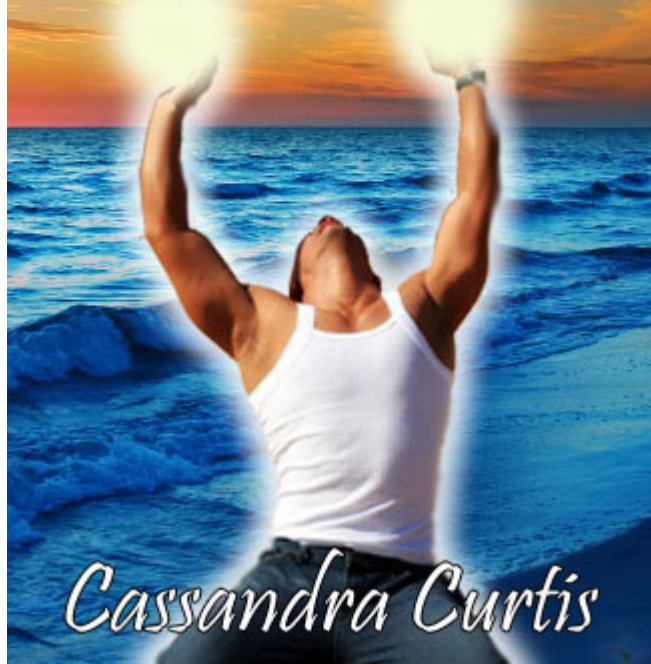
 Midnight Moon Café

Shimmer



Cassandra Curtis

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SHIMMER

Sherbet chiffon should be outlawed! Dixie kicked off her satin pumps and wished she could do the same with her bridesmaid dress. Who ever heard of having the whole traditional shebang at a beach-themed wedding? Her crazy sister, Lavonia—that's who.

She looked from her sister to her new brother-in-law as they danced past, and fought back a sigh. The groom's eyes were locked on his bride, a half smile on his lips. Her sister caressed her new hubby's neck, and leaned up for a kiss. Lordy, if she had to watch much more of this she'd gag on all the sugar.

Oh sure, she was happy for her sister. But she wondered how many of the guests knew that Daniel had originally been her blind date, not Lavonia's. Before she'd known what was what, that sneaky brat up and stole him.

When she thought about it, she had to admit her sister made a better match for Daniel. The man liked magnolias, and no one had ever accused Dixie of being a delicate, fragrant flower. Nope, she was more of a firecracker pepper plant according to her last boyfriend. Hot to the touch and hot to the taste. Her ex should have remembered one other thing hot about her—and not cheated.

Dixie grinned. She'd scared him silly and taught him a lesson. The next woman who got her ex really should thank her.

She grabbed her shoes, the half-full glass of her pink champagne, and stepped from the hotel's ballroom onto the wraparound balcony. She looked toward the beach below. Sea foam washed on shore in a gentle roll of white bubbles. The dark of the sky and the waves in the distance melded so that there was no visible horizon...only endless velvet night and twinkling stars. The picturesque view caught her breath. It was just so...romantic.

A walk along the beach sounded perfect—so what if she had no one to hold her hand. Yep, she'd breathe in some of the fresh sea air and enjoy the beauty of the island. She picked her way down the steps and deliberately jumped the last set, her feet secure in the warm bank of sand. Tiny white crabs scurried to their burrows as she passed.

Ohh...bliss. The wet sand squished between her toes. She could still hear the music pouring from the balcony as she walked. Salsa with a heavy jazz influence.

Her hips and feet picked up the rhythm and she danced, splashing water as it rolled ashore. A few stray Sandpipers darted in front of her and picked off any minnows she managed to kick up.

She took a sip of her champagne and wished it was something more tropical, like a daiquiri or a piña colada. Hell, who ever heard of serving pink champagne at a beach wedding? Now, if it had been her wedding, all the guests would be drinking jungle juice out of coconuts, wearing Bermuda shorts, and the band would play good ole' southern rock. Or calypso—even hula music. She laughed, picturing her sister, Lavonia barefoot in a hula skirt and coconuts instead of the layered clouds of chiffon and satin.

A weird humming noise interrupted her thoughts and made her shake her head. The sounds was like that white noise thing, only she also could feel the fine hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She looked out over the ocean and saw a ball of light shoot from the waves, then zoom straight up into the black sky. She blinked. Took a step into

the shallows and gasped as two more of the freaky lights shot from beneath the waves no more than a hundred feet from her and then zipped into the stratosphere.

What the hell? She'd only had two glasses of the pink stuff, so it couldn't be a hallucination—could it? She started back toward the hotel, her stride more hurried than before, her eyes on the dark waves. Did UFOs fly underwater?

Another ball of light moved under the waves, before leaving the ocean. This one appeared to hover just above the water for a fraction of a second. Tingles raced down her spine as she stood frozen in shock, seeing something that couldn't possibly be. The damn thing glowed and pulsed—like it was alive, and headed straight for her.

Her sudden paralysis broken, she made a dash for the hotel steps, champagne sloshing onto her dress. The freaky damn thing was gaining on her. In a last ditch effort to buy herself some time, she threw first one high heel, then the other at the odd ball of light. It zigged, then it zagged. The first spiked weapon missed it by inches, but the second heel slapped the edge of the pulsating sphere, and spun it around.

Lungs near bursting, she flew up the stairs, onto the balcony, pausing only to open the sliding glass doors. She slammed them shut and turned to see everyone had stopped dancing, and were now staring at her.

She hurried over to her sister. Lavonia and Daniel stood next to his parents. “Did you see it?” She touched her sister's arm.

Lavonia turned to her, a grimace on her face as she looked her up and down, her ice blue eyes resting on the stained bodice of Dixie's dress.

“Why is it that everything you eat or drink eventually winds up on your chest?”

“What?”

Her sister glanced over at her new husband, then back at Dixie. “Do you do it on purpose, to draw men's eyes there?”

“Lavonia Maybelle, this isn't the time or place to argue or do a “poor, pity me” just because your chest is flatter than a pancake! I think I saw a UFO!”

Lavonia's mother-in-law gasped. The new father-in-law tried to squelch his grin—and failed. Her sister grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the small group of guests.

“Do you want them to think we are hillbillies? Where are your shoes? So help me, if you ruin my wedding reception—” Her sister spat out, her perfect teeth gritted.

“A UFO? Where?” Daniel appeared beside her and cut off his wife's words.

“On the beach. I was walking along the shore and I saw this weird ball of light shoot straight out of the ocean, and up into the sky. Then two more did that—and one started coming after me, so I ran back here fast as I could. I threw my shoes at it.”

“I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't screech out your drunken delusions in front of my new in-laws or the other guests!” Her sister hissed the words like a cat cornered by a big old bulldog.

“I am not drunk! I only had two glasses of that gawd-awful pink stuff.”

“God-awful? That champagne is over two hundred dollars a bottle! And don't think I don't know what you are up to, Dixie Ashleigh Ames!”

“Can you show me?” Daniel asked her, then darted a look at his bride. “You don't mind, do you, honey?”

Her sister twisted her lips into something that could have passed for a smile, and with pure sugar laced with strychnine, said, “Of course not, darling,” but those laser blue eyes promised evil intent as Lavonia shot a look at her.

She would have said something to reassure her sister that she wasn’t trying to screw up her wedding, or steal her new husband, but Daniel was already sliding open the glass doors, waiting for her.

“Thank you for believing me.” Dixie stepped out onto the balcony and leaned over the railing. She spotted her shoes and trod through the heavy sand, then bent to pick them up. Her brother-in law truly was a nice man.

“No problem.” He squatted down to help her when she seemed to lose her balance. No telling what Lavonia would make of such a gallant and harmless gesture.

“What have we here?” He reached out to touch a trail of tiny shimmering crystals that lay atop the footpath where her right shoe had landed.

“What is it?”

“That’s odd. Not sure, but whatever it is, it’s still warm.” He nudged one of the bigger crystals with his fingers. “It looks like bits of fused sea glass or some strange form of quartz.”

“I don’t remember seeing it before.”

“Can you point to where the lights were over the ocean?” He stood, brushing the sand and bits of glass from his hands, and turned toward the sea.

“Yeah, right over there, about four hundred feet away. But that last one surfaced closer, about a hundred feet from the shore—over there, and then chased me.”

“Along this path?” His eyes followed the invisible line she drew in the air.

“Yes. What do you think it was?” She moved to inspect the crystals closer. They were pretty and nearly translucent. She scooped up a handful of the sand at her feet, let it run through her fingers, and wondered at the tiny crystals remaining. They did look like quartz...or...? No, it couldn’t be? Could it?

“Daniel? Do you think a gemologist here on the island could tell us what these are for certain?”

“I’d guess so. But why?”

“I can’t be sure, but I saw this show on TV once, and these crystals sure look a lot like the ones they had.” Dixie looked back down at the clear little crystal stones.

“What show was it?”

“Undiscovered Treasures, or something like that. The show had this one part that talked about a state park that’s in Arkansas.”

“The Crater of Diamonds State Park?”

She glanced up at Daniel, and nodded. Excitement crowded out her previous fear of the UFOs.

“Don’t get too excited. It’s probably just sea glass. But you’re welcome to look in a local phone book tomorrow and see if there’s someone in there willing to check them out.” He started back toward the stairs, and then turned. “I know you and Lavonia don’t get along, Dixie. But I also know she loves you.”

“I know. I love her too.”

“So, I know you won’t mention the UFO again, or anything else about tonight. I don’t want Lavonia upset on our honeymoon. You understand.”

“I won’t say another word about the UFOs.” At his stern look, she added, “I promise.”

* * *

Rey sat on the beach, his long, bronze-toned body bare except for a pair of faded blue swim trunks. He put on his shades and kept watch. The delectable brunette from the night before had yet to show her pretty face. He rubbed his own face, remembering the spiked heel that same brunette had sent flying toward his head—well, what would have been his head had he been in his human form.

He’d been mildly amused when his brother worried that someone had seen their departure. Neither he nor his compadres ever worried about being spotted. Any sightings usually got classified as a little too much rum, a little too much sun, and an overactive imagination. But when he got a better look at woman who had seen them, he’d been intrigued. Her aura shone bright as a night star.

Of course, he didn’t expect her to knock the *adamas* out of him with her shoe. His brother got a good laugh out of that! It wasn’t until later that he wondered if the little human had been hurt from their encounter. He told himself that—and only that—was the reason he’d decided to check up on her.

He caught movement near the hotel’s side entrance. It was her! He had to get closer. She took the steps down to the beach two at a time, then walked to the exact spot where she’d hit him with her shoe. Now, she knelt in the sand, scooping up handfuls of it, and emptying her cupped palms into a clear, plastic bag. She snapped the bag shut and stood.

An overwhelming urge to touch her, flesh to flesh, fought with the common sense that told him to keep away. She headed for the stairs. Desire won out and he made his way over to her.

“Hello.”

“Oh!” She spun around and her sandal flew off between the slats of the steps.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. Let me retrieve your shoe for you.”

“Thank you.”

He reached through the opening and grabbed the rubber heel. At least she’d changed into less lethal footwear. “You do seem to have a problem keeping your shoes on, don’t you?” He muttered under his breath.

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry. Here you go, Ms.–?” He handed her the sandal and their fingers touched.

“Dixie.”

The moment stretched, infinite possibilities merged, and he saw the future in her eyes. He knew his people had mated with humans in the past, but he’d never wanted nor expected having more than a fling with any of the females he met on the island.

“You know, it sure is rude to have somebody tell you their name and not to tell yours back. Didn’t your mama teach you manners?”

He quirked his lips. “I’m sorry again it seems.” He released the shoe. “I’m Rey.”

“Rey. Like a drop of sunshine? I like it.”

“Happy to hear it. Are you here on vacation?”

“No, my sister’s wedding. Although the ceremony was yesterday and everybody else is leaving to head home today.”

“You aren’t leaving, I hope? We’ve only just met.”

“I’m supposed to fly out tomorrow, but I think I might just stick around. I love the island.” She tried to put on her sandal, but lost her balance, and reached out for something solid.

Her fingers gripped his forearm. Heat rushed straight to his groin. Damn, he’d never wanted a woman as much as he wanted this woman, right now. He curved a hand around her waist, wishing he could tear off the tiny scrap of fabric blocking him from touching her bare skin. He leaned forward and inhaled the lingering, fresh scent of cucumber shampoo.

“Thank you.” Dixie straightened and backed up a step.

A shaft of light made the bag she held shimmer. At least ten pure adamas stones were in the see-through baggie along with a bit of sand. He tried to smother a laugh. How could he not be attracted to a woman who literally carried part of him with her? She seemed concerned he’d noticed her little treasure and tried to turn away.

“Adamas. Quite lovely.”

“What?”

“The stones in your bag.”

“You know what they are?”

He heard the excitement in her voice. “Yes. You might say I am an expert on adamas.”

“I’m probably being too forward, but would you like to have lunch with me? My treat. I’d love to hear more about adamas if you’re willing?”

“I don’t think you forward at all, and it will be my treat to be with you.”

“Then it’s a date. Oh, but you might need to change clothes. Some places won’t let you in without a shirt on.”

“I happen to know a perfect place, very quiet, no shirt or shoes required, and the chef is a culinary genius. It will be my treat to take you there.”

“Is it authentic ethnic food? I’ve got a hankering to try something new.”

Her eyes sparkled and her little upturned nose made him want to kiss it. The sheer joy of life within her echoed in her aura.

“I promise you an adventure. Follow me, *muchacha*.”

* * *

“Where is this restaurant? Timbuktu?” They’d walked along the curve of the cay for several minutes, only stopping once they reached the private docks. But she couldn’t complain. She’d followed along behind him enjoying the view. The ocean and beach weren’t bad either. He had the hot, Latin good looks of someone like Mario Lopez or Ricky Martin, yet something about him made her think his heritage wasn’t entirely Latino.

She knew she should be more wary. A strange man in a foreign country leading her off to a more secluded location on the pretense of taking her to lunch. He could be a serial killer or a rapist for all she knew. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. She should have agreed to meet him at a crowded public restaurant in town. Or maybe at the hotel’s own restaurant until she got to know him better.

Damn, her sister was right. She was impulsive.

Rey must have sensed her second thoughts, because he took her hand in his and pointed toward the docks ahead.

“See the boat moored at the end of the dock?”

“You mean the dingy?”

“That’s our destination.”

“So I have to fish for my own lunch?”

He laughed, a full, hearty sound that rolled in timbre. No one who laughed with such good humor and happiness could be evil—right?

“No, querida. But should you like to fish, I will provide the rod and reel. The dingy is nothing more than a way for us to get to the real boat. I promise my chef will tempt you with his skills.”

“The real bo—?” She scanned the horizon and finally saw the yacht. “Oh my...”

“We will be there soon, and you can have whatever you like. And I will tell you more about adamas, si?”

“Si.” She took both his hands as he helped her into the dinghy.

“We will soon be there.”

She watched the play of muscles across his back, as he untied the rope that kept them anchored to the dock. The expanse of smooth, bronze skin made her hands itch. He tossed the rope into the boat, and sat down across from her.

“Ready?”

“Very.”

“Then off we go.” He pulled the cord on the outboard motor.

Within minutes they’d arrived at the glistening white yacht. Several hands leaned down to help pull her aboard as she climbed the ladder. Three men, each as bronzed and gorgeous as Rey, smiled down at her.

“Welcome, senorita.” The shortest of the men guide her to a white draped table.

The place settings were for two. “How did ya’ll know...?”

A warm hand caressed her back. Rey moved the chair back for her as she sat down. He took the seat across from her, his eyes lingering on her lips.

“You couldn’t have called ahead, I’ve been with you the whole time, and I never saw you use a cell phone.”

“Quite true. Sometimes my brother or my sister joins me for lunch.”

“But if one of them shows up, where will they sit?”

“Should my brother or sister appear, another table can easily be prepared. Please do not worry.” He took her hand in his and stroked the back with his thumb, sending all sorts of tingles along her skin. One of the men who helped her aboard earlier, now stood at Rey’s side, holding a chilled bottle. At Rey’s nod, the man poured white wine into their glasses.

“I’ve never been on a yacht before.”

“I’ll be happy to take you on a tour after our meal.”

“You must be doing okay to afford something like this. So, what do you do for a living?”

“If I told you I am nothing more than a playboy, would you be disappointed?”

“Are you?”

“No. I am a marine biologist.”

“I’m impressed. Sure seems to pay well.”

He laughed, “Actually, it does not. My research is funded by a very small grant.”

“Then how—never mind, it’s rude of me to ask.”

“My family owns the boat.”

“Wow. Well, they sure have good taste.” And a lot of money, she thought.

She sensed a presence at her elbow and looked up to see another crew member standing there, and looking expectantly at her host. The two men chatted in rapid-fire Spanish—at least that’s what it sounded like on the surface. But she detected an underlying flavor to the words, much like the difference between her own southern twang and someone from Boston.

When the crewman left, Rey explained, “There is red snapper, grilled with lime, Ensalada de Aguacate y Tomate, or avocado and tomato salad with scallions, in a vinaigrette dressing. And for dessert, fresh piña colada sorbet.”

“That sounds delicious!”

“If there is anything else you would like, you need only tell me.”

“Well, you did promise to tell me all about adamas.”

“So I did. The stones are somewhat rare and usually found on the bottom of the ocean floor, trapped in gullies and potholes.”

“They look like rough diamonds to me, but my brother-in-law thought they were just ordinary sea glass.”

“Sometimes they are called sea diamonds. The legends say that once upon a time a mermaid princess fell in love with a human man, a sea captain. This enraged her father, Neptune, so he struck out at the captain’s ship, sending it crashing into the sharp rocks along the coast. The captain drowned and the poor mermaid could not save him in time. She cried forty days and forty nights until all the water in her body was gone. Then she crawled onto the beach for the sun to take her. The pure essence, the magical energy within her burst free, and she transcended into a glorious ball of light. Later, the islanders found hundreds of tiny crystals, much like the ones you have, left in the sand where she’d lain. The discharge of so much energy, had created a residual mineral—”

“Adamas. Oh, how beautiful.” The mermaid tale sure fit what she’d seen last night. Had he seen it too? Maybe she wasn’t crazy.

“Yes. The problem is that several mining consortiums are now looking at the Cay and the surrounding waters as a possible source for offshore marine diamond mining. I’ve been given a grant to do an impact study on how such an operation will affect not only the marine life, but also beach erosion.”

“I remember reading on the plane, that the island sits on top of a once active volcano. Made me wonder what would happen if it suddenly decided to be active again.”

“The results would be devastating.”

She shivered. Imagine sitting on an erupting island and the only way off was by plane or boat. It would be chaos!

Their food arrived and a content silence descended as they dug into their lunch. By the time the crewman cleared their plates and brought out dessert, the sun began to dip toward the horizon.

“Everything was so delicious. You were right; your chef is a genius.”

“I’m sure he’ll be pleased to know you enjoyed the meal.”

“You mentioned earlier adamas is rare. How much would one of my stones be worth?”

“Uncut, in today’s market, perhaps five thousand of your American dollars for the smallest of stones. The largest of them, maybe fifteen to twenty thousand, uncut.”

“And cut? In a setting?”

“Perhaps forty to fifty thousand a piece, depending on size, cut and clarity.”

“I’m rich!”

He laughed. “You must pay for them to be cut and set or sell them first.”

“Is there a dealer in town? Someone honest, that would buy them from me?”

“There is. His name is Silas Mariner.”

“I know you probably have important things to do tomorrow, but could you go with me to see Mr. Mariner?”

“I would be glad to, Dixie.”

“Our second date.”

“You do move quickly, querida.”

Oh Lordy, if he only knew! His eyes deepened as though he had the same thought. Third date’s charm. It was more than a silly fancy—it was her rule—one she’d made a long time ago, a promise to herself not to jump in bed with any man until she knew more about him than just his name. She wondered if she could hold out until that third date.

Rules applied to ordinary men. Her eyes traveled over the intense eyes, strong, chiseled jaw and chin of the man seated across from her. Rey didn’t fit that category. Oh no. She bet if she looked up the word hot, his picture would be there next to it.

She scooped a generous portion of the piña colada sorbet into her mouth to cool down her overactive libido, and couldn’t help the yummy sounds coming from her throat. “It’s incredible. I’ve never had sorbet before...so creamy.” She looked up and caught him staring almost transfixed.

“What?”

“You have a bit of the coconut and cream on the edge of your mouth.”

“Oh.” She tried to lick it off, but judging by the deep glow in his eyes, all she’d succeeded in doing was getting her handsome host aroused. An image flashed in her head, one of him drizzling melted sorbet over her breasts and flicking his tongue over her nipples. They tightened in response. *Down girl! Remember the third date rule.*

“Allow me.” He leaned across the table and brushed a finger over the dab of sorbet, carrying it to his mouth. He sucked the sweet cream off of his finger. “You are right, it is incredible.”

Excitement and anticipation warred before they settled low in her stomach. She squeezed her legs together tight. When had she ever wanted a man this much? The very timbre of his voice made her abdomen quiver and heat pool between her thighs.

“You feel this too, don’t you? The chemistry between us.” He stood, held out his hands. She placed her palms in his and let him pull her into his arms. He slid a hand behind her waist, while the other hand clasped hers firm. He swayed on the balls of his feet, and encouraged her to follow his lead. The ocean waves created the background music for perfect for seduction.

“You move beautifully. I first noticed that about you. So carefree and joyous splashing at the water’s edge.” He pulled her closer and bent to nuzzle the nape of her neck. A shiver spread down her spine, awakening every nerve ending along the path.

Her grandmama always said if you want to know if a man is good in bed, watch how he moves when he’s dancing. She had a feeling granny would have given Rey high marks. Whew. Smooth and slow and so damn sexy, it made her ache. And he thought she was joyous! No one had ever called her that before.

She'd just been feeling defiantly happy the other night, as she shimmied down the beach. Well, happy until she saw those damn—wait, when had he seen her near the water?

She'd only met him today—not ten feet from the hotel's stairs! Only her and the moon, and a few of those freaky glowing balls had been on the beach last night.

Dixie pushed at the bronzed wall of muscle. "You saw me? I was alone."

"Not completely alone," he admitted.

"Then you saw them—you saw the UFO's!"

"I saw them."

"What are they? Have you seen them before?"

He lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them. "You remember the legend, si?"

"Please, you're not going to pass that wild hare of a story off on me, are you? Mermaids crying 'til they turn into lights?"

"You would rather believe in aliens come to Earth to wreck havoc and harm the innocent?"

"If you were there and saw me, then you must have seen one of them come after me. Why didn't you try to help me?"

"I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. You probably were here on the ship, right? I mean, what could you do to help me when you were out at sea?"

"You would have come to no harm. He was merely curious about you."

"He? You sound as though you know them personally."

"Last night was not the first time I've encountered them. We are not so far from the waters of the Bermuda Triangle. I've seen many things, Dixie, that cannot be easily explained by science."

"Most scientists think there are logical explanations, though. You're different."

"How so?"

"More romantic." She leaned up on tiptoe to pull his head down to hers. Just a sip, a taste, she told herself—nothing more. Then his lips parted under her own, eager to sample all she had to offer. She couldn't resist taking more. His tongue played along the roof of her mouth, flickered around her own tongue, testing her resolve. *Third times charm. Remember the rule!*

She pulled back with reluctance, and took a deep, calming breath. "I'd love to take that tour of the ship now."

Could her voice be any more shaky? *Come on girl, get it together!*

"I would love to take you to my bedroom, but I think our tour must be postponed. It is time I returned you to your people. They must be worried about you."

"I didn't—I mean, that's not what I—I"

"Shh." He put a finger over her lips. "I know. I merely enjoy the spark in your eyes and the blush on your cheeks." His let his finger trail down her chin and throat.

"Your skin is so soft...you have no idea how much you tempt me, querida."

He took her hand, guided her down the ladder, and into the dingy.

"You don't have to return me personally, one of your crewmembers..."

"No. I want to make sure you are safe."

"Rey, if you don't want to help me with the stones tomorrow. I'll understand."

“Why would I change my mind? No, I will meet you at your hotel’s lobby tomorrow morning at ten o’clock. It might be best for you to give the adamas to the hotel manager to put in their safe for the night.”

* * *

Dixie opened the balcony doors and welcomed the ocean-scented breeze. The night air cooled the stuffy, sweltering room. Of course, her hotel room wasn’t the only thing that needed cooling. The last two hours, she’d turned in bed, fidgeting—and all because of one man. Tomorrow she’d be on her second date with Rey.

Lordy, but she wanted to nibble on those lips of his! Run her hand along the swirling line of dark hair that bisected his abs and see if the hair below his waist was as silky. Caress his strong thighs and tease him with her fingernails.

A cool wash of air passed over skin, causing gooseflesh. She rubbed her arms, prepared to get back in bed, but stopped when she saw something strange move within her peripheral vision. She twisted fast, saw the ball of light. What the hell did it want with her? She backed up a step, looking wildly for something to hit it with.

The weird thing seems to sense her fear and backed away, almost like it was frightened too.

“What do you want with me?”

The sphere pulsed, glowing. Was it trying to communicate? “I promise I won’t hurt you, but you gotta promise not to hurt me. We gotta deal?” She held out her hand and the light shrank to the size of a softball and settled there. It tingled on her palm, warm, but not hot to the touch. Could she be dreaming?

“Do you have a name, little fella?”

It pulsed again. Were those pulses some kind of language? “I don’t want to hurt you, but I need to get my video camera out so I can tape this...otherwise no one will believe me.”

She reached to open the nightstand and the little ball of light shot away, darting out the balcony doors.

So much for her evidence. She sighed, shutting the balcony doors and getting back into bed. Finally, an hour later she sensed herself about to doze off. Her last thoughts were of Rey and the odd, pulsing ball of light.

She lay on the deck of Rey’s yacht, letting the sun bake warmth into her skin. He knelt beside her, squirting sunblock lotion into his large hands. Then he turned her over, rubbed the liquid over her skin, massaging as he went... He slid his hands under her bikini bottom, cupped her ass and squeezed. Now those same hands caressed the sides of her breasts. She could feel his hot breath stirring the fine hairs on the back of her neck, his lips whispering what he wanted to do to her, asking her permission.

Yes! Oh yes! He pushed her bottoms down, pulled them completely off and positioned her so that she now bent on her hands and knees. His fingers teased her, parted her nether lips and pinched her clit. Over and over he tormented the soft pink flesh beneath his fingers until her pussy wept. When she squirmed under him, he slapped a firm hand on her ass. She shuddered, and waited to see if he would continue.

He worked two then three fingers inside her, thrusting them while his thumb teased her clit. She bucked as an orgasm hit her hard, and felt another stinging slap on her ass.

She tried to call out, to plead, but her voice could make no sound. He removed his fingers and replaced them with his cock, driving into her. He grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled her head back.

She trembled, unable to stop the quiver of excitement that raced throughout her body. He tensed, and pulled out, spilling his seed on her ass and thighs.

The dream shifted, and she lay on a large bed. Rey leaned over her, sucked her nipples. His tongue traced a fiery path along the valley between her breasts and down her slightly curved stomach. He parted the folds of her pussy with his fingers and blew his warm breath on the sensitive flesh.

“You want me?”

“Yes!”

“All of me? There is no turning back. Once I am inside you, you are mine. Do you understand?”

“Please! You are all I want! Fill me up, make me whole, Rey.”

“Mine, querida. All mine.”

The man between her legs began to glow in the darkness, his body pulsating with brilliant light. Then he surged, thrust his cock deep and the light began to pulse inside her too.

Rey cried out, “Mi amour. T’amo!” A loud buzz swirled around her head. She tried to find where the sound come from. When she looked back, Rey had disappeared.

* * *

Dixie jerked awake, pulled from the most intense, erotic dream of her life by the buzz of her alarm clock. She smacked the snooze button and rolled over, hugging herself. God, it had seemed so real. If sex with Rey was anything like that, she needed to rethink her third date rule!

She stretched, grabbed a towel from the rack in the bathroom, and turned on the water. Anticipation made this the quickest shower on record. Partly, she knew because of finding out the exact value of her adamas stones, but also because of being with Rey.

By the time she got the stones out of the hotel safe, and met him in the lobby, her stomach fluttered in knots. He wore dark blue slacks and a crisp white shirt, with the arms rolled to his elbows. The first few buttons were left undone, exposing a wide swath of bronzed skin. She had an urge to lick the indent at the base of his throat and unbutton his shirt, then trace her tongue all along that path. She clenched her stomach and thighs in an effort to stop the quiver that her thoughts set in motion.

He placed his hand at the small of her back, and guided her to his car.

“Silas is expecting us.”

“I can’t wait to see how much these are all worth! This is so exciting,” she said, unable to help the bubbling enthusiasm in her voice. Nothing special like this had ever happened to her before.

After a few minutes, they arrived at their destination. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, but this wasn’t it. Banana leaves sat in a bucket on the front stoop of what appeared to be a shack. The bucket sat next to a cat lounging in a rocking chair. Kitty dozed, so she didn’t pet it, and instead followed Rey into the store.

Beaded curtains made makeshift doors, and a rack held tie-dyed T-shirts. A spinning rack held both sunglasses and puka shells choker necklaces. Sixties music played in the background, and heady incense burned in a large clamshell filled with sand. It was like she'd walked into a time warp.

"Silas!" Rey called out. A minute later, an older man with salt and pepper hair poked his head out from the beaded doorway to their left, walked over to clasp Rey's arm, and pulled the younger man into a bear hug.

"Rey! Long time, mi amigo."

He turned to look at her and smiled, "You must be the beautiful senorita Rey talked so much about," he released Rey and took her hand. "Welcome to Mermaid's Cove, Dixie." He lowered his head and kissed the back of her hand.

"Rey says you deal in adamas and can tell me their value."

"Sure can. Been collecting them for the past forty years."

She opened her purse and removed a small baggie filled with the uncut gemstones. They shimmered brighter than diamonds. She placed the baggie on the counter and unzipped the bag. Silas took a jeweler's loupe from behind the counter and leaned over her stones for a look.

"May I?" He pointed to one of the smaller, whiter stones.

"Sure."

He picked it up and looked at it under the loupe, turning it between his thumb and forefinger. "Nice quality. Seldom see one with so few imperfections. Very pure." He shot a glance at Rey. "Must have come from a very strong source."

"So, what is it worth?"

"Uncut, as it is...perhaps three thousand U.S. dollars."

"And once it's cut?"

"The stone will have fewer carats, but the clarity and brilliance will be greater. This would make a nice stone for an engagement ring."

Rey coughed.

"Or perhaps a small pendant." He looked over at Rey, a huge grin on his face. "I would say it could be worth anywhere from four to five thousand.

"Oh, that's wonderful! What about the other stones?"

He set the small stone aside and picked up the biggest of the lot, a huge pale blue adamas. "The cloudier stones are worth less, but pale blue are rare." Silas peered at the stone through the loupe, turning it in his hand. "Uncut, maybe five, six."

"Six thousand dollars?" And that was only one stone! She had ten! She'd sell the stones, move out of her small apartment, put a small down payment on a house. Maybe buy a decent car. She squeezed Rey's arm, joy bubbling inside.

"Are you in the market to buy any of these?"

"I couldn't give you full value, because I have to stay in business and think of my resale value, but if you're willing I could offer you a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"I'll take the whole lot for twenty-five grand. Best offer you'll get wholesale. Of course, you could try to sell them one at a time to private collectors on some online auction site, you might get more from them. Up to you. You want to think about it or do we have a deal?"

"What do you think I should do, Rey?"

“Silas is fair and honest. Best trader in the islands.”

“Then it’s a deal! Do we need to go to the bank?”

“Bank?” Silas burst out laughing.

Rey grinned, “Dixie, Silas *is* the bank.”

“I don’t understand...” She watched the old trader disappear behind one of his beaded curtains, then reappear a moment later, holding five small stacks of U.S. bills.

“I believe in cash transactions whenever possible.” He placed the stacks next to the stones.

Dixie picked up one of the stacks. “I’ve never held so much cash in my life!” Just looking at it made her feel faint. She fanned herself with one of the stacks.

“Lordy! Glad I have a handsome bodyguard.” She shoved the rest of the cash in her purse. Silas poured the stones into a green velvet bag and put them in his pocket.

“Thank you, Mr. Silas.” She couldn’t stop grinning.

“Stop by anytime, my dear.” Silas nodded to Rey, and leaned forward to tell him something in private.

A flood of red color spread across Rey’s bronzed cheeks. “We go.” He guided her from the little shop and into his car.

Concerned about carrying such large sums of money on her person, she once again took Rey’s advice and put the money into the hotel’s safe, keeping out only a few hundred dollars. Enough for lunch and a little shopping.

They were leaving the lobby when someone called out her name. She turned to see her new brother-in-law and her sister. Looked like the honeymoon couple decided to come up for air. She certainly understood. If she had Rey in her bed, she wouldn’t want to leave anytime soon.

“Dixie! I thought you’d left the island. Want to introduce us to your friend?” Her brother-in-law held out his hand and Rey took it as she made introductions. As they shook hands, she noticed Rey’s knuckles get white. He drew back his hand, his brows creased. Her brother-in-law took a step back, a grin on his face.

“I didn’t know Dixie knew anyone here.” Lavonia eyed Rey like a rare hunk of beef she’d like to sample.

“We met yesterday,” Rey explained.

“And now we gotta go.” Damn, she didn’t want to spend her lunch with her sister and brother-in-law. Especially with the way her sister was acting, cooing and simperin’ like a...a...magnolia!

“Perhaps they would like to join us for lunch?” Rey asked.

Now was not the time for him to be such a gentleman! “Oh I’m sure they are too busy to have lunch with us. This is their honeymoon, after all.”

“Congratulations.”

She linked her arm with Rey’s. “Besides, we have private things to discuss.”

“We do?”

“Yes, we do. Ya’ll enjoy the rest of your honeymoon.”

Seeing her sister openly admiring, Rey made her realize something. She wanted Rey, and she didn’t want to wait till the third date. But did he want her?

* * *

He inhaled, eyes fixed on Dixie as she bit into the cherry she'd scooped from her drink. The succulent flesh parted under her teeth, and juice smeared her lips. It was the most erotic thing he'd seen. Silas had enjoyed making him blush. He already knew she had light in her, hell—she was a beacon. No one filled with that much sheer joy of life carried darkness. But Silas had it right. He wanted to fill her with his light, to spread her thighs and enter her body and soul.

But how could he explain and not frighten her? She licked her lips and his heart thumped. Perhaps he could go to her again in a dream. She'd been receptive. And responsive. The memory of which tightened his cock.

The waiter brought the check and began clearing their plates. Too soon this date of theirs would come to an end. He had to do something, anything to keep her with him.

Dixie paid for the lunch, and stood. *Please no, don't let the date come to an end. Not yet.*

"Would you care to take a walk along the beach?" She smiled up at him.

"I have a better idea." Desire mixed with another emotion he refused to name.

"And what's that?"

"Allow me to finish your tour of the ship."

"The bedroom?"

"The first place on the tour." He took her hand in his and they crossed the street, and walked along the beach toward where his ship moored.

"You know I used to have a rule. I wouldn't sleep with a man until after the third date."

"Hmm...I believe this is our third date."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because our first date was on the beach that night when I saw you dancing along the shore, carrying your shoes and singing off key."

"Oh. I figured this was our second date—not that it matters, since I've been thinking about that rule anyway..."

"And...?"

"Some rules were made to be broken." She slid a hand underneath his shirt, and stood on tiptoe to brush his lips with her own.

The End

About the author:

Ms. Cassandra Curtis spent her formative years traveling with her parents, learning a smattering of languages—usually just enough to get her in trouble. After college, she worked as a reporter and photojournalist, while continuing her love of art. She now writes fiction full-time. An avid gardener and wildlife enthusiast, she enjoys the magick found in nature. Her interests include: art, antiques, astronomy, folklore, mythology, genealogy, music, eastern philosophy and collecting magickal artifacts. A member of both the World Romance Writers, and Romance Divas, Ms. Curtis won the 2006 Amber Quill Press Heat Wave Contest with her novella, Cup of Fate.

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