

The afternoon had turned gray and cold by the time we pulled up in front of the lake house, and a gusty wind was blowing off the water. I shivered in the kitchen, putting on water for tea while Ethan got a fire going in the fireplace and threw another couple of logs into the woodstove. Soon enough, though, the fire was snapping bravely against the draft and things were starting to warm up. Outside, the wind had blown up a rattle of raindrops against the windows. I was glad to curl up with my mug and microfleece on the bed and watch the flames dance in the fireplace.

Ethan stretched out on the bed beside me, propping himself up on one elbow and balancing his own mug of brew in front of him. He wasn't watching the fire, though. He was watching me.

I turned to look at him and smiled. "Okay. I guess I'm ready to talk about it."

"Only if you want to."

"I don't think this bed is big enough for the two of us plus the great big elephant we brought with us back from the doctor's office, too."

Ethan smiled. "You have a point."

"So. No alien probe. No proof."

"Right. But that's not the only problem."

"No." My stomach was suddenly churning. "Because if the probe is no longer there, where is it? I mean, was it removed? And if so, who removed it?"

"Exactly." Ethan took a thoughtful pull on his tea. "Asia, what if your loss of memory about the time you spent in captivity wasn't the result of trauma? What if it was the result of a deliberate effort to make you forget?"

I sat up and stared at him. "What do you mean? Brainwashing?"

"Well, yes, in a word. Drugs, electroshock, psychomanipulative techniques. There are any number of means to the end. No doubt a more advanced culture would have a few I'm not aware of." His jaw tightened as his gaze fixed on the fire.

I started to shake again, though the room was thoroughly warm now. "My memories of the time I spent on that planet . . . I was empty, blank, unable to feel anything. . . I thought it was drugs. Are you saying they did something to my mind?"

Ethan sat up, set down his mug and grasped my trembling hands in his. "Whatever it was had no lasting effect, Asia. Your mind is whole and strong and fully intact now."

I searched his eyes. "How do I know that? Just this morning something else came back—a memory of being examined when I was first taken. That's why I jumped when you touched me. How do I know there's not more—worse—still in there?"

"There may be pockets of memory still protected by your healthy mind, Asia. That does happen." Ethan had slipped into professional mode. I should have been annoyed, but I found myself clinging to that reassurance instead. "Once you feel completely safe, you'll release them, and I'll be here to help you through it. I have a feeling you've already acknowledged the worst of it. The story of what happened to you is complete. The only gaps are the actual abduction and return and your recovery from the shoulder injury, perhaps because you were unconscious during those times."

I wanted to believe him, God knows I did. But the sense of violation that had begun with the knowledge that I had been taken by unknown beings was now complete with the

knowledge that they had rearranged my mind. To make me forget. As if that was even possible.

The tears pooled in my eyes and began to roll down my face. “Why would they do that to me? Who were they that they could do that?” Even as I spoke I knew: I hadn’t been the only one. I’d simply been one of an uncounted number of those taken and somehow returned to Earth.

Ethan gathered me in and wrapped his arms around me. I pressed my face to his warm chest and gave in to what was left of my grief for the life I had lost, for all the lives lost.

“They can’t have been human to hurt you like they did.” His hand stroked my hair. “My Asia, my sweet, beautiful Asia.” His voice became a magical murmur, a soft, warm salve for my aching heart.

And I know, if I were taken again today, I would cling to that one moment so strongly they could never take it from my mind—that memory of Ethan holding me in the firelight as afternoon turned to darkest night and whispering my name so it sounded like love.