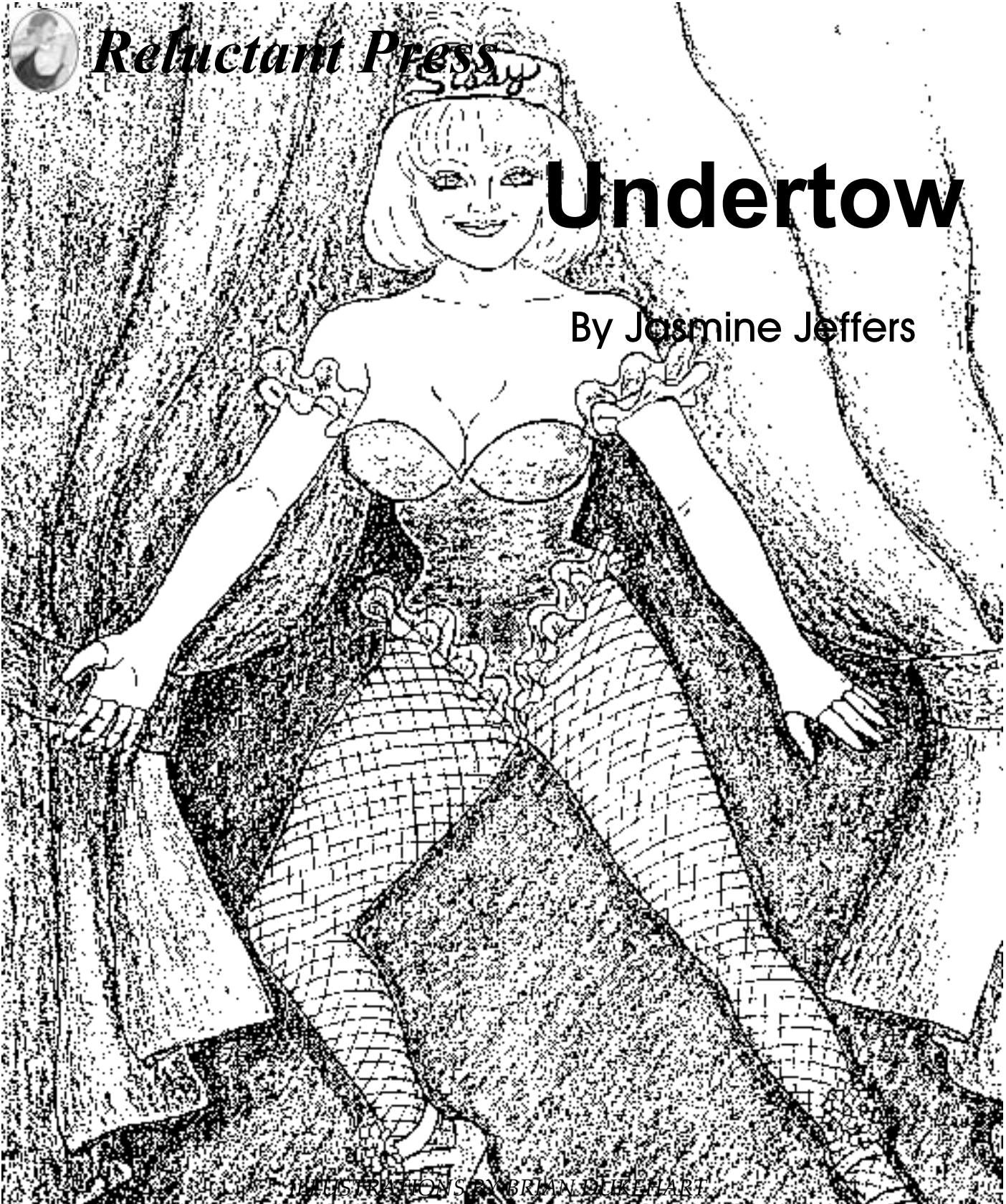




Reluctant Press

Undertow

By Jasmine Jeffers



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIAN DUKEHART

A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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UNDERTOW

By Jasmine Jeffers

CHAPTER ONE: BRANDON DAINTY'S RESUME

Sliding into the passenger's seat, Brandon Dainty dropped the visor and examined himself in the mirror. He grimaced, making sure no food lodged among his perfectly formed teeth. Snugging his tie, he nodded with satisfaction. He opened the door and stepped from the sedan.

Dainty slipped into his suit coat, buttoned the second button, and grabbed his briefcase. Locking the door, he oriented himself and strode purposely from the lot. A brisk five minute walk placed him in the lobby of an elegant brownstone on the Denny Regrade. He perused the directory.

WILLOW AND KLEIN, PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS SUITE 301

He pressed the elevator button and waited. The doors opened to an empty, wood paneled interior. Taking a deep breath, he composed himself, trying to still the butterflies in his stomach.

Brandon craved this position, knowing the first interview is critical. He vowed to do just about anything to land it. He glanced at his immaculately manicured nails lacquered with clear polish. He had even trimmed and shaped his own eyebrows as his mother had so often requested him to do. Centering himself, he focused on BEING exactly what the job description sought:

Bright, dynamic, creative individual sought for undercover and investigative work. Must be flexible, able to travel, preferably single. Possible junior partnership available for the right individual.

Brandon longed to be out on his own in the world. He had studied for it, dreamed about it, and now he began to forge a future for himself. He visualized himself in his dream vocation, forgetting for a moment the protected years of childhood and high school.

Those rich hidden experiences help to delineate the character of the fastidious and adaptable applicant. His father had died when he was four years old, making him the only child of a single working mother.

Amanda Dainty glowed with ambition and intelligence, managing to buy her own women's apparel shop by the time Brandon was eight.

Although he liked to roughhouse, ride bikes, catch frogs, and play ball like most youngsters, he was required to be on his best behavior when spending time at his mother's shop. He was to act like a “little lady” as his mother gently called him.

He didn't really mind. True, his mother dressed him in little outfits on the days he stayed at the store. It was on the other side of town and none of his friends would see him there.

He loved his mother. He couldn't object to the little white cotton panties with the ruffled hems, or the soft t-shirts, or the white cotton blouse with big sleeves and the rounded collar. The black, brown, or blue velvet pant suit did not bother him. Yes, the pants were very short shorts that rose from the vee of his crotch to mid hip, exposing the panty's ruffles. The attached bib and suspenders had to be buttoned or unbuttoned at the rear waist band by his mother or one of the sales girls whenever he had to go to the potty.

Basically the anklets or kneesocks were just that, except for the ruffled lace edge. Shoes were shoes even if Brandon's were called Mary Janes, with shiny patent leather, an ankle strap and rounded toes. At least they matched his shorts.

Brandon liked the attention he received from the customers — most of the time. If the ladies became too gushing in their praise, or pinched his cheeks too often, he would run and hide among the racks of long nylon nightgowns.

He became quite helpful at an early age. One of the reasons for `CHEZ MANDY'S' popularity was her policy to entertain the customers' daughters (and sons at times) while the mothers shopped.

She set up a small playroom off the main floor with puzzles, games, dolls, along with a small table and chairs. One day, she noticed Brandon playing house with a young girl. They drank tea and pretended to eat cookies. This gave her an idea. She closed the shop early that day and took him to a nearby children's shop.

“Brandon, do you like the outfit you wear in the store?”

Brandon shrugged, “Sure, mommy, it's okay.”

“Do you enjoy helping Mommy?”

“Yes, I know you don't have to hire a baby sitter and I can go to the playroom when I'm bored.”

“Good. That's why I want to buy you something special so that you can help Mommy even more! And it will be fun!”

So, Brandon wasn't too embarrassed when he was fitted for his little pink party dress that afternoon. The satin felt good to touch; it was loose and cool. The white chiffon petticoat tickled his skinny legs. The frilly white pinafore was necessary to protect the dress, according to his mother. The court shoes with the two inch heels were a new experience. He liked flowers, so the tiny pink rosettes on top of the white shoes were fun to look at.

On the drive home, his mother explained her new idea, Tea Time with Brandi.

Amanda dressed 'Brandi' at home Saturday morning. This did make him nervous because he was afraid one of his friends would show up, see him dressed that way, and tell his friends. After she rubbed a little rouge onto his cheeks, gave his lips a light coat of pink lipstick, tied a pink ribbon into his hair and put white gloves on his hands, he wasn't worried anymore.

He looked just like a girl.

Just the same, Brandon made a mad dash for the car when he got outside.

"No, no, Brandi," admonished his mother, "you mustn't run when you are all dressed up. Come back here this instant."

He reluctantly returned, stood on the front porch and looked up at her.

"You shall learn to take very small, careful steps, although if you want to go faster, I will permit you to skip if you ask me nicely."

This tone confused Brandon. She wasn't this strict when he was a boy. Did she have to call him Brandi outdoors?

"Aw, Mom, do I have..."

"No arguments, young lady! Now is there something you wish to ask?"

"Uh...yes, Mommy, may I skip to the car?"

"Yes you may. I will be right out. Stand up straight next to the car door and remember to keep your knees and ankles pressed together."

At the store, more instructions followed:

"Brandi, I want you to be Mommy's little hostess. Lots of ladies like to bring their little girls along; but, it is a headache for mothers, and me to have them running around the store giggling and pulling at the clothes."

"Now when you see a girl walk in, go up to her and curtsy. You remember how to do that, right?"

"Yes," said Brandon, demonstrating for her.

"Very good. Curtsy and then ask if she would like to have tea with Brandi. They don't have to know that you are a boy. Take her to the playroom and show her the dolls and toys. I will keep the portable refrigerator stocked with grape juice, cookies, bread, and peanut butter."

"Have her sit down, spread a cloth napkin across her lap and ask if she would like tea with lemon or sugar. Then have fun and pretend. Put grape juice in your teapot and pour it. Talk about whatever she wants to talk about. Offer her dolls, books, or puzzles, anything she likes. This way, the day will pass quickly and you will be helping Mommy so much!"

It worked out well. Brandi made lots of new friends. Sometimes he was even invited to a girl's birthday party, so his mother bought him more party dresses. Some of the friendships developed into correspondence that continued to this day... Some girls even knew his secret...

He stepped off the elevator. Directly in front of him was a large paneled oak door with the numbers 301 in black iron numerals. To the right, a gleaming brass sign proclaimed:

WILLOW AND KLEIN, PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS.

CHAPTER TWO: THE INTERVIEW

Brandon planted a soft smile on his face, assuming a relaxed, confident air. Inside the small, tastefully appointed waiting room sat a huge white man in a bad suit. Brandon observed the broad shoulders, square jaw, balding head, and black, heavily soled dress shoes.

“A *cop*,” he noted to himself, walking past the man to a small reception window.

The window slid open and he announced himself to the polite female face.

“Oh yes, Mr. Dainty, we are running a bit late this morning. Please complete these forms and we'll call you in as soon as we can,” she said, handing Brandon a clipboard and pen.

The “cop” stared at Brandon. He saw the manicured nails, the scrubbed school boy appearance, and scowled.

“A *friggin' pansy*,” noted the cop to himself.

Brandon sat down next to a floor length mirror to the left of the reception window. A short time later, a door to the right of the sliding window buzzed. A young woman emerged and exited the office.

“Please come in, Mr. Murphy,” invited the receptionist.

Murphy exploded to his feet and lumbered through the door.

Brandon worked to complete the questionnaire that appeared to be a “get acquainted” tool detailing his special abilities and interests. He read over his answers; satisfied, he looked at his reflection in the mirror and smiled.

“*You can do it*,” he mouthed to himself.

As he said it, he spotted two stray hairs above the bridge of his nose between his eyebrows. He glanced at the closed window and stood, reaching for a pair of tweezers in his coat pocket. Quickly, he plucked the hairs, removed a small eyebrow comb from the same pocket and brushed his eyebrows up as his mother had taught.

He scarcely had time to pocket the comb when the door buzzed and burst open.

Murphy stormed through, eyes flashing, his neck and face red with anger or embarrassment.

“Who wants to work for a bunch of women anyway?” the lout sneered as he stalked through the office exiting through the heavy oak doors.

Three minutes later, Brandon was ushered into the office, led into a bright expansive room by the pretty, husky-voiced receptionist who was attired in a pink knit suit, with a white blouse, calf length pencil skirt, black hose, and pumps.

As he walked by her station, he noticed that the mirror was really a smoked glass window that provided a complete view of the waiting area. He tensed a bit but figured that they were too busy to notice his grooming.

His forms and resume were delivered to a woman who stood behind a long rose-wood desk. His name was announced.

“Thank you, Lisa, this will be the final interview of the day. If your filing is finished, you may leave.”

“Thank you, Ma'am,” she replied, and dipped into a formal curtsy before leaving.

“Goodness, I haven't seen anybody do that in a long time,” smiled Brandon as he extended his hand toward the one offered from behind the desk.

“I am Sydney Willow, co-owner of this firm,” stated the tall, immaculately groomed executive, “and yes, we work with many well to do clients and therefore insist on proper dress and manners at all times. Have a seat, Mr. Dainty. May I offer you a beverage while I peruse your credentials?”

“No thank you, Ma'am,” Brandon demurred, sitting down.

After several minutes of nods, subtle but raised eyebrows, Sydney Willow raised her eyes to scrutinize the young man across from her.

“Mr. Dainty, you have a fairly solid resume here. A lack of field experience weighs against you. Sometimes that can be a liability. Take that former police detective who was just in here. He was set in his ways, lacked all subtlety, and looked like a heart attack waiting to happen.”

Brandon nodded, waiting for her to continue.

“I know that the program at the university you attended is excellent as are your grades. I did my post graduate work there, so I am familiar with the professors as well as the techniques and technology that are presented. You should be able to pick right up on the equipment we utilize.

“When we find a candidate such as yourself, we look to other areas of the applicant's life as a guide to his or her suitability. Now you had some theatrical experience in high school and college?”

“Yes, I performed in several lead roles, plus numerous chorus and dancer parts,” affirmed Brandon, who then went on to elaborate.

“Those are mostly female roles!” exclaimed Miss Willow. “Didn't any young women attending your school try out for them?”

“Sure. I guess I was the most convincing, or maybe the best mimic. Seems that I can focus on a part and “become” that character. Also, my mother paid for and herded me through voice, dance, and piano lessons all through junior and senior high.”

“Hmmm,” paused Sydney Willow as she skipped to another question, “It says here you learned to work well with the public while employed at your mother's dress and lingerie shop during high school and on summer breaks at college. That is rather unusual work for a young man is it not?”

“Perhaps,” said Brandon, reddening slightly, “except I didn't work as a young man.”

“Excuse me?” inquired a startled Miss Willow.

“Whenever I worked at the shop, I did so as `Brandi'. I wore a blouse, skirt, nylons, and heels. I curled my hair and applied make-up. Most of the customers thought I was Mandy's (my mother's name) daughter.”

“But...Why?”

“The money was good — I received a base salary plus commission and I knew my stuff. Mother felt that I should know the products, so I was encouraged to wear all of the different styles and brands of hosiery and lingerie. I was free to wear it at home after school. My friends never found out. The point is, I told the customers the truth about the merchandise and sold them quality.”

“Why are you interested in this position?”

“I am a grown man now. I yearn for independence. I'm looking for adventure, risk, and I want to travel. Life is not ever what it seems. In this kind of work, I am able to use my education, my flexibility, and talents to dig under the surface. Maybe, I can even help somebody in the process.”

“Thank you, Mr. Dainty, that is all I have to ask you. Is there anything you would like to know?”

“Yes, please tell me about your company. Who are you, who is the other owner? How many people work here? What kinds of cases do you accept?”

“My partner's name is Greta Klein. She is the technical part of the team. She selects the equipment we need, oversees field operations, does some of the investigative and undercover assignments. I am the administrative, marketing, and financial half. I talk to the clients, maintain the office, and oversee the budget. We have a bookkeeper/accountant, secretary/receptionist, some technicians and security people.

“My father, who started the business, was mostly a one man operation for thirty-two years. He was a pro — and he established a solid client base that we still service to some extent. He passed away five years ago, but not before he taught me the finer points of the business. I met Greta at the university and business has been expanding ever since.

“Now we are in need of another field agent and investigator. I am going to review our applicants. We will notify the successful candidate within forty-eight hours. Will you be in town for a couple of days?”

“I'm here regardless of your decision,” affirmed Brandon. “I mean, I am very interested in the position and know I can do a great job for you. My mother is the only family I've got. She is semi-retired, quite wealthy, and usually on a cruise somewhere. So I am available and prepared for anything.”

With that said, he rose, shook Sydney Willow's hand and left the office.

Sydney sat quietly for a long while, her pencil idly tapping the desk. She smiled at the image of the dapper young man plucking and combing his eyebrows.

CHAPTER THREE: HIRED!

Two days is a long time to wait.

Brandon, trying to save money, stayed close to his motel room, watching television and second guessing himself. Was he too honest? Would she think he was some kind of wimp, who would faint in a tough situation?

Years of dancing, bicycling, and other exercise put him in top physical condition. True, he had sloughed off the last several months while studying extra hard. His pecs had become soft, flabby, and his rock hard thighs showed evidence of extra weight.

Miss Willow didn't notice that did she?

At least his waist was lean and tight. He had never smoked, drank alcohol only occasionally. He was mostly vegetarian, a good cook. He decided to get up and find a good restaurant when the phone rang.

“Brandon Dainty, please.”

“Speaking.”

“Hello, Brandon, this is Sydney Willow. We are prepared to offer you the position and would like you to come in tomorrow at ten A.M. Can you possibly make it?”

“I certainly can, Miss Willow,” exclaimed the elated Brandon, “and I'm ready to work!”

“Tomorrow, we'll discuss salary, benefits, the probationary period, and then I'll send you out on a little assignment — just to give you a taste of what to expect. Another line is blinking, I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Good-by,” said Brandon to the click on the other end of the line.

CHAPTER FOUR: ORIENTATION

“God, she's beautiful,” thought Brandon as Sydney Willow greeted him in the bright morning light.

She stood beside tall, wood framed windows opened to allow a flow of fresh air. She looked radiant, poised yet relaxed. Attired in a double breasted red blazer with padded shoulders covering a knife pleated black and white striped dress, she exuded power and purpose. Sydney's luxuriantly thick blond hair, brushed straight back from her forehead and dropping in a curly cascade over her shoulders reminded Brandon of a country girl.

His knees felt weak, a combination of awed attraction and a certain trepidation of being her employee.

She motioned for him to sit at a round table next to the window. On it was a vase of fresh flowers and a folder with various papers lying on top.

“I thought we would go over salary, benefits, company policy, and the like over a light breakfast.”

Brandon smiled. He was going to like this job — he could just feel it. Yet, he felt startled when Lisa entered the room carrying a tray with food and drink. She wore a gray serving uniform; the slim skirt hobbled her hips and gait, requiring a careful walk on heels that had to be 6 inches in height. The collar and short, puffed sleeves were trimmed in white lace. A lacy apron protected the skirt. A French style cap covered her black hair that was pinned into a tight bun.

Miss Willow had already begun her presentation so Brandon shifted his gaze from the secretary who quietly set the table. The heady aroma of coffee, the ice cold pitcher of orange juice, the bagels, cream cheese, and fresh fruit swirled with the imagery of the two women to throw Brandon into a state of sensory overload.

He grounded himself and mentally told himself to observe and absorb everything that was transpiring.

Brandon's initial salary pleased and surprised him; the benefit package was substantial. Dress codes varied depending upon the assignment or task. He was to strictly observe and obey any requests made of him in this area because it could affect the security and safety of other employees, clients, or the company itself.

Lisa, Sydney explained, is being groomed as a possible field agent. She is trained to perform all tasks competently and without complaint. To demonstrate, Sydney summoned Lisa to clear the table and to do the dishes. Lisa curtsied, loaded up the dishes and disappeared.

“By the way, Mr. Dainty, have you found a place to live?”

“No. Not yet. I've been in town less than a week. Could you recommend any neighborhoods for a young, footloose guy?”

The food had loosened his reserve and the confidence returned.

Sydney Willow stared intently at him for several seconds. Again, it unnerved him and reminded him of her power.

“Actually, I know of an available apartment only five blocks from here. It has underground parking, but you could walk to work, or take a bus. It is a beautiful, one bedroom, furnished apartment in a modern, secure building.

“The place is on the tenth floor, has a balcony and a fireplace. My father managed to acquire some property that became part of the estate bequeathed to my sister and myself. If you wish, I will call the manager and tell him I have a tenant. The rent is \$500.00 per month. Interested?”

She flashed a brilliant smile.

Brandon melted. He didn't know what to say. He had landed a great job and now was offered a great place to live.

“Yes, Ma'am, it sounds fantastic. I do have the money for first, last, and security deposit if that is a requirement.”

“Well, I will talk to Mr. Kucera and see what we can do.”

“Now then,” she continued, “let me show you our operation and then we will get down to business.”

First stop was the employee lounge and kitchen where Lisa was finishing up. Next visit was to the dark room where negatives and prints from cases in progress hung from a line drying. Brandon met Mike Reynolds, a wiry middle aged man with salt and pepper hair and a close cropped beard. He was the company photographer and photo-tech. Then he was ushered into a large communications room. Several employees monitored video screens, or worked with headphones and other electronic sound equipment.

Brandon met several uniformed security guards here and learned that a portion of the company's business was home and business security. The guards were males and powerfully built while all the people monitoring the video and sound equipment were women. Some of the screens showed empty interiors of an apartment including a bathroom, living room, and kitchen that he thought was excessive when a sound or motion detector would serve the same purpose.

Once introductions were complete, Sydney led Brandon into another large room containing racks of clothing, and shelves with wigs, hats, and other accessories.

“In a way, the private investigation business is like a Hollywood set,” began Sydney, “since we have cameras, sound gear, and wardrobe all used to capture the capers of a group of characters. Welcome to wardrobe.”

“Today's episode, Mr. Dainty, features you!”

“What?!” asked Brandon, uncertain at the turn of the conversation.

“I thought we would start you out by creating an undercover exercise. You've displayed confidence in your abilities and I am curious to see your stuff,” continued Sydney, a twinkle in her eye.

She looked him up and down, evaluating his size.

“Let's see, your application indicates that you are 5'7" and 145 pounds. What does that translate to in Brandi's sizes?”

“Er, uh, I don't know,” wavered Brandon, “I haven't worked at the shop in almost a year and I've put on weight in my hips and chest. I used to wear a size 12 blouse and I'm probably about the same in a skirt or slacks. I also have not shaved anything but my face since then.”

Sydney ignored his uneasiness and rummaged through the racks.

“Well, perhaps we'll start with something loose, but concealing. Mr. Dainty, kindly step behind that screen and remove your suit.”

Brandon gulped and moved slowly behind the elegant Chinese screen depicting blackbirds flying over a mountain. He removed his suit jacket, unbuttoned his vest and shirt. He hung them on a hanger from a portable valet on wheels. He removed keys, change, and wallet from his pocket and placed them in a tray. Loosening his belt, he dropped his trousers and hung them neatly. He removed his shoes and socks and put them in a bin on the bottom of the valet.

“Are you finished undressing, Mr. Dainty? Just slide the valet out when you are ready.”

Brandon pushed the aluminum stand just outside the screen, where it disappeared from his sight.

“Mr. Dainty! Did you not wear underwear, today? How uncouth!”

“No, Ma'am. I mean, I'm still wearing my t-shirt and briefs.”

“Why that's silly, remove them this instant, we don't have all day,” replied Miss Willow sharply. “Hand them to me.”

Brandon quickly complied. A pair of white nylon gloves appeared, draped over the screen. He knew they were to prevent runs in his hosiery that he assumed was coming.

The strangest style of pantyhose he had ever seen floated over the screen. The opaque, flesh-toned support hose with a sewn on matching back seam were standard enough. He tugged them up, they uplifted his calves and squeezed the flab on his upper thighs. A double band of elastic held them tight at the top of his legs. The panty was sewn to the top of these. The shiny white satin with a full billowy cut lined with a cotton crotch felt soft but not constricting against his tucked, and slightly engorged penis. Never aroused by female clothing before, he wondered if the softness of the hosiery or the nearness of his strong, beautiful boss excited him.

“Gee, I thought these were Underalls,” said Brandon, running his fingers over the cool fabric, “but these panties are made of satin. I've only worn cotton in the past.”

“Yes, aren't they lovely? agreed Miss Willow. ”They shape and control the legs yet feel luxurious under a slip. However, you will need one of these first.”

Brandon held a black panty girdle. Surely he was not expected to wear this. There had to be a mistake.