

“Vicky Tiel? Isn’t she dead yet?” The beautiful, slim young woman pointed to the sign in Bergdorf Goodman’s couture salon. She and her friend stopped briefly to inspect a Vicky Tiel gown on display. They didn’t seem to notice me, the designer, sitting nearby. In my white lace peasant dress and gold platform sandals, I probably looked like another customer. Some designers might have been embarrassed or angry, but not me. I knew that being “undercover” could be instructive.

“I wore her pleated lavender lamé dress to my junior high prom,” said the woman in the pale pink suit.

Her friend chimed in, “I wanted to wear her strapless lace empire gown for my wedding but my mom vetoed it. She reminded me that Grandma was buried in a Vicky Tiel ‘Pretty Woman’ Goddess dress.”

I had to smile. The old lady probably wanted to go out looking her best, I thought, but kept quiet. It wasn’t the first time someone was ready to write me off. After forty years in this business, I’ve developed a fairly thick skin.

I thought back to the early sixties, when I was a student at Parsons and the head of the school told me that I had no future in the commercial fashion world of Seventh Avenue.

In my time, I’ve been thrown off movie sets by Mike Nichols and John Frankenheimer, snubbed (and then approved) by Coco Chanel, and arrested in the Middle East and then again in Pigalle. I’ve been kicked off an airplane for being “inappropriately” dressed, sucked out a helicopter door and pulled back in by Elizabeth Taylor, had my nude body printed on matchbook covers, then been banned by the French government. I’ve had some wild ups and some spectacular downs, and I’ve managed to survive through it all.

Surviving is what I do best. More than thirty years ago, my own survival—my very life—was literally at risk.

It was back in 1974, off the coast of Palermo, Sicily. I was lying on the floor of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton’s bedroom on the *Kalizma*, their 165-foot yacht. I was trying to grab on to the long strands of the fuzzy beige carpet while the boat rocked back

and forth, almost upside down. Gale-force winds were churning the sea and tossing the boat around like a child's toy. Each time we lurched to one side, Elizabeth's Louis Vuitton trunk with the gold *LV* flew past her king-size bed. Fortunately the trunk was empty, since Elizabeth had flown the coop, leaving Richard once again.

As the boat threatened to tip all the way over, I desperately looked for anything to grab—the bathroom door frames, the bedposts, the deep-pile carpet. I stretched out my arms and legs like a rock climber on the side of a steep mountain, holding on for dear life. The fierce typhoon had already sunk almost every boat in the Palermo harbor. We had begun the day with two crew members on board, along with my husband, Ron Berkeley (Burton's makeup man), and my eighteen-year-old stepson, Craig.

The boat was about to capsize, and I didn't know where they were or even if they were still alive.

Then I heard Ron's voice coming from the hallway, where he also was lying on the carpet. "Good-bye," he yelled. "I love you. We're all going to die."

I yelled back, "*No!*" I was *not* going to die in the *Kalizma*, not sleeping on Pratesi sheets. What about the dinner we had started? What about the \$600 bottle of Château Palmer waiting in the galley? We were going to make it to Naples and I would visit Pompeii.
I will not die today.

You might ask why I was even on Liz Taylor's yacht in the middle of a crazy storm. Ron had been working on *The Voyage* in Italy, and the Sicilian location shooting was finally over. During the shoot, Richard had fallen in lust with Sophia Loren, and now it was time for them to part. At the wrap party the night before, Richard was not willing to leave Sophia. He asked us to take the boat, with all his books and clothes, to Naples while he stayed behind to woo Sophia. Like so many men before him, he thought (wrongly) he could persuade her to leave Carlo Ponti, her older husband.

During a previous filming in Italy, Elizabeth and Richard had been Sophia's houseguests in Rome. Elizabeth had immediately sensed the animal attraction between her husband and the Italian

temptress and had been extremely upset. Now it was happening all over again, but this time Elizabeth was not going to stand for it. She bolted. And for the last time, it turned out.

At the wrap party, Sophia had cut Richard off abruptly and retired to her room before the festivities were over. Having drunk one (or more) too many and forgetting that at almost fifty he was too old to play Romeo, Richard had impulsively decided to climb the wall of the Villa Igiea. The antique castle, converted to a grand hotel, hung over cliffs jutting above Palermo harbor. Richard scaled the thick vines on the hotel's front wall, and in spite of his age, managed to make it to the third-floor balcony adjoining Sophia's room. He was about to go inside but peeked through the window and stopped himself.

Without making a sound, he spun around, climbed back over the balcony, and gingerly made his way down to ground level, with just a few minor scrapes and cuts. Later he tearfully told me that Sophia had been sharing her bed with another person . . . and *not* Carlo Ponti. Not elaborating, he said he had decided not to join Ron and me on the boat. He urged us to leave at once. A storm was coming and we had to cross before the typhoon got to Sicily.

Richard's plan was to join us in Naples with Sophia at his side. But he sounded more desperate than hopeful. I tried to console him by explaining that Sophia had an inglorious reputation as the "Goddess of Love." He was not the first man to fall under her spell. Every actor she worked with (most notably Cary Grant) was seduced and then discarded. She never left her husband.

The storm eventually stopped and we all survived. The *Kalizma* had been caught at sea in the same region as the spot referred to in *The Odyssey*: the Strait of Messina, Europe's most dangerous sea passage. Ulysses had almost come to grief there, tempted by the Sirens, sea demons. Unlike the mythical wanderer, Richard Burton did not return to the welcoming arms of his wife. He arrived in Naples dejected and alone, with no Sophia at his side.

And now, thirty-five years later, here I was at Bergdorf's, waiting on customers, lightly amused by their comments. All these years later, my dresses, lingerie, and perfumes were still selling. In fact, I named my men's perfume Ulysses and my women's

perfume Sirene, in honor of that night aboard the *Kalizma*. This book is the story of how I survived—and yes, even *thrived*—as a fashion and fragrance designer, and an occasional costume designer for Hollywood. It's about how I managed to keep my business going, no matter what and how many highs and lows occurred on my journey.

Back then, tossing on the Tyrrhenian Sea, I was weary but not ready to call it quits. Today I am the longest-surviving female designer in Paris. For more than forty years, I have experienced great glory moments being a “fashion favorite,” then being dismissed as a “has-been,” and finally being rediscovered as the designer everyone copied. I have had wild times followed by reflective times, which led to growth as an artist and as a human being.

Along the way, I learned much from the beautiful and alluring women (and a few men) I had the privilege to dress. Many are stars you will recognize by their first names only. Many were kind enough to share their secrets of seduction and power with me. I wrote this book to share their amazing stories, along with some fairly outrageous adventures of my own.