

Chapter 1

Brian Hunter sucked the end of his ball point pen, drummed his nicotine stained fingers on his completely bare desk and studied me intently from behind his heavy rimmed, thick lensed, glasses

'Nice to meet you Mr Gable?' this was addressed in broad Brummie tones, as a question rather than a greeting

Brian's office, a rented pair of rooms above a hairdressers in a parade of shops in Selly Oak was, like the desk, bare, not uncluttered or tidy just bare. Veronica, the secretary, receptionist, tea maker and, judging by the photos on the walls around Brian's office, the firms main attraction had made me stand and wait in 'Reception', the smaller of the two rooms, whilst Brian finished with his first interviewee, a small stocky man with a bald head

'He's got no chance' Veronica said, in full ear shot of the man

'He's got to be big' she chewed her gum and twisted her hair between her fingers and watched the applicant shuffle dejectedly out of the door

'.....and hairy, big and hairy, see, that's what they like, the ladies, especially the old ones' she blew a bubble and eyed me up and down

'Are you.....?'

'Hairy?, yes' I said anticipating the question

'And big?' I stared at her, standing in front of her desk, 5'11" tall, I wondered if she had impaired vision, fortunately our conversation was cut short when Brian asked Veronica to 'send in the next contestant' his little joke I guessed, although neither Veronica or I laughed

'Please take a seat' he continued 'can you tell me anything about yourself?' his

script was well rehearsed, if a little predictable. Like Veronica's reception room, there was no where to sit, Brian having the only chair, and so I just stood in front of his desk with my hands behind my back and wondered, not for the first time, why I was here

'Oh, yeh, sorry about that Mr Gable, the office furniture has been delayed, in Customs' he put down his pen carefully and looked up at me above his glasses, as though he was about to disclose one of his inner most secrets 'it's Scandinavian you know'

'Oh, I see' I said

'You can have my chair if you like Mr Gable' Brian stood up with the maximum of fuss

'Clark, please Brian, call me Clark, but if I have the seat you'll have to stand!'

'That's all right, I've been sat down all day' I glanced at my wrist watch, there was no clock on the wall, it was 10.00 O'clock in the morning

'You have a seat and I'll get Veronica to make us some coffee' he poked his head round his door

'Miss Sommes, can we have two coffee's please'

'Make it yourself, and there's only tea and UHT milk' I had, obviously, been wrong to include tea making in my imagined list of Veronica's duties

'Ha, ha, she likes her little joke does our Veronica, Mr Gable'

'Clark' I corrected, lowering myself into Brian's chair behind his desk

'Clark, yes, very good, like the actor hey, so tell me Clark, why do you want this job'

My mother was a big fan of the silver screen and it had been her idea to name her precious son after the star of 'Gone with the Wind'.

It was hard to take Brian seriously, it wasn't his lack of authority over

Veronica, or the inadequate furnishings of his office or his exaggerated Birmingham dialect, it was his appearance. The heavy black rimmed glasses sat deep on his purple strawberry nose, the product of cheap spirits drunk in large quantities over many years I guessed, his swarthy complexion and thin black greasy hair were all set off by blue lips. He had inadvertently sucked the ink from his ball point pen, so that now he resembled a heart attack victim.

'Is the business going well Brian?' I asked, avoiding his question and stifling a laugh

'Brilliantly' he enthused his parted blue lips revealing blue teeth 'Things are really taking off'

'It's just that when we spoke at the start of the summer you said that you were looking to take on a lot more staff if things took off' I looked round the room at the numerous colour Polaroid's of Veronica, dressed (or undressed to be more accurate) as a nurse, police woman, nun and schoolgirl, Brian followed my gaze

'We've had a whole stream of boys and girls, they just haven't stayed for long'

'So, how many people on the staff now?' I asked

'Including me and eh, Miss Sommes, that would be eh, two'

'Oh I see' I said adopting the role of interviewer rather than interviewee, I rested my elbows on the desk and my head in my hands

'And I couldn't help noticing Brian that the phone hasn't rung once since I've been here today!'

'Things are a little quiet today' Brian sounded apologetic, he put his hands in his stained flannel trousers and kicked at the threadbare patterned carpet with his grey, leather effect, moccasins

'So how many bookings have you got for the week Brian' I could see I was wasting my time 'Lips Unlimited' which advertised under the catch phrase.....

Your satisfaction is our pleasure

.....would not, after all, provide the level of casual employment I needed to sustain me through another year at University

'Well, there's the retirement do at the bus depot'

'That'll be a repeat engagement will it Brian?' I had noticed a thank you letter from the Birmingham Bus Company pinned above Veronica's desk in reception, it had stuck in my mind because a line from it read.....

Many thanks for giving Alf a good send off, you'll be pleased to hear his injuries were only minor

.....and I had tried to imagine what his injuries, minor or otherwise, might have been or more interestingly how they had been caused

'Oh no, not the Bus depot, you're right that was last week' Brian was sweating now and pacing up and down, as the office measured no more than 10' x 10' this involved all of two steps in each direction, his light grey Crimpoline shirt had large, and growing, damp patches under the armpits and his tie seemed to be tightening around his neck

'Anything else?' I was making conversation rather than looking for answers, my original thoughts of a glamorous part time career as an entertainer following in the footsteps of my name sake, albeit performing as a 'Kiss-O-Gram' dressed as a gorilla, had been dashed and now all I really wanted to do was get out of Brian's cramped little office

'Well to be honest Clark' Brian sat on the desk and leant towards me. This was unpleasant, he was unpleasant, the unsightly sweaty armpits were accompanied by a waft of BO, I leant back in Brian's chair

'The business is in a bit of a slump at the moment, our advertising budget has been hit rather badly by the outlay on the costumes and then there's our little logistical

problem' he continued, standing up again and fumbling in his pockets. I was relieved when his obscene rummaging eventually ended with the production of a packet of cigarettes and a lighter

'Cigarette?' I smoked occasionally but the thought of taking anything associated with Brian's lower regions and putting it in my mouth was more of a deterrent to smoking than any billion pound Government campaign

'No thanks, what logistical problem?' Brian took a deep pull on his B&H and exhaled a huge cloud of smoke through his mouth, nose and ears it looked like

'Veronica, Miss Sommes, my lovely assistant, she does the engagements right'

'Yes' I said, the fact that Veronica did the 'jobs' was evident from the tacky Polaroid's, but lovely was an adjective I would not have associated with Veronica, scrawny (she was pencil thin, with virtually no bust) belligerent and unhelpful would all work but lovely took a rose tint on even Brian's milk bottle bottomed glasses

'And I host the engagements, right!'

'Yes, I see'

'The problem is if I'm out with Veronica there's no one here to answer the phone'

'Why can't she do the jobs on her own?' I waved my hand in front of my face to clear a breathing space in the smoke filled air

'Oh no that would never do, and they're engagements not jobs if you don't mind, it wouldn't be very professional see' I obviously needed more convincing so Brian continued, breathing smoke out through his blue stained teeth as he spoke

'And the clients can get a little excited sometimes' the thought of even the most desperate punter getting excited over Veronica was hard to believe, the men in the Polaroid's looked embarrassed, frightened or just plain bored but not excited

'And she can't drive, *very well*' a light went on in my head

'Does a car come with the job then?' I asked, my interest suddenly aroused. I lived on the wrong side of town and a car would be a huge benefit to me for the commute to and from University. My grand plan was to fit the Kiss-O-Gram engagements around my lecture schedule during the day and supplement the evening engagements with the odd spot of bar work.

'There is a company vehicle provided, yes'

'And would I be allowed to use it when I wasn't working?'

'We could make some mutually acceptable agreement' said Brian adopting the mannerisms of a big city deal maker, he flicked his cigarette at the crack in the partially open window. The ladies heading into the hairdressers for their shampoo and set's in the street below were never in any real danger as, inevitably, the cigarette missed the gap and bounced off the window frame and onto the carpet where Brian danced on it until it was extinguished

'So can I take it now then Brian' I was pushing him because it had taken me hours to cross Birmingham by Bus and now a gentle drizzle filled the grey sky

'I haven't decided if you've got the job yet' Brian looked despondent, I was ruining his fun. I got up to leave, Brian needed me more than I needed the job. This wasn't strictly true, I was desperate for money, as I was resitting my first year and, consequently, not receiving a grant, but judging by Brian's less than bulging order book this was unlikely to be my cash cow.

'Well?, have I got it then?'

'There's a couple of questions I need to ask you and of course Veronica will need to assess if you and her are artistically compatible' he poked his head round the door again and asked Miss Sommes if she could join us, the request was met with a heavy sigh and a reluctant 'All right'

'Oh and can you bring in the costumes'

'Fetch erm yourself' was the predictable response from the 'lovely' Veronica, who now stood, framed in the doorway, with her bare arms folded across her sequinned red boob tube. The boob tube should really be described as a chest wrap as Veronica's petite figure offered no visible signs of support, it was, presumably, held in place by velcro, or selotape or perhaps gum as Veronica was continually chewing and obviously had an inexhaustible supply

'Go on then' she looked at me and made an upward movement with her head

'Go on then, what?' I said, Brian had since disappeared out of the office and down the stairs to collect the 'costumes'

'Get erm off!' I looked at the little figure in the doorway and noticed that if you overlooked the shapeless figure, the round shoulders, the skinny legs with knobbly knees, the lank bleached blonde hair, the appalling taste in clothes (the red chest wrap was accompanied by black plastic mini skirt and red high heel shoes) and the continual chewing she actually had nice hands .

There's something good about everyone, I thought, and then Brian appeared at the top of the stairs, an insane grin on his blue mouth and I dismissed this thought from my mind. Brian had hanging from his arms what looked like the aftermath of a road kill featuring a gorilla, a leopard and a steam roller; a grotesquely distorted gorilla mask peered up at me from beneath a leopard skin leotard.

'Right then Clark, why don't you slip into the Tarzan outfit first' Brian dumped the lifeless gorilla onto the desk and handed me the leopard skin leotard

'Where shall I change' my request for privacy was met by a smoke induced cough from Brian and a high pitched cackle from Veronica

'Just get erm off you Gessy, if you can't do it in front of us you'll be no good on the job'

'Engagement' corrected Brian

'She's right though Clark, it's no good being shy'

My teenage years had been marked by a stream of part time jobs, taken on the spur of the moment to provide funds for life's essentials, records, tickets for rock gigs, drink, excursions to the pictures, mags from the top shelf, more drink. The work in my early teens could be classified into two broad categories; the first would best be described as tedious and boring - outdoors and the second as tedious and boring - indoors. In category one you could fit, paper boy, butchers boy, grass cutter and farm labourer and in the second shop assistant (sweet shop and clothes shop), poultry preparation was a sort of half way house as the chicken shed in Daniels farm had so many holes in the roof it might as well have been outdoors. In my later teens a third and fourth category had replaced the previous two, tedious, boring and unsociable - indoors - bar and kitchen work plus a stint as a stacker in a lemonade factory and tedious, boring and unsociable - outdoors - granite set layer for DOE and labourer on a tarmac gang.

Each post had brought with it a high degree of unpleasantness but taking my clothes off in front of the freak show that was Brian and Veronica was a new low

'Well come on then Clark, let's be having you, I've got to get on you know, things to do and people to see and all that' Brian barked at me and Veronica nodded in agreement. Brian had nothing to do and no one to see I was certain of that, but I had no wish to prolong the agony either. I slipped off my old Church's brogues without undoing the laces, they were use to this and didn't put up any resistance, unbuttoned my flies and let my best 'going out' jeans drop to the floor. Veronica, who had been relatively quiet up to this point, apart that is from the smacking of her lips as she exercised her jaws on yet another stick of chewing gum, broke her self induced

silence with

'Nice legs, shame about the face' and gave a small cackle. I ignored her and pulled my huge baggy v neck jumper (one of my Grans creations) and Fred Perry sports shirt off in one movement revealing my muscular, toned torso! and manly hairy chest!. I folded my arms across my chest and starred at them. They starred back but said nothing, Brian's blue tongue hung out of his gaping mouth and Veronica was going purple behind the hand she had clasped over her mouth. I followed the line of their eyes to my groin area and immediately understood

'I can explain, it's just that.....' I was cut short by Veronica, her purple face exploded into a high pitched cackle of laughter

'He's wearing., he's wearing....., he's' she struggled to get the words out between the sobs of laughter, but Brian finished it for her.

'He's wearing girls panties'

Half an hour later, my ordeal at an end, I waved good-bye to Brian and a still laughing Veronica and headed off across Birmingham in the battered and rusting light blue Ford Fiesta Van, the company vehicle. I was still flushed from the panties incident but pleased that, despite it, I had got the job and even more pleased that I now had some wheels.

Brian had accepted my explanation that I had run out of clean boxers and that my girlfriends old sports knickers were the only clean undergarments available. This wasn't completely true, she had a whole draw full of knickers but would only let me 'ruin' the oldest, biggest and tattiest. He also accepted that this was the first and probably the last time I would wear women's undergarments. Veronica, I felt, was less than convinced. She had eyed me very suspiciously when I had pulled on the Tarzan outfit and announced to Brian that 'At least I'll be safe with him' and when Brian had

asked me to practice picking her up and running round the office like a Gorilla she had said that I wasn't to bother as she didn't want me to 'Strain anything' and had added 'If there's anything to strain'.

I tried not to dwell on the interview and concentrated instead on manoeuvring the small vehicle through the busy roads. The Tarzan outfit was folded neatly in a plastic Tesco carrier on the passengers seat and the Gorilla suit hung at the back of the van. Veronica had looped the hanger through a hole in the neck part of the mask, so that it hung upside down like a head that had been unsuccessfully decapitated, in the rear view mirror, the swinging ape with it's upside down face was most off putting.

I wondered where I would be the next time I took the suit off the hanger and pulled on the hot simulated fur and rubber ensemble, Veronica seemed to have performed mainly in offices and bars but Brian had said that I would need to be prepared to work 'Unsociable hours in a wide variety of locations'. The last gorilla had left under a cloud, apparently he had refused to pay for damages to the suit, caused by a particularly lively group of girls on a hen night and had threatened Brian with court action if he wasn't prepared to compensate him for the personal injuries incurred in the incident. Brian wasn't very forthcoming on what the personal injuries had been but said that the gorilla suit had a tear in it around the groin area. Veronica said 'The crotch was ripped out' which made my eyes water, although I guessed she was referring to the suit. Brian's take on the incident was that the gorilla shouldn't have got himself into a vulnerable situation in the first place and that even if he did he should have been able to cope with 'A handful of tipsy girls'. I thought Brian was probably right, how difficult could it be!.

The agreement I had made with Brian was that I would call in every day at 5.00 and get the schedule for that evening and the following day, Brian would try and make sure most of the work was scheduled for afternoons wherever possible to give

me time for my studies. If Veronica was on the job, so to speak, I was to pick her up and take her to the venue and then act as the master of ceremonies, presenting the certificate to the poor unfortunate and taking the Polaroid's, for this role I was to dress smartly and be prepared to chaperone Veronica out of any difficulties she might encounter with frisky clients (an unlikely scenario). My remuneration was £3.00 per engagement and £6.00 if I was taking the lead role as Gorilla or Tarzan. Brian charged the punters £25.00 so he was taking £16.00 on each job which, considering his meagre overheads, wasn't bad for someone with a backstage role. Dressing smartly was a challenge, I had no casual smart clothes and no business suit, but I did have a silver dinner jacket and some rather natty black 'Guards' trousers which I had picked up at a Birmingham rag market and I had used for uni balls, these would have to do. Judging by Veronica's 'smart' clothes, the red chest wrap and black mini skirt, I shouldn't have to worry too much.

All in all providing the orders picked up the job looked like it would provide everything I needed, money, transport and it was a bit different it would surely be better than bar work. I remembered, however, having similar thoughts when, many years before, I had packed in my paper round for a butchers round which had promised extra cash, better hours and transport in the form of the butchers bike. The first day on the job, the butcher, a rotund man with large red hands with nails chewed so short they were almost non-existent, had proudly wheeled out the butchers bike for my inspection. The huge black steel contraption had a very large frame to hold the wicker basket on the front and a heavy metal stand to keep it upright when not being ridden, even without half a ton of steak, chicken and sausages in the basket it was at least twice as heavy as any normal bicycle. It also had a metal sign post riveted to the central triangle of the frame, on my first outing on the machine, wobbling unconvincingly out of the butchers drive and down the road, I knew I would never be

able to use the bike outside work. One of the local girls in the village had first drawn my attention to the sign, which read:

Prime British beef

Best Pork sausage

Home delivery

Sitting astride the beast, with my leg partly obscuring the sign all that was visible was 'beef sausage delivery'. This had caused her much amusement and at school the following Monday I was christened with the nick name 'meat man'.

The car lurched and spluttered it's way round the streets and the windscreen wipers tried but failed to cope with the gentle drizzle. At forced stops, like traffic lights, I, together with the amazed onlookers, noticed the engine revved uncontrollably and pulling away the traffic for about half a mile behind was covered in a thick black cloud of partially burnt fuel. It could not be described as a comfortable ride, the heater seemed to be limited to two settings, full on or off, the drivers seat had an unidentified bulge in the middle and the passengers window rattled in the frame. However, despite it's obvious faults, I liked my little car and was looking forward to showing it off to my house mates.

On the street outside my 1930's rented house I stopped the car, or rather I pulled into the side of the road and the engine cut out on it's own. At the same time the glove box door dropped open, instinctively I leant over and rummaged inside, an opened buff envelope was stuck to the base of the compartment by chewing gum, I pulled it free, the letter bore the initials BH (Brian Hunter I assumed) having assured myself it was empty I tossed it on the passengers floor and leant further over to the passengers side and peered into the glove box not wishing to search blindly and risk sticking myself to the chewing gum.

Something black and lacy appeared to be wrapped around something black

and shiny. I gingerly retrieved the makeshift parcel and straightened up in my seat.

'All right Clarky, what's this then' my flat mate, Collin, had opened my door and was peering into the mini van, he stank of stale beer and looked like he had just stumbled out of bed

'I've got my own wheels' I said, grinning like a Cheshire cat

'So I hear, the bloody heap woke me up, I meant this though' he pointed at my lap where the black lacy panties were revealing their inner treasures, a hand gun.