



**THE
KILL
FACTOR**

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CHAPTER

Emerson Ness had not been scared in a very long time. Now she was terrified.

The room was gray, not only in color but in character too: perfectly square, perfectly dull. No windows. The only light came from two fluorescent headache bulbs that flickered overhead. The table was off-center in a very purposeful way.

Emerson sat at that table, trying not to think.

They want you to think, she told herself, they want you to replay the events over and over until you're not sure what happened and what didn't happen. That's why everything is so gray and dull; so that you've got nothing to focus on other than your thoughts.

She tried then to clear her mind, but it was impossible. She was shaking. She saw it in her hands as she nervously pulled at her fingertips, and then noticed a thrumming throughout her entire body. *Stop that*, she commanded herself, but no amount of trying would slow down the tremor that ran through her like a current, and as she stared at her earthquake hands, her mind drifted back to the reason she was in this room. She saw the flames eating up the building. She heard the

sirens wailing into the night, smelling that burned-hair smell.

No! she told herself. *Think of something else. You're scared, that's all.*

Arson was a serious crime—especially when it was a school that burned down. The government did not take kindly to people who destroyed their property. Cost the government money and you were looking at jail time.

She knew it didn't look good. She had been caught on the school grounds late at night, clutching a bag full of money, the building burning at her back.

When was the last time you were this scared?

She scoured her mind, moving back through her sixteen years of life, trying to remember when she had last been truly terrified. It had been nine years ago, when she was seven and her brother, Kester, had been an infant. Their mother had been dead only a few months, and their father had gone off to “make content,” spending the night in the catacombs with nothing but a cheap camera drone and a thin blanket. Everything that man did was for views and followers. Maybe he was right. Maybe it really was the only currency that mattered anymore.

While he'd been away, Kester had gotten sick. Really sick. At first his breathing had been a little ragged, a little wheezy, but then it started to rattle. *Sounds like he's got rocks in his breath*, she had thought as she stood at her little brother's door, holding her own breath and trying not to cry. He had started coughing then, coughing and coughing, and after a while, it sounded like he was drowning.

Emerson had tried to call their dad, but there was no signal in the catacombs. She had gotten angry, smashing the ancient cell phone on the kitchen floor and then punching the door so hard her knuckles bled. Then she had started to panic, running out of the baby's bedroom, pressing her hands against her ears, and then running back in, willing him to miraculously get better. "Stop it now, Kester! Stop that!" But he didn't get better. He got worse.

She had leaned over his cot and yelled at her tiny brother. "Please stop! Please!"

Finally, she had gotten ahold of herself and called an ambulance. The paramedics had agreed to meet her, but they refused to drive down into the Burrows, so she'd had to wrap up her distressed brother and run to the entrance of the tunnel.

Kester had an infection in his lungs that had turned into pneumonia. The doctors saved his life. Thirty hours later—when she had returned home carrying her baby brother in her arms—their father had been sitting at his computer editing the footage of his night in the catacombs, oblivious. She had hated him in that moment. She had never forgiven him.

That same kind of fear was in her again now, here in this interrogation room where—any second now—an officer, maybe two, would enter and tell her that she was looking at prison. A building had burned to the ground, and \$900 of physical cash had been stolen. Physical money was not as valuable as brand credits, but theft was theft.

She imagined slowing time right down until seconds lasted minutes and hours lasted days. Then she imagined time running

backward: the door to the interrogation room opening, the police uncuffing her and marching her backward into the wagon, the mug shot drone erasing photographs of her. And then she thought, *If I could go back in time, why not just keep going?* And so, in her mind, days rushed by, fading from dark to light, the moon reversing across the sky, chased closely by the sun, years and years, faster and faster, before Kester was born, until, finally, time began to move forward again at regular speed, and Emerson was six years old, and her mother was still alive.

“Em,” her mother said, holding out an ethereal hand.

Emerson reached out for that hand, and had almost touched it when she was snatched from her reverie by the interrogation room door opening. Two officers came in and sat down in the bigger, more comfortable chairs opposite her. There were no introductions, no greetings, not even a moment of eye contact. The short, female officer spoke first.

“It is currently 2:41 in the morning on December twelfth. Special Agent Dern interviewing suspect alongside Officer Bannon. Let me get some information clear for the report: Your first name, Emerson, is spelled E-M-E-R-S-O-N?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s right,” Emerson said, and cleared her throat after hearing the vibration in her voice. She reminded herself to be tough. *You’ve done nothing wrong, remember that. Yes, you stole money, but it was only to feed your family. It’s not your fault that the building burned.*

“And last name, Ness, spelled N-E-S-S?”

“Yes,” Emerson replied.

“And address is 2331/19 The Burrows?”

This list of meaningless questions sparked anger in Emerson. “This is dumb, I shouldn’t be here, I—”

“In a minute,” the officer said, holding up a hand, still not making eye contact. Emerson clenched her jaw, irritated that she had been shut down so effectively. “I know you’ve already been read your rights, Ms. Ness, but I’m going to repeat them now so that they are on record: You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney, which you can pay for in brand credits or cash, and if you cannot afford one, one will be provided for you. Do you understand what I have told you?”

Emerson had been in situations like this before many times, and had learned that she could push aside almost all other emotions if she filled herself up with anger. She did this now. “Yeah, I’m not stupid.”

“Do you want a lawyer?”

“Don’t need one. I haven’t done anything.”

“For the record, the suspect has chosen, of her own free will, to waive her right to a lawyer.” The officer finally made eye contact, and all Emerson could see in those eyes was ambition. “You were arrested outside Stone’s Throw High School shortly after midnight this morning, is that correct?”

“Does this one speak?” Emerson asked, pointing at the tall, square-faced officer sitting next to Agent Dern.

“Answer the question, please.”

“I was arrested, but I still don’t know why.”

“You were apprehended outside a burning school with a bag full of stolen money. Why do *you* think you were arrested?”

“Sarcasm?” Emerson replied. “Really? Is this how the police conduct their business these days?”

“You’re impulsive, aren’t you, Ms. Ness? You don’t think before you speak, and you don’t think before you act. So, for those reasons, I’ll spell out to you exactly what you are being charged with. You are under arrest on suspicion of theft, and arson.” She paused. “And manslaughter.”

Emerson slowly sat up in her uncomfortable gray chair and stared at Agent Dern. “What did you say?”

“Manslaughter, Ms. Ness. It means—in this case—that you committed unintentional homicide in a criminally negligent manner.”

Her anger dissolved away, like ink in water. “Someone . . . someone died?”

Agent Dern looked at her watch. “About twelve minutes ago. A man named Marvin Tzu, a janitor. He died from injuries sustained at the scene. Burns, smoke inhalation.”

Agent Dern took a photograph of a man in his sixties out of a manila envelope and placed it on the table between them. Emerson stared at the man; his eyes, sad and soulful, seemed to gaze right back at her. She recognized those eyes. She felt her heart twisting in her chest like a bag full of rodents. Suddenly, it was hard to breathe; her vision blurred and then came into focus almost too sharp. “I . . . I changed my mind. I do want a lawyer.”

“That’s entirely your choice, Ms. Ness,” Agent Dern said, closing the case file that had sat in front of her and standing up. Officer Bannon stood up almost at the same time. “Interview paused at 0245 hours.”

They exited the room without so much as a glance back, leaving the photograph of Marvin Tzu on the table.

The silence that followed seemed to fall down from the ceiling like dust, and in that silence, Emerson felt like she couldn’t catch her breath. Her feet felt numb, and her thoughts were tumbling in her mind. She was sure that she could feel the earth spiraling through space. She gripped the underside of her chair. She had to hold on to something or be cast into the infinite void.

Dead, she thought. Someone died. Someone died. They’re dead.

The confidence and determination of Agent Dern had scared her at first. Now it terrified her.

Emerson took one last look at the photograph on the table, and then turned it over.

She had a criminal record already—that meant it would be all too easy to pin this on her. And when they did, she would spend the next two decades in a room even more dull and gray than this one.

I can’t let that happen, Emerson told herself. I can’t. Kester needs me, I can’t leave him alone. Get a grip, Em, you need to think. Get ahold of yourself.

But she couldn’t seem to access her thoughts. All she could see in her mind’s eye was the flashing of the mug shot drones that

had circled her at the scene of the crime, taking photos as the school burned behind her, the flames reaching their skinny fingers up into the black sky.

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The door to the interrogation room opened again after what felt to Emerson like hours. Though perhaps it had only been minutes. A short man with white hair and small round glasses entered.

“Are you my lawyer?” Emerson asked, no longer able to hide the fear in her voice.

The man ignored her question. Instead, he ambled over to the table, sat down on the chair that Agent Dern had vacated, and took a virtual notepad out of his pocket. He placed it on the table, glanced at Emerson over the tops of his glasses, then used his fingerprint to open the virtual stack of documents that hovered in the air between them.

“What is this?” Emerson asked.

“Emerson Ness,” the old man said, and smiled warmly. “You might be the luckiest girl alive right now.”

Emerson’s brow furrowed as she looked at the newcomer. “Look around, old man. Do I look lucky to you?”

The man laughed, a hearty and friendly sound. “No, no. You certainly do not. But, rest assured, you are.”

“You’re going to explain?” Emerson asked, and felt the tiniest flicker of hope inside herself. She extinguished it quickly, though. Experience had taught her to never get her hopes up.

“Explain I shall,” the man said, smiling that charming, kindly smile. And Emerson felt herself warming to the man in spite of herself. “You’re lucky, Ms. Ness, because I came along just at the right time! You see, I’m your ticket out of all this mess.”

“My ticket . . . I’m sorry, what’s going on?”

He laughed again and then leaned back in his chair. “Forgive me, Ms. Ness. I’m being cryptic. I don’t mean to be. Let me try to be more clear. I’m a producer, which means I’m in charge of bringing together a team of people to create a television show. Now, correct me if I’m wrong, Ms. Ness, but you’re looking down the barrel of at least fifteen years in maximum security. Slate County. They’re going to try you as an adult, understand? Even though you’re sixteen, they’re going to try you as an adult because you’ve got a criminal history, including aggravated assault and forgery.”

“I can explain all that,” Emerson tried. She’d done it for her brother, she wanted to say. She hadn’t had a choice.

“You’re going to explain it to a jury?” He raised a white eyebrow.

“I . . . I . . .”

“Doesn’t matter,” the man said, waving a hand. “You’re not setting foot in a courtroom, and—if you win the competition—you’re not setting foot in a prison. You won’t have to worry about any of that once you sign this contract.”

“Competition?” Emerson asked.

“Listen,” the Producer said, leaning in close and gesturing to the dim room. “All of this, this crap, this is how they keep people

like you down. You're a young, intelligent girl with all the potential in the world, and yet you're fighting for your life every day. How is that fair? Can I tell you a secret? I hate this system. I'm from the same place as you, Ms. Ness. I'm from the Burrows and I had to use every ounce of strength to get out. I want to offer you a chance to get out too."

Emerson looked at the digital contract that hung between them. "What is it?" she asked. "What does it say?"

The Producer laughed and raised both hands out to his sides in a gesture of evangelical praise. "It says you're going walk out of this station and wave to those arrogant cops on the way, that's what it says. Did you see that Agent Dern? She wants you. She wants to see you burn. She knows you've got no defense, Ms. Ness. No brand value to pay for a lawyer. I could see it in her eyes. Be honest, what are your credits worth? How many followers do you have? Under a thousand, I'd wager?"

Somehow, Emerson knew that the Producer had looked into her already. He knew that she had no followers at all, meaning her digital brand credits were worth less than physical cash.

"What would I have to do?" Emerson asked.

"That's the best part," the Producer said, lacing his fingers behind his head as if they were both relaxing on a summer's day. "All you have to do is be yourself. Be likable. Watch your follower count grow by the millions and your currency become valuable beyond your wildest dreams."

Emerson sat back in her chair and looked from the Producer's smiling eyes to the floating stack of papers between them. "You're

going to have to give me more than that,” Emerson said. “I don’t understand what’s going on here.”

The Producer sighed and sat forward. “Emerson, we don’t have time to go into the details. I wish we did, but the chief of this place has given me exactly five minutes. Suffice it to say that this is a one in a billion opportunity. You happen to be a prime candidate for a new show with a very real prize. That prize is freedom. If you don’t sign on the dotted line in the time I’ve allotted myself to meet with you, that opportunity will go to someone else. Listen to me, girl. You were born to fail. It’s not your fault, it’s just the facts as I see them. I’m offering you an opportunity to change the narrative of your life.”

Emerson swallowed. “What is the show about?”

“You’re still asking questions? Really? I’m offering you a cure for cancer and you’re asking me what flavor the pill is?”

Emerson looked into the fatherly eyes of this strange man who had burst into her life at her most vulnerable. “There has to be a catch,” she replied. “Nobody gets to walk away for free.”

The Producer nodded slowly. “You’re smart, Emerson Ness. Too smart to be in a place like this. The show goes like this: Fifty young people on the verge of imprisonment will take part in various games. The difficulty of these games is determined by how many followers you earn throughout the show. If you lose a game, you will face a public vote against whoever has the least amount of followers. The person voted off is incarcerated in a maximum-security prison with no contact from the outside world, and no contact from other prisoners. The sentence is automatically life

in solitary. The one person with the most followers at the end is free to go, and not just free to go, but free to go with hundreds of thousands of new followers, advertising endorsements, and popularity that will set them up for life.”

Emerson’s head was spinning. This had come out of nowhere. One minute she had been mentally preparing herself for a decade or more in Slate County, and now this man with his compassionate face and caring words came along offering her . . . what?

“The clock is ticking, Ms. Ness,” the Producer said, his voice quiet and understanding.

Emerson tried to process everything he had said. It wasn’t freedom he was offering but a one-in-fifty chance of freedom. The price she had to pay was to be paraded on screens across the world as entertainment.

She was aware of the seconds ticking away as she considered the Producer’s offer. Finally, she came to a decision.

“No,” she said.

The smile on the Producer’s face melted away like spring ice. “No?” he repeated.

“That’s right, I said no.”

“I . . .” He laughed. “I wasn’t expecting that. Can I ask why?”

“Your show, whatever it’s called, is disgusting. It’s exploiting people. You’re using people’s darkest moments as entertainment. You’re using people’s desperation to amuse others, and I . . . I can’t be part of that.” She lifted her chin. “Besides, if I don’t win—which is likely—I’ll be exchanging fifteen years in prison for life in prison. That’s no prize.”

The Producer kept his expression of amusement. “We’re offering people an opportunity.”

“Then offer it,” Emerson interrupted. “Don’t dangle it in front of people’s faces and make them dance for it.”

He laughed, sat back in his seat, ran his hands through his hair, and laughed again. He swiped his hands over the documents, and they disappeared. “Well, I’m not going to beg you, Emerson. I respect your decision, but this is an opportunity that thousands of kids in your situation would bite my hand off for. If you don’t want it, someone else will.” He stood up and pocketed the virtual notebook. “Your father will be disappointed, though.”

Emerson sat up. “What do you mean?”

“Huh?” the Producer said, and turned back around to face Emerson. “Oh, just that we need consent from a parent or guardian in order to validate your involvement in the show. Your father gave us that signature less than an hour ago. He seemed *very* happy to give his permission.”

“You’re lying,” Emerson said. Her dad was a mediocre parent at best, sure, but she couldn’t believe he’d go so far as to practically consign his only daughter to life in prison.

The Producer put the virtual notebook back on the table and scanned it. The documents reappeared between them, and the Producer pulled out the final sheet. Her father’s name, Markus Ness, was scrawled across the bottom.

“He cares about you,” the Producer said. “He wants to give you a chance to walk free. That’s a good dad in my book.”

Emerson traced each letter of her father's name with her eyes, feeling her stomach sink. "He doesn't care," she said. "All he wants is—"

But there was no time to finish her sentence. The door to the interrogation room flew open and the two officers entered.

"All right," Agent Dern said. "That's time."

All he wants is a famous daughter so he can grow his own brand, Emerson finished her thought. She pictured Kester in her mind. Kester, who was more intelligent than both of them. Kester, who was born deaf in a society that had given him next to no support.

Emerson looked into the eyes of the Producer. How could someone so benevolent make such a cruel offer?

"I can't do it," Emerson told him. She felt a moment of dizziness, as though her entire future had just taken a step off a high and sheer cliff.

"I'll tell you what," the Producer said. "I'll post your bail. You'll be out of here tomorrow and I'll give you one more day after that to decide. We can even add a clause stipulating that all of your social media and credit accounts will be transferred to your brother in the event that you are incarcerated."

Emerson opened her mouth to tell him that she didn't need any more time, that her mind was made up, but the words wouldn't come.

The Producer put a big, papery hand on her shoulder, offered her one last smile, and then left her to be escorted to a holding cell by Agent Dern and the silent Officer Bannon.