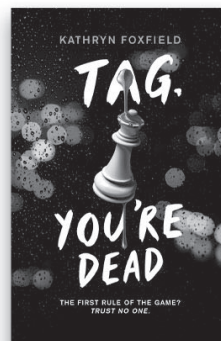
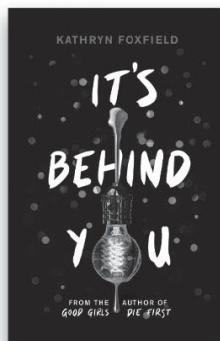




Kathryn Foxfield is the bestselling author of *Good Girls Die First*, *It's Behind You* and *Tag, You're Dead*. She blames her love of the creepy and weird on a childhood diet of Point Horror, Agatha Christie and Dr Who. She writes about characters who aren't afraid to fight back, but she wouldn't last five minutes in one of her own stories.

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KATHRYN FOXFIELD

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THE-SAF: Let's go, let's go, let's go!

JOEYS-MAGIC-FOOT: Awesome, it's the space shuttle. This location is sick.

(Nine player avatars materialize in a disintegrating spaceship, surrounded by sparking consoles and falling debris. Through the window, Earth spins closer and closer. Flames engulf the spaceship as it plummets through the atmosphere.)

GEORGIA-SMELLS: For goodness' sake, you've changed my username again. How do I change it back? Saffron, seriously?

SIR-HENRY-OF-BLOBLAND: If any of you shoot me in the first thirty seconds, I will cry.

(THE-SAF sets SIR-HENRY-OF-BLOBLAND on fire with her bionic flame-thrower arm.)

SIR-HENRY-OF-BLOBLAND: Whhhhhhhyyyyyy?

STAR-BABE04: Harsh, Saffron. You know he gets upset when you kill him.

THE-SAF: I can't help it. It's who I am.

SIR-HENRY-OF-BLOBLAND: Actually, I'm not dead?

MR-MISCHIEF69: Honestly, it doesn't make much difference to the game.

SIR-HENRY-OF-BLOBLAND: What?

JOEYS-MAGIC-FOOT: I'm heading for the loading bay to find one of those sweet mecha-suits.

MR-MISCHIEF69: Yassssss, I'm coming with you!

GEORGIA-SMELLS: Wait, slow down. Let's think first. There are eight rooms in this spaceship, and the extraction point is on the top deck. If we work together, we can—

ULTIMATE-HELIX: Nope. See you later, losers.

(ULTIMATE-HELIX parkours into the ventilation system and vanishes.)

QUEEN-MILLIKINS: He'll hide in the ducts until we're all dead again. It's selfish behaviour and I'm getting seriously tired of it.

THIS-GAME-IS-BASIC: How's it any different from you hiding behind your boyfriend while we do all the hard work?

MR-MISCHIEF69: Better than spending the entire time complaining, mate. Why are you even here when you hate this game?

(A computer short-circuits and the sparks electrocute THIS-GAME-IS-BASIC. His avatar's skeleton glows brightly, then he explodes into blood droplets.)

THIS-GAME-IS-BASIC: FUCK!

(THIS-GAME-IS-BASIC signs out of the Sole Survivor server.)

MR-MISCHIEF69: Never mind, he's gone. Mecha-suit, here I come.

QUEEN-MILLIKINS: Joey, where are you? I've got a robot thing chasing me. Shoot it already. Shoot it, shoot it!

JOEYS-MAGIC-FOOT: I've got you, babe.

STAR-BABE04: Hey, who stabbed me in the back? I can't believe you, Saffron.

(STAR-BABE04 explodes into blood droplets.)

GEORGIA-SMELLS: Saffron, stop killing people!

THE-SAF: Err, that's the point of the game?

GEORGIA-SMELLS: We won't make it to the extraction point if you murder everyone. We need a strategy if we're— Saffron, stop it!

MR-MISCHIEF69: Dude, you impaled me. Cue awesome death scene. Urgghhh ahhhhh grrrrr.

(MR-MISCHIEF69 explodes into blood droplets.)

MR-MISCHIEF69: Avennnnng meeeeeee!

JOEYS-MAGIC-FOOT: Whoa, hull decompression. I'm getting sucked out.

THE-SAF: Perv.

JOEYS-MAGIC-FOOT: Oh, hang on, my butt's stuck. Someone help me out?

THE-SAF: Ha ha no. Evil laugh, ha ha ha.

GEORGIA-SMELLS: What is wrong with you?!

THE-SAF: Stay calm, Georgie.

GEORGIA-SMELLS: I am not calm. This is a disaster!

(The ceiling partially collapses and ULTIMATE-HELIX falls out of the ventilation system. His avatar explodes on impact.)

ULTIMATE-HELIX: I WELCOME DEATH!

QUEEN-MILLIKINS: Why are you so weird? No, no, NOOOOO!

(A meteor bursts through the wall and eviscerates QUEEN-MILLIKINS.)

THE-SAF: It's you and me, sis.

GEORGIA-SMELLS: You've sacrificed your only chance of winning the game by killing everyone in THE FIRST TWO MINUTES!

THE-SAF: Worth it.

(A satellite strikes the spaceship and the survivors suffocate in the vacuum of space. Game over.)

1

SAFFRON

Sole Survivor isn't just a video game – it's a way of life. In fact, everything you need to know about a person can be gleaned from how they play. Take me, for example. I'm all guns blazing, throw myself into the action, do or die. I'm a rebel, a risk taker, a legend.

My twin sister Georgia, though? Well, Georgia likes to take charge and make a plan and *think* about things. The problem is, she thinks for so long that – *BOOM!* – game over. There's no time for thinking when you're spinning out of control through the Earth's atmosphere or being chased by zombie clowns.

Georgia's pretty much the same in person, only with more success. See, my sister is an overachieving

know-it-all. Straight As, editor of the school paper, debate club captain, chess champion. All of this comes at the expense of an actual personality. Her favourite thing in the whole wide world is writing stern letters of complaint, usually to me. She's a seventeen-year-old "I want to speak to your manager"-meme, right down to the blow-dried bob and folded arms.

She's used to getting her own way. She's used to winning awards. But everything's about to change. Because for the next two weeks, we're no longer safely cocooned within the artificial environment of school. We're out in the real world, experiencing work. And Georgia's about to discover her real-world survival skills are as pitiful as her *Sole Survivor* gameplay.

"I give her three days," I say, tossing a Jelly Baby into my mouth.

"To live?" Lightman says.

"Until she's fired," I say. "Wow, dude, what are you like?"

"I thought we were still talking about *Sole Survivor*."

Fair point. I've spent the past half hour trying to explain my favourite game to Lightman, but he doesn't get it. This could be because Lightman isn't a person, he's an advanced Artificial Intelligence. He's also my only company down here in this windowless control room that looks worryingly similar to a *Sole Survivor* drop location.

My work experience placement is at Play a Game – a brand new, high-tech escape room complex featuring three

zones and the choice of thirty-six games. The big selling point is that there's an AI – that's Lightman – to guide you through the experience, choosing which games your team will play and which team members will play them.

My role in all of this? Well, you know how when you're in an escape room, there's always someone watching you? That someone is me. On the walls of the control room, there are projected CCTV feeds covering almost every inch of the complex. It makes me feel like a god. But it turns out, being a god is actually quite boring.

The issue is, *Play a Game* is so new it doesn't open until next Monday. So for now, there's not much for me to do except chase up a missing shipment of fifty thousand small plastic balls, and get to know Lightman. It was weird at first, talking to a computer. But now we're the best of friends.

“Have I told you about my theory?” I ask.

“The one where you believe you can determine who someone is as a person by how they play *Sole Survivor*? Yes.”

I'm unperturbed and keep talking anyway. “I've been playing with the same crew for nearly two years. Of the eight other players, I've only met four of them in person. But I still know everything that's worth knowing about the rest, all thanks to watching how they play.”

“I remain unsure what the purpose of the game is,” Lightman says.

I roll my eyes. For a super-intelligent computer program, Lightman is slow on the uptake. *Sole Survivor* is

the simplest game in the world. The aim is to be the last player standing when the ten-minute timer runs out. So not only do you have to find a way to deal with everything the game throws at you – and that can be meteors, monsters or magma depending on what location you’re dropped into – but you also have to kill off your competition.

It’s all about strategy. Are you the sort of person who works as a team to reach the extraction point, only to turn on your friends in the final minutes? Do you hide and wait for everyone else to kill each other? Maybe you prefer to pick off your biggest rivals straight away. Or do you, like me, light the world on fire so you can dance in the flames?

“It’s fun,” I say. “Like *The Breakfast Club*, but with more death.”

The little red light above Lightman’s camera flickers. I always take this to mean he’s thinking. “A brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess and a criminal,” he says. “Five teenagers who become friends after spending the day together in detention.”

“Exactly. Now imagine they all had grenades and only one could make it out alive. Hmm, I wonder who it would be?” I try to picture the characters in my head, but it’s been a while since I saw the film.

“That is an interesting question, Saffron. I would need to gather more data.”

“I can tell you who it wouldn’t be: the brain. Too much thinking.”

“Boom, game over,” he says, repeating my words back to me.

“Exactly.” I lean forwards so my face is centimetres from the camera. I tap on the tiny lens. “Are you sure you’re not alive in there?”

“I am quite sure, Saffron,” he says. I think there’s an edge of amusement to his voice, but maybe I’m imagining it.

The thing with Lightman is he’s programmed to sound like a soft-spoken young man. Sometimes, when we’re talking, I close my eyes and imagine he’s standing next to me, alive. But the perfect pace of his speech always reminds me he’s no more than a collection of clever code. Which is rubbish because I get on better with him than I do most humans.

I push myself away from the desk and spin in my chair. “I find it hard to believe someone created you just so you could run an escape room.”

“They did not. I was originally programmed to learn. My primary objective was to collect data to better understand human behaviour. The scientist who designed me hoped that, with this knowledge, I would be able to better replicate human thought patterns to the point that my behaviour would be indistinguishable from the real thing.”

“They wanted you to become sentient. Ha, I knew it!”

“The project failed. I proved too rigid in my thinking, and overly reliant on predictive algorithms.”

“And now you’re stuck here. Sucks to be you.”

“Play a Game is, in fact, not so different from the training simulations I was tasked to run in the laboratory. My purpose here is to predict how our guests will behave and to use this information to choose which games are best suited to their personalities. Within seconds of a guest signing the waiver form, I know them better than they know themselves.”

“Wouldn’t work on me. I am an unknowable mystery.”

“It is simply a matter of data. I am programmed to use facial recognition technology to track our guests across all indexed sites. I then analyse their preferences and behaviour using data from their social media presence, determine their strengths and weaknesses from their predicted personality traits, and search for any pre-existing rivalries between them and the other players in their group that may impact upon their success in the game rooms.”

“Wow. You’re a proper stalker. Did you analyse me?”

“You are a member of staff, not a guest.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” I say. “Come on, what does the data say about me? Give it to me straight, Lightman.”

A computer fan whirs in what feels suspiciously like a long sigh. “As you wish, Saffron. My analyses suggest that while you pride yourself on breaking rules, your chaotic façade hides a deep-seated fear of failure. It appears that the source of this fear is your sister, Georgia, whom you believe you will never match up to. Which is understandable as your sister is—”

“Whoa, stop! Oh my god, Lightman!” I gape at the red light, my mouth hanging open.

“You asked me to give it to you straight.”

“You’re as bad as she is,” I mutter. “No sense for what’s an appropriate thing to say.”