

**Five Nights
at
Freddy's**

**THE
FOURTH
CLOSET**

by

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CHAPTER ONE



“Charlie!” John clambered through the rubble toward the place where she’d been, choking on the dust of the explosion. The ruins shifted beneath his feet, and he stumbled over a block of concrete and caught himself just before falling, scraping his hands raw as he grabbed frantically at the broken surface. He reached it, the place where she’d been—he could feel her presence beneath him. He took hold of an immense block of concrete and hefted it with all his strength. He managed to tilt it from the pile and overturn it, where it fell with a thud, rattling the ground he stood on. Over his head, a steel beam creaked, wavering precariously.

“Charlie!” John cried her name again as he shoved another block of concrete away. “Charlie, I’m coming!” He was gasping for breath, moving the remains of the house with desperate, adrenaline-fueled strength, but the adrenaline was running thin. He set his jaw and

pressed on. His palms slipped as he tried to lift the next block, and when he looked he realized, dazedly, that his hands left streaks of blood wherever they touched. He wiped his palms on his jeans and tried again. This time the broken concrete moved, and he balanced it on his thighs and took it three steps away, then dropped it on a pile of debris. It crashed down onto the rubble and shattered rock and glass beneath it, starting an avalanche of its own, and then, beneath the sounds of wreckage, he heard her whisper: “. . . John . . .”

“Charlie . . .” His heart stopped beating as he whispered back to her, and again the rubble moved under his feet. This time he fell, landing hard on his back, knocking the wind out of him. He struggled to inhale, his lungs useless, then haltingly he began to breathe. He sat up, light-headed, and saw what the collapse had revealed: He was in the little, hidden room in Charlie’s childhood house. Before him was a plain, smooth metal wall. At the center was a door.

It was only an outline, without hinges or a handle, but he knew what it was because Charlie had known, when she stopped running in the midst of their escape, and pressed her cheek against the surface, calling to someone, or something, inside.

“. . . John . . .” she whispered his name again, and the sound seemed to come from everywhere at once, bouncing off the walls of the room. John got to his feet and put his hands on the door; it was cool to the touch. He pressed his cheek to it, just as Charlie had, and it grew colder, like it was draining the warmth from his skin. John pulled back and rubbed the cold spot on his face, still watching the door as the shiny metal began to dull before his eyes. Its color paled

and then the door itself began to thin, its solidity vanishing until it looked like frosted glass, and John saw there was a shadow behind the glass, the figure of a person. The figure stepped closer, the door clarifying until he could almost see through it. He moved closer, mirroring the figure on the other side. It had a face, sleek and polished, its eyes like a statue's, sculpted, but unseeing. John peered through the door between them, his breath clouding the near-transparent barrier, then suddenly the eyes snapped open.

The figure stood placidly before him, the eyes fixed on nothing. They were clouded, and unmoving—dead. Someone laughed, a frantic, mirthless sound that echoed in the small, sealed room, and John looked wildly around for the source. The laughter rose in pitch, growing louder and louder. John covered his ears with his hands as the piercing noise became unbearable. "CHARLIE!" he cried again.

John jerked awake, his heart racing: the laughter went on, following him out of the dream. Disoriented, his eyes darted around the room, then lit on the TV, where a clown's painted face filled the screen, caught in a convulsive fit of laughter. John sat up, rubbing his cheek where his watch had been pressing into it. He checked the time, then breathed a sigh of relief—he had just enough time to get to work. He sat back, taking a moment to catch his breath. On the TV screen, a local news anchor was holding a mic up for a man dressed as a circus clown, complete with a painted face, a red nose, and a rainbow-colored wig. Around his neck was a collar

that looked like it belonged in a Renaissance painting, and he was wearing a full yellow clown suit, with red pompoms for buttons.

“So, tell me,” the anchor said brightly. “Did you already have this costume, or did you make it especially for the grand opening?”

John switched the TV off, and headed for the shower.

He'd been at it all day, but the noise was still unbearable: a rattling, clanging din punctuated by shouts and the intermittent, earthshaking clatter of jackhammers. John closed his eyes, trying to blot it out: the vibrations resounded in his chest, filling him up, and amid the noise the sound of desperate laughter suddenly rang in his ears. The figure from his dream came to him again, just out of sight, and he felt as though, if he just turned his head the right way, he could see the face behind the door . . .

“John!”

John turned: Luis was standing a foot away, giving him a puzzled stare. “I called your name three times,” he said. John shrugged, gesturing at the chaos around them.

“Hey, some of the guys are going out after this; you coming?” Luis asked. John hesitated. “Come on, it'll be good for you—all you do is work and sleep.” He laughed good-naturedly and slapped John on the shoulder.

“Right, good for me.” John smiled back, then looked at the ground as the expression faded. “I just have so much going on right now.” He tried to sound convincing.

“Right, lot’s going on. Just let me know if you change your mind.” He clapped John on the shoulder again and headed back to the forklift. John watched him stride away. It hadn’t been the first time John had turned them down; not the second time or the third; and it occurred to him that eventually they would stop trying. That there’d be a moment when they would all just give up. Maybe that would be for the best.

“John!” another voice called.

Now what?

It was the foreman, shouting at him from the door of his standalone office, a trailer that had been brought onsite for the duration of the construction and sat precariously on a dirt ledge.

John trudged across the construction zone, ducking through a vinyl sheet in the trailer’s doorway. Moments later he was standing across a folding table from the foreman, the plastic wood-textured paneling barely holding to the walls surrounding him.

“I’ve got a couple guys out there telling me you’re distracted.”

“I’m just focused on my job, that’s all,” John said, forcing a smile and trying to prevent his frustration from leaking out. Oliver smiled, unconvincingly.

“Focused,” Oliver mimicked. John dropped the smile, startled. Oliver sighed. “Look, I gave you a chance because your cousin said you’re a hard worker. I overlooked the fact that you walked off your last job and never came back. You know I took a risk on you?”

John swallowed. “Yes, sir, I know.”

“Stop with the ‘sir.’ Just listen to me.”

“Look, I do what I’m told. I don’t understand the problem.”

“Your reactions are slow; you look like you’re daydreaming out there. You’re not a team player.”

“What?”

“This is an active construction zone. If you’re in la-la land, or you’re not thinking about the safety of the other men out there, someone’s going to get hurt, or killed. I’m not saying you have to share secrets and braid one another’s hair; I’m saying you have to be on the team. They have to trust that you’re not going to let them down when it counts.” John gave an understanding nod. “This is a good job, John. I think these are good guys out there, too. Work isn’t easy to come by these days, and I need you to get your head in the game. Because next time I see it in the clouds . . . well, just don’t put me in that position. Understand?”

“Yeah, I understand,” John said numbly. He didn’t move, standing on the shag brown carpet that came with the

portable office as though waiting to be dismissed from detention.

“Okay. Get out.” John went. The dressing-down had taken up the last few minutes of his workday; he helped Sergei put away some of the equipment, then headed to his car with a muttered good-bye.

“Hey!” Sergei called after him. John stopped. “Last call!”

“I . . .” John broke off, spotting Oliver out of the corner of his eye. “Maybe next time,” he said.

Sergei pressed. “Come on, it’s my excuse to avoid that new kid’s place—my daughter’s been begging to go there all week. Lucy’s taking her, but robots creep me out.”

John paused, and the world grew silent around him. “What place?” John said.

“So, you coming?” Sergei asked again.

John took a few steps backward, as if he’d come too close to a ledge. “Maybe another time,” John said, and walked decidedly to his car. It was old and brownish-red, something that might have been cool in high school. Now it was just a reminder that he was still a kid who hadn’t moved on, a mark of status that had become a mark of shame within the space of a year. He sat heavily, a plume of dust shooting out the sides of the car seat as he dropped onto it. His hands were shaking. “Get a grip.” He closed his eyes, and clutched the wheel, steadying himself. “This is life now, and you can do

it,” he whispered, then opened his eyes and sighed. “Sounds like something lame my dad would have said.” He turned the key.

The drive home should have been ten minutes; but the route he took was closer to half an hour, as it avoided driving through town. If he didn’t drive through town, there was no risk of running into people he didn’t want to talk to. More importantly, he didn’t risk running into the people he did want to talk to. *Be a team player.* He couldn’t muster real resentment toward Oliver. John wasn’t a team player, not anymore. For almost six months, he had been coming and going from home to work like a train on a track, stopping to buy food now and then, but not much else. He spoke only when necessary; avoided eye contact. He was startled when people spoke to him, whether they were coworkers saying hello, or strangers asking the time. He made conversation, but he was getting better at speaking while walking away. He was always polite, while also making it clear he had somewhere to be—made obvious, when necessary, by suddenly turning in the opposite direction. Sometimes he felt like he was fading away, and it was jarring, and disappointing, to be reminded that he could still be seen.

He pulled into the lot of his apartment complex, a two-story building not really meant for long-term tenants. There was a light in the window of the manager’s office: he had

tried for a month to track the open hours, then given up, concluding that there was no pattern.

He grabbed an envelope from the glove compartment and headed toward the door. He knocked, and there was no response, though inside he could hear sounds of movement. He knocked again, and this time the door opened partially: an old woman with the skin of a lifelong smoker peered out at him. “Hey, Delia.” John smiled; she didn’t smile back. “Rent check.” John handed an envelope to her. “I know it’s late. I came by yesterday, but no one was here.”

“Was it during business hours?” Delia peered into the envelope carefully as though suspicious of what might be inside.

“The lights were off, so . . .”

“Then it wasn’t during business hours.” Delia bared her teeth, but it wasn’t really a smile. “I saw you hung up a plant,” she said abruptly.

“Oh yeah.” John peered over his shoulder toward his apartment, as though he might be able to see it from where they stood. “It’s nice to take care of something, right?” John tried to smile again but quickly gave up, engulfed in a vacuum of judgment that allowed for no levity. “That’s allowed, right? To have a plant?”

“Yes, you can have a plant.” Delia took a step back inside and looked poised to close the door. “People don’t usually

settle in here, that's all. Usually there is a house, then a wife, and then the plant."

"Right." John looked down at his shoes. "It's just been a rough"—he began, but the door closed with a firm *thunk*—"year."

John considered the door for a minute, then headed to the ground-floor apartment at the front of the complex, now his for another month. It was a single-bedroom unit with a full bath and half a kitchen. He kept the blinds up while he was away, to show that he had nothing: the area was prone to burglaries, and it seemed like a safe bet to telegraph the fact that there was nothing to steal here.

Once inside, John locked the door behind him and carefully slid the chain into place. His apartment was cool and dark, and quiet. He sighed and rubbed his temples; the headache was still there, but he was growing accustomed to that.

The place was sparsely furnished—it had come that way—and the only personal touch he had added to the living room was to stack four cardboard boxes full of books against the wall below the window. He glanced at them with a disappointed familiarity. He went to the bedroom and sat down on his bed, the springs creaking stiffly beneath him. He didn't bother turning on the light; there was enough daylight still leaking through the small dingy window above his bed.