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DREAD WOOD FEAR GROUND

Property of Tablo

For the Reid family, with love.



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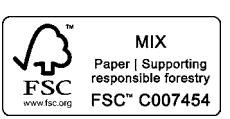
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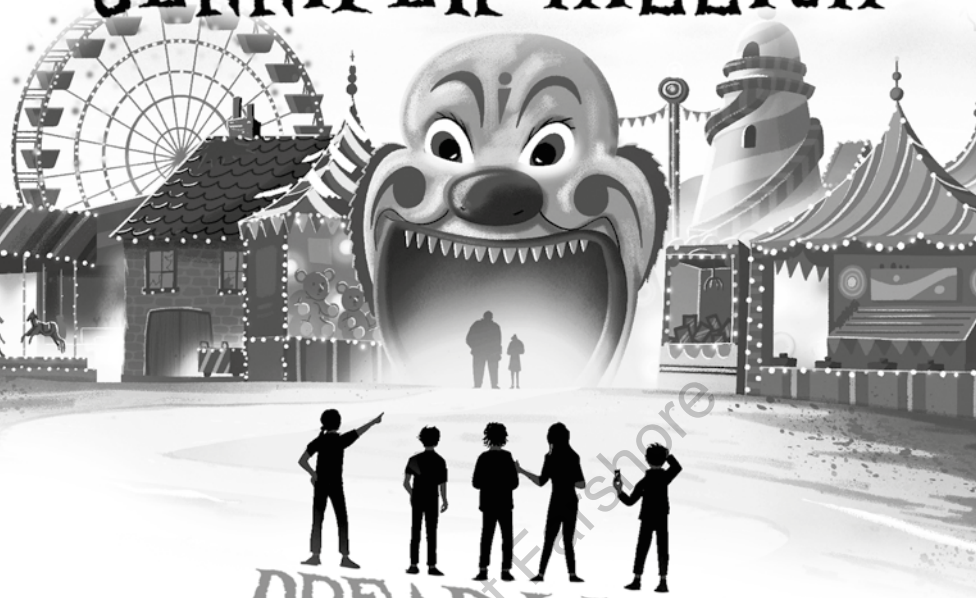


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JENNIFER KILLICK



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FLINCH:
A PLAYER'S GUIDE

Turn fear into fun with 'Flinch' – the most exciting game you'll ever play. Earn points by scaring your friends in this brand new, fast-paced, thrill-fest of a game that is taking the world by storm. Don't miss out – download the FREE Flinch app now and scare your way to victory.

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Once the app is downloaded, you will be assigned a unique player reference. From that moment you are part of the game, and – should your app alert you of the start of a round – you MUST play.

The Flinch app selects players using geographical location, so being in an area where a large number of players are collected increases the chances of a round being announced.

The players selected will be notified of the start of a round by the Flinch tune playing on their mobile devices. The Flinch tune is ‘Pop Goes the Weasel’, a nursery rhyme used in traditional jack-in-the-box toys. Imagine turning the handle on the box, winding it slowly towards a jump-scare. Players have until the music stops to take their places, ready to play.

When the first part of the Flinch tune stops playing, there will be an undetermined number of minutes for gameplay, during which players must try to score as many points as possible. The round will end when the final line of the Flinch tune plays and the final jump-scare has popped.

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During game play, the rules are simple:

1. The aim is to make other players flinch. A flinch is a physical reaction to a scare – a gasp, a jump, a shout, or running away.
2. A flinch can be obtained through any means, except physical contact. No touching.
3. When a flinch is obtained, the flincher must use the app to give a point to the player who scared them, simply by holding their mobile devices close together and clicking a button.

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Failure to follow the rules will result in player elimination. The players with the most points will be rewarded with a coveted place on the Flinch leaderboard.

Do you have what it takes to scare your way to the top? There's only one way to find out . . .

CHAPTER ONE

THE GAME

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A scream splits the silence of the Dread Wood. I brace myself against the tree behind me and force myself to be still. Not easy when my body feels like a human beehive. Under my skin everything is buzzing, vibrating, like I might explode at any moment, splattering blood and body parts across the green of the woods. I picture it for a second, and strangely enough the thought distracts me enough to calm me. The image leaves me with one lasting thought: I do not want to die at this school.

Quiet again. Time to move. I can't resist a quick glance above me and a scan of the ground ahead. The memory of the last time I was hunted in these woods will always be with me, but I remind myself that the spiders have been gone for months. I'm facing a different enemy now – fewer legs but almost as frightening.

I dart forward, keeping in the shadows as much as I can, avoiding the bright sunlight that streaks through the gaps between the trees. I reckon I know these woods better than most people, which gives me an advantage. There are places where I know people will be hiding – the hollowed-out bushes close to the paths which make everyone who finds them think they've discovered some massive secret, until they spot the screwed-up candy wrappers and left-behind bottles and cans. Someone will be huddling in there now, thinking they have the drop on whoever passes by. Easy target.

As I get close to one of the hollows, I see movement. It's too early in spring for everything

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in the woods to have properly filled out – shrubs are still budding, leaves uncurling. Through the tiny shoots of green, I can see a dark shape, crouching, shifting slightly on their feet like they can't keep still.

I hold back for a moment before I make my move. It could be a trap – someone acting as bait while an ally waits to pounce. That's the trouble with Flinch: you're never sure whether you're the hunter or the prey.

In the second before I attack, I hear something that stops me in my tracks. A squeak of fright that makes me peer into a hollowed-out bush, and then a hiss of disgust as the person hiding there brushes a bug off their clothes.

'Naira,' I say. 'You're lucky it's me who found you, otherwise you'd be flinched for sure.'

'Oh god, Angelo.' Naira looks out at me and holds up a hand for me to help her from the hollow. 'This bush is infested. Did you see that disgusting creature? What was it?'

'A beetle, I think.' I pull her under a branch

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and out into the open. ‘It was hard to tell, what with you being in a shadowy bush, and the creature being only a few millimetres long.’

‘Small doesn’t mean harmless,’ Naira huffs, brushing invisible bugs off her PE kit. ‘Just look at Hallie.’

I grin. ‘We need to get out of here. Game’s not over yet.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ Naira says, retying her ponytail. ‘And don’t look at me like that – I’d be perfect on my own, anywhere but in these woods.’

I nod, but I’m already looking forward to telling the others about this later and seeing the glare on her face. ‘Let’s go.’ I lead her away from the path. She’s strong, fast and stealthy, and I’m glad to have her at my back.

We jog further into the Dread Wood, only stopping now and again to look and listen.

Nobody knows exactly when Flinch became a thing, or who played the first game. We first heard about it a few weeks ago, through

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listening in on muttered chats in the dining hall between clustered groups of people hunched over pizza slices. Once it started being talked about in all the usual places online, there wasn't a person in the school who didn't know what it was or how to play. Everyone has the Flinch app on their phone, and once you have the app, it's in the rules that you have to play. I've always been good at breaking rules, but Flinch is so addictive that I've never even been tempted to swerve a round.

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The rules are simple. The Flinch app notifies players at the start of a round by playing the start of a tune – *Half a pound of tuppenny rice, half a pound of treacle, that's the way the money goes* . . . Then the music pauses. In that time everyone scatters, hides, finds places to launch their attacks from. The aim is to make other players flinch or run away, usually by jump-scaring them, but everyone has their own technique. Physical contact isn't allowed, but other than that, anything is fair game. If you

make someone flinch you connect the Flinch apps on your phones to claim your point. The round ends when the app plays the final line of the song.

'Do you have a plan?' Naira whispers. 'Surely nobody's going to be hiding this far in? I want to win, not get lost so deep in the woods that my body isn't located until I've been eaten by maggots.'

'We're going to circle back,' I say. 'I know another noob spot we can check out – bound to be someone lurking there.'

'Well, can we circle back soon? The round's going to end, I have won zero flinches today, and I'm starting to feel like I'm in the Hunger Games out here in all this nature.'

'Any sign of the others?' I spot the boundary fence through the trees – the place where the school grounds end but the Dread Wood goes on, past the train tracks, until it reaches the edge of town.

'If Hallie was close, I feel like I would have known instantly, so she must be over the other

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side of the woods . . .' Naira says. I nod – Hallie's game tactics involve less sneaking in for surprise attacks, and more shouting aggressively at people until they can't stand it any more and give her the flinch point.

'I heard a scream about five minutes ago that I'm pretty sure was Gus,' Nai carries on. 'I mean the pitch of it – you know how he sounds like a stepped-on puppy – it's distinct, you know?'

'It is,' I say. I hesitate, but I have to ask. 'What about Colette?'

I'm glad Naira is behind me so she can't see my cheeks burning. I know she knows anyway – I can picture her annoying expression, just like she can picture mine.

'I have no idea about Colette,' she says. 'You know how she is – for someone so apparently pure of heart, she's incredibly good at being sneaky.'

It's true that Colette is a lot of things all at once. I've never known anyone like her.

Naira, Gus, Hallie and me were forced

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together last November during a Saturday detention that turned into a fight for our lives. In one day we went from being people who didn't even look at each other in the corridor to good friends. Over the past four months we've grown even closer, but there's still a lot we don't know about each other.

With Colette, things are even more complicated. The four of us were in detention that day because we'd treated her badly. Worse than badly. We'd been awful to her. Once detention was over, all we wanted to do was apologise. I never expected to be forgiven, but Colette being Colette, I was. We all were. And since then we've stuck together. Being part of a group is new for me – feels as uncertain as walking across the school field, wondering if there's something lying in wait under the ground. Like a trapdoor could open up beneath my feet.

Something stops me, suddenly. I don't know if I saw some movement in the corner of my eye,

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or my ears picked up the smallest sound, or if it was just a feeling, nothing specific, but my body tenses. I put a hand on Naira's shoulder, turn and meet her eyes, trying to warn her without speaking. I don't know if she senses it too, or if she gets my message loud and clear, but she freezes instantly. We stand shoulder to shoulder, not even breathing, watching the woods around us. The bees inside me thrum quietly, stingers ready. My whole body knows it: we're being watched.

'Where?' Naira says.

'Not sure,' I say. 'Behind, to the left maybe. I think there's someone there.'

I'm too focused, too alert. My eyes are staring so hard that they're blurring. All I see are tree trunks, every one different but at the same time somehow identical, murky, towering, twisting pillars, concealing a million things. I try to relax and breathe in through my nose – the moss and earth scent of the woods always soothes me – but I can't smell anything except the sting inside

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my nose as it sucks in the chill, damp air. The back of my neck is itching, and it takes everything in me not to scratch it like a bear against a tree trunk. I stare into the Dread Wood as branches creak and sway in the breeze. Maybe I can see the start of a silhouette behind a cluster of evergreens, but I could be imagining it.

In these woods, just a few months ago, we were hunted by genetically mutated giant spiders. I know it sounds impossible, insane, unreal. But it happened. And ever since then I've found that my senses are a bit more finely tuned, my nerves strained. And of course Flinch is only making it worse.

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It's Naira who snaps me out of it. 'We should move,' she whispers. 'If there's someone there, they're going to follow, and then we'll know.'

I nod. We turn and walk on.

A twig snaps behind us, and my heart lurches. I feel Naira tense up, but we keep moving as if we haven't heard it. The best thing we can do is

lure them in, so when the ambush comes, we're ready for it. I remind myself that it doesn't matter if someone jumps out, only that we stay strong and don't flinch.

Another snap – from the same direction, but closer. We keep moving, as casually as we can.

'We counter-attack,' Naira whispers. 'Wait till they think they have us, then turn and scream in their face. They'll get a shock, we'll get the flinch points.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'That could work. We'll have to get the timing right, though – save it for the last possible moment when they're practically upon us.'

So we walk, feeling someone at our backs, dying to run or turn around, but not wanting to lose. It's been a couple of minutes, and I've been so fixated on whoever is following us, that I haven't noticed where we're heading until we're there.

'Look where we are,' I sigh, stepping up on to a tree stump.

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‘Great. My favourite spot.’ Naira looks up into the trees looming over us and shudders. We’re in the clearing where the spider monsters attacked us. Three of them – Big Brown, Wolf Grey, Red Skull. It’s where we fought for our lives, where we were impaled with toxic spines. I rub the spot on my shoulder where the biggest one hit me, and where the mark still shows on my skin.

‘What is it that Gus calls it again?’ Naira asks.

‘The Arena of Eternal Horror.’

‘Yeah, that works,’ she sighs.

I realise that we’ve stopped walking. Neither of us wants to go through it.

‘We do it here,’ I say, as I hear the soft crunch of a footstep on the forest floor. So close now. ‘Ready?’

She nods. ‘Ready.’

Instead of saying it out loud, I use my fingers to count to three, holding the first one up where only Naira and I can see it.

One.

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I take a deep breath in, ignore the itch on the back of my neck.

Two.

The breeze drops and it's like the warm breath of our ambusher take its place, grazing the top of my head from above. Whoever it is, they're tall. My mind flicks through the possibilities, trying to work out who it could be.

Three.

I try to brace myself inside without giving anything away on the outside, but at the same time, Naira spins around with a roar. I have less than a second to be frustrated at myself that I didn't make it clear we were going after three, not on three, before I join her, swearing out loud in a way that our teachers would be really disappointed about. But that second has made all the difference. I turn to see a figure running away from us into the trees, and Naira staring after them, pale-faced, looking like she's seen a ghost.

'Come on,' I say. 'They're running, you can

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claim the flinch point.' I make to go after them, but Naira doesn't move.

'I wasn't expecting that,' she says, and her heart is beating so fast that I can see her sweatshirt fluttering on her chest. She swears.

'What?' I say, worrying now. 'What is it?'

She opens her mouth to answer, but a jarring sound suddenly blasts from our pockets and rings out across the Dread Wood and stops her. We both jump. It's the Flinch app, playing the end of the tune that lets us know the round is over.

Pop goes the weasel.

'That was intense,' I breathe.

'Angelo . . .' Naira grabs my wrist. 'I think–'

A noise in the clearing behind us makes us both whirl around. And what we see makes me turn cold. There's someone watching us from a few metres away. They're standing perfectly still, head tipped to one side, looking at us like we're rats in a science lab. I don't know for sure who it is because they're wearing a mask.

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A creepy-ass rubber mask, covering their head and neck. Like some old-school killer-clown thing that would spring out of a jack-in-the-box – cracked white skin, painted eyes, fixed toothy grin, neon-yellow fluff for hair.

I don't know why they're looking at us.

'Round's over,' I shout. 'Didn't you hear?'

The masked figure doesn't move, doesn't speak. They hum, though, the tune for the end of the game. *Pop goes the weasel*.

I take a step towards them. I want to know who they are.

Then from behind us, back where the original stalker was, there's another sound that makes my blood feel like it's going to freeze. It's the tune again, but not hummed.

Whistled.

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