

Chapter One

“So, it's the big money moment. Sharna, you've decided to gamble. You may leave here tonight with absolutely nothing, straight to the hole, collecting sweet piffle. You could have walked away with a guaranteed fifty thousand pounds, but you've rolled the dice and decided to risk everything. Let's see if you get the lot...or the drop!”

A single moment, frozen in time. Framed in the glare of the flashbulbs that scorched its shadow into the wall, a pair of huddled lovers, spooning with a death-grip tightness and gawped at by Pompeii's apathetic tourists.

“Alright, I must ask for absolute silence in the studio.”

If you replay something enough times, it loses all meaning. Like when a record skips, the needle scratching out the same fragmented line, over and over, the words and syllables all jumbling together until you feel like you've forgotten how to speak English. Where does one word end and another begin? It's all just static. The white noise of memory on memory, the infinite re-runs in your mind, take after take, each nuance, each vocal inflection and intake of breath repainted so many times that its layers are thick enough to climb up like a ladder into the sky, pulling the saints and harpists out by their halos, tossing them overboard and hearing them as they fall behind you back down into the sin and the filth. That's when you punch God right in the windpipe for endowing human beings with the ability to retain knowledge of past events.

“Prrrrrrrp”

...

“Hey, aren't you the guy...”

I didn't answer. I just snatched my change off of the counter and headed back out into the street.

“It is you...” I heard from inside, as I speed-walked away, pulling my hoodie tightly over my head, humming to myself so that I wouldn't hear the rest of the sentence before I'd gotten out of earshot.

I'm used to pretending I haven't heard. Ignoring people, or telling them they're mistaken. These past months it's become an instinctive reaction. The little kick after the doctor hammers you on the kneecap, the retch when the fingers tickle the back of the throat. Denial has become my job. Denial from what happened, denial of who I am, and *why* I am who I am. As far as callings go, it's a world apart from the one I had in my previous life, the job that landed me in this situation in the first place. But lately I'd come to realise an important thing. I wasn't alone. What at first seemed like a truly unique hell was actually more of a modern disease whose infection, while potent and usually fatal, was growing as quickly as its list of potential victims, stalking pages both paper and electronic, and waiting to pounce on the soft throats of its next casualty.

That was the day, the day that I made the first step into putting everything right, into making them all forget. I fed the numbers into my phone, international prefix and all, and then I waited. I hoped I hadn't gotten the time zones wrong. Maybe I was calling while he was asleep. If he was anything like me, his nights were spent pacing a trough through his floor, crying, or trying to dull the pain with a series of increasingly cheap bottles of alcohol and prescription medication. I don't remember sleep any more than I remember dignity.

“Hello?” said the gruff mid-west American accent.

“Oh, hi,” I said, suddenly nervous, suddenly fumbling for the words I'd already played out in my mind more times than I cared to mention. “Listen, this is going to sound weird, but am I by any chance speaking to Brian Jessop?”

“No,” he said, immediately hanging up. *Yes*, I thought, clenching a celebratory fist to my chest. It's him. His “no” only confirmed what I'd suspected in the first place, that we were both sufferers of the same twenty first century disease, and through each other, we could work towards a cure. I redialled the number, and the

call was picked up by a machine, a nondescript, Stephen Hawking computer voice telling me to leave a message.

“Hi, it's me again. Listen, Brian, whatever you think I am, I'm not. My name is...I'm...I'm Jimmy Fartpants,” I said, pausing to let the information sink in to both him and myself. I'd spent so long denying who I was, hearing it coming out of my own lips was like looking into the mirror and having my reflection spit at me. “Jimmy Fartpants. I mean, that's how you'd know me, if you know me at all, which you might, considering who you are. Anyway, I figure we have a sort of...common interest. I think I can help you. If you're interested, which I sincerely hope you are, could you call me back on...”

“Jimmy?” said a voice.

“Yeah.”

“*The Jimmy Fartpants?*”

“One and the same, afraid so,” I said. The silence that hung in the air was like the silence that follows one man catching another masturbating into his own face.

“What do you want?” he said, finally.

“The way I see it, both of our lives have been taken from us, through no fault of our own. We both have the same problem.”

“You mean the whole...”

“Right. I've got my thing, you've got yours. We're not the only ones either. Out there, there are lots of people like us. Dozens, maybe hundreds, all locked inside their little boxes. It's a death sentence. We're all sat on death row, just waiting. I just want you to know, we're sat there together, and I've got the keys to let us out.” Brian released a dismissive gust of air through his nostrils.

“What do you want to do, form a support group?”

“Something like that,” I replied, “all you have to do right now is listen. A minute of your time, that's all I'm asking. Sixty seconds to hear what I have to say. I have a way to put an end to all of this.”

“Alright, go.” So, then I told him I had the plan, the plan that would save us all.

...

I'd started as a second-tier children's TV presenter. On the secondary digital channel at first, but working my way up to

presenting the main studio links within the space of two arse-kissing, networking years. I was all spiky hair, white teeth and tight t-shirts, and the on-screen chemistry I'd shared with a fast-talking puppet – a purple meerkat with constantly revolving pupils and the manner of a coked up used car salesman – had got me spotted by the higher ups, who groomed me for something bigger. Eventually I made the move into grown-up television, landing a spot presenting the backstage program of a big reality show. It was all the stuff that didn't quite make the cut of the main program: psycho contestants, teary back stories and eccentrics, but with a nice amount of creative free-reign that enabled me to put my own stamp on things and further raise my stock. Then came *The Red Chair*. Pitched as the next *Weakest Link* or *Millionaire*, the concept of *The Red Chair* involved a complicated series of transparent jail cells, shackled contestants locked out of rounds and unable to win points, and a final round involving a mock electric chair. Importantly, it also contained two popular elements that had proved crucial in the success of other shows; namely the ability of contestants to fuck each other over, and a finale involving an all-or-nothing gamble. I made it down to the final two for the host position. It was between me and a former radio DJ who'd mostly just nicked his ideas from Danny Baker, but was popular among university students who didn't know better. After he was caught huffing on the gas from a rape alarm in the back of a rickshaw, the job was mine. What I hadn't realised at the time was that the only reason I'd been hired over a more bankable name was that nobody thought the show would work.

Tucked away in the early afternoon timeslot that appealed to students, stay at home parents, pensioners and the terminally unemployable, *The Red Chair* quickly became a word of mouth sensation. Its unique brand of rapid-fire general knowledge and Stanford Prison Experiment-style social experimentation positioned the show, along with the host, higher up the food chain than anyone could have imagined. I liked to think that my rapport with the contestants played somewhat of a part in the success. Here I was, fresh faced, young-pup presenter, suddenly fronting the fastest rising, blog-buzzing, water cooler-chatter show on TV. All eyes were on me, but I didn't mind the pressure, I *thrived* on it. This, I thought, this is where I belong, in the living rooms of the nation, in the newspaper gossip columns in the work lunch room, papped in the street with my minor celebrity girlfriend – I was finally home. The channel heads didn't agree, especially when the speedy rise brought about a move to the

lucrative quiz show teatime slot. They felt the show could do with a bigger host, a familiar, comfortable name that could really push it into the ratings stratosphere when it went into prime-time. It was make or break, the lot or the drop. I had to prove that I could perform - that I belonged.

The loudest rumbles through the corridors of power were rumours of the notion to replace me with Billy Harris. Harris had become infamous himself, as the beloved host of a popular 1970s battle of the sexes game show that pitted married couples against each other, entitled *Beat Your Wife*. Unfortunately for Billy, a string of tabloid revelations throughout the eighties revealed that he'd seemingly used the title of his show as a coda for his own life, and regularly battered all three of his wives throughout their stormy marriages. The pun-hungry media lapped it all up like exhausted dogs. For a period, you couldn't pass a newsagents on a Sunday morning without seeing the blue, swollen faces of one of Harris' ex-wives adorning the front pages, with more tell-all stories about how he'd bitten her on the knees while she slept, or forced her to spend her birthday beneath an upturned garbage can which he sporadically struck with a hammer. However showbusiness being what it is, one tearful, regret-filled television interview and an ironic university tour reinvention later, old Billy's sins had been forgiven and forgotten, and all he was missing was a star vehicle to drive him back to the top of the light entertainment highway where he belonged, as a returning hero from Broken Britain's once glorious past. *TRC* was that vehicle, but unfortunately for Billy Harris, a precocious young hooligan was already strapped into the driving seat.

When we first made the move from taping a week's worth of shows in a single day to the live slot, I knew it was as much a test of me as it was the format, and that they'd all be watching and waiting — waiting for a slip up, waiting for the ratings to drop so that Billy could swoop in and rightfully take over, while I got swept under the rug like a metrosexual Pete Best. It hadn't happened though. The first four shows went perfectly, a Monday-through-Thursday that cemented me as the right man for the job, and flipped a middle finger at the doubters. That's not to say I just calmly sailed through. In the run-up to the first live show, I became convinced that it was possible for a case

of anxiety to be so powerful it could drop a man dead where he stood, and I walked through those studio doors with sleep that barely hit hours in double figures for the week. Almost as soon as the ominous opening theme to Monday evening's show had ended, and I'd sternly fixed the camera with my introductory line, the frothing waters calmed, and I had everything under complete control. I was a total professional.

Then I met Sharna from Coventry.

Chapter Two

While she didn't have a direct impact on my fate per se, Sharna from Coventry's presence at my side when it all happened made her guilty by association. Her face was burned onto my memory that day, like that of an ex-lover, or a child who bounces off the windscreen as you text your way through a red light. I remember everything about her. Her light blue t-shirt, her flabby, moley arms, and the way she doubled over at the waist in laughter when, for some inexplicable reason I'll never understand, I farted.

That was it. The end of me. Right at the knife-edge, vinegar-strokes apex of the show's tightly orchestrated, finely honed rubber band of tension, the deathly silent studio, the tight close-up on both of our faces, the nation, dinners on laps, teetering on the edges of their shabby armchairs, every sinisterly winking star in perfect, one in a trillion alignment.

“Alright, I must ask for absolute silence in the studio.” I had no idea at the time that that would be the last thing to come out my mouth that anybody would take seriously. The instant after I spoke, I broke wind with what Kenneth Williams might have described as alarming ferocity. It rippled like the rude noises you make as a child by placing both palms over your mouth and puffing with your cheeks. A cartoonish, honking great parp of a trump that almost blew a hole through the back of my trousers, echoing around the acoustics of the studio like a bag of marbles dropped onto the polished floor. As soon as it broke free, I prayed that the mics hadn't picked it up, that I'd be able to continue without anyone noticing, but the crowd's reaction was almost instantaneous. I say almost. There was a half-second void, the calm before the madness. I'd say it felt longer, but not much, and only because I felt my career flash before my eyes. Then, as one, the world before me erupted into laughter. Hysterical, knee slapping laughter, deep from the belly, uncontrollable, contagious, Newton's cradle, self perpetuating and circulating, rocking the seats free from their bolts, and spilling lap-trays onto living room carpets. Wigs slipped from heads, dentures from mouths, and the earth shook beneath my feet. From the firmly regulated audiences who are forbidden to make a sound unless a man with an earpiece and a pair of waving hands tells

them they must, to the gallery in the background of the producers furious berating, came a riot of laughing and catcalling. The producer's raging demands to carry on and wrap up the show were like a hateful, schizophrenic voice inside my own head.

“You're blowing it! You're fucking blowing it! Fifty seconds to commercial, you bollock!”

I fumbled for words, desperate to regain my composure, to see out the final minute with some vague semblance of professionalism, but the moment the first fits of laughter had filled the studio, the taboo was broken, and all bets were off. Even the camera-crew and floor manager were tear-stained and hunched at the stomach. There was no way back. I stuttered and stumbled as the red light on the camera went out, and we went off the air, the credits rolling on a single of my slack-jawed death rattle. Off to the side of the stage, jobbing warm-up man, Micky “Micky” Sunbeam just shook his head and walked off into the shadows.

“You fucking motherfucker! You shit! Stupid shit! You cunt! You dirty fucking fuck...” I pulled the earpiece out, leaving it to dangle off the side of my head, and began wandering shell-shocked back to my dressing room, past the audience, past crew members with damp cheeks and chests tight from laughing. Everyone seemed so distant, as if the moment I released my brown air, the world got a little farther away, just out of reach, the wrong side of the glass at the reptile house. I could still hear the producer, his distended voice buzzing from the earpiece like an angry bee. I knew that if they'd heard it up there in the gallery, that meant that the live audience had heard it too. I'd effectively just guffed directly into the living rooms of over five million people, while they were eating their tea. Maybe fifteen years ago this wouldn't have been a big deal, but in the era of crystal clear HDTVs the size of a wall and 6.1 digital surround sound, it was tantamount to breaking in to each and every one of those five million homes and squatting down to ripple my anus straight into their gaping mouths. Christ, I thought, anyone with a big enough subwoofer will have *felt* it. Even the blind, I remember thinking at the time. *Even the blind.*

In the time it took to get changed and leave the studio, my voice mail was already full of messages from friends or people I'd pressed the flesh with on my way up, who made raspberry noises

down the line and giggled, or asked if it was an intentional way of resigning and making a bit of press, knowing that they'd wanted to oust me anyway. Nobody even bothered with the kindly pretence that my career hadn't just gone down in a ball of shitty flames, and that everything was going to be okay.

I don't remember much about the car ride home. The driver later told a newspaper that I was "catatonic," and that his silent passenger had spent the journey "chewing on his own wrists." As soon as I got inside, I necked a handful of sleeping pills and dove on top of the bed, hoping to be swallowed up by the duvet, pulled underneath and drowned in the sheets, and hoping that things would seem better in the morning. They did. For about ten minutes, where the events of the previous day barely felt real. It was like having a nightmare about being naked in a public place, and awaking in the safety of your own bed, alone and encased in sweaty cotton. Could I have gotten away with it? There's no way it could be as bad as I remembered. Nothing is that awful. Then I checked the internet.

It was not a good weekend. There was a lot of drink, a lot of crying, and a lot more of trying to convince myself that it was no big deal. It's odd how the brain copes in the face of apprehension. It locks into a routine of tireless mental back and forth where you constantly switch between positions, convincing yourself things aren't as bad as they seem, backing it up with a thousand reasons, exhibits A through Y in ziplocked bags, irrefutable proof that *this* way is so, and only an idiot would think otherwise. Soon enough, you'll take the stand for the opposing viewpoint and deliver an impassioned argument for the case that actually, *that* way is so. Black, white. Malignant, benign. A smile, a smirk. A heart, a bloodied fist. The internal see-sawing eventually leaves you with no respite. Even when you're inside the white, bathed in light and exonerated by your cold, hard facts, telling yourself everything's going to be okay, you're now aware and alert that in a few minutes, the black is coming again, and you can no longer hide from the threat of its arrival. The white, the right, the benign and the free, it all becomes a shabby cardboard shelter, underneath dark and growling skies. When you do find something in those memories, a soothing snapshot from a new perspective, you also see that the walls are thin and buckling, and a crack of thunder shakes the ground underfoot, and you realise that the only thing you'll ever know for certain is that you'll never find peace.

Maybe that's what people are referring to when they use the word 'acceptance.'

I knew that they couldn't fire me if they couldn't talk to me, so I sat in the bathroom in the dark, curtains drawn, phones off the hook, with the taps in the sink and bath running so that the words "I didn't hear the doorbell" wouldn't be a lie. If you're not listening to the outside world, you can't hear them saying anything bad, ergo, they're saying nothing at all. In my madness, I clung on to the hope that everything would just die down, given time, and that I'd be nothing more than a five minute wonder. Hell, maybe Pete Doherty had done something more newsworthy over the weekend, and relegated me to a non-story.

"Please be dead," I thought, "please be found blue and still, a throat clogged with sick and a needle hanging out of your eyeball. That would solve all my problems."

Monday, noon, and selfish Pete Doherty was still walking around, inflating his lungs up and down, so I had no choice but to arrive at the studio, as I was, bleary eyed from a sleepless weekend spent perched underneath the sink, pretending not to hear the rabble of photographers camped outside of my flat. I ran through the day on autopilot, avoiding eye-contact like Jason in Medusa's lair, and hiding in my dressing room until the last moment. In the make-up chair, the flirtatious chit-chat I'd share with Karen as she'd powder the shine off of my forehead was nowhere to be found, so I spent twenty minutes trapped in front of my own reflection, both of us trying to ignore the rhythmic water-torture of the elephant in the room loudly banging its enormous cock against the underside of its body.

Come air-time, and I was a wreck. The show was an absolute shambles, and with the added publicity from the weekend's press, forwarded emails, ripped footage embedded into blog posts and MySpace walls, office and pub gossip, and topical jokes on TV panel shows, a couple of million extra people were there to see everything collapse around my ears. I fucked up questions, fell over my words, and at one stage, tripped over my own feet when walking the contestant from area of the stage to another. I could feel my career

slipping away from me, sailing over the edge of the world in a boat carried on the billowing winds of my arse. When we went to the first break, I was sweating profusely, and had to restrain myself from taking a swing at Karen when she ran on to mop me down. At the finale, as I asked for silence from the studio audience, I braced myself for the creaking sound of an expectant nation leaning forwards in their seats. I listened. They listened. In this newest patch of yawning silence, the producer bellowed into my eardrums, calling me all manner of things, from a cunt to a shit and finally, just a series of unintelligible guttural sounds. Five minutes later he was calling me into his office to let me go.

The official press release said that I'd been released from my contract due to "emotional exhaustion," although the headline writers disagreed.

Coming Up Trumps

Host Left Fart-Broken by Trotting Bot

Quiz Dis-ASS-ter

Parping Host Skids Offscreen

Career in the Toilet

Variations on *He Blew It* were the most popular choice, and a few managed to crowbar in stuff about getting the *Bum's Rush*, but a lot of the media attention quickly focussed on the hiring of my replacement, Billy Harris, who was *Riding On The Winds* of my failure.

As for me, I was now Jimmy Fartpants. Branded for life like fucking cattle. Jimmy Fartpants. Or Fartguy. Or any number of things people called me in the street until I stopped going out altogether. One time, someone called me Mark. I thought they'd confused me with someone else, until off my look he said "short for skidmark," and disdainfully laughed me into the distance. The whole experience left me so self-conscious about anything leaking out from down there that I didn't shit at all for the first three weeks. I still can't take a dump if I think there's anyone else within five hundred yards. It was as dark a period in my life as anyone should have to endure. The complete loss of identity. Someone else, the other person I now was, just thrust upon

me by the public, all because I'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and my bottom had gone into business for itself. It's a perfectly normal thing, we all do it, I just happened to do it on TV.

When I was a kid, my grandfather used to fart all the time. He'd squeeze one out and say that his bum was haunted. It was like his catchphrase. One time, he accidentally followed through, and my nan, quick as a flash, called through from the kitchen, "You finally got that exorcist in then, Charlie?"

After a lot of months, a lot of things I don't care to talk about or even remember, I turned on the TV for what felt like the first time in a million years. That was when I realised I wasn't alone. That was when I started formulating the plan.

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