security Group was at a private hospital and Genevieve had survived a gunshot wound to the chest. A driver took him to the location.

Sam found a disheveled Lincoln asleep at Genevieve's bedside. His head rested on his arms while his hand held hers tightly. Sam had been there before, and he knew that feeling all too well. He understood what it was like to hold on tight afraid to let go because then you'd have to say goodbye. He gently pat Lincoln's shoulder.

Lincoln woke up and rubbed his hands through his hair. He stood up and grabbed Sam into a hug. "Sam, we almost lost her."

Sam hugged him in return as if he were embracing his own late son, Jefferson. "I'm so relieved that she's okay. Where are your parents?"

## SLINGSHOT

Lincoln exhaled and stepped back “They are asleep two rooms down and should be awake in the next few hours.”

“The team?”

“I sent them back to the hotel to get rested up, and we’ll circle back later today.”

“Do we have any idea who orchestrated this attack on the gala?”

“We don’t know. The police have a waitress in custody.”

“Okay, I’ll reach out to my government contacts and see if I can find out anything more.”

Lincoln’s voice broke with emotion as he said, “It’s good to have you here.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” said Sam.

Sam turned to go and then stopped and turned back around. “I received a rather odd message while on the plane. Now, I’m not sure that it’s connected, but the timing is strange.”

“Have Pan take a look at it. She might be able to put a location to it,” Lincoln said.

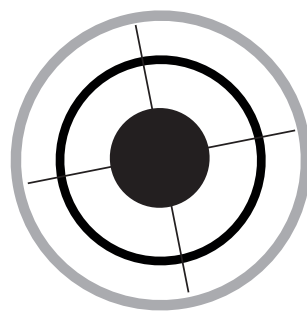
“I’m thankful you’re okay. I’m thankful that everyone is okay.”

“Me too. I don’t think I could...” Lincoln admitted then stopped himself short to overcome his emotions.

“Don’t worry, son. We’ll get ’em.”

Sam walked out of the room and closed the door behind him. He paused. He steadied himself by leaning against the wall.

All of them were safe. Hunter. Sofia. Lincoln. Genevieve. Pandora. Violet. Roosevelt. Lucky. Dr. Pharma. Kingston. The ball of tension in the back of his neck loosened as he leaned his head against the wall, closed his eyes, and said under his breath, “Thank you.”



## CHAPTER | 01

GAME CLOCK: 85 DAYS

*BOOM! WHOOSH!* The blast wave whipped through Kingston's body and hurled him into the air, before smacking him down into the dry, cracked ground, knocking the wind straight out of him. A high-pitched tone rang through his ears. He hauled himself up to a seated position. All he could gather through his blurry, stinging eyes were plumes of dust. Panic rushed through his body as he tried to catch his breath.

His mind raced. He struggled for air. He coughed but couldn't hear it. A thought smacked him across the face.

*Where did Pandora go?*

She had been right behind him. He opened his eyes. He looked over his shoulder. Zero visibility. His thoughts jumbled around in his brain.

"Pandora!" Kingston yelled. He couldn't hear his voice. His hand reached up and touched his ear.

*How did I get here?*

They found something. What was it? A game? That couldn't be right. He dragged himself up to his feet. He had to find Pandora. He scratched at his neck trying to yank his face mask up to inhale fresh air. He pulled his mask up just past his mouth and sucked in a mouthful of dust, which set off a chain reaction of sputtering coughs. He took a few steps forward trying to find a pocket of clean air, flailing his arms to get

## SLINGSHOT

the dust away from his face while simultaneously almost tripping over his feet.

He inhaled and found the air he was looking for. He still couldn't believe that he was a part of Platinum Security Group. It had been beyond challenging to join this secretive black ops group, but he had done it. He had carved out his own place. At least he thought he did. Now here he was legitimately in the field trying to find a mysterious adversary related to the attack that happened only five short days ago.

*Where is the rest of the team?*

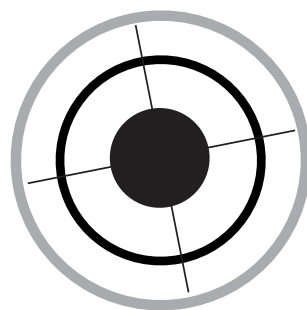
Oh yeah, the attack at the Future Trust Gala. Genevieve had been shot. Sam and Lincoln were at the private hospital with the Silas family. Roosevelt and Violet were undercover in Washington D.C. tracking down information from that waitress. Lucky and Dr. Pharma were at the Pacific One Compound. Lucky was flying around. Dr. Pharma was in his lab working on something. What was it? A new tracker?

*How long have I been here?*

His mind swam as he looked at his watch. Right, they arrived an hour ago. The dust settled, and he could see a foot in front of him.

*Why can't I hear?*

Suddenly, it hit him. He remembered everything from before the bomb went off.



## CHAPTER | 02

GAME CLOCK: 85 DAYS

60 minutes earlier

It was about an hour before sunrise. Kingston shut the engine off a mile away from the location of the IP address that Pandora had discovered embedded in Sam's message a few days ago.

"Ready?" asked Kingston as he looked over at Pandora. She wasn't usually in the field. Most of the time, she was off-site in front of a computer writing code at an accelerated pace. Lincoln, the team lead, deduced that the sophistication of the attack required Pandora to be onsite to assess the tech.

Pandora pulled her neoprene face mask over her hot pink hair. Somehow, she managed to find time since the gala and all the craziness to dye it. Pandora was good at staying true to her style in spite of the field uniform. She yanked the mask over her face and was out of the car before she answered, "I'm waiting on you."

Kingston smiled and pulled his mask on, then said, "I'll try my best to keep up." He barely got his words out before she took off walking at a fast pace. Kingston wondered if he would always be running to keep up with her.

Lucky snagged Pandora's usual seat even though he typically was in the field. He was good at all things mechanical and loved to invent

gadgets that they could use. Currently, he was remotely flying a drone around the perimeter from the comfort of the Pacific One Compound, the West Coast home base located off the coast of Santa Barbara. It was disguised as an oil rig that Sam had purchased and transformed into a compound for Platinum Security Group that they fondly called the PIC.

Lucky's voice crackled in their earpieces as he used their code names, "One Zero and Three Zero, from what I can tell there's no one in your five-mile radius beside a small pack of coyotes to the west of your location."

"Roger, Homebase," replied Kingston.

Lucky said to Pandora, "One Zero, how does it feel to be in the field? Nice to stretch your legs?"

Pandora looked over at Kingston and shook her head, then responded, "Three Zero, did you hear a strange voice? Because I did."

Kingston laughed and said, "Not getting in the middle of this."

"That voice seems to think that I can do nothing except sit at a desk," replied Pandora.

Lucky said to Pandora, "Hold on, there, now; that's not what I meant, One Zero."

"That voice better not leave boot marks on the console," stated Pandora.

"Do you know what? I got bare feet," said Lucky.

"Get your feet off my console," said Pandora.

"Don't worry yourself one bit. I got it from here," said Lucky.

"Did I mention that I have a recording device pointed at my station?" said Pandora.

Pandora and Kingston heard a thump in their earpieces as Lucky said, "Okay, now everything's tickety-boo," said Lucky.

"Tickety-what?" asked Kingston.

"He means he's fine now that his feet are off my console," said Pandora.

"Why don't we focus and get back to the mission at hand," said Lucky.

They arrived at an old dilapidated two-story house in the middle of nowhere Utah. It looked abandoned from the outside. No tire marks in the dusty driveway. Kingston and Pandora circled the house to see if they could get a view inside one of the many windows. No such luck—each window was covered with some sort of blackout curtain that kept them from seeing anything inside.

“Anyone inside the house?” Kingston asked Lucky as he headed to the porch.

“As far as I can see, no heat signatures inside the structure,” replied Lucky.

Kingston cautiously walked up the steps to the front porch and tried the handle. The door opened easily.

The hairs on his neck stood up. His breath quickened. He pushed his wristband, and a chemical pulsed through his veins settling the uncertainty in his lungs. Dr. Pharma had formulated a special asthma medication that relieved his symptoms at the press of a button. He pulled a handgun out of his side holster and aimed into the darkness. He signaled to a skittish Pan that he was moving forward. She followed with her gun extended, aiming in the opposite direction. The contacts in their eyes switched to night vision, and they stealthily walked into the dark house.

They moved in slowly, checking in every direction. The house was unfurnished and covered in a thick layer of dust. They both pushed into the darkness.

All the doors were open except for the one in the hallway. According to Lucky, it led down to the cellar.

Kingston reached down and turned the knob, half expecting it to be locked. Instead, it opened easily. His gut said that they were walking into a trap. He exhaled and stepped down onto the first step. Once his foot hit the top step, a blinding light turned on. The contacts in their eyes immediately changed to sunglass mode. They proceeded carefully down the stairs, not knowing what was waiting for them. By the time

they reached the bottom floor, Kingston realized that he was holding his breath. He pushed out the unhealthy air as quietly as possible.

The basement was encased in shadows and the only light that reached into the room was from the stairwell. As they stepped toward the center of the room and the walls lit up with an amber glow.

Pandora located a computer in the corner of the room. She pulled out her laptop and flipped her mask up and off her face. She connected her computer to the one in the corner.

“Let’s find out who we’re dealing with.”

She typed a few lines of code and a message appeared on the walls:  
GAME CLOCK: 85 DAYS

Pandora keyed in a few more lines of code and the message disappeared. The next thing Kingston saw was a laser scan over Pandora’s face.

On the wall it said, “Greetings. Pandora Vu.”

Pandora stopped typing. Information about her could be seen projected on the wall. Pandora Vu. Born in Tokyo, Japan. Arrived in the United States at age five. Graduated Stanford with a Computer Science degree. Employed at Redline Technologies as a software engineer. Then all kinds of pictures. A picture of when she was young sitting on a stoop next to what looked like her dad. A picture with middle school friends celebrating her thirteenth birthday. A picture of her in the computer lab. A picture from Tokyo fashion week dressed in street wear. A picture of her graduating college. It was unnerving.

A holograph appeared in the room. It was a projection that stood nine feet tall. It was a man dressed in a 1950’s tuxedo with a glowing red-orange vintage gas mask over his face. There was a small, round screen on the respirator over his mouth that displayed sound waves anytime he spoke.

“Shouldn’t you be at work? Honestly, your manager at Redline Technologies might find it strange that his software engineer is in Utah. Don’t you think?”

Pandora said nothing. She yanked her mask back over her face. She typed even faster trying to hack through the firewalls.



“Were you at the gala? I don’t remember seeing you.”

Kingston flattened himself against the wall and made sure that his mask fully covered his face.

The holograph looked over his shoulder, “Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I’m the Founder. Shall we begin?”

The computer screen went black and Pandora raised her hands off the keyboard. “What just happened?”

A black-and-white checkerboard appeared on the wall mimicking what was on Pandora’s computer screen. The words *Bounced Check* superimposed over the board then disappeared. A small half-red-and-half-blue colored ball materialized on the far right corner of the board.

“Using the keyboard, your objective is to change each square from black or white to one solid color. The challenge is to bounce the ball on the squares. If the ball lands on the red side, then the square turns red. However, if it lands on the blue side, then the square turns blue. The only way to win the game is to turn the entire board into one solid red or blue color. In addition, you must dodge the yellow throwing stars, or you lose your life. You have three lives to live and if you lose them, then game over. Understand?”

Pandora coolly replied. “Perfectly.”

Kingston crept closer and watched over Pandora’s shoulder as she played round one. She found the rhythm of the ball when it switched back and forth from red to blue. She figured out a strategy and was able to get a diagonal set of red squares until a throwing star nailed her.

The board cleared and she started again. She was able to successfully turn half the board blue when three throwing stars hit her at once. By the last round, she had successfully managed to get four solid columns of red squares when a blitz of throwing stars took her out of the game.

On the wall it said:

GAME OVER

YOU HAVE LOST THREE DAYS.

The game clock appeared on the wall. It said 85 DAYS. Then the

game clock scrolled down to 82 DAYS.

The computer switched back to the original screen, and Pandora immediately went to work to break through the firewall.

The Founder appeared again. “Not the most impressive game play. But it’s a start.”

A ninety-second countdown appeared on the wall and started descending second by second.

“Bravo on getting through one firewall. But you don’t have time to go through another.”

The wall read 83 SECONDS.

“Was someone else with you?” The Founder looked around the room.

The wall read 72 SECONDS. Pan typed even faster.

“Might I suggest that you leave the house before the bomb goes off. It’s not fun to play with the dead.”

A rumble sounded through the house. Kingston sprinted across the room. He yanked Pandora’s arm and dragged her behind him up the stairs.

The Founder waved and said, “Bye, Pandora. See you at the next game and hopefully next time I can meet your friend.”

They both took off running and hardly made it out the door when the bomb went off. The blast pushed Kingston forward to the ground. Pandora was somewhere behind him.

*Pandora? Where is Pandora?*

The piercing sound had lessened, and he heard a muffled scream to the left of him. It looked like a pile of rocks. It was Pandora’s small frame curled up in a ball. He sprinted over to her side and found her fighting to stay conscious. Her left ankle was bent backward in such a fashion that he was certain it was broken. Her body went slack and she passed out.

The ringing in his ears lessened, and all he could hear was Lucky yelling.

“One Zero and Three Zero. Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

Kingston wheezed out, “We’re alive. One Zero’s hurt. Get us out of here.”

Pan’s eyes fluttered open and closed for a second. Her eyes opened again. Kingston saw a look in her face that he had never seen before: complete rage.