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Silver Dark Blue Light

Rickey Mallory



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Published by ImaJinn Books, a division of ImaJinn

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Adobe PDF Format: No ISBN Assigned

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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One

Brad kissed her and kneaded her breast, his breathing labored as his erection pressed against her stomach. Tonguing her ear, he pushed his knee between her legs.

Eva's heart pounded faster as his hand moved down, down, outlining her hipbone, brushing her thighs. Her muscles clenched. She pressed a small kiss to his neck, then under his chin. Her jaw ached with tension.

"That's it, baby, come on," Brad whispered. "Touch me." He took her hand and put it on him.

Eva's breath stuck in her throat, and she fought the instinct to recoil, her fingers stiff with the tension. She gritted her teeth. She could do this. Tentatively, she brushed her fingers across the slick, smooth skin and felt his hard penis jump against her palm.

Brad gasped hoarsely. "Oh, baby." His voice thickened as he strained toward her. He lifted himself over her, his legs heavy against her thighs, his chest heaving. He bent his head and tongued her ear. "Take it. Put it in."

Eva's heart thumped painfully. She wrapped her hand around his shaft, desperate to please him. This time—this time—she could do it.

"Put it in, baby. Now!"

Tears filled her eyes. The feelings swelled—turned to panic. Her chest spasmed, and she couldn't breathe.

Dark. Silver and black. Pain and fear and

horror that went on and on.

Pushing against his sweaty chest, she sobbed. “No! No!”

“Shit.” He rolled off her, panting.

Eva winced and touched his face. “Brad, I’m sorry. Just give me a little more time. We’ll try again—”

Brad threw himself off the bed. “To hell with it.” He stood naked, his penis still hard and angry red, his face contorted with fury and frustration.

It was her fault. She knew that. She just didn’t know what to do about it. It seemed the harder she tried, the worse the results.

“I’m sick of this, Eva. Sick of watching you pretend to enjoy my touch. Sick of how you just hold your breath and endure. Hell, I’m sick of feeling like a selfish jerk. If you could just tell me what you want—”

“I can’t. I don’t know. I get so far, and then the images fill up my brain, and I panic. What I went through . . .” She paused, squeezing her eyes shut. “No one can imagine. Think of rape, and not just your body but your mind, too.” She shuddered.

The long silver corridors that led to that room. The wires, the tubes, the awful sticky fingers. . . .

“Yeah, right. Same old story.” Brad whirled and slammed into the bathroom.

Eva heard the sound of the shower. Indescribably sad, unbearably empty, she reached for her robe and pulled it over her naked body.

“Here.”

A piece of paper fluttered in front of her unfocused eyes.

“Eva!”

She jumped, realizing Brad was standing beside the bed, speaking to her. The little rectangle of paper rested on her thigh. She picked it up. “Where did you get this?”

He shrugged. “Somebody gave it to me.”

She stood and wrapped the robe around her and jerked the sash tight. “You think I’m crazy? You want me to see a shrink?”

Brad buttoned his crisp white shirt. His light brown hair was short and spiked in the latest fashion. His body was perfectly muscled, his tan the proper shade, his nails clipped and buffed, not polished.

She met his gaze in the mirror. The double image gave her the impression of two people. The real one, standing with his back to her, and the silvery reflection.

Silver . . . dark . . . pain. Her fingers clenched around the business card, and inevitability settled over her.

“It’s not that I think you’re crazy, sweetheart,” he cajoled. “Obviously you have repressed memories from your childhood that cause you to freeze up. It’s not normal to be as afraid of sex as you are.” He turned, knotting his tie. “You might want to check that guy out.”

Eva pushed her tangled hair back from her face and walked over to stand beside him. “And you expect me to believe someone just walked up and handed this card to you?”

Brad met her gaze in the mirror. “On my way back from lunch this guy bumped into me,

said ‘Sorry,’ and handed me the card. Like an apology or something.”

A likely story. More likely Brad had combed the Yellow Pages looking for a shrink that specialized in her problem. Her heart ached. Maybe she should be grateful that he cared enough to try. But it hurt.

“So you think this—this therapist can fix me? It says here he specializes in alien abduction cases.” She waved the card. “You know what that means. He specializes in loonies who think they were abducted. Right?”

Standing on her bare tiptoes, she stuck her face in front of his. “Right?”

Brad had the decency to look chagrined. “Sweetheart, if I’m going to take you down to the Keys to visit my folks this Thanksgiving, well . . .”

Eva pulled the robe tighter around her neck. “Must put on our best face to meet the folks. If Mumsy and Dadsy don’t approve, then Brad will have to find himself a new girlfriend.”

Brad gave her a tight smile and put his hands on her shoulders. “They’ll love you. I just think maybe with therapy—”

“Screw you, Bradley Finch Marchant the Third.”

Brad looked down at her, a hint of cruel amusement in his eyes. “If you could do that, we wouldn’t have a problem.”

“You know what?” Eva ripped the card in two, then put the two pieces together and ripped them again. “Get out!” She threw the pieces of paper at his face. “Get out! And don’t call me again. “

Brad adjusted his tie, then went into the bathroom, coming out with his shaving kit. He grabbed his suit jacket off the back of a chair. "Fine." He scowled at her. "You're a frigid bitch, Eva. You need help."

As the door slammed behind him, Eva's tears welled and slipped down her cheeks silently. She wasn't sure why she was crying. He was an ass.

The trouble was, he was also right. She wasn't normal. She thought of the only two other relationships she'd attempted since her last abduction. One had lasted a month and the other not even that long. Without sex, it was not easy to maintain a relationship. When she tried to explain, it only made things worse. Nobody believed that she'd been abducted by aliens, not once but numerous times. Many of the specifics were hazy, but if she lived forever, she'd never forget the first time or the last.

The first time, she'd been ten years old. Her father had taken her for ice cream after dinner because her mother had a headache. When they got home, he'd tucked her into bed and turned out the light.

When she'd awakened, the whole room had been bathed in a silvery blue glow, and an odd, pretty creature had gestured to her.

A child of ten probably had two choices at that point—scream or obey. Eva always wondered what would have happened if she'd screamed.

When she'd woken up, back in her bed, she'd had a fever. Her mother had let her stay home from school the rest of the week.

For Eva, the time she'd been gone seemed endless, but her parents had acted as if she hadn't been gone at all. She'd made a couple of tentative attempts to talk about what had happened, but her story had been so bizarre, so outrageous in her fourth grade vocabulary, that they put it down to watching too much television.

Her last abduction had been four years ago, when she was twenty-three. As she'd done every other time, Eva had obeyed the gray hairless creature that appeared at the foot of her bed. She'd endured the same unspeakable pain and revulsion as every time before. But that last time, something had been missing. An odd, comforting sound that had always been present was gone, leaving nothing but a terrifying, aching emptiness. She'd come to depend on the soothing wordless message. Maybe it was a mind probe designed by Them to observe her reactions to different stimuli. Maybe it was a defense mechanism developed by her own brain. Regardless of its source, it had kept her from going insane from the pain and humiliation.

The silence left by its absence was devastating. Eva had searched with her mind, calling, seeking, pleading with it to return to her, to help her, but she got no answer. She was alone in that dark place with the aliens. It had been the worst time, but it had also been the last.

Two

Eva came awake suddenly, as she always did—curled into a fetal ball, her arms around her knees, whimpering. She invariably went to sleep on her side, relaxed, one arm under her head, and woke up in a knot.

Stretching carefully, she realized she was still in her robe. She'd slept most of the day away. She'd missed her shift at the café. Joe would probably fire her. Another hazard of being an alien abductee. If she told them, people treated her like a freak. If she didn't tell them, didn't explain the reason for her sudden blackouts, the odd images that took over her mind and caused her to respond inappropriately or to drop things, then they . . . treated her like a freak.

When she stood, her head swam, reminding her that she hadn't eaten. She didn't like to think about food. Brad had complained about how thin she was. Somehow she could never bring herself to tell him that just thinking about food made her taste Their acrid, slimy, foamy—

She crushed the thought right there and dashed for the refrigerator.

Half a bottle of water helped her drown that particular recollection. The damn flashes of memory came at the most inconvenient times. At least, now, she didn't immediately throw up. That had lost her a few jobs and prematurely ended several dates.

Sipping the rest of the water, Eva went into

the bathroom. It still smelled like Brad. His musky after-shave, the deodorant soap he favored, the hair gel.

Frigid bitch. The echo of his voice chased away any sentimentality conjured by the lingering scent.

She glanced at herself in the mirror. She looked so normal. In most ways she was normal. She was educated, although she'd never finished her degree. Several abductions during her college years had so disrupted her concentration that she'd lost her academic scholarships. To her parents' grave disappointment, she'd finally quit school and gotten a job as a waitress.

For the past four years, since the abductions had stopped, her challenge had been to stay focused, not to give in to the repercussions. She knew what a doctor would say, if she could find one who would believe her. She'd looked up her symptoms. Posttraumatic stress disorder. PTSD. It didn't belong only to soldiers. Rape victims, victims of violence, new mothers—all could experience it.

She turned on the hot water and poured blue scented oil into the tub and lit the candles that she'd placed strategically around the tiny room. She'd searched until she found holders that gave off the perfect blue glow, complimented by the blue tinted bath water. She'd spent way too much money on them. But the color blue combined with warm water comforted her, gave her pleasure. It took away the harsh memory of dark, silver walls and white, piercing light.

She sank down into the water, letting it

surround her with warmth and the scent of fresh, clean air and something subtle and floral. The delicate odor banished all other smells, real and imagined. She ran a bath sponge over her arms and shoulders, watching the water bead and cascade off her smooth body, leaving her skin glowing in the blue candlelight.

Setting the sponge aside, she leaned back and closed her eyes. She ran her oiled hands over her arms, her shoulders, up her neck, enjoying the feel of her own hands. Gentle, safe hands.

A fluttering like fear rose in her throat. Reaching back in time, she tried to conjure the soft, comforting sound that had soothed her during her abductions. Her memory was too sketchy to duplicate it, but even trying helped.

Her fingers drifted downward, sliding quickly past the sensitive skin of her breasts to span her waist. Then further, over her hips to her thighs.

Fear pulsed through her, pushing the fragile memory away. Her breathing grew short and rapid. She slid her hands up her inner thighs, her skin pebbling with goose bumps, her muscles knotting as she pressed her thighs together, halting her fingers' journey. She clenched her fists and cried out in frustration.

Deliberately relaxing her hands at her side, she breathed slowly and steadily until the panic subsided. Then she got out of the tub. The water was getting cold, anyway.

In the bedroom, Eva decided to call the café to see if she could work the late shift to make up her time. As she reached for the phone, she

spotted some trash on the carpet. She punched in the numbers for the café, then bent to retrieve the litter. It was the business card. The corner she held read Dr. Sea and a little further down, by appoin. She turned it over, but there was nothing on the back.

“DeLite Café.” It was Joe, the owner.

“Joe, it’s Eva.”

“Damn it, Eva, where you been?” His angry voice grated on her fragile nerves. “You better have the mother of all flu.”

“Sorry,” she muttered. “I was sick, but I’m better. Can I come in tonight?”

“Damn straight you can. Get your ass in here, and close up for me. I gotta be somewhere. And I’m dockin’ you. Half pay tonight.”

Eva sighed as she disconnected. It would be a long night, knowing she was working for even less than usual.

She picked up the other three pieces of the torn business card and placed them together on the rumpled bedclothes.

Dr. Seain Jones, Therapist

by appointment only

paranoia

persecution complex

555-3366

alien abduction

She reached into her bedside drawer for the cellophane tape.

* * *

Eva turned the knob and stepped into the

waiting room, nervously drumming her fingers against the front of the purse she held clasped at her waist. She was the only one there.

She walked over to the white reception desk with its sliding frosted-glass window. No receptionist. Just an old, mud-colored clipboard with one sheet of lined paper. At the top, were the printed words NAME, APPOINTMENT TIME, ARRIVAL TIME. The sheet was blank.

She wrote her name, Eva Quintana, but didn't fill in the times. It seemed silly to bother when she was the only person there.

She'd dressed carefully in her dark, sleek, conservative clothes. Nothing high fashion, nothing to make her stand out in a crowd. She'd chosen her favorite black tailored slacks and turtleneck. She never wore bracelets or rings or belts.

She paced, ignoring the comfortable-looking chairs and the magazines. Twenty minutes after her scheduled appointment time, the door to the left of the receptionist's desk opened.

"Come in, Ms. Quintana."

The voice was low and masculine, with a hint of an accent. Was it British? Or German? It was so subtle.

She stepped into the room and the door closed behind her. A dim blue glow highlighted an aquarium that covered the wall to her right, its filters sending a pleasant bubbling sound through the air. She felt herself relax. Anyone who liked blue water couldn't be all bad. He was seated in a leather desk chair at the other end of the room, one ankle resting on his other knee.

He wore faded jeans, classic penny loafers, and a ribbed pullover shirt that hugged his wide shoulders and the rangy muscles of his arms.

“Dr. Jones?”

He nodded toward the only other chair in the room.

She walked toward it, aware of his eyes on her, wishing she could take more time to study his face. It was an interesting face. Not handsome but nicely shaped, with high cheekbones, a strong jaw, a wide straight mouth, and a true aquiline nose.

“What can I do for you, Ms. Quintana?” he asked.

Eva lifted her gaze and saw his eyes for the first time. They were a clear, crystal blue. His gaze was steady, unblinking. Somehow she had the idea he was struggling, with what she wasn't sure, but she felt that she could trust him.

To her dismay, tears burned the back of her throat.

“I . . . need help.” She gripped her purse with both hands. Okay, that sounded stupid.

Dr. Jones smiled. Just a small curve of his lips, but Eva felt the warmth of the gesture. She quickly swiped away a tear and smiled back.

“I guess that was silly. I wouldn't be here if I didn't need help.”

“Take your time.” He tented his fingers, resting his elbows on the chair arms. His hands were long and lean—strong, beautiful hands. The pushed-up sleeves of his shirt exposed sleek, elegantly muscled forearms dusted with golden hair.

Eva stared at his arms. "My boyfriend left me." The tears spilled over, wetting her cheeks, falling too fast for her to catch them.

"His loss."

She blinked. "Hey, aren't you supposed to be objective?"

The blue eyes twinkled as he pushed his fingers through his bronze hair. "No. I'm here for you." He leaned back in his chair, and Eva remembered how much she loved a great looking guy in worn, faded jeans. Brad had always worn slacks. Always.

"Why did he leave?"

She swallowed and compressed her lips, then took a deep breath. "He called me a frigid bitch."

"Are you?"

Eva shook her head once, twice, then stopped. "Yes."

"Tell me about it."

Eva sat stiffly on the edge of the seat, clutching her purse. "I can't have sex," she said tightly, her hot cheeks cooled by the tears that continued to fall.

"It's all right. You're safe here. You can talk about anything."

Her fingers tightened on her purse.

Dr. Jones reached over and took it from her hands. "Relax," he said and set the purse beside her chair. "Sit back and just talk."

Eva leaned slightly against the chair and took a shaky breath. "I should quit trying and admit it's never going to happen. But I get so lonely."

"Why can't you have sex?"

“Because I was—” Her throat closed on the words. She struggled to breathe, her chest spasming. No real air was getting in. She sobbed, gasped.

Dark. Silver dark. Endless corridor. Pain and fear and horrible loneliness.

In less than an instant, he was there, beside her, his warm, healing hands cradling her face. “Slow. Breathe slowly, easily. Think of something pleasant. What soothes you?”

With his body close to her as he sat on the arm of her chair, with his hands cradling her against the taut muscles of his chest and shoulder, it didn’t take Eva long to surrender to his calming voice.

“Baths.”

“Good.” His voice rumbled in her ear. “Think of your bath, of the warm, healing water.”

Eva imagined his strong arms lowering her into her bath, his hands caressing her skin like hers had last night. Safe hands, gentle hands, with strong fingers that would slide across her breasts and down to press against her abdomen, hands that would look unmistakably masculine in the light from her blue candles.

He would urge her down, pressing her, pushing her. . . .

The hands changed, turned gray with sticky sucking fingers. The creature was there, in her bathroom, invading her house.

“No! No, no, no.”

“Ms. Quintana.”

Eva opened her eyes, gasping for breath. It wasn’t Them. She was in Dr. Jones’s office. He was sitting in his chair, and her arms were cold.

“Our time is up.”

“Has it been that long?”

He shook his head, his eyes troubled. “I think you’ve had enough for today.”

He leaned back in his chair. “We’ll talk more tomorrow. I want you to go home and take a warm bath. Remember, nothing can hurt you in your bath. Nothing. Your bath is your safe place.”

Eva stood. Her limbs were shaky. She looked down at him. “I think you may have ruined that for me.”

Three

Eva didn't take a bath. She couldn't. She climbed into bed that night, hoping sleep would banish the renewed memories of Their hands on her.

Still, the dreams came. She woke up gasping. At first she thought she was back there, strapped down, helpless, at the mercy of Them. But when she finally pulled herself out of sleep, she realized she was in her new apartment. Safe. Free. Or as close to free as she'd been since the age of ten.

After getting a drink of water, she climbed back into bed, groaning at the time. She had to be up at four o'clock for the morning shift at the café.

She sighed and turned over, closing her eyes tightly, but her arms and legs were cramped with tension. She couldn't relax. The echoes of her nightmare were too close, too real.

After a while she picked up the remote control and turned on the television, listlessly flipping channels. She scooted past a couple of late-night sci-fi thrillers and several infomercials. On a science channel, she found a documentary on whales.

Settling into the pillows, she turned off the narrator's voice and watched the graceful creatures cavorting in the wide, cool ocean and imagined that she was one of them. In the fantasy world between waking and sleeping, the soft songs of whales turned into the delicate

sounds that had soothed her during the awful times.

She slept better than she had in months.

The next day at the café was exhausting. She worked from five a.m. until after two without a break. As soon as she could, she changed clothes and caught a bus to Dr. Jones's office, the smell of rancid grease clinging to her. She had a three o'clock appointment.

It surprised her that she even wanted to go back. All the last session had done was bring back terrible memories and ruin one of her few pleasurable experiences. She looked out the smeared bus window at the dull, unchanging streets. She'd never noticed how incredibly colorless the world was. She found herself comparing the bus seats, the passengers' dull clothing, the gray, sad monotone of the streets, to the glowing colors of Dr. Jones's office. The blue glow of the aquarium, the light that seemed to glint from his hair and eyes, the rich, dark wood, the jewel tones of the fabric on the upholstered furniture.

Like yesterday, no receptionist sat at the desk, no names appeared on the patient list before she wrote hers on it, and no one else was waiting for the doctor.

Eva paced, her black boots silent on the heather blue carpet, her fingers making a faint tapping sound as they beat unconsciously against her flat leather purse. She wished she had a cigarette, although she'd never smoked.

"Come in."

Eva jumped. She hadn't heard his office door open.

Stepping into the room, she paused for a moment to look at the aquarium. Bright little fish darted here and there. Pink and white coral lined the bottom of the tank. Sea anemones waved their black arms. Bottom-dwelling creatures mouthed words at her that she couldn't hear. Or perhaps they were just breathing.

"Ms. Quintana, did you sleep well after your bath?"

Eva turned. Dr. Jones was sitting in his chair, one arm resting on the mahogany desk. His long legs were encased in black denim, and he wore a loose knit fisherman's sweater.

He gave her that smile that barely quirked his wide, straight mouth. Had she noticed yesterday how utterly beautiful his features were?

She sat down, clutching her purse on her lap, but he leaned over and pulled it gently from her grasp, setting it beside her.

"Well?" he prompted.

She frowned. "I didn't take a bath. I had bad dreams."

His blue gaze turned soft. "I'm sorry."

"Well, you ought to be. It's your damn fault." She waved a hand. "I know you'll tell me I have to overcome the bad memories. It's part of my healing. Go ahead. I've heard it all before."

"What can I do for you, Ms. Quintana?"

She gestured impatiently at the repetition of yesterday's question.

Make me feel! The thought was there, in her head. She had no idea how or why it got there. That wasn't why she was here. It was feeling

too much that was the problem. Truthfully, she'd be happier if she felt nothing at all. Then, at least, she could simply lie there and pretend to enjoy sex.

But that wasn't why she'd come either. She was here because everyone in the world thought being abducted by aliens was a fantastic tale conjured by a disturbed mind, and she wanted someone to tell her she wasn't crazy.

"I want these memories out of my head." Her voice caught. She hadn't meant to say that.

She gathered all the energy she had left, after carrying trays and bussing tables all day, and flung it at the handsome, unflappable doctor in a huge fireball of impotent anger. "I don't know what you can do for me. You're the fucking shrink. You tell me." She fished in her pocket for the ripped-up card she'd taped back together. "Paranoia. Persecution complex. Abducted by aliens. Those are your specialties. Which do you recommend? Pick one. Personally, I'd go for paranoia. Alien abduction is way overrated."

She stood, too restless and nervous to sit still, but when she faced the aquarium, the blue water called to her. She couldn't bear to look at it, so she turned toward the wall behind her chair.

"Oh God!" Her limbs threatened to collapse, and a wave of nausea engulfed her.

A huge modern painting that she hadn't noticed yesterday loomed over her like all her worst nightmares come true. Stark silver and black, a study in perspective, it depicted a long corridor that got smaller and smaller until it

disappeared into the center of the canvas. It was the alien ship.

Eva swayed, teetering on the brink. The silver dark called to her. She closed her eyes and fell into the painting.

Warm strong hands saved her.

Dr. Jones stood behind her, his low voice whispering in her ear. “Don’t be afraid, Eva. Look. Look into the painting, and tell me what I can do for you.”

Eva stared at the layers of paint-on-canvas until they became the corridor she’d been forced to walk so many times. Until way down at the other end of that long corridor, she could see the huge heavy door.

“Tell me what you see.”

She shook her head. Her throat spasmed. Her mouth was dry. She was mesmerized by the corridor, paralyzed by the knowledge of what lay behind the door. She couldn’t have spoken if her life depended on it.

“Tell me.”

Seeping in through her terror, his voice compelled her, his hands promised her safety.

“You’re not there. You’re just remembering. Remember out loud.”

She swallowed, then managed to speak. “The door is massive, much bigger than a door should be.” Her eyes burned, but she couldn’t blink, couldn’t tear her gaze away from the center of the painting. “It screeches, metal on metal. It hurts my ears. The white light hurts my eyes. My nose burns from the smells. The table is there, in the center of the room. I can’t get away. Their sticky, smelly fingers push me down.

Silver straps—my arms and legs are restrained. Table is so cold. And then it all starts again. Like last time. Like every time.“ Every time.

“What starts?” His voice was lower than a whisper. It was almost a thought inside her head.

“I . . . can’t—” Her breath came in short, painful sobs. Her limbs quivered in anticipation of the pain to come. “Make . . . it go away,” she whispered. “Give me . . . something. A . . . pill, an injection . . . a frontal lobotomy. Something.”

Dr. Jones’s hands slid up her shoulders to her neck. He pulled her hair back from her ears and placed his palms on both sides of her jaw, cradling her face. “What would make it go away? You know, don’t you Eva? You know what you need. Say it. Tell me what you want.”

His body pressing closely against her from behind, his breath brushing her ear, his warm hands caressing her skin, sent sensations through her that she’d never felt in her life. His presence was more sensuous than eating chocolate, his voice more uplifting than Mozart, the heat from his hands more satisfying than a steaming hot bath. All those things it had taken her years to learn to enjoy. It had taken her so long to overlay the dreadful experiences of her abduction with mundane pleasant ones. But no matter how hard she’d tried, she’d never been able to overlay that worst, most awful intrusion, that most heinous betrayal. It lurked inside her, like a wound that wouldn’t heal. And she was terribly afraid it would stay there forever.

“You can’t know what I went through. Their cold, sticky hands, their probes, the worst . . .”

“I know,” he said gently. “I know. But talking about it will help.”

She tried to shake her head, but his hands stilled her. “No. I can’t. I just want to stop the memories. I want to feel like a normal person. I want . . . to love.”

A sigh so quiet she wasn’t sure she’d heard it breathed past her ear, and Dr. Jones’s fingers fisted briefly in her hair.

“I’m here for you,” he said, his voice carrying that slight odd accent. “You’re in control. You tell me to stop.”

He slid his hands inside the neck of her sweater, pushing the material down a couple of inches, and began massaging the sides of her neck in slow, small circles, until the knots that ached under her skin dissolved and relaxation began to spread downward from her shoulders across her back.

Then he slid his hands upward, pressing soothing, delicate caresses along the sensitive skin of her throat, urging her head back against his shoulder. When she allowed herself to lean against him, his other arm slid around her waist, and his body pressed close and warm against hers.

Her throat fluttered with a faint taste of panic, but his gentle voice came again.

“Look at the painting,” he whispered. “From the outside. Stay above it, beyond its reach. It’s just a painting. Don’t let it conquer you.”

Eva’s entire body trembled as she stared at the long straight corridor that filled her vision. His fingers brushed the underside of her chin. He traced her jaw line, her earlobe, her temple,

where she felt her blood coursing beneath his touch. And all the while his other arm held her against him. Safe.

The corridor beckoned to her, like the edge of a rocky cliff to a despondent lover. Come. Don't be afraid. Just one step.

Panic stole her breath, but he whispered "Shh," into her ear as he gathered her hair in his hand and slid his fingers through it.

The corridor became paint and canvas again as his caresses stirred her body into a new, heightened sense of awareness. Something deep and primal was born inside her.

He bent his head and grazed his lips against the soft skin behind her ear. A frightening need pooled heavily between her legs.

His hand at her waist opened, his fingers spreading across her abdomen, pressing her body back against him. He spread his legs, and she felt the heat and hardness of his thighs, his chest, his arms. She arched her neck and opened heavy-lidded eyes.

The corridor.

Her body went rigid with shock and fear. She was trapped between him and the looming corridor. She couldn't move. It was as if the silver restraints held her in place. Panic choked her.

Dr. Jones released her and stepped away. "Okay Eva," he said gently. "It's okay. Our time is up."

Eva took a deep breath, forcing her limbs to work. She looked at him, but he'd walked around his desk to the window, his back to her, his head slightly bent. The nape of his neck

was exposed.

Quivering, she reached down to pick up her purse and walked toward the aquarium. His reflection in the glass didn't move. At the door she paused.

“I'll see you tomorrow, Dr. Jones.”

“Eva? Have a bath tonight. Touch yourself, enjoy your body. Use the things you love. They'll help you.”

Four

“Dolly’s got the flu.”

Eva looked at Joe in exasperation. “And I’ve got an appointment. Can’t Heather double up tonight? Or I’ll work a split shift. I just need two hours.”

“You want a job, or you want your appointment?”

Eva shook her head, defeated. She couldn’t afford to lose this job. She’d worked her way down the employment ladder, losing job after job because of her erratic behavior and her unexplained absences. If she lost this job, she had nowhere left to go. “I’ll make a phone call. You’re a prince, Joe.”

Joe wiped his hands on his dirty apron. “I’ll try to work something out for you tomorrow, or maybe the next day. Dolly don’t get sick much.”

Eva pushed coins into the pay phone and dialed Dr. Jones’s number. She’d decided he had an answering service that made his appointments. Although she hadn’t figured out why she seemed to be his only patient. Maybe he saw most of them at a hospital, she rationalized as the phone rang.

“Dr. Jones’s office,” a crisp voice said.

“This is Eva Quintana. I need to cancel my appointment.”

“Quintana. Okay. Thank you for calling.”

“Wait. It may be a couple of days. I’m working double shifts while another person is out sick.”

“Okay. Thank you for calling.”

Eva pictured the girl, sitting at a computerized switchboard, answering the phone for a dozen companies. She didn't care. She was probably filing her nails and thinking about her boyfriend.

"Look. Tell Dr. Jones to call me. Please."

"Okay. Got it. Call Ms. Quintana. Thank you for calling."

"Eva! Table three!"

The double shift seemed endless. There were the usual travails of waitressing at a greasy spoon. A couple of guys tried to play grab-ass with her. One nice looking limo driver asked her for a date, which she turned down, and she dropped a tray full of lunch specials. By the time she got home she smelled of grease and meat loaf, and she had a headache.

Throwing her bag onto the table and dropping her clothes as she walked, she went straight to the bathtub. She never took showers, they reminded her too much of the coffin-like room where she'd had to stand, holding her breath, while cold, harsh spray hit her from all sides. The spray had burned like acid but never left a mark—another painful memory of her abduction that she could never explain to anyone.

Cautiously she lit the candles and ran the water. A memory of Their sticky fingers tried to push into her mind, but she thrust it away. "You're not going to take my baths away from me."

Sinking into the warm, scented water, she squeezed the sponge over her arms, her breasts, her belly. Then she quickly washed the smells

of the café off her smooth, hairless skin.

One side effect of the chemical spray was that she had no hair on her body. None. She'd always wondered why They'd left the dark wavy hair on her head. They were hairless. Maybe the hair on her head fascinated Them, while the hair elsewhere repelled Them.

She repeated Dr. Jones's words as she leaned back and closed her eyes. "Use the things you love. They'll help." His face appeared before her inner vision, and her insides quivered.

She'd been trying not to think about him after the sessions, trying not to think about the things he'd done to her in his serene, blue-lit office. For her, there was an element of the forbidden about that hour in her day, an element of excitement. She didn't want to dilute it by thinking about it afterward, nor did she want to dwell on whether it was ethical for a therapist to touch his patient in the way Dr. Jones had touched her.

At that moment, though, in the warm silky water, Eva looked at her body. She'd spent the past four years trying not to look at herself. As if she could pretend she didn't have a body and, therefore, They couldn't have done those things to her. Usually, she ran the bath sponge over her stomach and down her thighs as fast as she could. Tonight she took her time and watched the sponge as it slid across the top of her leg, leaving a slick streak of soapy water. She dipped the sponge then squeezed it over her belly, concentrating on the path of the droplets, the rivulets like little rivers as they ran down her bare pubis and tickled the insides

of her thighs. Monstrous shadows and noxious memories tried to intrude, but with an effort of will that only days ago she'd have denied she possessed, she kept her focus totally on the simple, mindless act of bathing.

Other thoughts did manage to intrude, however. Thoughts of Dr. Jones's hand spread against her flat abdomen, of his warm breath on her skin, his hard body supporting hers. When he'd brushed her hair tenderly away from her neck and caressed her, she'd nearly cried at the sheer pleasure of the selfless, giving gesture.

Something that had been born inside her when he'd first touched her stirred. Eva took the bath sponge and slid it down the inside of one thigh, then up the inside of the other, until it tickled against her bare nether lips. She gasped at her audacity, and blushed. Quickly she splashed some water on her heated face and got out of the tub.

She had no trouble sleeping that night.

* * *

The next few days at work were carbon copies. Sixteen hours long, with too many greasy meals, too many complaining customers, too many headaches. And very little time to think about why Dr. Jones hadn't called her back.

Eva missed the lock with her key three times before she got her apartment door open. Yawning, she glanced at the answering machine even before she turned on the lights. No blinking red glow.

She stood there, her purse hanging from her arm, her keys still clutched in her hand, and

cried from sheer exhaustion and disappointment. She looked at her bed, then at the bathroom.

As tired as she was, she decided on the bath. She might fall asleep in the water, but at least she'd be rid of the sickening odor of old grease that clung to her clothes and hair.

She dropped her clothes and stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror. She had never purposely studied her naked body. To look at herself was to look at a victim, and she had never wanted to do that.

The woman in the reflection was slender, with average breasts, a reasonably taut abdomen, nice shoulders, and no body hair.

Remembering her bath the previous night, Eva brushed a hand across her pubic bone, feeling the velvety hairless skin with her bare fingers for the first time. She looked at her naked labia, enduring the blush that crawled up her neck and face. Then she tilted her head, arched her neck, letting her dark hair drape over her shoulders. She touched her jaw line with a finger, thinking of Dr. Jones. A tiny thrill tightened her thigh muscles in a ripple of pleasure that was almost painful.

Straightening, she glared at her reflection. "Your bathwater is getting cold."

Naked, she lit the candles, painting the tiny room with the blue, wavering glow she loved so much. Then she lowered herself into the bath, sighing as the warm water soaked the ache from her limbs.

She cleared her mind, thinking of nothing but the pleasure. She ran the sponge over her

breasts, watching in wonder as the tips puckered and turned a deeper pink. She slid it over her belly and felt her muscles tense in expectation. Tentatively, she moved it downward, lifting one leg and holding her breath as the soft fibers of the sponge touched her exposed labia. She gasped. Her hand froze. She wondered how it would feel if it wasn't her hand but Dr. Jones's, holding the sponge.

The vision of his hand on that most private bit of skin started her heart pounding, and her brain whirled with conflicting images that titillated and frightened her. She rushed through the rest of her bath.

As she climbed into bed, the phone rang. Could it be Dr. Jones, finally calling her back? With her pulse hammering in her ears, she lifted the receiver.

"Eva!" Joe's voice.

Disappointment ripped through her like a paper cut. "What is it, Joe?" she sighed. "I can't work twenty-four hours. Sorry."

"Dolly's back. She'll work the late shift tomorrow. You're off the hook." There was a pause. "Uh . . . thanks."

Eva couldn't suppress a smile at Joe's gruff tone. "You're welcome. See you in the morning."

Eva pulled the covers up and lay in the dark, her inner vision filled with a cool blue glow. She'd see Dr. Jones tomorrow.

Five

The office door was locked.

Eva banged on the door. “Dr. Jones! Hello!” She’d telephoned not two hours before, and the girl from the answering service had assured her that Dr. Jones would get the message. Maybe he was with another patient. But why lock the entrance to the waiting room?

“Dr. Jones!” She doubled her fist and banged on the door. “It’s Eva Quintana. I’m here!”

Tears formed in her eyes. “I need to see you,” she whispered. She banged again, then leaned against the door, which opened, almost toppling her.

As she regained her footing, relief washed over her like cool water. It no longer surprised her that Dr. Jones could open and close his doors remotely. His entire office must be wired. She looked around the empty waiting room. There were probably cameras hidden in the plants, too.

His office door swung open silently, and the relaxing blue light from the aquarium drew her inside, as it always did. She stopped and looked at the huge tank that covered the entire wall to the right of the door. Watching the fish darting about made her think about the luxurious feeling of her bath. She imagined sinking down into the clear blue water, until it closed over her head . . .

And she couldn’t breathe.

The stinking gel, rising over her feet, seeping

up, up, to cover every millimeter of her skin, reaching her waist, her breasts, her chin, covering her mouth, her nostrils, her ears, her eyes.

“It looks inviting, doesn’t it?”

Eva gasped and realized she’d been holding her breath. She stretched out her hands. She wasn’t encased in the gel. She gulped in huge breaths of air.

“No,” she snapped. “I hate it.”

“Do you?”

She walked over and sat down in the chair, ignoring the painting that loomed over her head. He reached over and tugged her purse from the strangle-grip, she had on it and set it beside her chair.

If she weren’t so irritated with him, she’d be amused and a little flattered. Apparently the two of them had adopted a ritual. “Where were you?” she asked shortly. “With another patient?”

Dr. Jones leaned back in his chair, studying her. He brushed a hand through his bronze hair. He had on a short-sleeved black T-shirt that left bare the fine musculature of his arms. His limbs and body were long and lean and hard, like a swimmer, and that golden dusting of hair on his arms fascinated her. Unconsciously she rubbed her own hairless forearms as she allowed herself a few seconds to admire him. Her only disappointment was the khaki pants. She loved those blue jeans of his.

“What can I do for you, Ms. Quintana?”

Pulling her gaze away from his trousers, Eva sighed and shook her head. “You know what,

Dr. Jones? I am a waitress. I get paid shit. I've worked seventy-two hours out of the past hundred. My feet hurt. My head hurts. I'm in a really bad mood. I can't tell whether you care what's wrong with me or you're just screwing with my head. And I'm tired of that fucking question. I've answered it before. I'm not sure you want to hear what I think you can do for me right now."

A glimmer of amusement shown in his eyes. "Why don't you try me?"

"Okay. Here's what I want. I want to be normal. I want to feel something"—she slapped her palm against her chest—"in here. Where there's nothing."

The amusement faded from his eyes. He tented his fingers. "Let's talk about the aquarium. Why have you decided you don't like it?"

Eva's heart took a leap into her throat, where it lodged painfully. Here it was. The opportunity to talk about what was really bothering her. She'd asked for this. It was why she was here.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Her gaze darted to the aquarium and back to him. It occurred to her that his eyes were the same color as the blue light from the tank, and they were watching her with a calm, serene acceptance.

Maybe she could explain it to him.

She took a deep breath. "It's too much like the suspension tank."

His gaze flickered but didn't waver. "Suspension tank?" His low voice held an odd

note. Maybe the accent she couldn't identify.

She nodded, her mouth dry. Her fingers tightened on each other until they cramped. "The place where They kept me. No—stored me."

"The aliens."

The tone of his voice made her bristle. It was filled with irony and something else she couldn't identify. But his gaze stayed on her, and his posture invited confidence.

"Yes, the aliens," she retorted defiantly, lifting her chin. "So we're finally going to talk about Them. I was abducted by aliens. Call Jerry fucking Springer."

He didn't wince, didn't react at all. "It was always your choice. You had to wait until the time was right for you."

"Oh, don't give me that psychobabble. You knew." But she did want to talk, to tell someone who wouldn't make fun of her. "They abducted me. They took everything from me, then tossed me away like a piece of garbage. They made it impossible for me to have a normal life, to do anything but wait tables and sit in my apartment and try not to think, because all I can think about is Them." Her spine turned to jelly, and she slumped in the chair.

Looking at him through her lashes, she waited for him to start spouting platitudes about symbolism and meaning and therapy and medication.

But he didn't. Nor did he move. His wide brow was furrowed, and his gaze was fixed on his fingertips, which were white, as if he were pressing them together as tightly as he could. "What did you do before?" he asked.

“Before? Before what?” The question bewildered her.

“Before you were abducted, Eva.”

Her neck and shoulders hurt. Her head throbbed. Straightening in the chair, she lifted her chin. “I was ten years old the first time.” She shrugged. “So there was hardly any before.”

Something happened to him. His hands dropped to his lap. His eyes widened, and for the first time, she realized the whites of his eyes had a bluish cast—or maybe it was the damn aquarium light. His face drained of color, leaving it tinged faintly blue, as well.

“I didn’t know you were that young,” he said.

She shrugged. “Of course not. How could you?”

“But if you were ten . . .” He seemed flustered. “What did They—”

“What did They do to me?” She laughed uneasily and clasped her hands together. “It’s hard to remember that far back. At first, I think They mostly observed me. I remember being lonely and scared. So scared . . .”

For a long moment he sat there, his gaze locked with hers.

Then he stood and held out his hand. Without a thought, Eva stood, too. His hand cradled hers—warm, strong, safe. She looked up and saw tears glistening like diamonds in his eyes.

He murmured something she didn’t understand and pulled her carefully to him, wrapping his arms around her. “Close your eyes, Eva. Close them, and come with me.”

Enveloped in his hard, strong arms, she felt

weightless, boneless. She closed her eyes, and when she did, she felt as if she'd melted into him.

“Keep your eyes closed. Listen to my voice, Eva. Nothing but my voice. We're going somewhere.”

She smiled. She could listen to his sexy voice forever. It was like a deep melody, lulling her into a dreamlike state that banished all the bad from her life. She barely took in the meaning of his words on a conscious level. She just let him support her as his voice flowed all around her.

Don't be afraid. I'm right here. Don't open your eyes, but look, Eva. Look with your mind.

She felt as if she were in two places—standing in his office with his arms around her, and floating in a velvet darkness with him by her side.

Now, we're going into the water. Shh. Stay with me.

The velvet cloak of darkness faded, and they were surrounded by the beautiful, soft glow of the aquarium.

Eva gasped, panicked, but his hands held her, and his mouth covered hers, breathing for her. Eva had endured chaste and sloppy kisses from the guys she'd dated, just as she'd endured their invading, grasping hands. But anything that touched her body had always been a part of her nightmare. Until now. Dr. Jones's lips were as gentle and welcome as his hands on her had been last time, as his imagined presence in her bath. His breath filled her, sweet and warm and sustaining. His mouth moved over hers, and she didn't want to pull away.

When he lifted his mouth from her parted lips, her eyes opened in surprise. She wasn't choked by water or invaded by slimy gel. She didn't even have to breathe.

She saw him through the blue glow while tiny gold, black, and silver fish darted between them. He'd somehow left his clothes behind. He was naked, his fine sculpted body perfect in every way. She looked down and saw that she was naked, too. And her body was beautiful.

She met his gaze, and he smiled.

Yes. You are beautiful.

He both of her hands in his, and they floated, weightless. A golden fish swam past her face, its delicate fin brushing against her eyelash. Eva laughed and bubbles escaped her mouth to float upward in a stream.

Gliding toward her like a serene graceful fish, Dr. Jones pulled her close, molding her body against his. The part of her brain that remained rooted in reality noted that this was the first time she'd seen or touched a man's naked skin without feeling repulsed.

Her breasts pressed against the bands of muscle that strapped his chest, and her nipples sprang to life as they brushed the soft, sparse hair on it. They peaked, achingly sensitive. She breathed, and her belly swelled against his taut abdomen. His body grew rigid, hard, his arousal thick and long between them.

He lifted a hand and brushed her cheek with his index finger, then scraped his fingernail as lightly as a feather across her skin. Her cheek became the center of her entire body, tingling at the combined feelings of his touch and the

water's caress.

Still holding her, floating in the water, he continued, brushing his finger down her neck, over her collarbone, and on until it touched the top of her breast. His fingernail slid over the distended tip, causing it to pucker as the center of her consciousness shifted to that erect nipple.

She arched her back as his fingers squeezed the taut bud, torturing it with the possibility of a greater reaction. Her other breast tightened in sympathetic response, and she opened her mouth in a silent moan as he met her gaze and turned his attention to her other nipple.

Before long she was writhing, moaning, begging for more, her hands clutching his biceps, her legs wrapping around his.

He ceased his delicious torture of her breasts and pulled her closer, until her sensitized nipples touched the silky hairs on his chest once more. They ached with sensation as he wrapped his arms around her and slid his hands down her back to cup her buttocks, then continued further down to urge her thighs up around his waist.

The horrifying memory of her legs being forced apart by sticky gray fingers stopped her for an instant, but he brushed his lips against her temple and murmured soothing, musical words in her ear, and she forgot everything else. His fingers were warm as they slid along the skin of her thighs, pulling her abdomen and her pubis up against his lean hips.

He bent his head to tease her lips with his tongue. The sensation of tongue and water, coolness and warmth, sent frightening thrills

through her body, down to the place at her center that throbbed and ached. She rubbed herself against him, trying to ease that ache, as his mouth closed over hers and his tongue swirled, tasting her.

As he took the kiss further, thrusting his tongue deeply into her mouth, he moved his hands, rocking her rhythmically against him, aiding her quest to stop the almost unendurable longing that was steadily building between her legs.

Still rocking, the two of them whirled like dancers in the caressing water. Eva grew dizzy with the motion, with the longing, with the building throbbing tension he seemed determined to increase and prolong like a symphonic crescendo.

When he caressed her breast again, squeezing the throbbing, aching tip between his fingers, she thought she would die. What had already seemed unbearable she realized was merely the beginning. His warm, wet fingers played and coaxed, teased and flicked, until something inside her clenched and contracted, again and again. She moaned against his mouth, a question, a plea, an entreaty, and was surprised when he stopped kissing her.

She tumbled backward in the water and almost lost her bearings, but his hands held her by the waist. Her head was flung back, her hair floating, her limbs feeling like part of the ebb and flow of the water and not part of her at all.

He tumbled with her, his mouth closing over her the thick, erect nub of her nipple. A deep,

exquisite pain pierced her core, a throbbing, pulsing combination of pain and pleasure like nothing she'd ever felt before. Her most secret place contracted with the force of the feeling.

He suckled and licked, then grazed the tip with his teeth, intensifying her contractions. She squeezed her thighs together, not in fear, but in fierce need. His hands still holding her waist, he trailed his hot tongue down her abdomen, circled her belly button and darted his tongue into its depths.

Every place his hot, soft tongue touched burned with lust. Eva had nothing to compare the feelings to. Nothing, not even her baths, had ever felt this good.

She couldn't stand to simply float free while he was touching her, so she reached out and slid her fingers into his hair.

As she did, he moved his hands from her waist to her hips and his mouth downward, from her navel. Eva's back arched as his warm, caressing tongue went down, down, until the tip of it slid along her naked cleft. She turned to hot liquid as he wrapped one hand around her hips and pressed the other against her mound, his fingers delving alongside his tongue.

His hair floated against her skin like a silk scarf as his hot silken tongue dipped into her, lapping, tasting, nipping at a tiny bud, causing an amazing sensation she hadn't known was possible. His tongue and mouth worked magic as his teeth grazed that ultra-sensitive bud, eliciting a sharp piercing pain that wasn't pain at all.

Then his tongue moved downward even

further, licking, stroking, traveling ever closer
to her darkest secret core.

Dark.

Secret.

Pain.

The suffocating gel. The probing, sticky
fingers.

Eva screamed.

Six

She collapsed into strong arms. The lovely blue glow vanished. The sensuous floating sensation disappeared. The exquisite pleasure fell away like a dropped satin gown, leaving nothing but the horrible cold memory of the gel.

She pushed at the barrier that penned her in—hard, cotton-covered, alive, and heaving.

“Eva, Shh! Come back. Come back!”

Hands gripped her shoulders. The barrier was a man’s chest. She gulped in fresh air, her whole body quivering with reaction. Echoes of pleasure trembled through her like little aftershocks, warring with the horror of Their holding tank.

“Eva?”

His voice finally penetrated her brain—familiar, low, safe.

It wasn’t Them. It was Dr. Jones.

Relief and anger suffused her. What had he done to her? Why had he taken her back there?

She jerked away, whirling toward the aquarium, but she couldn’t bear the beautiful blue, and she knew the painting of the corridor was behind her. There was no place to look but at him.

Steeling herself, she crossed her arms over her breasts, which still ached and throbbed heavily. Shivering, she did her best to ignore the feeling.

“What was that?” she demanded, averting

her gaze as she struggled to stop herself from trembling. “Hypnotism? Are you trying to desensitize me? Deprogram me?” Her eyes burned, and her chest hurt, as if she’d held her breath too long. “Well, it’s not going to work.”

She dashed tears away angrily, casting covert glances in his direction, seeing him wipe his face and the back of his neck with a hand that, even in the midst of her anger, she noticed was shaking.

She could barely breathe, whether from anger or from reaction, she wasn’t sure. “This isn’t some—mental problem caused by a traumatic childhood. I’ve been through all that. Because, believe it or not, you aren’t the first shrink I’ve seen.” She tapped the toe of her black boot on the floor and took long, slow breaths until her chest quit cramping.

“Not that hypnotism isn’t a nice idea,” she continued. “Just not for me. I can guarantee you my memories aren’t repressed. It’s my damn feelings that are repressed, you—” She stopped. She couldn’t think of an appropriate expletive. Handsome bastard didn’t quite send the right message.

Eyeing her narrowly, Dr. Jones sat, and his demeanor demanded that she do the same. Her gaze flickered toward the door. She could leave. He wasn’t forcing her to be stay. But if she walked out that door, she’d be walking right back into her colorless, terror-ruled life. Then what?

“What do you think happened, Eva?”

She flopped into the chair. “I’m not wet, and neither are you. So I’m assuming we weren’t

really in”—she waved a hand toward the aquarium—”in there. I think you somehow hypnotized me and then . . .” An echo of the thrilling pain swept through her, weakening her knees. Had she been standing, she was sure she’d have collapsed.

“And then you violated . . . you . . . touched . . .” She gave her head a shake. “I don’t know what you did, but I’m pretty sure it was against some ethical code about doctors and patients,” she finished lamely.

“What frightened you?”

She dropped her gaze, staring at her hands. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You need to. It’s very important.”

Something in his voice made her glance at him.

“Maybe the most important thing you’ll ever do.”

His eyes mesmerized her. They were filled with concern and passion. He believed in what he was saying.

She took a long breath and made a vital decision to trust him.

“Time there wasn’t like time here,” she said more quietly, hesitantly. “I’d be with Them for weeks, yet when They returned me, it was always the next day here.”

Dr. Jones bent forward and rested his elbows on his knees, his clear blue eyes so intense and focused that she cringed away from their scrutiny.

“When They weren’t”—she paused and licked her lips—”studying me, They kept me in a tank. The gel would rise up, covering me from toe to

head, an inch at a time. By the time it got to my mouth I was panicked. I couldn't breathe. I always thought I was going to suffocate. I tried to fight it, but I couldn't move."

He nodded. "And when They took you out?"

She shook her head, her eyes squeezed shut. "They . . . They would make me walk down . . ." she sobbed and covered her mouth with her hands, shaking her head.

"I can't," she whimpered.

"Try."

She breathed into her cupped hands. "Why? Why should I? I do okay when I don't think about it. I know what happened. I choose not to dwell on it. I choose to get on with my life."

"And you're doing okay?"

"Yes." She lowered her hands and looked at him defiantly.

His brows lowered. "You're getting on with your life?"

She lifted her chin. "Yes."

He made a noise that sounded suspiciously like "Hmm."

"Don't 'hmm' me. What are you thinking?"

His eyes lit with amusement for an instant. "I'm just wondering why you're here if you're doing so well."

A chill slid along her spine as he observed her calmly. She couldn't look at him.

"How do you feel?"

She considered his question. How did she feel? Alive. Open. Sexual. For the first time since she could remember, she felt good.

She shrugged. "Okay."

"Just okay?"

She gritted her teeth. He was so damn persistent. “I feel better.”

“What about the aquarium?”

Eva turned and looked at it, reliving the sensation of floating in the aquamarine glow with his hands and his mouth on her. Her thighs clenched with longing, and her mouth watered with desire.

“Do you hate it now?”

She stood and approached it, her gaze caught by the delicate little fish and plants. She flattened her palms against the tempered glass and closed her eyes, reliving the feeling of Dr. Jones’s hard abs and harder arousal against her naked flesh. She pressed her body against the cool glass, clenching her buttocks and flattening her breasts in an empty effort to reclaim the lovely floating feelings.

She shuddered. “No. I don’t hate it now.”

Seven

“How many times were you taken?”

The night had been long. Eva had slept badly, disturbed by confused, erotic dreams, half pleasure and half pain. The nightmares of the awful silver dark were getting mixed up with the soft blue glow, and her memories of pain and torture were being pushed out of her head by delicious feelings of longing and desire.

She'd awakened several times with her breasts throbbing and her thighs and buttocks clenched. Once she'd been shocked to find her hand down there, caressing herself.

She'd rushed through the day, anxious to get to Dr. Jones's office, not allowing herself to actually wish that he would take her back into that hypnotic state. Not allowing herself to question whether he had shared her experience, or whether the entire thing was just a lonely woman's daydream.

So here she was, and Dr. Jones was pensive and distant. Disappointment burned inside her like heartburn.

“I don't want to talk about that.”

He did the thing he always did, planting his elbows on the chair arms and pressing his fingertips together, as he watched her without expression, without speaking. She hated it when he did that.

She sighed. “I suppose it was about twenty times.”

He sat forward and rested his elbows on his

jeans-clad knees. “Between the time you were ten years old and when? When was the last time?”

She closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the chair. “Four years ago. I was twenty-three. Somehow I knew it was the last time.” She opened her eyes and saw him nod.

His blue eyes were unspeakably sad. Tears glimmered like silver in their depths.

“But it was also the worst, because—”

He straightened. “The worst?”

Eva bit her lip. He was doing it again. He was pulling her back there. “I don’t want to think about it,” she whispered, clenching the arms of the chair. “Don’t make me.”

“Why was it the worst?”

His voice was calming, compelling. Eva shook her head and dug the heels of her hands into her eyes, but he murmured something, still compelling her, and she finally looked at him. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her fingers shook, her whole body quivering. She didn’t know if she could live through the remembering.

“When I was little, I thought everyone had to go with Them. I thought it was just something people didn’t talk about. But as I grew older, I discovered that the other girls shared everything. Periods, boys, what they would and wouldn’t do on a date. But they never mentioned Them. If I said something about Them, people just looked at me funny.”

“You thought you were the only one.”

She nodded. “After I was older, and They started . . . touching me, probing me . . . doing

all kinds of experiments on me”—she shuddered—“I began to realize there must be others.”

Dr. Jones stood and looked out the window, his back to her. “Others?”

“At least one. Someone—or maybe something . . . but I’m almost positive it was a person . . . someone else was there. He sang to me, sent me images.”

“He?”

“I don’t know how I know, but, yes. I think the presence was male. He was strong, protective.”

The memories flooded her. The first time she’d been aware of it, she’d thought it was her own brain, taking her to a place separate from her body, which was being so mercilessly probed and studied. Songs and images had flowed through her—not exactly sound, not exactly presence, but more than merely thought, certainly more than imagination. The songs were soft and ethereal, the images were of an unfamiliar place—a watery surreal place where everything was blue and shimmery.

She’d learned to trust the thing she thought of as Him, to give herself up to Him, and He had helped her to survive.

Eva shook her head slowly. “I don’t know. I never saw Him—or anyone else except Them. And the sounds and images were not really anywhere except inside my head. But I knew there was someone else. Someone who was going through the same thing I was. Someone else who had walked down that dark awful corridor, just as I had.”

His back still facing her, Dr. Jones stuck his hands into his pockets.

His spine was arched enticingly, his shoulders slightly hunched. The polo shirt he wore was tucked into his jeans, which cupped his lean buttocks snugly. He stood silhouetted by the soft light from the window, and her burning eyes were soothed by the beautiful curves and planes of his body. Her fears were calmed by his unyielding presence.

“I do know one thing, though,” she said.

He turned his head, his profile as perfectly sculpted as the rest of him. “What’s that?”

“He was my friend,” she muttered.

An instant of silence hung between them.

Then he said, “Close your eyes, Eva.”

His voice floated around her like an echo of the thing that had helped her. Her heart racing, she obeyed.

“Close them and come with me. We’re going somewhere.”

Her trembling increased as she heard him cross the carpet, coming toward her. Her eyes flew open when he took her hands and drew her up out of the chair. He shifted and wrapped an arm around her waist, and they stepped into the monstrous painting.

“No,” she whimpered, pulling away from him. “Please don’t.”

“Trust me. Come with me. I’m here for you.” His voice was almost no voice at all. It seemed inside her, all around her. It promised safety, and she believed it.

They walked down the stark silver corridor, their bare feet making no sound.

Eva looked down. They were both naked again. And he was aroused. Beautifully, vastly aroused. Her heart sped up, in fear and anticipation. She wasn't sure she could bear what was going to happen.

"I'm so afraid," she gasped. "Don't make me go there. Not there."

Dr. Jones turned toward her and pushed her gently against the silver wall of the corridor. The wall, which she knew was cold, hard metal, felt like liquid silver, molding, undulating, caressing.

He propped his hands on either side of her head and bent his elbows, slowly lowering his mouth to hers. At first his lips just brushed hers. She closed her eyes and pretended she was somewhere else—anywhere but in the awful dark silver corridor. Pressing her palms against the wall alongside her, she lifted her head slightly, toward him.

His lips nibbled on hers, brushed across her cheeks, her chin, her temple, her eyelashes, then down her nose to touch her mouth again.

His tongue tentatively touched her upper lip, nothing more than a butterfly kiss. She parted her lips, and he lowered his mouth another few millimeters, enough to push his tongue through her parted lips.

Eva had never been kissed so carefully, so beautifully, so worshipfully. They were not touching at all, except for their mouths, and yet she felt consumed by him, enveloped by him, protected by him.

He delved past her teeth with his tongue, his lips softly moving on hers, his head tilted

so that they still were joined only at the mouth.

She opened to him, brushing her tongue against his, puckering her lips in a little O, squeezing and sucking on his tongue like a form of lovemaking. He bent his elbows another fraction, thrusting his tongue in and out, in and out, in an imitation of the sexual dance, a prelude and a promise of the ultimate penetration to come.

Then, so slowly it was as if he were melting onto her, he pressed his body against hers. First his arousal, silky and hard, pushing against her belly. Then his chest, his nipples puckered, his diaphragm heaving. Then, finally, his legs, long and lean and strong, their muscled tension a promise to hold her up, to support her.

Eva put her hands against his chest, not to push him away but to feel him, to take in his heat. She breathed in a heady, familiar scent that she hadn't noticed before. A kind of spice or herbs, dark and enticing.

As she touched his taut, tiny nipples, he gasped against her mouth. She was fascinated and incredibly turned on by the feel of them, and by the idea that she could draw such a reaction from him. Copying what he had done to her in the aquarium, she circled and teased and flicked the pebbled nubs until they were stiff and hot, and his chest was heaving. He made a sound deep in his throat of unmistakable arousal, and Eva felt a thrill course through her, hearing it. She felt so powerful, knowing she could turn him on.

He took his hands away from the wall and cupped her breasts, his thumbs painting erotic

circles on the aching tips. Eva moaned silently. She had no breath for sound. His thumbs rubbed and teased, and her breasts tightened until she thought she would scream with the pleasurable pain. But he had only begun.

He lowered his head and grazed one nipple with his teeth, sending a shock of delight through her that caused her to cry out loud. He was relentless. He nibbled, tongued, sucked, until both breasts pulsed with orgasmic vibrations. She pressed against the wall, only his hands and mouth holding her upright. The sight of his head bent as he laved and suckled on her breasts, the feel of his silky hair against her skin, the curve of his muscled back, all added to her excitement. She was helpless, caught up in sensation, as he made love to her breasts.

Still he wasn't finished. Straightening, his blue eyes blazing, he kissed her lightly on the lips, then turned her around to face the wall and covered her body with his.

She instantly panicked. The silver wall was against her face. The wall of the cold, hard, endless corridor. "No, please." She pushed against the wall with her palms.

"Stay with me, Eva," his voice caressed her ear as he put his hands over hers and pressed his arousal against her bottom.

She clenched her fists on the undulating metal wall and closed her eyes. Her breasts were flattened against the silver surface, her stomach and diaphragm swelling against it with each gasping breath.

He spread his legs, totally surrounding her,

his long sinewy muscles like thick ropes, tying her down.

Pushing her hair aside, he grazed his teeth along her neck as his hands moved downward to pull her rounded bottom even closer to his heat. She felt his erection pressing against her, felt it slide from the small of her back, along the juncture of her buttocks. She felt a hot wetness from its tip and heard the rasping of his breath.

“Oh please, no,” she whispered desperately. “I can’t—”

“Shh. Nothing can hurt you here, Eva. Nothing. Believe me. Trust me.”

He reached around her and placed one hand on her breast and one on her bare, rounded stomach.

Eva couldn’t fight him even if she’d wanted to. He controlled her completely. Even her brain. It was the only explanation. She tried to think, tried to stay rational as his left hand cupped and caressed her breast and his right hand began to slide enticingly down to rest on her thigh.

His palm caressed the silky smooth skin of her hairless thigh, then slowly, tantalizing, moved upward. She couldn’t help herself. She arched toward his touch. A delicious glowing ache grew in her abdomen, and she felt a wet warmth at the apex of her thighs. His fingers brushed lightly over the V at the top of her thighs, and she gasped.

This isn’t the corridor. She reminded herself of that as he pressed his palm over her mound, then curled his fingers into the edge of her hot

nether lips. Without conscious thought her legs parted, giving him access. Slowly, deliberately, he moved his fingers up and down her labia, barely teasing the naked skin. She shuddered.

It's just a painting.

He slid a tentative finger inside her, where she knew she was wet and waiting. Her legs tensed, and the anticipation grew inside her. His other hand teased and caressed her breast, and she felt an arc like lightning between her breast and hot, aching passage so close to his hand. She wanted more.

This is all in my mind. It isn't real.

He pushed gently, aided by her body's dewy reaction, until he found the tiny nub that was the center of all her sensation. One finger brushed upward, sliding back and forth across the strangely sensitive bud.

This isn't really . . .

Eva's body clenched and, all at once, erupted like a volcano. Red and black and silver sparks flew behind her eyes as she arched again and again in an torrent of sensation that went beyond her wildest imaginings.

She lost track of time, of space, of her own mind. The exquisite pleasure went on and on as she surrendered to the liquid silver wall and the magic of his hands.

Eight

To her intense embarrassment, when Eva got home she realized her panties were soaked. She bathed quickly and climbed into bed, more interested in reliving the pleasure Dr. Jones had given her than in the fleeting, lonely comfort of her bath.

He had taken her into the dark silver corridor. She didn't care if it was some kind of hypnotic trance. She didn't care if he was controlling her brain. It was working. He was systematically attacking her fears and turning them into pleasure.

She lay in bed, her fingers straying along her breasts, her belly, her thighs, and wondered if Dr. Jones was just using hypnosis to make her more comfortable with her body—she'd asked him to help her feel after all—or if there were something else, something real, taking place during her sessions. Either way, she also wondered if what he was doing was ethical.

Stretching luxuriously, she acknowledged that she didn't care. She felt better than she had—ever. She felt more alive, more content, more like a woman, than she had in her entire life.

She pictured his angular face, his kind mouth, his bright blue eyes that sometimes shone with compassionate tears. He wouldn't hurt her. He was helping her to love herself.

She'd never talked to anyone about her experiences. Never dared to. But Dr. Jones

seemed to believe her. And more importantly, he seemed to understand. He didn't ridicule her or look at her as if she were nuts.

She touched herself the way he had touched her. She slid her finger along her bare labia and inside, just like he had. And as she did, she relived the feel of his mouth on her neck, his hand on her breast, his breath against her ear . . . then his hand working its magic on her down there.

He'd been turned on. Even if it had just been in a hypnotic dream, she had allowed a man to touch her. For the first time in her life, her body had been sexually satisfied, and the man who'd given her that gift had been left unsatisfied.

Her finger found the little secret nub and played with it, amazed at her boldness. As she explored her body, she put herself back there, back in that long dark silver corridor that had been the source of so many of her nightmares. Dr. Jones had taken the nightmares and made them something quite different, something wonderful. She recalled the hot, hard feel of him. She imagined that her hand was his, that it was his breath that sounded shallow and excited in the silence of her bedroom. That it was his fingers teasing her nipple into erection. She imagined his silky bronze hair against her skin and his hot, sweet tongue on her . . . and the feelings blossomed inside her until it hardly mattered where she was or even who she was. Finally, blue sparks flew, and the explosive climax overtook her.

Oh, dear God.

She had done it. She had touched herself,

found herself, for the first time in her life. She lay there for a long time, breathing heavily, as the tiny aftershocks of orgasm spasmed ever more faintly through her.

It was the same and yet so very different from what she'd felt with Dr. Jones. Now she knew the secrets of her own body. Now she understood how to coax the feelings she'd always been so afraid of. But her lonely hand was a poor substitute for his hard, supple, masculine body.

She wanted the real thing.

She lay back on her pillows and closed her eyes. Next time she saw Dr. Jones, she'd insist on being awake for whatever it was that he did to her. She didn't want to be hypnotized any more. If that's all he was doing, well, he'd taught her how to enjoy her body without guilt, without fear. Maybe that could be enough.

She fell asleep with the haunting sound that she missed so much echoing in her ears.

* * *

It was several days before she allowed herself to go back to Dr. Jones's office. She didn't call to cancel. She just didn't show up.

It was something she had to do. She had to know that she could get along—and still experience pleasure—without his hypnotic presence. She had to know that it wasn't just a mind trick.

Her newfound comfort in herself seemed obvious to others, too. One of her regular customers, a lawyer who came into the café for breakfast every morning, asked her to go to a movie with him, and she did. She had a great

time.

At her apartment door, David asked her if he could come in, but Eva wasn't sure she was ready for that giant a step. So she just kissed him and told him she'd love to see him again soon. The kiss was pleasant and made her insides tingle, but compared to Dr. Jones' mouth and tongue, David's kiss was childish and chaste.

She looked in the mirror as she brushed her teeth. "But if he's hypnotizing me, he could just be telling me how good his kisses are." She rinsed her mouth and nodded at herself.

"Tomorrow." She pointed the toothbrush at her reflection. "Go and tell him we're done."

She slept dreamlessly that night.

* * *

"So I just wanted to thank you and work out a payment plan." Eva hadn't released her purse when Dr. Jones had reached for it.

He'd raised his eyebrows but hadn't insisted.

Now he looked at his hands as he carefully pressed his fingertips together. "You're not ready to go yet."

Eva stiffened. "I think I am."

"We haven't talked about the reason you came."

"Sure we have. You've done so much for me. I'm much more comfortable with myself, and I have you to thank for that."

"But that's not why you came, is it?"

Eva stared at him. She couldn't force herself to answer his question.

"You need to talk about what They did to you. The worst thing."

His words sent shock waves along her spine, and threatened to shatter her fragile hold on sanity.

“No.” She stood. “I don’t need to talk about that. Everything is fine. Thank you. Now, please, tell me how much I owe you.”

“While They held you, did you dream?”

Eva glared at him for a minute, then gave an exasperated sigh and flopped back onto the seat. His questions were always evocative, and for some reason, she always wanted to answer him. But she wasn’t going there. She would control how much she told him from now on.

“Yes, I dreamed. Mostly about getting out of there and never going back.”

“What else?”

He looked very serious, as if her answer was of utmost importance to him.

Her dreams were nobody else’s business. “I am not going to allow you to hypnotize me any more.”

He didn’t speak.

“In fact, I’m a little concerned about what happens while I’m under the effects of the hypnosis.”

He waited.

After a few moments, Eva drummed her fingers on her purse. “Okay. I used to dream that He or it—whoever it was who helped me—came into that room and rescued me from Them. I dreamed that we escaped and hid, and They never found us.”

Dr. Jones didn’t react.

“And we lived happily ever after,” she mumbled under her breath, staring at her

fingers squeezing her purse.

“Me, too.”

“What?” Her gaze snapped up to meet his sad blue eyes.

He stood and held out his hand. “Come with me, Eva.”

She stiffened. “No. I told you. I’m not going to be hypnotized any more. I appreciate what you’ve done—”

His finger on her lip stopped her. “I’m not asking you to close your eyes. You’ll be wide awake for this, I promise.” He took her hand. “Now, come with me.”

His tone held strain, worry, and sounded almost as if he were angry. It terrified her even more than his words. She tried to pull her hand away, but he wouldn’t let go.

“There’s one place you haven’t gone. One place you have left to go. Trust me, Eva.”

She shook her head, her heart beating wildly. “I can’t. I’m too afraid.”

“I know.” He smiled gently. “Do you think about me when you’re at home?”

She couldn’t tear her gaze from his. “Yes. I apparently have a crush on you, which I understand is not uncommon between therapist and patient. I wish I didn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to be hurt.”

He tugged on her hand until she gave in and stood.

“You’re trembling. Don’t be afraid. Come with me, Eva. Come.”

He looked at the wall beside his desk, and a door that Eva had never noticed opened. The

room beyond the door was dark and silver, with a stark metal table in the center of the room.

Terror sheared her breath.

“Oh, no. No no no!” She jerked backward, fighting against his grip, but he wouldn’t let go. He wrapped an arm around her, holding her against her will.

“Please, Eva. You’ve trusted me so far. Trust me now.”

“No!” She pushed, struggled, but he held her fast.

“Have I hurt you? You know you can trust me.”

“But that—” She sobbed, choking on fear. “That’s the place— I can’t— Please. Please, no!”

He pushed her into the room in front of him. Eva clung to him, not from a sense of safety, but because he was the only thing alive in there.

The familiar instruments gleamed cruelly. The table with its silver straps beckoned to her. She could already feel the cold restraints wrapping around her wrists and ankles. Her back and buttocks burned from the chill of the table. Her body contracted, trying to pull in on itself, as it anticipated the horror of what They had done to her happening again.

Dr. Jones stared into her eyes, his glistening and brightening until they seemed to glow—they were so blue.

“What was the worst, Eva?”

She gulped for air around the lump of panic in her throat. “I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. You are the bravest person I’ve ever known. Tell me what the worst thing was that they did. If you can do that, then I

can help you.”

Her head swam. She clenched her fists in the material of his shirt and buried her head in the hollow of his shoulder. “I’d thought They’d done everything They could do. They’d probed every part of me—looked at . . . tasted . . . tested everything. Just everything. But the last time . . .”

“The worst time.”

She nodded. She spoke flatly, as if by not reacting outwardly, she could protect her inner self. “I think They wanted to see if They could produce a . . . a hybrid. But also, I think They were just curious. After all Their examinations and Their . . . tests, They must have known.”

“Known what?”

“That I was female. That I could bear children.”

His arm tightened around her shoulders. “They knew who was female and who was male. That wasn’t their purpose.” His quiet voice held a harsh note.

She drew a ragged breath. “They . . . raped me. I lost count of how many times, how many ways. I didn’t think I could survive. I . . . I—” She doubled over. “Oh. Oh, God, I’m going to be sick.”

“Lie down on the table, Eva.”

She shook her head dumbly, far beyond speech.

No, no, no, she mouthed as tears flowed down her face and her insides cramped with nausea. Her arms and legs felt as if they were going to collapse, they were trembling so badly.

“Lie down. I’m here for you.”

She looked toward the door, expecting to see the odd, pretty creatures, but there wasn't a door. It was just a wall, dark and silver.

"I'm not Them," he said, his sad eyes burning into hers. "Don't you know that by now?"

She did know. "Why are you doing this? How? How did you create the place where—" Her mouth filled with salty saliva, and she swallowed against the rising nausea.

"You know how. There's nothing in here that you don't want to be here."

Horror mingled with astonishment contorted her features. She started to protest, but he cut her short, again placing his finger on her lips.

"It's true." He nodded slowly. "Your thoughts and memories are controlling this place—this reality."

She began another denial, but he didn't give her the chance.

"Listen to me, Eva," he said. "You're strong. You can endure anything. You've proven that. You survived the worst. And you still have the capacity to love. Do you have the capacity to trust?"

Eva took a long, slow breath and contemplated his words. She'd survived. Yes. Her chest swelled with pride. She had survived. She looked at the man who had helped her find the feelings she'd been afraid she didn't have. Could she trust him?

She had so far.

"Lie down on the table, Eva. Prove that They no longer control your life."

It was a command she could not ignore. Yet, in truth it was no command. It was a plea. His

eyes were glued to hers as he waited to see what she would do.

She lay down.

He stood at the foot of the table and took her right boot in his hand.

She jerked. "What are you doing?"

"Remember what I told you? This is real. This is now. Not a dream. Your clothes won't magically disappear in here." He slowly unzipped the boot and slid it off her foot. He lifted her foot and caressed it, pressing his thumb into the arch massaging, kneading.

His erection was outlined against the material of his tight jeans. Eva wanted to touch it, to stretch her leg and press her bare foot against it, feel it throb along her arch.

He set her right foot down on the table and picked up her left, sliding the zipper down and slipping the boot off. His sure, strong fingers massaged her foot.

Eva gave up yearning to be out of this place. She had to be content with following his lead. He'd said she was in control here, but she thought it was he who was in control.

She met his gaze and knew that, at least in part, she was wrong. She was as powerful as he, especially here, especially now, with nothing between them but their clothes.

He slowly slid his palms up the black wool gabardine of her slacks, pausing briefly at the V between her thighs, then on up to her waist.

Apprehension crowded into her breast. As his warm fingers unbuttoned the button at her waist and slid the zipper down, her breath caught. He pulled her pants and panties off in

one motion, then walked to the head of the table and reached for her shirttail.

“Lift your arms.”

His soft, compelling voice commanded her obedience. Her diaphragm contracting painfully, she raised her arms. He pulled her shirt off and unhooked the front clasp of her bra. Spreading it open, threading one arm at a time through the straps, he then slid it out from underneath her.

She was naked. Really naked. The steel table was cold against her skin, raising goose bumps on her flesh. She could barely breathe. Her muscles clenched, protecting themselves against the cold alloy of the table. She heard something—a metallic click—and knew immediately what it was.

No!

The restraints clamped over her wrists and ankles, silver and stiff and chilled, just like she remembered them.

“Oh, please. Please. Don’t. I trusted you!”

Her heart pounded, and her chest seized as her breaths huffed in and out in short, shallow sobs. The icy cold table burned her skin, the restraints pinched, the room was filled with Their noxious smell.

“Eva.”

His voice couldn’t penetrate her hysterical terror. It was all starting again, and she couldn’t stop it, couldn’t help herself. She could only scream.

And scream.

Nine

A warm and gentle hand cupped her cheek. Eva's body arched in surprise at the contact. They weren't warm. They weren't gentle. Her eyes flew open, and she met Dr. Jones' brilliant blue gaze.

"How do you feel?" he asked quietly, his fingers tracing her cheek to her jaw and down to caress her chin.

He'd brought her here. He was the cause of her panic. She jerked, fighting the restraints until her wrists and ankles throbbed with pain. She took a breath to scream, but he put his finger over her mouth.

"Shh. The restraints are not really there. You can get rid of them."

She shook her head wildly. "No," she whispered hoarsely. "Nothing can. Not until They're done with me."

"The aliens are gone, Eva. They were pure evil, and they've been destroyed. They can never hurt anyone again. The only thing torturing you now is your own fear. The restraints are there because you believe They still have a hold on you. You must learn that They don't."

"How can you know that?"

"I know." His voice was firm, confident.

She wanted to believe him. She fell back on the table, exhausted by her struggles. "I don't understand."

He smiled, that little quirky smile that lit his eyes like blue diamonds. Then he dropped

his shirt and pants, bent over and kissed her.

His kiss pushed the fear from her brain, as it always did. He crushed her mouth beneath his, holding her chin in a grip that was firm but not harsh.

With his other hand he touched the tip—only the very tip—of one breast. Eva felt her nipple respond immediately. She ached to pull him to her, to mold his body into hers, to experience that last, ultimate, real connection with the man who had guided her through the horrible silver dark. But her hands were restrained.

Don't fight them. Believe in yourself.

His voice echoed in her head. He met her gaze, and touched her other nipple. Her breasts ached with an exquisite pain that drove her insane with panting need.

He nodded, his eyes bright with reassurance.

"I believe in you," she said, and as if by magic, the silver straps dropped away. Her arms wrapped around him, and she pulled him close. He climbed onto the table with her, his naked body glimmering with a faint blue glow in the low light.

She wanted to wrap her legs around him, and she did, lifting and parting her legs to encompass him. Something wet landed on her cheek, and she looked up to see that his eyes were swimming with tears.

"Dr. Jones?" she whispered.

"Seain."

As he kissed the hollow of her shoulder and lay himself over her, she pictured the name on the business card. Seain. She'd thought it was

pronounced Shawn. But his pronunciation was odd, musical. And she'd heard that peculiar musical voice before. It was the lovely blue sound, that special, safe place, where she'd always found solace.

"Seain," she whispered.

He touched her breasts again, this time fully, reverently, palming first one, then the other, then lifting them to roll her nipple against his palm. His fingers tantalized each tender nub to a hard point, his thumb teasing the tip while he raised his head and kissed her again, thrusting his tongue deep inside her mouth.

She arched upward, her breasts aching for more, and his mouth left hers to trail a fiery path down her neck to the hollow of her shoulder, where his lips lingered, as soft as the touch of one of his tropical fish's silky fin.

Then he caressed her breasts with his tongue, licking the tops and the sides before tasting the skin between them. Eva's fingers entwined in his bronze hair, and she guided his head until he caught one nipple between his teeth. The sensation was pure ecstasy. She moaned, pushing her hips against his, his mouth still locked to her breast, suckling deep, sending electric shocks through her whole body until pleasure rose to the level where it was almost painful.

He sat back, sliding his hand over the curve of her waist, down across her smooth hip to caress the shape of her bottom, then glided across her belly until his fingers rested at the apex of her thighs.

He slid one finger deep inside her, enticing

her to move against it at the same time his mouth returned to her lips. She strained against him, and he slid his finger deeper inside, while his thumb caressed the throbbing nub that was the center of her desire. She arched against his hand, and moaned in pleasure as he thrust his fingers deeper and deeper.

She reached for him, encircling his arousal in her hand, something she'd never done before. He murmured something unintelligible, his erection pulsing and throbbing against her shy, eager palm.

An excitement built in her until she wasn't sure her body could hold it. The burning cold table, the place where her body had been tortured and invaded and violated, had become a sacred bed, where for the first time in her life she would welcome her lover.

His tone hushed, Seain spoke again in a language Eva didn't know— and yet she did. He sang to her as she stroked him to incredible an length and hardness. His response to her inexperienced touch making her bold, she ran her finger up the underside of his shaft, where a large vein pulsed. She touched the tip, where she found a tiny slit, damp with a slick liquid that, amazingly, did not disgust her but made her even more curious. She discovered that when she touched his wet tip, he shuddered and stiffened, and finally grabbed her hand, whispering for her to go slowly.

He continued stroking her, alternately delving and teasing until she was dewy and slick, so ready for him that she felt small contractions beginning deep inside her. Her

body felt empty, needy, and she knew intuitively exactly what it required.

“Now,” she said. “Now.”

His gaze burned into hers as he shook his head. No. Not yet. This is for you. It must be perfect.

“I can’t stand it,” she moaned, squeezing his hand length, sending an agonized shudder through him. Her thighs tightened around his hand, but not with fear. Pressing her legs together made the pleasure his magical fingers drew from her even more intense, more exciting, until her entire body seemed afire with greedy yearning.

He took his hand away. She cried out, and reached for his it, but he evaded her grip and touched her lips with his fingers. She stared at him, and his wide, beautiful mouth softened into a tender smile.

Heat rising up her neck to blaze in her cheeks, she flicked out her tongue and tasted—tasted herself, her need, her desire.

“How much longer?” she whispered, her hips arching against him. “I can’t bear it.”

His slick, wet finger slid down her body to her hips, lifting them and settling his shaft gently against her, poised carefully above her. Looking past his golden shoulders, past the rippled bands of muscle that crossed his lean abdomen, to where crisp bronze curls surrounded his penis, she watched as he slid the tip of his erection against her slick opening.

He pushed the damp tip forward carefully, slowly, until it parted her hot wet entrance.

She stiffened, remembering awful, painful

invasions, and he stopped. His arm muscles quivered, and his thighs were tense and rigid. The expression on his face was determined.

Carefully, his hand stole downward to touch her, coax her, relax her, and, soon, her breath quickened and her hips strained upward once again.

He pushed into her a little further, watching her face, stealing a kiss from her lips, his eyes soft and questioning.

“Oh please, Seain. I don’t care if it hurts.” Her inner muscles were pulsing along with her rapid heartbeat. Her body craved the completion his body promised, even while she braced herself for the same monstrous invasion she’d thought would kill her during her abductions.

Never, my heart, would I hurt you.

With elbows bent and supporting his weight, he teased the peaks of her breasts with the silky hair on his chest as he carefully, so very carefully, pushed inside a little further. This time, to Eva’s surprise, her muscles didn’t shrink in fear. This time, as he held her gaze and murmured familiar, soothing echoes of the songs that had sustained her through her darkest times, her body opened to him.

A brief sigh of relief escaped his lips, and he lowered his head to kiss her. The kiss went on and on, becoming deeper as his tongue mimicked his shaft’s penetration. Under his ministrations she relaxed and, a mere fraction at a time, took him in. With every millimeter gained, Eva thought that had to be it, he couldn’t possibly go any further. But then he did until, at last, he was buried inside her to

the hilt.

She gasped in unbelievable pleasure, her heartbeat thrumming in her temples, her body opening like a flower.

Then he began to move. Reversing the long journey he'd just made, he pulled slowly out of her tight passage, and her inner muscles tightened of their own volition, straining to keep him. Then he buried himself again. Out, then in, seemingly deeper with every thrust. Her body adjusted, flowing with his movements, her entire being craving sensation.

She ran her hands across the muscles of his chest, her fingers delighting in the feel of his body hair. She caressed his shoulders and his neck and touched his lips as he had touched hers, and all the while he rocked inside her, until her whole body felt transformed from matter into pure, undiluted energy.

Still, he moved, slowly, sweetly, his hard length stroking her, filling her, turning the last dregs of her terrifying memories into a beautiful sensual dance.

She grasped his hips and pulled herself up, taking him deeper than she would have thought possible. He groaned, and his body began to pulse rhythmically. He gritted his teeth and clenched his jaw, continuing to murmur to her in their secret musical language.

"No, Seain," she whispered. "Don't hold back. Make it now, for both of us."

His eyes glittered, and his song swelled. Feeling the deep, heavy contractions begin inside her, she met his pulsing rhythm and matched it, and the two of them created their

own supernova of sparks and fire as they climaxed together.

* * *

A few minutes passed before Eva was able to gather her scattered wits. They lay curled together on the warm table in the empty room, she with her eyes closed, listening to Seain's soft melody of satisfaction.

"Seain?" she whispered. "You were there?"

His song stopped. His body tensed, and an instant later, she felt his nod against her hair.

"I knew there were others, but . . ." She turned in his arms until she could look into his eyes. "You were captured and tortured, too? You endured all that?"

He held her gaze without answering, but deep inside him—beyond the clear blue of his eyes—was a darkness that gave her the answer: Yes. He knew what she had gone through because he, too, had suffered it.

She touched his arms, and the crisp hair on his chest. "Didn't they spray you with the chemical?"

He touched his forehead to hers and nodded, grimacing.

"But your hair grew back."

"Our bodies can regenerate some things."

She studied his features. "You don't belong on Earth."

He shook his head, a faint smile on his lips.

"Where do you come from?"

He inclined his head. "Out there. Much closer to the center of the galaxy, where the stars are bright enough to light the night."

His voice held the certainty of truth, but Eva was stunned. “How did you get here? How did you happen to find me?”

He brushed her hair away from her cheek. “I didn’t happen to find you, Eva. I searched a long time for you. Your world is very small. Very far out on the edge of the galaxy. My father helped me, once I’d recovered.”

“Recovered?”

He nodded. “By the time my father’s ships found Their planet, I was very close to death.”

“Oh Seain, I’m so sorry.” She touched his hand. “Were you . . . did they do things to you?”

He was silent for a moment, then said, “They were evil, cruel creatures. They had no respect for life, except their own.”

She watched him closely. He was looking at her lips, her chin, her hair, but not her eyes. She lay her palm against his cheek, and his gaze met hers. His blue eyes were sad, so sad.

“Someone helped you recover?” she asked.

He gave a single nod. “My father’s physicians repaired my body. Then my father sent me to a woman, a therapist of sorts, who helped to repair my soul.” With a fingertip, he traced the line of her lips, the curve of her jaw, the line of her brow, his expression pensive in the low light. “I’m fine now. As you will be.”

His words and his sad eyes sent fear rushing through her like adrenaline. He’d come all this way to find her. He’d repaired her damaged emotions, made her stronger than she’d been before. And now . . .

She grabbed his head between her two hands. “Please don’t tell me you’re leaving.” She

didn't think she could live without him.

"This is not my world. I don't belong here."

"Then why did you come?"

His long bronze eyelashes shielded his gaze from hers. "It took me a long time to heal. I very nearly died. I had to be sure—" He paused without looking up. "I knew you would need help, too. But you're going to be okay."

Suddenly, the table felt cold, and Eva felt naked and alone. She sat up and grabbed his shirt and pulled it on.

"I want out of here."

She looked around her. The room was suddenly chilly and alien again. She had to get out. Her temples pounded. "Let me out! Where's the fucking door?"

The door appeared, and Eva stalked out and stood barefoot in the center of his office, hugging herself.

He followed, buttoning his jeans, looking like a teenager caught with his girlfriend. "Eva—"

"No!" She held up her hand. "I want some answers."

He waited, silent.

She looked at his bare walls. "You aren't a therapist." It wasn't really a question, but he shook his head to confirm her conclusion.

"How did Brad get your card?"

"I gave it to him. I needed to get you to come to me, so I could help you." He stood there bare-chested, hair tousled, the most beautiful, sexiest being she had ever seen. And if she believed him, he had come light years just to help her.

"How many times were you abducted?"

He blinked, and his mouth grew grim.

“Once.”

That took some of the steam out of her fury. “Once?” she repeated, her initial confusion growing into appalled certainty as the implication sunk in. “For how . . . how long?” she managed.

“Fifteen years.”

“Oh, God, Seain.” He’d been held there all that time. Constantly. “Why? Why would They send me back over and over, but keep you?”

He shook his head. “I think they assessed the endurance of the various races, and adjusted their methods accordingly.”

“And you were very strong,” she whispered. “How did you bear it?”

“The same way you did.”

She stared at him. “But I couldn’t have if it hadn’t been for you. For your voice.”

A smile softened his drawn features.

Did he mean what she thought he meant? She knew now that it had been his voice in her head all those times, his cool blue fantasy world soothing her. She had survived because she’d known she wasn’t alone. He had helped her to bear the unbearable. But who had helped him?

Ten

“Are you saying someone sang to you?” she asked.

Seain’s smile widened. “I’m not sure I’d call it singing. But, yes, someone kept me from losing hope. Someone gave me strength. Someone kept me alive long enough for my father and his royal fleet to find me.” His voice was odd, strained. His lashes were spiked with tears.

“Who was it? Are they all right?”

“I think so. You tell me.”

Eva’s throat tightened. “Me?” she croaked. “But I didn’t do anything.”

“Yes, you did,” he insisted quietly. “You called to me. You searched for me. During those last weeks when I was too weak to respond, you never stopped sending your message of hope and love.”

Her eyes widened. “You were there the last time? When I couldn’t find you?”

“I was there, but I couldn’t help you.” His voice was filled with anguish and regret. “I was too weak. Instead, you helped me. Your strength, your determination, kept me alive. You sustained me.”

Shock and wonder coursed through Eva’s veins like blood. “My strength? I had no strength. I searched for you, for your voice, because I thought I would die without it. I didn’t even know you were real, but I . . . I loved you. I thought you were gone—or dead.”

She ducked her head. She'd laid open her deepest soul. What would happen now? It had taken her so very long to learn to live without the anticipation of his musical voice. Now that she'd heard it again, how would she ever survive if he left her?

She sucked in courage with a deep breath. "So we saved each other. Why are you here now, Dr. Jones? Why the pretense? The business card. The office. Is all this even real? Or am I dreaming?"

"It's real."

"So you traveled across the galaxy, looked until you found me—I'm not even going to ask how you could have managed that—and when you did, you rented an office and set yourself up as a shrink just so you could heal me. And you did all this for what? Out of some notion of universal altruism?"

He stood and walked over to the aquarium and splayed his hand against the glass. The little fish and other sea creatures gathered close, as if he'd called to them.

She walked over to stand next to him, tapping her foot, waiting.

He hummed at the fish for another few seconds, then turned and looked at her. "No."

She propped her fists on her hips. "Then why?"

"My people are born in water. We live there for the first several years, until our gills develop into what you might call a hybrid gill-lung. We go back to the water to mate. And when it is time to die."

Eva felt like crying. She heard it in his voice.

He was going to leave. “Are you trying to tell me that you’re going to go back to your . . . planet or your . . . your star system or wherever you came from?”

He closed his eyes. “Yes.”

Eva whirled away from him, strode to the chair and picked up her purse, then stalked toward the door, passing Seain on the way. His body drew her like a magnet. But she had to maintain her distance. She had to protect herself.

“Okay, then,” she said. “Well, thanks. Now I don’t have to be afraid of the dark or of sex. And I suppose you’ve cleared up my nightmares, at least temporarily.” She turned back bravely and stuck out her hand. “Nice to finally meet you. Send me your bill.”

“Eva, don’t.” His voice sounded tortured, off-key. “Come with me.” He took her hand, not in a handshake but in entreaty.

Eva knew her heart wasn’t strong enough to endure any more hurt. She’d walk away. She’d survive. After all, she’d survived the worst. Even Seain had said so.

But it wasn’t the worst she was worried about anymore. She wasn’t sure she could ever get over the best.

So she upped her defiant sarcasm another notch, shielding her fragile feelings. “Come with you where? What’ll it be this time? Another romp in the aquarium? Another ‘up against the wall?’ Or one more time on the torture table for the road?”

Seain raised his liquid gaze to hers. “Come with me.” He began to sing softly, the sound

she'd heard during her darkest times, the sound that had saved her.

Her eyes filled with tears. "I thought I couldn't go with you. Wasn't that your point, about the gills and the water? Could I even survive on your world?"

Shrugging, he gestured around him. "I can survive on yours for a while. We breathe the same air." He held out his hand. "Come. Let me show you something."

She looked at his hand, so human, so beautiful. Then she held out her smaller one for him to take. He'd been there for her all that time. If she was going to have to live the rest of her life without him, she wasn't going to give up one nanosecond of the time they had left.

A door opened in the wall, and he dropped his jeans and slipped the shirt off her shoulders. They stepped through the door. Eva squeezed his hand as the door closed behind them.

Cool blue water started at their feet and rose quickly. Seain took her into his arms and held her close as the dreadful panic rose in her breast faster than the water.

"Breathe slow and deep," he said calmly. "Everything will be fine."

The similarity to the storage tank was staggering, overwhelming. The water might as well be gel. She closed her eyes tightly and held her breath. But suddenly, Seain's mouth was over hers.

Trust me. I'll breathe for you.

Stirred by his kiss, she relaxed in his arms. And just like before, as the water closed over her head, she discovered that as long as he was

there, she didn't have to worry about breathing.

He held onto her as the buoyancy of the water lifted and floated them upward. His hands flirted with her skin like the little fish's fins and tails, touching her here and there, skimming across the tips of her breasts, sliding around her waist, dipping between her thighs where they tickled and teased until her legs turned boneless.

His lips nibbled over her like the tiny water creatures' mouths, sucking, blowing, making every square inch of her skin come alive, turning them all into extraordinarily sensitive erogenous zones.

She tried to give him back the pleasure he was giving her, but for a long while, he wouldn't let her move. His hands and mouth were everywhere, and her body was helpless against his erotic assault.

At last, when he paused, his chest heaving, to float for a moment, she gathered her energy and turned his seduction on him. Surprising herself by her boldness, she floated around him, her hands touching all the places on his body that were so different from hers. His strong, muscled back, the dip below his waist, then the curvy swell of his backside.

He gave his body up to her for her perusal and pleasure, and although fine tremors shook him when she ran her fingers along the cleft where his buttocks met, he didn't move. She slid a finger along, barely touching, until she reached his thighs, then she circled him again, and came face to face with his penis.

She'd never thought of any part of a man's

body as being beautiful or even interesting, until she'd seen and touched Seain. But now, safe with him, floating in the beautiful blue water, she explored him with wonder and love. As he closed his eyes, trusting her, she touched and tasted and felt and studied. A couple of times his hand reached out, but he never stopped her.

As they swirled lazily through the water, she clasped his erection in her hands and stroked it until he stiffened, and a bell-like sound echoed in her brain. Then his entire body spasmed, and as she watched in awe, his hips arched and he erupted again and again against her hand, the semen thick and globulous and quickly dissipating into the water.

It was beautiful.

As his body quieted, he reached for her and pulled her to him, where, amazingly, she found that he was almost immediately as hard as he'd been before his orgasm. Cupping her buttocks, he pulled her onto him. She was slick and ready, her passion aroused by his naked, trusting eruption against her hand.

When he entered her, the sensation of his hot arousal and the swirls of cool water surrounded her. He kissed her breasts as he drove into her, his mouth hot on her water-cooled nipples, his hands warm and soothing as he caressed the small mounds of her breasts. Then he raised his mouth to hers as his thrusts spiked her body to peak after peak of joy.

When he throbbed and arched and emptied himself into her, something magical happened. Something beyond the physical. Beyond even

the emotional. For the first time in her life, she felt whole. He had crossed the universe for her, and in him, she had found her other half. Joined body and soul, they melded into oneness.

A minute later, as he guided her back to the locker where they would leave the water for the air, Eva felt a profound sadness. She loved him. She had loved him all those years, when she didn't even know who he was or if he was even real.

He had found her once, in the awful silver dark of the alien ship. He'd found her again, across the vast, empty expanses of the universe. But for what? They were different. Alien.

As the locker dried them and they stepped out into the office, Seain was as solemn as she.

"Why can't you stay here?" she asked.

"There are many reasons. First, there are certain minerals in our water. They'd be harmless to you, but we can't live without them."

"So take a supplement."

He shook his head and pushed his fingers through his damp hair. "The mineral doesn't exist here. And we absorb it through our skin. It only exists in our oceans."

"You said there were many reasons."

Seain turned toward the window. "I told you my father's ships rescued me and destroyed the aliens, and that he helped me to find you. The reason my father had those capabilities is because he is the Commander of the largest fleet of starships in our star system."

Eva felt as if she'd been teleported into a space drama. Though she had a feeling she knew where he was going with this.

Seain proved her correct as he continued. "He took on a great deal of personal debt to help me. As his first-born son I owe him, and our people, a great obligation. And I can't ignore that."

He turned to face her. "You would be welcome there. My father wants to meet you."

Eva shivered. "But what if I go with you? Is your whole world water?"

He shook his head. "As adults, we live mostly on the land."

"But what about . . . mating. You said you breathed for me. How?"

"I can sustain you for short periods of time."

Eva looked at him thoughtfully. "Not too short, I hope."

A flicker of a smile crossed his lips, but before he could speak, she spread her hands wide and added, "My parents don't know how to deal with me, but they love me. And my brother's wife is pregnant, and, well. . . ." She looked at the aquarium then at the window. "It will be hard to leave my family."

Seain nodded. "I understand completely. But we can return for visits. We have the technology."

Eva thought about her life and what the future held for her. Seain was right. She was going to be fine. She could stay here. Probably finish her degree, get a good job, maybe even marry. She thought about the life she'd always longed for but never believed she could have.

Now it was possible. All she'd have to do was pretend that her life had always been normal.

But she knew, no matter what she did—

marriage, family, college degrees—it would never be enough for her.

“You are the only being in the entire universe who knows me,” she said. “You know the worst that has happened to me. And you traveled a long way to find me.” She laid her palm against his cheek. “I am so sorry I didn’t know you.”

“You loved me. And you know me now.”

“Yes. Will you teach me how to sing?”

His face lit in a smile that transformed his features entirely, rivaling one of the great Master’s paintings of an archangel for beauty. He pulled her to him and took her mouth in a deep, ravishing kiss. His tongue worked magic on her lips, in her mouth, parrying with her tongue in an erotic duel. By the time he stopped, she was dizzy.

“You already know how to sing, my love,” he said, grinning. “I love you so very much.”

Eva’s throat closed with joy and love. She never thought she’d know happiness. She’d always prayed for just a bit of contentment. And here he was, handing her the sun, the moon, and the whole rest of the universe.

“I love you, Seain,” she said, spreading tiny kisses all over his face. “I love you for everything you did for me and just because you’re you, and I love you because you’re so beautiful and—” She stopped, pulling back a bit to frown at him. “This is your natural form, right?”

Seain laughed and kissed her again.