

## ***The Washashore***

**Detective Lieutenant Beston, you simply *must* understand, it was never about the money,”** she says, her husky voice resonant with enough sincerity to assail, but not assuage, my suspicion. “I agreed to sail away with Vaughn because I love him, and trust *he* loves *me*.”

There’s a slight chance she’s telling the truth, though my bet is she’ll never set sail again—or see a cent of his money. The evidence is piling up.

Amanda Mulher is one complex lady. Somewhere between thirty-five and forty, she poses a slew of contradictions for a guy like me. Her understated, classic wardrobe broadcasts good taste, yet a smoldering sensuality just below the surface suggests so much more. If you take a good look, those expensively tailored suits are hiding something. And that’s what I’m paid to do, take a good look at every last detail. I’m damn good at it, too—and I’m not talking fashion.

She’s not a high-priced call girl—old news given the hordes of working “ladies” here in Grand Bahama. She’s not one of their “altar” egos, either. By that, I mean the hordes of trophy wives holed up in gated communities along the shore. No, Ms. Mulher’s in a class by herself. Like no one I’ve ever met. Because of that, I can’t scuttle a hunch she’s not who she says she is. Maybe I’m out of my league, but my instincts tell me there’s more to her than I’ve gotten out of her. Yet.

I’ve seldom seen a woman so comfortable in her own skin. Even after hours of questioning, every glance, every gesture, is captivating. Not studied or provocative, just charming and incredibly self-possessed. She’s more than at ease; she’s savoring every moment life has to offer—even while being grilled for hours in this dump.

There’s fun to be had with Amanda Mulher. That’s for sure. She’s got a terrific wit, she’s smart, and she treats me as if I’m the only man in the world. I’m not the greatest authority on feminine wiles, but even I can tell she’s quite the package. No doubt, she’d make some guy truly happy—until she killed him, that is.

What I’m trying to say is I’m pretty damn sure she murdered Vaughn Kreisler. He’s been missing for nearly two weeks, and things don’t look so good for him making a comeback. According to the Boston FBI, he left one hell of a life behind, a multimillion-dollar company he started from scratch, a society wife with an impeccable pedigree, a waterfront house in Marblehead, Mass., a townhouse in Boston, and a winter getaway in Kauai. The way I see things, it would take one hell of a woman to get him to slip his mooring line. I think I know who, and, the more time I spend in Ms. Mulher’s company, why.

Kreisler’s disappearance is a sensation back in the States. The tabloids run something on the case almost every day. It all began when his wife found a note at the summer place that said, “Forgive me.” That was it. They’d recently separated, but even before that she’d paid little attention to his frequent absences, so she just figured he’d had an attack of remorse.

Three more days passed before she stumbled onto the fact that he'd vanished without a trace—at least that's what she told the Feds. She found a hell of a lot when she finally put two and two together. He'd closed his bank accounts and sold his shares of the company, as well as several investment properties. What's more, all proceeds had been wired offshore.

There was some consolation in the midst of all this: a brokerage account in her name with a recent deposit of fifty mil. A pleasant surprise for most folks; but it appears the little woman isn't satisfied. When you think about it, why wouldn't she try for more? If he's proved dead, she gets it all. If they divorce, she could get as much as half. Seems worth the extra effort to me.

With all the cars accounted for, no trace with private jet services or public airlines, and his fifty-footer still moored off the Corinthian Yacht Club, the wife was at a loss. Then a yacht broker called to ask how they liked their brand-new eight-eight-footer, the *Last Chance*.

Dawn over Marblehead, as the saying goes. Lois Kreisler called the police. The locals got lucky right from the start. They learned *Last Chance* was delivered at night—fully provisioned down to the last detail—and departed at dawn the very next morning for points unknown.

Apparently, an old duffer overnighting at the next mooring got up early to hang it over the side. Midstream, he was taken aback to see a tall, beautiful, buxom woman board *Last Chance*. As he finished up and settled in to watch, the goddess raised her sails, dropped the mooring pennant—tossed it from the bow like a bridal bouquet is the way he told it—then, with no help, tacked through a harbor crowded with high-end yachts. All this without auxiliary power, against the tide in a light breeze, just as the sun rose, as if she had something—or someone—to hide.

The theory is Kreisler was below decks. The question is why wasn't he at the helm of his brand-new yacht? Lots of millionaires get kidnapped for ransom, and some don't live to tell the tale. As a result, the Feds consider him a missing person—until he turns up somewhere dead or alive, that is. This makes the woman sailor a person of interest to the FBI and, subsequently, yours truly. How much do you want to bet the babe at the helm was our Ms. Mulher?

According to the Feds, Lois is furious about the other woman and insists Kreisler's still alive, or—if you read between the lines—will be until she kills him herself. I don't mean to sound so negative; it's just I've learned to expect the worst. An occupational hazard, I guess. As some smart-ass once said, "An optimist is frequently disappointed, a pessimist sometimes pleasantly surprised." I'll take pessimism every time—you've got no place to go but up.

In any case, Lois claims her husband moved his funds offshore and fled the country to avoid a divorce settlement. She's already initiated proceedings for her share of the seven hundred million she says he's worth. So Kreisler's in the soup with the FBI and a pissed-off wife. Maybe he should have given more thought to his choice of crew—or should I say first mate?

When *Last Chance* hailed the marina at Old Bahama Bay, I raced from Freeport to West End to take Kreisler into custody. The FBI wanted him on ice until they decided whether charges were warranted. In a rare example of inter-agency cooperation, Customs held the yacht in quarantine until I got there.

Ms. Mulher, the only person on board, greeted us on deck like the Queen, offering the grand tour as if she did it every day. We searched the whole boat, even the crew quarters in the bow, but no Kreisler—just some monogrammed men’s clothing and a shaving kit. Quite the yacht, by the way: electric winches, power thrusters. Despite the size, a seasoned sailor could single-hand her. In fact, my late sainted grandmother could have managed it from her rocking chair.

Desertion, divorce, adultery, they’re not my bailiwick, but a missing person case often ends up as a murder investigation—my specialty, as it so happens. The facts in this case shout foul play: there are minute traces of blood on the lazarette and the sheath of a long antifouling knife. The knife is missing, and there’s no tender in the davits.

No one sails any great distance without a tender, so where is it? I’ve got a hunch. If the murder took place in an inflatable Zodiac, a few slashes and the body, the knife, and all blood traces—save the two I found—would be safely at the bottom of the ocean.

I ask again about the missing items.

“As I told you yesterday, and the day before, and the day we met,” Ms. Mulher says, with a touch of weariness that borders on the theatrical, “it was dead calm before dawn. I was awake, but still in my cabin. We must have caught a net or line on the rudder because I heard Vaughn lower the Zodiac. He *had* to have taken the knife with him. It was in the lazarette the day before—I saw it there.

“As you already know, a rain squall overtook us. As I also told you, the autopilot was on, the sails were up, and *Last Chance* took off like a shot. I felt her heel, then came up on deck. The Zodiac was gone, and Vaughn was nowhere to be found. I reefed the sails and hove to, but by then visibility had deteriorated. It stayed that way for several hours. I searched and searched but found nothing. Finally, I made for Old Bahama Bay.”

“And you didn’t radio his disappearance because?”

“Vaughn wanted to start a new life. He made me promise there’d be no publicity, no matter what. Besides, I just know he’s alive. He’s an excellent seaman. He’s done several Atlantic crossings by himself. What’s more, the Zodiac was extremely seaworthy. He must have made for shore. We were only a few miles off West End, after all. Those waters aren’t exactly isolated.”

And yet he didn’t radio to tell you he was safe, and he wasn’t waiting for you when you came ashore, I say to myself, seeing a hole in her tale big enough to steer the *Queen Mary* through. This lady hasn’t deviated from her story one iota. It has the same flaws every time.

“You’re quite the sailor yourself, Ms. Mulher,” I say instead.

Again, I ask myself, why didn’t she call for help?

She tosses her blonde locks, then runs her fingers through them.

“Why thank you. How kind of you to notice. I’ve sailed for years. That’s how Vaughn and I met.”

“Say more about that.”

Amanda Mulher’s background check has come up blank in the States—no record, no identity. Nada. Except here in the Caribbean, where she has several Customs entries and hotel stays on various islands.

“Nothing much to say. I’ve been a sailor most of my life: transatlantic crossings, the Mediterranean and Pacific, and, most recently, the Caribbean. I met Vaughn when my boat was moored next to his at the Corinthian in Marblehead. He was kind enough to help me replace my solenoid.”

I’m not going to ask what that did for her, in case it’s some mainland euphemism I haven’t heard of yet.

“Your personal information seems a bit sparse,” I say instead, hoping my research will shake something loose. “The folks at the Excelsior said you had only a passport when you checked in—no other photo ID.”

“Oh, that! My purse was stolen the first night you let me go ashore. Fortunately, my birth certificate and passport were still on board.”

She looks me right in the eye as she says this. No doubt about it, she’s one cool customer. Her casual, confident tone gets my guard up. We’re not chatting at the country club; we’re talking about a missing person, possibly murder. She should be nervous, and she isn’t. There’s something off about that. I can’t put my finger exactly on what. Yet.

Perhaps she figures she’s gotten away with it and just needs to let the clock run out. It’s worth a try. I can’t keep her indefinitely without evidence. I don’t have a body, just the FBI dossier. There’s no official suspicion of foul play, only my instincts, which are decidedly unofficial. She could pass the hours playing dodge ’em with me and get off scot-free if I don’t catch a break soon. I wouldn’t put it past her to think that way. Given our proximity to the Gulf Stream, there’s little chance Kreisler’s body will wash ashore. Even so, it’s a high-stakes gamble on her part, but then, as I’ve said, she’s not your typical suspect.

“OK, that’s it for today,” I say, more intrigued than ever, but not wanting to overplay my hand. “Check in with me tomorrow, in case there are any developments. In the meantime, stay on the island and make sure I can reach you.”

I find it useful to string suspects along with multiple interrogations over extended periods. Even if they don’t show it at first, the pressure to keep their story straight day after day wears them down. Sooner or later, they slip up or crack. Works every time.

Ms. Mulher pouts a bit as if it’s a minor inconvenience: like breaking a nail or finding a run in her pantyhose.

“Oh sure . . . No problem. Where can I go? You’ve impounded the boat at the marina and my passport at the hotel. You have someone tailing me night and day. It hardly seems the time for a trip to Paris.”

Ha. I’ll have to swap out Fawkes for someone else. She’s pretty slick, this Ms. Mulher, or whoever the hell she is. Fawkes is a real pro, and no one has ever made him before.

Standing to leave, Ms. Mulher extends her hand palm down as if expecting me to kiss it.

“A pleasure as always, Lieutenant. I’ve come to enjoy our little chats. Same time tomorrow?”

I shake her hand instead—with a strong grip. She doesn’t even wince.

“Sure, why not,” I say. “I’ve got all the time in the world.”

“Aren’t you fortunate,” she says with a mischievous glint in her eye.

I smile in spite of myself.

With that parting shot, she turns and sashays out of the room as if she’s walking the red carpet. Every head in the squad room turns to watch. Three cops collide in a rush to open the door for her.

Though I don’t particularly care for women in the sack, it’s beginning to make sense why Kreisler tossed everything over for this one. You have to admire her guts, and if she’s half as good in bed as her sexy vibes suggest, she’d be well worth weighing anchor. Even I can see that. That said, I can’t get past this hunch she’s one of those “black widow” types. You know the MO: seduce the man, get in the will, do the poor bastard in, and move on to the next one. It would explain why I couldn’t trace her in the States. Those gals go through so many married names and false identities it’d be easier to find Jimmy Hoffa than track one of them down.

Along those lines, I wonder if Kreisler had any idea what he was getting into. I could make a joke about him going overboard for a pretty face, but given the circumstances, it seems in poor taste.