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Media Highlights  
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### **34. Unmasked! Meet the CIA's real mistress of disguise**

**Kathryn Knight, DailyMail.co.uk, 4 December 2010**

Like Angelina Jolie in spy thriller *Salt*, many secret agents' lives have been saved by a fake identity. Here, a former CIA spook reveals the tricks of the trade...

As anyone who's attended a fancy dress party can confirm, there's more to a decent disguise than a wig and a bit of make-up.

For one woman there was an awful lot more to it: as a CIA operative working under the tantalising title of Chief of Disguise, it was Jonna Mendez's job to help the organisation's field agents assume myriad identities.

In most cases their lives, and those of countless others, depended on her amazing transformative skills.

The world she operated in is a shadowy one, recently mirrored by spy thriller *Salt*, in which Angelina Jolie plays a CIA agent wrongly accused of working for the KGB.

For Evelyn Salt, disguise is a way to help thwart her pursuers. For Jonna, her skill helped facilitate some of the CIA's most daring operations.

As with all the best spies, Jonna seems an unlikely candidate for the world of espionage. Now 65, she is a photographer, living quietly with her second husband, ex-CIA officer Tony Mendez, and their 17-year-old son Jesse, near Washington DC.

Born in Kansas to a conventional middle-class family and happily working as a teacher, she only fell into spy work after her 1969 wedding to her first husband, a CIA officer who only revealed his true identity two days before their wedding.

'I believed he was a US army officer,' she recalls. 'I'd never had any cause to doubt his cover. I guess my fascination with the agency started right there.'

When her husband was stationed by the CIA in the Far East, Jonna joined him and ended up working as a secretary - albeit an unconventional one.

'Day after day we were processing papers that influenced events around us. What we were seeing was changing the course of history,' she recalls.

Jonna yearned for more responsibility and, at the age of 27, she persuaded her superiors to train her in the art of clandestine photography and secret writing techniques.

A year later she was sent on her first assignment, training foreign agents to process secret documents using the latest technology.

'Think of Q in James Bond, and you're about right. We'd put cameras in cigarette packets, key fobs and perfume atomisers, and we had numerous systems by which agents could communicate.

'These could involve shaving a pet, tattooing a message onto it and then passing on the animal once the hair had grown back. Or an agent might reduce a page of text photographically to the size of a full stop, then glue it on to a page in a magazine and post it to their contact. It sounds like the stuff of movies but it was driven by necessity.'

In 1985 Jonna took on a new role - as a disguise specialist on the Indian subcontinent. The job was as enthralling as the title suggests.

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'In the field, every agent knows that a lot of people they meet would try to describe them later, so they want as many things as possible in that description to be wrong: height, weight, hair colour, moles, piercing, tattoos, scars, wrinkles. My job was to help them achieve that.'

Working with her specialist kit - prosthetics, stage make-up, wigs, pigments - Jonna could effect such amazing transformations that she could help people change genders and even ethnicity.

'It depended on context and how long they had to wear it for - you couldn't have stuff that would melt under the midday sun, for example,' she recalls.

'Sometimes I had to improvise with local materials - even dust from the street. Simple things made all the difference. If you put something in people's shoes they would walk differently for instance. You'd watch these people walk and move, and then work out how to make them do the opposite.'

On one occasion she provided the disguise that allowed local operatives to steal a priceless communication device from a Russian stronghold, accompanying the team throughout the mission - although she dismisses any suggestions of bravery.

'What we were doing was protecting the agents who really were risking their lives,' she insists.

That isn't to say that there weren't some hairy moments. 'There were a couple of occasions when I thought: "This is it",' Jonna admits.

'In one of them I ended up walking into the middle of a drug deal in Latin America. Another time, I was part of a sting operation in a hotel and found myself with a Kalashnikov pointed at me across the lobby.'

Inevitably, the strains of this nomadic, adrenaline-fuelled lifestyle impacted on her personal life. By the late 1980s Jonna and her husband had drifted apart, and they eventually divorced.

What she wasn't prepared for was her growing closeness to another CIA operative, this time her boss, Tony Mendez. By 1988, the pair had started dating and in 1992 an astonished 47-year-old Jonna found herself pregnant with her first child.

'Having kids wasn't really compatible with the job, so I hadn't gone down that road. Then suddenly I'm having a baby and I knew things would have to change,' she says.

She retired when Jesse was four months old, though she has maintained links with the profession - giving lectures as well as sitting on the board of Washington's Spy Museum, alongside former MI5 chief Dame Stella Rimington, who she knows well.

The pair bonded, she says, over their experiences as women in a male-dominated profession.

'In the field, old-fashioned attitudes prevailed. If you made a mistake as a woman it was held up as an example of weakness; if you were a man you were given another chance. It's getting better, but some of the dinosaurs need to move out of the way.'

There were other difficulties too, for although she told her parents about her profession, Jonna had to hide the true nature of her work from all her friends. The secrecy took its toll.

'It's quite isolating, and it's why spies socialise largely with their own,' she says. Yet Jonna wouldn't change a thing.

'I had an amazing adventure. Mothers ask me if I'd recommend my job to their daughters and I say: "Absolutely".'

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