

ALTERNATIVE ENDING/OBSESSION FALLS

Twelve and a half weeks later, in the wee hours of the morning, Summer sat dozing in a chair by Kennedy's hospital bed.

Just that morning, the bandages from the latest surgery had come off his face, and he had been judged improved enough to move from University of Washington Medical Center to a private convalescent hospital. It was quieter here; less beeping, less patients, staff that seemed less frantically busy, medical checks done with less frequency.

The move had exhausted him, but he had settled in well, going right to sleep.

Summer had settled in with him, reading a book and keeping an eye on him until she drifted off.

Now she felt the brush of someone's gaze across her face.

She sat bolt up and looked toward Kennedy.

For the first time in twelve and a half weeks, he was looking back.

Since the battle at Parnham's house, when he had been so badly beaten, Summer had spent hours, days, weeks waiting for him to acknowledge her by glance or word.

Yet never had he looked at nor spoken to Summer.

At first she hadn't noticed.

He was unconscious.

She was terrified, afraid he would die. She had to explain what had happened at that construction site to his sister, his nephew, the FBI and Sheriff Garik Jacobsen.

He came out of the coma.

She had had to hire one of Seattle's best lawyers to get her death certificate revoked, then to get the last year's charges of kidnapping and attempted murder dismissed, then to deal with the law and their displeasure at her and Kennedy's decision to deal with Michael Gracie by themselves. At that point, it was a hard-fought battle to keep her out of jail.

He had been motionless and unresponsive.

The medical staff had warned that brain damage was a probable outcome of blows that crushed skull and nerves.

Summer had insisted he had taken the blows, then picked a lock, shot a gun and saved her life.

The staff had agreed his actions were hopeful, more so than if he had been immediately unconscious. Yet in reasonable tones they had explained that the pooling of blood trapped in the cavities of the skull and the continued swelling had probably done later, irreparable damage.

He started focusing on lights, then on faces. As day followed day, he comprehended simple instructions, instructions like, "Move your fingers." At last, after two surgeries to repair the damage to the bones of his face, he spoke his first words. They were brief and slurred, but the medical team moved from careful hope to jubilation.

Kennedy McManus had not broken by his ordeal.

But he seemed not to notice Summer.

She told herself he was so surrounded by other stimuli — the medical professionals, his family, the physical therapists — he couldn't focus. The brain

surgeon and the psychologist warned he probably suffered from amnesia.

But when at last she was there alone with only him, and he still wouldn't look at her ... she knew.

He remembered.

He remembered everything he had seen that day and heard. He remembered the kisses she had shared with Jimmy, her declaration of love for Jimmy, and that she walked out the door without a backward glance.

Now, at last, his blue eyes were open, and fixed on her.

This was the moment she'd been waiting for.

This was the moment she feared.

She stood up. She walked to the edge of the bed, picked up the cup of water, put the straw between his lips and waited while he swallowed. When he was done, she put the cup back — and he caught her hand in his.

In a hoarse, halting voice, he said, "I ... believed ... you."

She didn't pretend not to know. "I know. He believed me, too."

"I thought ... would never see you again." The effort of speaking, the strain of emotion, made him break a sweat.

She went into the bathroom, wet a washcloth with cool water, brought it out and patted his forehead. "I only had one chance against him. One weapon I could use. I needed be outside, where I swing my sling without hindrance. And I had to put him off-balance, make him believe I chose him over you." She smiled slightly. "Luckily, his ego was in collusion with me."

"He ... kissed you."

"He did." She wanted to lie, to say it was all acting on her part. But he had

demanded the truth from her, and after what they had been through, he deserved nothing less. "Jimmy was passionately involved with me. Which made him a good kisser."

*"Why was he ... passion ... involved ... with you?"*

"Because I survived, because I escaped him. He believed I was his soul mate."

Kennedy closed his eyes.

She feared he was slipping away from her. She put her hand to his chest, and stroked it. "Kennedy, Jimmy was crazy. I don't know if his time in prison took his sanity, or the beating he endured, or if he was born to madness. But he saw the world in different colors than the rest of us, and when he wished, he used those colors to daze and deceive. It was mesmerizing. He slipped the bounds of reality and made it seem like reality."

Kennedy's eyes opened, and he glared, affronted. "You were willing to ... to ... to ..." Words failed him.

"To be mesmerized?"

He nodded.

"So were you. In college, you were his best friend."

She didn't know if she had permanently killed the conversation or if he was searching for words. Perhaps it was unfair, but she took advantage of his uncommunicativeness. "He was already a career criminal, yet he blinded you with his charisma."

Kennedy grunted.

So he was still listening. "He idolized you. Why when you discovered his

corruption did you turn away from him so finally? Did you never think you might have been able to help him, to change him?"

"No."

"Because of your background? Because of your parents? Or because he was your friend, and you felt personally betrayed by him? He thought that he and I were alike. I think that you and he were alike. You both have such intelligence, such power. You both are dangerous."

"No."

"Yes," she insisted, "you are. If you were ruthless, and if you were without conscience, you would be feared as Jimmy was. But you ... even in the hottest fit of temper, you would never hurt a child or kill a man. Jimmy didn't bother to get angry. He tormented with precision, for entertainment. He murdered coldly."

"I ... killed those men in the" — Kennedy's hands fluttered as he searched for the word — "helicopter."

"Would you have done that if they hadn't been threatening me?"

"No."

She bent down and put her face close to his. "Jimmy *threatened* my life. You *saved* my life. Let me tell you how sexy that is."

"You ... saved mine."

"Yes. I did. I am also filled with sexiness."

A faint smile skimmed his lips.

During his recovery, Kennedy had not spoken to her. That gave her time to think, and she wasn't going to back away from their issues. "I love you. I won't betray you. You need to decide if you believe me, because loving you doesn't

mean I'll never look at a movie star on the screen and drool."

"Jimmy ... not on a screen."

"No, he was real. If he had been a singer, he would have been a legend. If he was in politics, he could have been president. And if he was in the movies, he could have been a star. Mad or sane, he was the kind of man who made men trust him and women want him. I'm not going to apologize for finding him attractive." She was starting to talk too fast, to sound defensive. And she was getting to the important stuff. She took a few breaths and said, "Nor will I apologize for kissing him in front of you. It had to be done."

"Will you apologize for anything?"

She thought about it. "No, because I made it all work together. The physical stuff, his previous successes with women, his delusion that we were soul mates, and yes, the fact he believed no woman could ever not want him."

"But ... you did want ... him."

"Just parts of him. The rest of him was darned spooky."

During the conversation, Kennedy had been accusing, demanding, rejecting. He had needed her to justify her actions, and she believed him justified in wanting that. Now his vivid blue eyes grew warm and soft. He scooted to the far edge of the bed, turned onto his side, adjusted the tubes that dripped fluid into his veins, and opened his arms. "Lie down with me?"

"Yes. Please." She eased onto the mattress, taking care not to jolt him, yet wanting to hold him close and tight.

He was warm, alive. *Alive.*

She was alive, too, and grateful to embrace him at last. She clutched his

hospital gown and looked up into his face. "Do you remember how to kiss me?"

He enfolded her in his arms. "I don't remember ... everything that happened ... that day. But the memory of kissing you ... has kept me alive ... with hope and desire. Now ... I want to do it again, with nothing and no one between us."

"That's good, because that's exactly what I want, too."

THE END