

Identity: Noelle Mercier



Philippa Peters



An "Adult Tv" Novel



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IDENTITY: NOELLE MERCIER

by Philippa Peters

*****1. Tell us what we don't know*****

Thierry stepped out of the bakery with his baguette and cream cheese-filled croissants. He turned to wave to Madame Loty as he always did just as a man in a dark raincoat eased away from the wall. His hand indicated the pavement in front of Thierry where a dark-windowed limousine pulled up in front of the pair.

Virginia Shepherd rolled down the front window. "Get in, Thierry," she said tersely, rolling the window back up and ignoring him as she went back on her cellphone.

A Section Chief here, in Paris, a part of the pickup of a basically unemployed agent? Thierry swallowed and handed his packages to the surprised muscle who'd opened the door for him.

“Enjoy,” said Thierry before the door slammed shut after him. The guard on the back seat frisked him quickly and neatly, removing the stiletto Thierry kept in his sock for occasions like this, occasions when he felt threatened. Despite the danger he recognized right away, Thierry would not have thought of using it on a higher-up in the agency all the way from Washington, especially a star on the rise as he’d heard that Ginny Shepherd was.

Ginny snapped her phone shut and half-turned from the front seat of the speeding car. “You’re coming with us,” she said, “back on active service. I need to know everything there is to know about Noelle Mercier, including if you were really fucking her or not.”

Thierry blanched. He knew instantly he’d made a mistake. To an operator like Ginny Shepherd, he’d probably given away the secret he’d held onto so fiercely through previous interrogations. Yes, he’d been making love to Noelle Mercier - had it really been a year since she’d left him? - whenever he could get her panties down after she’d returned in amnesiac distress to Paris.

“Everything about Noelle?” Thierry managed to gasp. “You, you must have all the files? She, she’s been retired what, a year, at least! I don’t know where she’s at these days.”

“She was here in Paris ten days ago,” snapped Ginny Shepherd. “The French are hopping mad that the fingerprints of one of our agents were found in the apartment of Ahmed Barrouqi and his brother, the banker. I trust you know who they were.”

“The executive and financial brains behind ...” Thierry began.

“Behind every attack on an American target since nine-eleven,” snapped Ginny Shepherd. “Ahmed was supposed to be protected while he was here to talk about some peace proposal the French thought they could foist on him. So, an agent of ours is identified as the one who took out the pair, both Ahmed and his brother.

“Who’ve co-operated in every way with the French, they’ve been telling us, for years. The brother guaranteed that Ahmed was tired of continual warfare and could broker a real peace. He was ready to make concessions to us, on behalf of his intimate friends, as he called them.

“You can guess what the French think now. One of us, they’re saying to my superiors,” she stressed that word, “has taken out the first real opportunity for ending the conflict in Central Asia. The boys of the Deuxieme Bureau don’t believe the double killing was ‘by accident,’ misunderstood orders, or any other face-saving euphemism you’d like to use for a disastrous incident. Having us simply disavow Noelle Mercier, as we already have, isn’t going to abate the shit storm that’s going on between Washington and Paris.”

“Noelle’s in Paris?” Thierry asked without trying to dissemble but, still, Ginny looked at him very sharply.

“Yes,” snapped the fortyish, blonde woman, well-groomed as all American women of her age and wealth would be. Her blue eyes were like steel, Thierry thought. She wouldn’t take ‘No’ for an answer. She’d be most disappointed in Thierry, even though he was on the ‘disabled list’, unused and unforgiven for what had happened the last time his superior had visited Paris. His and her overseers didn’t want another dead Section Chief. By the cortege of black-glassed Hummers that led and followed them, Thierry knew that was a given.

The car zipped into the underground garage of a building two kilometers from the embassy. It wasn’t a place Thierry had ever been in, much less heard about. He was brought to an interrogation room where there were images of the grisly murder of the Barrouqi brothers on the wall screen. They’d been shot, execution-style, through the front of the head, their faces almost obliterated.

Through a long glass wall, Thierry could see many people working computers, street scenes on the screens, many of the road they’d just driven. Intent

faces studied the cars moving along the streets. Along with charts and screens, there were pictures of Noelle, some that he'd never seen.

She'd never looked more beautiful, Thierry thought, aware that these were new photographs of Noelle, seemingly in New York, looking young, fresh and very girlish. She was on Mohammed Barrouqi's arm, his tongue hanging out – was that a stewardess's skirt and blouse - as if he'd never seen a girl like her before. He probably hadn't, thought Thierry ruefully. Hmm, Barrouqi in the States? And allowed to go free with the prettiest girl in the agency?

"How many fingerprints did the French find of Noelle?" asked Thierry, trying to be business-like. The pause that followed allowed Ginny to organize who she wanted in the interrogation room with him.

Ginny looked sharply at Jack Reynolds, her principal aide, as sharp as she was, younger, a man who'd attached himself to a shooting star, Thierry assessed.

"Two," said Jack shortly as Ginny nodded to him. "One was on an unused bullet in the gun, the other on the alarm system to the apartment."

"You think it's a setup?" asked Ginny, staring at Thierry fiercely from behind Jack's head, his eyes as predatory as hers.

"She'd never have done a job like this," said Thierry, wondering at the desire that came over him to protect Noelle from his bosses as he'd done once before. That hadn't worked out so well. "A clear assassination and clues to lead back to her? She wasn't trained for executions like that, Jackson used to say all the time. He'd say that he could send me out with a gun and a cyanide pellet in my mouth if he wanted anyone just dead. Noelle was on a different level."

"*The Bourne Identity*," sneered Ginny. "The professional assassin? Don't make us laugh! She was just part of a security team we ran out of Paris that you were part of. Did she ever actually kill anyone?"

Thierry's blood froze. "You, you don't know anything about her at all, do you?" he gasped.

“Enlighten us,” said Ginny flatly.

“The files,” gasped Thierry.

“Have all been eliminated, as far as anyone, the deputy director included, can tell,” said Ginny, her look intense and baleful as she stared at Thierry. “So tell us anything and we’ll believe it ... for a few days anyway. Tell us all we need to know. And don’t tell me that *The Bourne Identity* was true because I won’t believe you.”

You should, thought Thierry Bouchard, you should. You should believe it. “How do you know it’s her?” he asked, desperately stalling for time to think.

“The fingerprints,” said Jack Reynolds as if he was speaking to a small child, while Ginny looked at Thierry grimly.

“We had a way of getting around that in Jackson’s section,” Thierry began. “Even if she left a print, it shouldn’t have led back to her.”

“Yes,” said Reynolds. “We checked yours and came up with a Colin Powell, a Marine killed in a car accident in Germany.”

“And Noelle’s?” asked Thierry, holding his breath.

“Nothing as famous as Colin Powell,” said Reynolds with a tight smile. “Her fingerprint check led to a different person also, a Flight-Lieutenant Stephen Nixon, who was killed on a helicopter mission over Iraq.”

Thank you for giving me Noelle’s real name, thought Thierry, shivering inside, certain it was true. She’d had all kinds of aliases in the time before she’d become Noelle totally. Jackson had used a name like that for ‘her’ a few times at the start.

“How’s Stevie Wonder coming along?” Jackson had sometimes enquired of the newbie’s handler, Thierry Bouchard.

“Great!” had always been the answer, even when the question changed to, “Are you sure you and Little

Stevie can handle what we expect of the two of you?" The answer again had always been positive though Noelle, as Thierry was calling 'her' all the time by then, would probably have disagreed vehemently with him. For the longest time, he'd never told her that Jackson checked up on her, Stevie Wonder's, progress as a woman and as an agent.

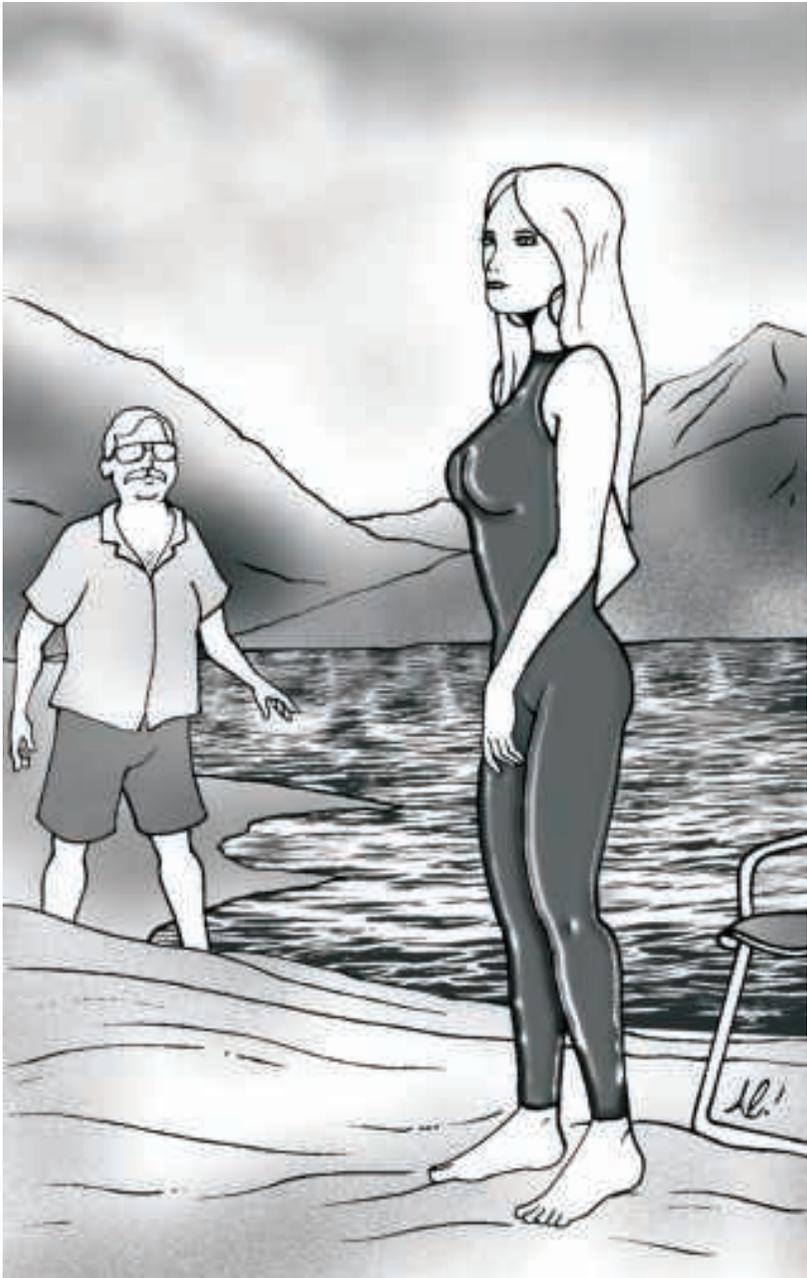
If I ever meet her again, I can tell her that, at least, Thierry thought glumly to himself. Maybe she won't kill me right away. She'd wanted so desperately to know who she really was, who 'he' was, the last time Thierry had kissed her, him, so passionately and told her, no, told him, to disappear outside Europe.

*****2. Mission complete*****

The plane blew apart most satisfactorily behind me as I dove from the sky. All sight of it had disappeared when I disengaged from the parachute, attached the weights I had in my pack, and began the long swim towards the Italian coast. That's what Thierry told me must have happened. I didn't remember it at all. He said a piece of the plane must have fallen on me, struck me on the head, it didn't have to be a large piece, and so I'd fallen into a catatonic sort of trance.

How could I have gone on swimming? I'd asked him doubtfully. Reflex action, he'd told me. I was trained to do that. It was good to know that my training had kicked in, that I'd been able to swim and head in the right direction. That's what the men, on the boat that picked me out of the Mediterranean Sea, had said I was doing, swimming slowly and methodically towards the coast, over thirty kilometers away.

The lookout had only seen me at the very last moment. I hadn't heard him yell or the boat coming up behind me. I hadn't heard it hit me. I don't remember the impact. I don't recall re-surfacing and trying to swim again. I don't recall catching hold of a float thrown into the water, holding onto it while I was hauled aboard the *Buena Fortuna*.



My first memory was of some old guy cutting me out of the wet suit I'd been wearing. "It's all right, lady," he said soothingly as I turned and grabbed the hand, with the scalpel in it, very tightly, enough to hurt him.

"It's all right, lady," he said again anxiously. "I'm not going to hurt you. I only want to get you out of this wetsuit - is that the right word? - you're wearing right now."

I wanted to ask him why he was calling me 'lady.' That wasn't the right word, I wanted to tell him. Couldn't he see who I was? And I needed the suit to swim and float in, I wanted to say.

"Our boat ran into you," the old man said, trying to pry my fingers from his wrist but he couldn't do it. "You won't need this ripped-up suit again, I promise you, lady. We'll take you wherever you want to go. We're headed into Genoa."

"Genoa?" I croaked. Was that where I was supposed to be going? Why would I be out swimming in the Mediterranean Sea to an Italian port? Because, because, and then the first fear hit me as I couldn't recall at all what I was supposed to be doing, swimming across a vast sea? And why was this man still calling me 'lady'? I let the man's hand go. He breathed hard in relief, instantly beginning to massage his wrist.

"Can I take off your swimming gear now, my dear?" the old man asked me. "Your flippers and mask are over there. Oh, and there's some kind of pack you were swimming with as well. Franco is looking at that."

I reached up to pull down the front zipper of the wetsuit. My hand ran over me, over my chest, over the breasts that bounced a little as I touched them. Breasts! I almost gagged and screamed at the old guy. What had he done to me? What kind of weird game was he playing with me? I sat up quickly, frightening the old man, frightening myself even more as long hair swept over my face and these womanly breasts bounced a little in front of me!

“My name is Niccolo,” said the old man with a nervous smile. “I serve as medic whenever we need one on *Buena Fortuna*.” He grimaced. “Horrible name, isn’t it, given to this boat by some English owner, previously. What is your name, lady?”

“My name is ...” I stopped, my mind swirling. I tried to say it, it was a woman’s name, this person who was me. I tried to spit out the word that described me, but I couldn’t. It just wouldn’t come. I think I scared the old man with the intensity with which I must have stared at him, me sitting there with long, blonde hair, thin eyebrows as I saw later, earrings at my ears, and perky, women’s breasts almost in his face.

“I don’t know what my name is,” I had to say, about to tell him not to call me ‘lady’ one more time or I’d break his wrist. I knew I could have done it as I held his hand.

Niccolo’s mouth dropped open a little. “The blow to your side and head,” he said, pointing to the wetsuit that didn’t cover half of me now, not completely. A huge, jagged slash ran up from my thigh and across my body, leaving the zippers to hold the whole thing together in places. I could now see why Niccolo was trying to cut the suit away from me.

“There’s no cut, no blood, just bruises,” said Niccolo quickly as I ran my fingers over my exposed smooth, hairless skin, skin like a woman’s, the fearful thought swept through me. “You can’t wear this back into the water, can you, pretty lady? Let me get you out of this. Don’t worry, my dear. I’ve seen a naked woman before.”

Niccolo tried to laugh at that remark. But there it was again, I thought in panic. I stared down at my chest and the two mounds protruding from me. That must be why he was spouting out all this ‘woman’ and ‘lady’ stuff? Couldn’t he see that I really wasn’t a woman? He must be able to tell by my voice, surely. He must be able to tell that I was ... I was ... I was ...

“Don’t try to force your name to come,” said Niccolo. “Just relax while I free this part from around

your breasts. There, my lady. It will all come back to you in a flood in a few minutes, I expect. You'll just be doing something perfectly natural, like having some soup with Franco and me and, presto, you'll say, I'm Gina, or I'm Sophia, something like that."

Well, I shuddered at such a suggestion. I knew I wasn't Gina Lollobrigida or Sophia Loren, I knew that. But I couldn't believe how much womanish hair popped out in front of me when Niccolo cut around the suit and the top came away. My long hair actually snagged on some parts of the neckline as well.

"Sorry, sorry," Niccolo went on as I gasped at the pains at my neck. "You girls look so pretty with long, blonde hair, don't you, but hold still! I'm trying not to cut any of it. There, I've just freed it for you." He picked up a mirror then to show me that he hadn't damaged my long, blonde hair.

I could see 'myself'. "That, that's ..." not me, I was going to say, but terror took over me briefly as I stared at the girl. Well, it was definitely a girlish face looking back at me in confusion, with such thick, dark eyelashes. Thin eyebrows, a thin nose, red, painted lips, surely, and gleaming earrings, flower-shaped, all combined with my long hair to shout at me that I was a girl, a pretty girl!

"That's Marcella that you're looking at," said a smiling Niccolo, "or Natalia, Maria, Pia?"

I was none of those! But I could be as I looked down at myself and there were these lovely breasts attached, no, growing out of me! How could that have happened? It couldn't have because I, I was a man!

"Sit up, pretty lady," insisted Niccolo. "I help you get out of the bottom half of this suit. Trust me, my dear lady, you don't have to blush and be so embarrassed. It isn't as if I haven't undressed my own daughters many a time."

So, I half stood, half rested, my body against the table, I think it was that, on which I'd been laid. Mmm, my hips curved most seductively inwards as my hips curved out, tight panties between my legs to

cover my most female of parts. I didn't know why I didn't believe what I was seeing but the evidence was very clear, from my long, shapely women's legs to the painted toenails, like the shaped, painted, womanly fingernails I had, that I was a woman.

It was so strange as I stood before Niccolo. He checked the thin, golden links of a ladies' watch at my wrist. He swung the stone of the necklace I was apparently wearing as well. The thin golden chain swirled around me and showed me a flowery pendant that matched the earrings that I wore and now bounced between my naked, 'perky' breasts. Who had called them that? I can remember laughing at the description as whoever it was had said they were just how 'Vernon' liked them.

Someone had been amused with the shape of my breasts? Then, the fearful thought struck me hard. I must be a woman! I had breasts and someone else, the first name I recalled, a Vernon, liked them the way they were!

"We don't really have clothing for you, dear lady," said Niccolo. "But here's a tee-shirt of mine and some jeans, too. Franco and Paolo are far too tall for a pretty, little girl like you to be wearing their clothes."

With a shudder, I pulled his clean tee-shirt over my head. My breasts inflated the tee, of course, much to Niccolo's glee, I could see. I doubtfully took his jeans in hand. They looked enormous when I tried them against my thin waist.

"I do need a bathroom," I said to Niccolo.

"The head, dear pretty lady," he said, "is through here."

I wobbled forward, almost falling as the boat seemed to be swaying an awful lot.

"My tee-shirt has never looked so good," Niccolo gloated, with a smile at me, looking me up and down appreciatively.

I'd have done the same, I knew, but how could I? It was weird how these markedly feminine attributes of

mine seemed to turn me on, with each bounce, in that same way that they were turning on Niccolo as well.

But I was hurting between my legs. I sat down on the toilet and slipped the panties down my legs, thinking I had to do that since I was a girl. And what was this? I was taped up and bound around my sexual parts. It took me a while to find where I could pull the tape down from my female parts. I had done a very good job, it *was* me, wasn't it, of using tape to conceal that I didn't have a female vagina between my legs. No, I had a male penis and testicles!

And they really hurt as I freed them. I think I squealed with the pain. Niccolo knocked on the door that luckily I'd bolted. "Are you all right, Andrea?" he asked cooingly. "Do you need me to come in and help you?"

"No, I'm fine!" I called back, realizing that I was speaking in a girlish voice that matched most of the appearance I'd presented to Niccolo up to now.

I bent to look at what was appearing more between my legs. My hair and necklace fell forward about my chest and neck. What the heck was I? It was almost with revulsion that I looked at my male parts. Yet, they felt so right! I was a man. It was these thrusting breasts, nipples showing through the tee-shirt, and the wide, fleshy hips that were wrong.

And my hair! Whoever had styled it so much like a woman's? Just pushing it back from my face made it fall into place. In the shaving mirror, a grimacing, distressed girl was looking back at me.

It took me a while to gather up the remnants of the tape. What could I do, I thought in dismay. I couldn't pretend to be a man, could I? My body and face were so much like a woman's. Oh, gods, I must be some kind of weirdo! I must be one of those fruitcakes, a man who thought there was a woman trapped in his body, who tried to be just like a woman.

A drag queen! Yes, that's what they were called. A travesti, a transvestite, that's what I must be. A man

who loved to dress in women's clothes. Oh, gods, had I altered my body so that I could be taken for a woman? And why would I do that? So everyone would treat me like a woman. I might even have a boy friend and enjoy kissing him as if I was his woman.

Ugh, I almost threw up at such thoughts. How could anyone be like this, a half-man, half-woman! It was gross and disgusting! Oh, gods, perhaps that blow to my head had knocked some sense into me. Perhaps I could get back, as soon as I could, to being what I was, a complete man.

But there was the job I'd just done! Slowly at first, I remembered all about it. I'd been a woman! It was true! I was a woman in a gorgeous dress, flaunting my breasts and pretty, female figure as I'd come clattering up the steps in my impossible high heels onto Vernon's plane!

I'd thrown my arms about his neck, covering his willing lips with my lipstick, wiggling my breasts back and forth against him. I kissed and kissed him, this Vernon, who put his arms about me, hugging me to him, whispering I was going to be his woman fully on this flight, wasn't I? And I was laughing, giggling as if I was drunk, nodding and promising Vernon, his smirk infuriating me, I felt, that I'd be his woman 'entirely', whatever that meant, on this flight.

In the boat's head, I stared at myself, my whole body quivering as I replayed what I, a woman, had done then with a man, at what seemed to be a later time in my memory for I was changed into another, really skimpy, revealing dress. I could remember twisting and twirling, a girl admiring myself in such a lovely, short gown, in front of the dressing mirror.

I'd jumped onto Vernon, pressing my breasts against him, not just kissing his lips in wild abandon but taking his hands and encouraging him to fondle my breasts and my hips. It was as if I was high on something. That must have been it, I thought. The other men I was going to kill, too! That stray thought almost made me cry out in anguish as I didn't know why I thought that or even if it was true. But this whole group of men were there, laughing and smiling

at 'Poor Vernon', whom they teased since he couldn't be away from his girl friend for just one day.

"Oh, so that's why the aft cabin is a bedroom," the swarthy Franz Guerter had said while I wiggled my hips as Vernon stroked me.

"Be a good girl, Simone," Vernon had called me but that wasn't my name. It was an alias. Goddess, I thought, wondering at the word I'd chosen to use. How on earth did I know that? "Go into the bed cabin and get ready to make love to me all flight long."

"You promised me!" I gushed at my latest boy friend. Vernon patted me on my rear, traced my panties against me as I wiggled my tush against him, slapping it when I let go of him.

I exaggerated my wiggle as I left Vernon to his conference with his friends. "Don't be too long," I said in my most high-pitched, little girlish voice as I slid the shoulder straps of my bra and my dress down enough to give Vernon a flash of what he'd be caressing and what he'd be missing if he didn't hurry up and do whatever weapons dealers do when they're together.

Oh yes, I stared in amazement at the blonde, girlish image in the mirror. It was all coming back to me, who I was and everything. I knew that none of that had been my affair. My only task was to get aboard the plane and kill everyone on it. I knew that. It all flooded back. I remembered why I'd been a girl and why I was on such a plane. I'd let Vernon pick me up in a bar, after I'd been part of the chorus line at the *Kitten*. He'd loved my almost naked dancing, just one of the girls. He'd had most of them in his time. I was the new girl which is why I was to be his latest lover.

I'd gushed about going with him to the Riviera as we rolled around and bucked together on his hotel bed. I wouldn't let him penetrate me all the way, not that I wasn't that sort of girl, I let him know. No, I just wanted to go South to the warm weather. If Vernon took me, he could have me all the way, his Simone, fashion model. His chorus girl, I called myself, cooing about that fancy new jet he'd bought, complete with

bed cabin for long trips, or for lovemaking with a very pretty girl, with long, blonde hair, Vernon's favorite type of girl.

Only, I couldn't remember how I'd become that kind of girl. But I clearly had and had done my job. I'd made sure that Vernon was dead, strangling him with my panties as his eyes bulged out as he'd seen the real me, but only after he'd sniffed my panties. I'd then stretched them around his scrawny neck.

Easy to place the bomb, time it, change into swimming gear and leave the plane. "That dumb blonde girl just fell out of the plane!" I heard someone screaming. I counted to twenty before the flash. I fell another fifteen seconds before I opened my parachute.

I shuddered as I pulled on Niccolo's pants in the closed bathroom, thinking about why I'd been swimming in the water. I'd killed a whole planeload of people. I was a murderer, I thought in horror. Why had I done it? What had those people done to me to make me disguise myself so thoroughly as a woman, work my way onto a plane, simpering all over my boy friend, being the sexiest of girls for him, in the skimpiest of dresses, before I went to bed with him. I'd even acted like a girl in his bed, right up to the moment I killed him.

No answers came to me. Niccolo called at the door again. Numb in thoughts and body, I went over the poor retaping I'd done. My panties did at least seem flatter with the tape holding in everything that should be out. How could I have done this, behaving like a woman?

Then, thoughts of the way I'd moved and behaved, the way I'd kissed men so easily and fawned so girlishly all over them came sickeningly to my mind. I hadn't just been a chorus girl in short, frilly, girlish costumes, I'd been an escort of some type as well. I'd loved kissing men and luring them into my room in many different hotels.

Oh gods, what was I? My memories, the ones that flooded into me all seemed to be of me kissing men,

wriggling against and about them. Yes, I'd done something for those men that only girls who were paid for such a service would do, I guessed, my face afire in the shame I felt from my recall.

Was that the way I had to move and behave, to get Niccolo to co-operate with me and get me off this ship, behave as a showgirl? I had to wrap the belt Niccolo gave me twice about my waist, but I could free it in an instant to become a weapon. Yes, I might need to take care of him, I thought grimly, shivering at what I was thinking. I had to protect myself against discovery of who I was. I opened the bathroom door and sashayed to the room where Niccolo had been helping me with my wetsuit.

"What do you think, Nicky?" I pouted coyly, shaking, yes, definitely shaking, feeling so squeamish inside. I swayed into the room in the awful jeans, pulled together at my waist.

"A new style for girls ...?" I began with a forced giggle and stopped then because Franco was standing there. He'd broken into the pack I'd brought away from the plane with me. Of all the items in it, all the makeup and change of undies, the bras and panties, the one Franco had chosen was the gun that I'd wrapped in my black panties, the ones I'd strangled Vernon with. Well, they were pretty and he didn't need them, I'd been thinking, laughing to myself at my little joke.

"I told you she wasn't just a swimmer," snarled Franco to Niccolo, who had a long, kitchen knife in his hand. "It's a con! She's gonna signal to her friends to jump us!"

"Jump you?" I had to ask, putting as much swish into it as I could. Gosh, what was my real name and why was I here, really, apart from killing people and dressing as a woman? "What do you have on board? A ton of cocaine?"

Oh, the looks on their faces! They did have something like that on board. Franco raised the gun in his hand. I reacted instinctively. I didn't know I could move that fast nor did I know that I could chop down

so hard. I was sure I broke Franco's wrist. He went down, his howling choking off, as I also kicked him, right on the chin.

And while I was doing that, I whirled into the lunging Niccolo, turned his hand and buried the knife into him and not into me as he'd intended, that sweet old man.

There was another one, wasn't there? I vaulted up the stairs, my bruises groaning and protesting that I shouldn't treat my body like that. Paolo was armed with a Very pistol. He fired at me; only I'd moved when I saw him. I kicked him several times, the last one sending him from the steering hatch right over the side of the boat. I looked back as he bobbed up, waving at the boat, leaving him behind.

I anchored the steering wheel, leaving the boat to progress at the same speed. I went down to the dining cabin, I suppose it was. Niccolo was taking a long time to die. Franco's neck was broken.

"Please, pretty lady!" gasped Niccolo, trying to plug his wound with a tablecloth. I pulled it away. It was pretty bad. I could have left him, like Paolo, to survive if he could. But he'd seen me, talked to me. Besides, he was pretty stupid. He still thought I was a woman, even though he'd seen me move like a man.

His head was at a weirder angle than Franco's after I'd kicked him. I jerked Niccolo with my arms and hands, not knowing I was that strong and could kill a man so easily. Funny, but I didn't feel anything at all about killing, like that, or in any way, just as I don't think I'd thought at all about the people on the plane I'd killed.

I found my pack and the spare, womanly revealing bikini in it. Six hours later, I gently eased the cocaine smugglers' boat into the coastal waters off San Remo. I'd wiped clean everywhere there might have been evidence of me. Then, near to the shore, I used the cellphone I'd found in the red panties in the pack.

There was a number stenciled on the inside of the panties I think I'd been wearing before I took my flier

out of Vernon's airplane. Clearly, it was there as some kind of backup plan. If it hadn't been there, as I've often wondered, I'm sure things wouldn't have worked out for me as they did over the next few years.

"Thierry here," said a man's voice I seemed to recognize.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked him nervously.

"Noelle!" said the man who'd called himself Thierry. "Mission complete! Vernon changed his flight plan en route but you pulled it off anyway. I told our friend you'd call in when you could. But you're nearly ten hours overdue ..."

"I, I'm hurt," I whispered into the phone. Gods, my voice was so female in tone. I was talking to this man as if I was a woman. "I, I was hit on the head."

"Say nothing else," said Thierry quickly.

"I'm on a boat," I had to say. "How-how do I find you?" I think that was what I had to do. What else was there for me to do, a 'woman' like me?

"You don't remember?" Thierry snapped at me.

"I, I was hit on the head," I told him. "I didn't know my name was Nicole."

"It isn't," said Thierry, his voice softening. "It's Noelle."

"I'm two kilometers off San Remo," I said, checking the instruments on the boat. The smugglers had spared no expense and had the finest of equipment.

"You can swim to the beach?" Thierry asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Do it," snapped Thierry. "Get to a beach café and buy yourself a drink. Wear your red and black bikini and some kind of tee-shirt or white top. One of us will be along to find you. Stay put until we do."