

Five Nights

at Freddy's

FAZBEAR FRIGHTS #11

PRANKSTER

BY

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Some nights Jeremiah felt like he was one of the last cells in a dying body. When he was hired four years ago, straight out of college, the office had been a lively, dynamic place, full of people who were full of ideas. The boss had even shown up regularly back then. The company had produced a couple of moderately successful video games, and everybody felt confident they were on the way up.

Unfortunately, they had a lousy sense of direction.

The past three years had brought an increasing number of layoffs and a decreasing amount of revenue. Jeremiah had been in the process of sending out his résumé to other potential employers when the company was suddenly bought out by Fazbear Entertainment and entrusted with the task of developing their new virtual reality game. Excited about the possibility of working with VR and hopeful that the successful franchise might bring the company new life, Jeremiah had decided to stay.

Besides, he hadn't really wanted to leave. If he left, he might lose Hope.

Hope, in this case, referred to a person, not a quality, though Jeremiah had to admit he pinned a lot of his hopes on Hope. One of the three employees left in the office, Hope possessed every human quality Jeremiah treasured. She was kind and thoughtful without being a pushover. She was smart and resourceful without being arrogant. She was hardworking but fun-loving, too.

He didn't love Hope for her looks, but he still had to admit she was lovely to look at. Men who preferred flashier types might find her a little plain, but in Jeremiah's opinion, these guys were too obvious in their tastes to appreciate Hope's soft, natural beauty. She had shoulder-length ash-blonde hair that fell in soft waves around her keen-featured face. Her eyes were wide-set, brown, and doe-like. Her lips were delicate-looking pink petals. Jeremiah often wondered if they were as soft as they looked.

Since Jeremiah saw Hope every day, he thought that surely someday she would really see him and realize how he felt. He had tried to confess his feelings to her on two

different occasions. The first time, he felt like his mouth had been superglued shut. The second time, he had gotten his mouth open, but then their only other coworker, Parker, had barged in and taken over center stage, as always. Unlike Jeremiah, Parker never had trouble finding words. Sometimes Jeremiah wished he would lose a few of them.

Jeremiah sat at his desk, working on coding the VR game, absorbed in his work. He absentmindedly lifted his thermal mug to take a sip of coffee. As soon as the liquid touched his tongue, he felt like his mouth was turning itself inside out. The taste was unbearably sour, and without even thinking, he spat it out, spraying the computer screen. “What the—”

“Oh, that was too funny!” Parker’s voice boomed from the doorway. He was laughing his usual manic *hee-hee-hee*. “You did a total spit take! I got you good! Here, I got it on my phone. I’ll show you.”

Jeremiah looked up to see Parker, with his too-styled hair and impeccable suit, convulsed in laughter. To make it worse, Hope was standing beside him, giggling with her hand over her mouth. Her laughter, unlike Parker’s, was gentle and lovely, like the peeling of a bell. Jeremiah wished that she was laughing with him over some private joke they had shared instead of laughing at him, caught in another one of Parker’s stupid pranks.

Jeremiah knew he was blushing. He looked down at the mug. An acrid odor floated up from it and made his nose tingle. “What *was* that?”

Parker laughed even harder. “Apple cider vinegar! I sneaked it into your cup while you were in the restroom. Stuff’s supposed to be good for you, actually, but it probably helps to know up front that it’s what you’re drinking.”

Hope shook her head, but she was smiling. “Parker, you’re terrible.” Her sweet tone didn’t sound negative, though. It was as though she *liked* that he was terrible.

“Check this out,” Parker said. He held his phone up to Jeremiah. On the small screen, Jeremiah watched himself working obliviously, then taking in a mouthful of the vile liquid. He watched as his eyes got huge and he spat the vinegar out of his mouth, looking like an ugly stone gargoyle with a spout for a mouth. “Wow,” he said, trying to sound good-natured. “You really got me there.”

“You bet I did!” Parker said, running a hand through his overgelled brown forelock. He showed no signs of stopping his laughter anytime soon. “How long do you think it would take for that video to go viral?”

“Don’t post it,” Jeremiah said, sounding weaker and more desperate than he meant to. He was already embarrassed enough with only two people witnessing the prank.

“Here,” Hope said. She took the phone out of Parker’s hand and tapped the screen. “Deleted. Nobody else needs to see that but us.” Her voice was soft, comforting.

Jeremiah was touched. “Thanks, Hope.”

Parker nudged Hope with his elbow. “Aww, you’re no fun.”

“And you’re very naughty.” Hope dug through her purse, then walked toward Jeremiah’s desk. She held a wrapped peppermint in her outstretched hand. “Here, this will get the nasty taste out of your mouth.”

Jeremiah took the peppermint, letting his fingers graze the palm of Hope’s hand, which was soft and smooth. Her favorite ring—an aquamarine, for her birthstone—winked in the light as she retracted her hand. He would rather take her hand than the mint, but he knew that wasn’t what she was offering. “Thanks,” he said again. He popped the mint into his mouth. It was sweet. Like Hope.

Parker clapped him on the back. “I got you good,” he said again, chuckling. “But no hard feelings, right, buddy?”

Jeremiah looked at Parker’s grinning face, his large, almost unbelievably white teeth. There was something childlike about him, mischievous but not malevolent. He couldn’t stay mad at Parker. “Of course not,” Jeremiah said. “But watch out. I might get *you* next.”

“You think so?” Parker said with one of his *hee-hee-hee* laughs. “That’s some big talk, buddy. Catch me if you can. Many have tried, but *all* have failed!” He backed out of the office as if he were reluctant to turn his back on Jeremiah.

Hope shook her head, smiling. “He’s such a little boy.”

“I was just thinking that exact thing,” Jeremiah said. This fact made him feel strangely happy. He and Hope were so compatible, they even *thought* alike.

“I mean, he’s good at his job and everything, but

emotionally . . . I'd say about eight years old." Hope sighed. There was an awkward silence that Jeremiah failed to fill, and then Hope said, "Well, I guess I'd better get back to work."

"And whose job are you doing today?" Jeremiah asked. This question was a running joke of sorts. Three years ago, Hope had been hired to work the front desk at the office, but as the number of employees decreased, she ended up doing the jobs of several other people. For no additional compensation, of course.

"Mostly the PR director's," Hope said. "Though later I think I get promoted to pretend boss for a while."

Jeremiah sat up straighter. "I'd better look out, then and try to act extra busy."

"You'd better," Hope said, flashing her lovely little smile. "You wouldn't want the pretend boss to have to pretend fire you."

Jeremiah smiled back, wishing he could think of a witty response.

"Well . . ." Hope lifted her hand in a little wave. "I'll see you, Jeremiah."

"I'm sure you will," Jeremiah said. How could Hope not see him? There were only three people on the whole floor.

But at the same time, he knew that Hope didn't *actually* see him. Not the way he wanted her to, anyway. And yet every time she was in the room, his feelings for her seemed so obvious. Whenever she approached, he felt like one of those old cartoon characters whose eyes pop out of their sockets and heart visibly beats out of their

chest. But apparently she didn't see him like that. Or like much of anything at all.

Jeremiah sighed. It was time to get back to work.

Jeremiah lived in a plain, one-bedroom apartment in walking distance of the office. He had lived in much worse places when he was a student—basement apartments with ancient stained carpets and faucets that leaked more than they ran. Everything in this apartment was clean and new and in working order, but it was boring and bland and entirely devoid of character. It was a neat little box with eggshell-colored walls and beige carpet, everything designed to be as neutral and inoffensive as possible. Jeremiah knew that hanging some pictures on the wall and adding some plants or colorful cushions would help matters, but he could never gather the motivation to decorate. Something about the apartment felt temporary, like a hotel room he was staying in for a few nights, even though he had signed a one-year lease.

Tonight as soon as he got “home,” if that's what this place was, he stripped off his business-casual khakis and button-down and changed into a T-shirt and a ratty but comfy pair of sweatpants. He went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, and surveyed his options. He figured he should probably eat the leftover Chinese takeout before it went bad. He grabbed the white paper box, a soda, and a fork, and made his way to the couch. He reached for the remote and channel-surfed while he slurped his noodles cold out of the box.

There was an action movie that looked promising, one

he had meant to see when it was in the theater, but he hadn't gotten around to it. He polished off his noodles and watched the hero, in an expensive black suit, run and jump and beat up bad guys. He briefly pictured himself wearing the same kind of suit and punching Parker square in the face. But he knew he would never do it. He was decidedly not a man of action. He was the kind of guy who sat passively and watched the action unfold in front of him on a screen.

When the movie was over, Jeremiah changed over to a late-night talk show, but he soon dozed off. He dreamed, as he often did, about Hope. He and Hope were at a fancy restaurant with dim lighting and crisp white tablecloths. She was wearing a rose-colored dress with a scoop neck that showed off her lovely collarbones. He was wearing the same black suit as the guy in the action movie. They were eating frou-frou French desserts, pot au chocolat for her and crême brûlée for him, and they reached across the table, feeding each other sweet spoonfuls. They didn't talk because they didn't need to. Even without making a sound, they were in perfect harmony.

When the alarm on his phone went off, Jeremiah started and looked around, disoriented. He had slept in an awkward position on the couch all night. His neck hurt, and he had drooled on the upholstery. And now, like almost every other morning, it was time to make the coffee, to dutifully crunch his way through a bowl of cereal, to shower and put on clean khakis and a polo, all in preparation for another long day of work.

The dream he had enjoyed last night was definitely over.

In the shower, Jeremiah gave himself a pep talk. *Okay, so Hope is completely oblivious to your feelings, and she thinks Parker is hilarious. But you know what? You're a nice guy, and Parker, deep down, is a jerk. Didn't Mom always say that niceness counts? So maybe if you just keep on showing Hope how nice you are, she'll eventually realize she can't live without you.*

The pep talk helped a surprising amount. Jeremiah whistled as he dressed with a little more care than usual. He shaved off a three-day growth of beard and even put a little “product”—though he couldn't remember when or why he'd bought it—in his hair. He regarded himself in the mirror. Not bad. He was no action hero, but he looked nice. And he *was* nice. Nice was key.

He walked to the office with a spring in his step and took the elevator up to the fifth floor. As soon as the doors slid open, he heard the sound of Hope's laughter.

Parker was sitting at his desk showing Hope something on his computer. They were both laughing. Hope was standing right behind him looking at the screen. If either of them adjusted their positions by an inch, they would be touching.

“Hi, guys,” Jeremiah said.

Neither of them turned away from whatever was on the screen.

“Hi, guys,” Jeremiah said, louder this time.

“Oh, hi, Jeremiah,” Hope said, favoring him with a smile. “I didn't hear you come in.”

Nobody can hear much of anything if Parker's around, Jeremiah thought. But he didn't say the words. Nice. That was what he was going to be.