

12th September, 2002

IT'S 5A.M. WHEN Amanda Fortini strolls through the palm trees in a red bikini. She's barefoot, still slightly drunk after last night's party. Her skin is tanned from diving on the island's coral reef, and lazing by friends' swimming pools, her blonde hair two shades lighter than when she arrived in Mustique six weeks ago. She pauses for a moment, inhaling the island's smell of wild vines, hibiscus flowers, and adventure. The scent lifts her spirits higher as she follows the track through shoulder-high ferns. She's twenty-three years old, in love for the first time ever. Her previous relationships have been empty infatuations, but her new man will change her life forever. Certainty fills her mind as the shore comes into view, a glitter of pink sand unfolding in a wide crescent.

The young woman smiles as she steps onto the beach. The heat is increasing already, even though she's on the western side of the island, the newly risen sun warming her back. It's still so early there's no one in sight, the ocean beckoning her closer, tempting her to sprint into the waves like an over-excited child. She can do just as she likes here.

No journalists are hiding among the trees, waiting to ambush her like they do in New York. Mustique is the one place she can relax, without witnesses. That heady sense of freedom makes her spin in a pirouette, taking in the jungle's depths, a pristine white villa on the hilltop, and the sun dropping coins of light onto the water's surface. The Caribbean is cornflower blue, as calm as a basin of mercury, despite the storm warnings she's heard on the radio.

Amanda walks into the sea, slowly at first, letting it erase last night's heat from her skin, when she danced by a fire on the beach. A huge yacht hovers on the horizon ahead, its decks glinting in the sunlight. She allows the next tall wave to lift her off her feet. Her muscles feel loose and relaxed as she sets out from shore, arms and legs cutting through the water in a rapid crawl.

She only turns round once to catch her breath. Mustique looks like an advert for tropical holidays as she treads water: its hills rise above her, circled by acres of jungle and deserted beaches. Amanda floats on her back, content to drift for a while, turning her face to the sun.

A faint noise reaches her while she admires the island's lush profile. She can hear the ugly mechanical whirr of a speedboat, growing louder all the time. It could be a local fisherman or the yacht's owner, but why is it going so fast? Everyone knows that swimmers are in the water all day long. When she spins round a motorboat is racing straight towards her. Instinct makes her dive below the water's surface, until her lungs burn. the boat's propeller inches from her face. Didn't the driver see her waving frantically, to make it change course? The boat spins in a tight circle, panic flooding her

SUNDAY 12TH SEPTEMBER, 2002

system as she dives again. When it speeds towards her for a third time her reactions are too slow.

The boat's prow tosses her into the air like a rag doll, until she plummets back down into the water. Amanda is barely conscious when she surfaces, the waves' tumult ringing in her ears. Her gaze lands on the island again, like a camera lens, taking a last shot of paradise.