

FUN HOUSE

Coming May 2012

Chapter 1

He wasn't happy about it but, last night, my partner John Ceepak became a TV star.

Maybe you caught his act on You Tube this morning. The video snip of his guest appearance on the Reality TV show "Fun House" already has like two million hits. Ceepak, the one guy in America who could not care less about being famous, now is.

And it's sort of my fault.

Back in June, at the all-new, all-wood Rolling Thunder roller coaster, I met a girl named Layla Shapiro. She's my age, just turned twenty-six. Very sexy, very sassy. Turns out Layla (yes, her parents really liked that old Eric Clapton song) was visiting Sea Haven – our sunny resort town down the Jersey Shore – over Memorial Day weekend because she was scouting locations for Prickly Pear Productions, this Hollywood outfit that shoots crap for television like "Hot Dog" (an animal talent competition),

"Hot Tub" (something to do with blindfolded strangers finding true love), "Hot Mommas" (housewives picking the perfect pool boy), and "Hot Plumbers Of Brooklyn." Okay, I made that last one up.

"Fun House" is Prickly Pear's newest, most original creation. For one thing, it's their first show without the word "Hot" in the title.

"Think Jersey Shore meets Big Brother meets Survivor," said Layla when she described the show to me on our first date. Ten twenty-somethings (five guys and five girls), who are "totally into" tanning, gyming, and boozing get crammed into a cheesy rental house a block from the boardwalk. Fun ensues. They have weekly competitions, hook up with each other, drink booze, hook up some more, drink more booze, and then, at the end of the summer, the last drunk standing wins two hundred and fifty thousand bucks.

Ceepak's star turn came during last night's SkeeBall competition or, since this is Fun House, their *Brewskee* Ball tournament.

I wasn't there when the cameras were rolling but Ceepak filled me in over breakfast at the Pancake Palace. Plus I have his You Tube moment on my iPod.

Here's what went down:

Tuesday night is family game night at the Ceepak household. But the first week of August is way too hot to stay inside playing Parcheesi without air conditioning. So Ceepak and his wife, Rita, head over to the Coin Castle on Pier One to amuse themselves.

Unfortunately, they decide to roll a few frames of Skeeball, which is sort of like bowling on a ten-foot long inclined lane but, instead of knocking down pins, you try to whirl your polished wooden ball up a ramp into a series of scoring holes. You get ten points for the easy hole, twenty for the next easiest, and so on up to the fifty pointer which is maybe a millimeter wider than your baseball-sized Skeeball. When your turn's up, the machine spits out raffle tickets matching your score, which you can trade in for prizes – once you have like a billion of them.

I say Skeeball is an unfortunate choice for the Ceepaks because that same night the rowdy boozers from "Fun House" stumble into the Coin Castle with their camera crews to play the same game and, being blasted on brewskis, make lame "Hey, check out my balls" jokes to each other.

On lane six, Paulie Bracirole, the guy who calls himself "The Thing" and is always pulling up his T-Shirt to flash his buff bod (he can make his pecs wiggle), is losing to Mike Tomasino, the one who likes to gel his hair with

something stronger than Elmer's Glue so he can blow dry it up into what looks like a very stiff Burger King birthday crown.

In between frames, Paulie and Mike slam back beers, including a several cans funneled directly into their mouths via a beer bong hose. Two of the girls, short-but-top-heavy Soozy K and the trashy one with all the tattoos who calls herself Jenny Mortadella, are cheering them on. I think Soozy K and The Thing are an item. I know they've been hungover together in the hot tub. That was on episode one, which ran a month ago, the first Thursday in July.

Anyway, Paulie doesn't think his machine is playing fair because Mike has ten times more tickets than he does.

"It's rigged," Paulie snarls at the camera, veins, tendons and muscles roping in his neck. "My ball-hop is dented."

The ball hop is a ski jump ramp at the end of the lane that launches the Skeeballs up into the ring zone.

"That's lame," says Mike.

"What's lame?"

"Blaming the ball hop, dude."

"So? You're lamer."

I don't think they hire real writers for Reality TV so the dialogue is never what you might call snappy or punchy.

"Your balls stink, Paulie," shouts Jenny Mortadella. She and Mike Tomasino have an alliance, another thing that's always good to have on Reality TV shows involving competitions. Means you can stab the other contestants in the back until it's time to stab each other.

When Jenny says that, Paulie, of course, gets furious. His face, which is already bright orange from when he passed out in the "Fun House" tanning bed (Episode Two), goes all the way to Oompa-Loompa.

"Shut up, bitch!" On TV, it comes out "Shut up, BLEEP." The Fun House kids talk trash all the time so their show has more beeps than dialing a phone call to China.

"Who you calling a BLEEP, BLEEP?" says Jenny.

"You, you BLEEPING BLEEP." At this point, Paulie Bracirole hikes up his muscle-man T-Shirt to wiggle his nipples. "You see this bod? I am The Thing you want. The Thing you need."

"I think I'm going to puke," said Jenny. And she means it. Not because her obnoxious housemate is wiggling his tuning knobs at her. She's done a few too many Jell-o shots.

She races off camera.

When the camera swings right to follow her, it picks up Ceepak two lanes down with Rita. He's off-duty, so he's dressed in his civilian clothes, which look an awful lot like his uniform clothes except the cargo pants on his days off are khaki-colored and the polo shirt is white instead of navy blue.

Since I know Ceepak pretty well (he's been my partner on the SHPD for a couple years now), it's easy for me to quickly read the expression on his face when it flashes across the frame: agonized disappointment. His family's old-fashioned game-night fun has been ruined by an unanticipated invasion of reality show drunks and their ever-present camera crews.

Ceepak, of course, knows a thing or two about invasions. He's a former MP who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and won just about every medal a soldier can and still come home alive. He moved to Sea Haven when an old Army buddy offered him a break from the mayhem of war with a "quiet, peaceful, police job" down the Jersey shore.

There is no peace or quiet in the Coin Castle.

The loudmouths two lanes down are starting to work Ceepak's last nerve. Since he still keeps his hair high and tight in a military brush cut, it's easy to see his jaw joint popping in and out near his ear.

My partner is a six-two tower of power with more muscles chiseled on his chest than The Thing but he very rarely pulls up his T-Shirt unless he needs to tear it off to rip it into a tourniquet. One time, over in Iraq, when his convoy stopped in a Sunni neighborhood south of Kirkuk, a roadside bomb went off and all hell broke loose. Ceepak lost his T-shirt and one leg of his pants making improvised bandages for two of his buddies. Ceepak, of course, never told me about his heroic actions; I found the story doing a Google search on him.

The camera swings back to Paulie and Mike.

Mike is hooting and pumping his fist because his Skeeball machine just spewed out another long strip of raffle tickets.

"Screw this," says Paulie. He scoops up a bunch of wooden balls and cradles them against his chest. He hops up onto the machine so he can march up the ramp toward the scoring holes.

"Yo," says Mike. "What you doin'?"

"Beating you, bro!" Paulie starts stuffing balls down the 50 hole. The scoreboard dings and dongs. Digital numbers flips like crazy. "Yo, Soozy. Toss me some more balls!"

Soozy K giggles and jiggles. The girl, who probably wore a bikini top to her high school prom, has lots to jiggle. Some of it, I'm sure, is the original equipment; the rest looks like a pair of inflatable water wings sewn in under her skin.

"Who's BLEEPING winning now, BLEEP?" Paulie screams as Soozy tosses balls up to him. He slam-dunks like a maniac.

"Yo," says Mike. "That's cheating!"

"This is Skeeball, BLEEP. There are no BLEEPING rules!"

Ceepak is off camera but I figure he's crinkling his eyes down into narrow slits when Paulie says that because John Ceepak lives his life in strict compliance with the West Point honor code: He will not lie, cheat, steal or tolerate those who do.

"BLEEP you," says Mike as he climbs up on *his* machine. Totally wasted, he slips on the slick surface, falls backward, and bangs his head. Hard.

"Ohmigod," gasps Soozy. "He's BLEEPING bleeding!"

A camera zooms in on Mike as he sat in his Skeeball lane holding the back of his head.

"He's BLEEPING bleeding!" Soozy shouts again. Then she burps.

"Who gives a BLEEP?" says Paulie, who discovers he can just jam his arm in and out of the fifty hole without a ball to ring up more points.

That's when Ceepak enters the frame. The camera is behind him, so you can't see his face, just his buzz cut. First, he pulls a sterile gauze pack out of the hip pocket of his cargo pants and tossed it to Mike Tomasino.

"Apply that to your head wound, sir."

Next he whips out his SHPD badge and calls out to Paulie.

"Sir?"

Paulie, who has his back to Ceepak, totally ignores him. Keeps pumping his fist in and out of the fifty hole. Bells ring. Whistles whoop.

"Sir?" Ceepak raises his voice. "Sea Haven Police."

"Where?" Finally, the drunken muscleman swirls around. One last wooden ball is gripped in his right fist.

"Please climb down off the Skeeball machine."

"Why?"

"You are drunk, sir."

"So? It's the Jersey Shore. Everybody's BLEEPING drunk."

"I'm not, I assure you," says Ceepak.

"Aw, BLEEP you, your BLEEPING BLEEP wipe."

"Please step down from the Skee-ball machine, sir."

Believe it or not, instead of doing as officially instructed, Paulie tugs up his T-Shirt again. Points at his rippling man breasts. "Yo? You see this? I am The Thing you wish you could be."

"No, sir. You are not. You are drunk and disorderly. You are also in direct violation of several municipal codes not to mention the rules of fair Skee-ball competition."

In the background, I hear police sirens racing toward the boardwalk. I'm guessing Rita, Ceepak's wife, dialed 9-1-1 while Ceepak marched over to deal with The Real Idiots Of New Jersey.

Ceepak turns to Mike Tomasino, who is moaning and groaning, pressing the patch of gauze to the back of his head, trying not to ruin his up-do.

"Keep applying pressure to the wound, sir," says Ceepak. "Paramedics are on the way."

More bells ding and dong. Somebody hit a jackpot.

Ceepak and the camera swing back to Paulie's lane. He is, once again, jamming his arm in and out of the fifty hole.

"Sir?"

"What?"

"Cease and desist."

Paulie spins around.

"BEEP you, jarhead!"

And he chucks that wooden ball straight at Ceepak's head.