

Five Nights at Freddy's™

TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX

#4 SUBMECHANOPHOBIA

BY

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-85141-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 131

First printing 2023 • Book design by Jeff Shake

B AM, BAM, BAM.
Bam, bam.

“Hey, kid, you’re not supposed to be here.”

“Don’t hit the glass, *please*,” Caden Wykowski called from a few feet away beside the main center of attraction—what the owner called—Freddy’s Sea Life Mechaquarium. It was the only place in Freddy’s Fantasy Water Park that held underwater animatronics. Caden had marveled when he first saw the large swimming mechanical underwater creatures: a sea dragon, two sea serpents, a few sharks, assorted fish, a mermaid, and a vintage scuba diver. The tank also displayed a faux undersea scene with coral, plants, and sea shells.

The little kid must have snuck through the maintenance section to see the animatronics up close. Guests were only supposed to see the mechaquarium from the outer attractions.

“Why won’t the dragon look at me?” the kid whined. “Look at me, dragon!” The little guy wore red swim trunks, a yellow Freddy’s Fantasy Water Park T-shirt, and flip-flops, and likely had wandered off from his chaperone.

“Because the dragon’s not *real*, kid. It’s an animatronic.

Now, go on back to your family. They're probably wondering where you are."

"This place sucks!" The kid slapped the glass again.

"Hey!" Caden stalked toward him. "That's enough."

The kid spat out his chewing gum on the glass and spun around and shot Caden straight in the chest with a clear plastic water handgun—twice—stopping Caden in his tracks, then ran off toward the doorway that he wasn't supposed to enter in the first place.

Caden sighed, wiped a hand down his wet work polo, and watched the big wad of pink gum slowly slide down the tank's glass. He took out a rag from his pocket, leaned down, and wiped off the wad. Then he huffed air on the glass and tried to clean the surface the best he could.

"Hey, there, Wykowski! How's it goin'?"

Caden quickly straightened when he heard Martin Copper's voice. Martin was the owner of Freddy's Fantasy Water Park and his new boss.

Caden gave a nod, clearing his throat. "Ahem—good, Mr. Copper."

Martin smiled and waved a dismissive hand in the air as he made his way to him. "Call me 'boss,' will ya?"

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Caden tried not to stare at his wide grin. “Um, sure, boss.”

Martin Copper was an ordinary middle-aged man, of average height and build with thinning salt-and-pepper hair. The only eye-catching trait about him was his smile, which he’d apparently spent *a lot* of money on. His teeth were large, bright ivory, and capped straight to perfection. When he grinned, it was hard to ignore those pearly whites.

“Walk with me, Wykowski,” Martin commanded, and Caden strolled with him along the narrow pathway around the circular tank. The sea serpents, one faded purple and the other pale pink, slid by Martin as he walked by, their snakelike bodies writhing beside the glass. Roy, his coworker, had nicknamed them Marco and Polo because they often hid in obscure spots in the tank.

“They can be kinda creepy sometimes, eh?” Martin said.

Caden nodded with a forced smile, looking away from the animatronics toward the surrounding water park.

The crowd was sparse for a Friday, but they’d just reopened a week ago. The water park was structured like a giant wheel around the mechaquarium. To the north was the main entrance and the park’s office. To the west were Bonnie’s Sea Ponds, with two kiddie pools and the main diving pool. To the south was Freddy’s Treasures and Eatery, and the pier to get on Chica’s Fairy Boats. To the east were Foxy Island’s Water Slides, and tucked in between the clear-tubed water slides and game area were the employee lounge and maintenance workshop.

Chica’s Fairy Boats flowed along the small stream that separated the water attractions from the mechaquarium. At the moment, the boats were filled with a few kids who were squirming to get as close to the animatronics

as possible. Caden knew that Martin discouraged this. The animatronics were pretty worn down with chipped paint, rusted spots, and a few broken pieces that you couldn't really notice unless you were up close. The water park had been popular years ago but had been closed for years until Freddy Fazbear's Mega Pizzaplex opened two towns over. Martin was hoping to coast off the success of the Pizzaplex, but he hadn't put any money into renovating the place. It was Caden's job to try to keep the prized attractions up and running.

Which was turning out to be harder than he had anticipated.

Managing the mechaquarium was the only job with decent wages he could manage in Meadow Brook without some extra schooling. School hadn't been a pleasant experience for him, and he'd always learned best by working with his hands.

Martin sniffed and pulled at his nose. "I know I told ya already, but I need the tank kept clean, Wykowski. Spotless." Martin talked with his hands. When he was making a point, he'd stab the air or slice in front of him as if wielding an axe. Caden wondered if he knew how intense he seemed. "This mechaquarium is the bread and butter of the whole park. I need it to have a *big* comeback." He bared his teeth and pointed to a copper-colored tooth on the side of his mouth. "I gotta pay off this dental work. Real *copper*, ya get it?"

Caden nodded. "Nice. Um, yeah, Mist—boss. I check the water chemical levels every night and make sure everything's running smoothly along with the other pools."

"Good, good. And when an animatronic breaks, ya gotta fix it right away. No messing around. When the attractions close, the people don't come, and I lose money. And if I lose money, no jobs for anyone. Get it?"

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Caden nodded at the finger pointed in his face. “Understood. I’ll fix it right away, boss.”

“I hired ya ‘cause of your mechanics background stuff. You took those shop classes in high school, right?”

“Yep, took the hands-on mechanic courses, and I had that summer job where I worked on the mini animatronics at Penguin Pizzeria. I’m good with fixing things. My Grams always said so.” Caden glanced into the tank, scanning the swimming animatronics, and scratched his head. He realized he couldn’t see the mermaid. *Uh-oh.*

As if Martin had read his thoughts, he stopped walking and stared into the tank. “*Wait a darn minute.* The mermaid? Where’s the mermaid?” He leaned his flat forehead against the tank’s thick glass and looked down. Caden followed his gaze. There at the bottom of the mechaquarium, laying on a rock, was the mermaid. Her arms were crooked. Her eyes were wide open, with one socket pitch-black as one eyeball was missing. Her mouth was agape as if she had drowned.

“The mermaid’s down. I repeat, Wykowski, the mermaid is down!” Martin shook his head, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck. “Shut it down and get her fixed, gosh darn it.” Then Martin stormed off in a tizzy, waving his hands around in the air. “The more times I close it, the more money I lose,” he muttered. “Get her fixed, Wykowski!”

“Sure, boss,” Caden spoke quietly. “Not a problem. Right away.”

“I can do this,” Caden quietly muttered to himself as he climbed up the ladder to the enclosed platform that surrounded the top of the mechaquarium. “I am fearless.” His Grams always told him that using positive affirmations could help him get through tough situations. It had

helped while growing up, but he was discovering the words to be inadequate for his new job.

“I am brave.” He looked across the park and spotted Roy, closing down Chica’s Fairy Boats and offering free coupons to visitors to play games. Caden reached for the wet suit hanging on a hook and realized his hand was shaking. He curled his hand into a fist and opened it, then grabbed the wet suit used for diving into the mechaquarium. He licked his dry lips and tried to get his breathing under control as he felt his air starting to thin.

He shut his eyes and shook his head. “I can breathe fine. I can do this.” He stripped down to his swim trunks, and pulled on the snug suit and zipped it up. “I’m not a little kid anymore.”

He was nineteen and on his own, with Grams’s bills piling up. She’d raised him since he was six, and it was his responsibility to take care of her house while she stayed in the nursing home. It was the last thing she’d told him when she was being taken away in the ambulance for accidentally hurting herself after an episode of early-onset Alzheimer’s. It was important to her to keep her home, and he wasn’t about to let her down.

He needed this job. So he needed to be able to *do* the job.

He walked over to the mechaquarium controls and shifted the power lever. The hum of electricity clicked off. Then he pushed the button to pull back the blue tarp across the top of the tank. He heard the slow hum as the mechanical cover retreated. The strong chemicals in the water floated up into the air.

Caden slipped his feet into the diving fins, hefted on the heavy air tank, hooked his tool pouch to the carabiner on his suit, and slipped the goggles onto his head. He gazed down into the water and saw the shadows of the

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unmoving animatronics floating below him. A tremor radiated down his back. His feet felt heavy, as if they were glued to the platform. He lifted his legs one at a time to get them moving, then rolled his stiff shoulders.

Whenever he shut down the animatronics' power, the sea creatures stopped in different areas of the mechaquarium. Some were floating at the top, some in the middle, and others sank to the faux seafloor.

This would be only his second time inside the tank. The first time, he'd ducked under the water and swam above the animatronics, too scared to get close to them. He wasn't all that sure he could go farther down to the bottom. But this time he had to. *Had to.*

Hopefully this was just a motor issue. The main operating system of the motors was simple, just a bit of wiring and a reset button that could be pressed in the tank. If anything was seriously wrong, the animatronic would have to be hauled out to be fixed. He was pretty sure Martin would flip out if another animatronic needed to be removed from the tank, though.

Caden sat down on the edge of the platform, slipping his fins into the water. "I can do this. Everything will be fine. *Please let everything be fine.*" He pulled the goggles down over his eyes, put the breathing regulator into his mouth, and before he could stop himself, slid into the cold water. The chill of the water hit him first as he sunk straight down—

Right in front of the face of a shark's wide-open mouth with huge, sharp, rusted teeth.

Caden's eyes widened as a wave of panic slammed into him.

His heart hit against his chest, and he momentarily forgot where he was. All he saw was the terrifying mechanical shark, and black oblivion waiting down its

throat. He waved his arms erratically, trying to get away. He whirled and slammed into the vintage scuba diver, tangling with its arms.

It was grabbing him. *Holding him!*

Ahhhh! His mouth opened with a scream, releasing the breathing regulator. Water gushed down his throat. He shoved up toward the surface, burst through the water, scrambling to the edge, and pulled himself out of the tank.

He rolled over onto the side, choking out water and gagging. His chest felt like it was going to burst open and his body shook with tremors. He ripped off his goggles and took a moment to control his breathing as the blur of terror slowly faded away. Water dripped into his eyes and he blinked. He suddenly realized where he was and what he was doing.

He was at his job at the fantasy water park.

He was diving into the mechaquarium to fix the mermaid.

There was nothing that could hurt him in the aquarium.

He was safe.

“Ah, man,” he muttered to himself as he closed his eyes. *“Stupid, stupid, stupid.”*

Ever since he was younger, Caden suffered from submechanophobia.

The fear of machines while underwater.

After Caden’s parents were lost at sea during a second honeymoon, Caden had entered therapy. When he went to live with Grams and went back to school, everything seemed fine. For a time. He was making his way back into a normal life until the one fated day that he referred to as:

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The Second Grade Field Trip Gone Totally Wrong.

It turned out, his parents' death had left him with an unshakable fear of underwater machines. He didn't even know for certain what had happened to his parents, but his brain had decided that underwater mechanics were involved, and that fear had never gone away. After the field trip incident, he was teased for the rest of his school years. No matter how well he did on the field or how nice or how quiet he was, his classmates had never forgotten. And they, in turn, never let him forget.

For years, Caden wanted to leave, to run away, but he couldn't just leave Grams. So he'd stuck it out, and he'd found ways to cope.

Maybe he had even hoped, wished, dreamed that one day his parents might come home to him.

And he was still terrified and he didn't understand why. During his episodes, it was as if all common sense was ripped out of him and he became this pile of fear and helplessness. His therapist, Dr. Marks, thought he possibly had imagined his parents' plight so vividly that it had caused the phobia. But Dr. Marks had also said it was just a clinical guess.

Just a guess.

It was hard to cure something when you had no idea what it stemmed from in the first place.

Though therapy hadn't given him the answers he needed, it had taught him a few techniques to endure his phobia.

He'd learned to avoid the fear.

Avoidance wasn't always the best way to solve a problem, he knew, but it was the only thing that helped. That was why he loved building and fixing things. When he dug into a project, it distracted him from the harder times in his life.