



**HEROES
ARE
FOREVER**

HEATHER MASSEY

It began as a carefree summer day like any other. It ended very, very differently.

Jenny skipped to Gallagher Creek early that Friday morning. Sunlight dappled through a canvas of mile-high oaks while thick swarms of no-see-ums hung in the humid air.

Oblivious to the shadowy figures trailing her, Jenny's blonde curls bounced as she scampered over the moss-carpeted banks. There, the nine-year-old intended to construct another dam—a larger, better one than the last. She had formulated the engineering mechanics on the back of her last spelling test.

This one would be the best she had ever designed.

While she dragged a heavy log, dark shapes fell over her. Three older boys appeared, demanding her money, her

cell, and anything else of value. Once again, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Being a sensible child, Jenny instantly activated the correct response. She ran. But in her haste, she tripped. The noose of leering boys grew tightly around her, blocking all escape. “Go away!” she cried. “I haven’t done anything to you!”

Laughing, one of the boys grabbed her arm. “So?”

But that’s when she heard another voice.

“Leave her alone.”

Everyone froze. Jenny peered between the bodies of her assailants. A boy stood nearby. He was short, and even scrawnier than she was. Her panic mounted. How could he possibly help?

The boy gripping her broke the tension. “Whatta you gonna do?”

The newcomer produced a large stick from behind his back. “Whatever it takes.”

As one, the first three boys charged him. The new boy retaliated in kind. A maelstrom of punches, kicks, and flailing limbs followed. Wham! One of the attackers went down. Jenny ran over, prepared to deliver a swift kick to his head.

A yell stopped her. Looking up, she gasped. One of the boys held a watermelon-sized rock above his head. Below him, splayed upon the ground, was Scrawny Boy. Before she could shout a warning, the bully brought the rock crashing down. Jenny heard a sickening crunch as the rock connected with Scrawny Boy’s left arm.

Screaming, Jenny reached out and grabbed the closest

weapons she could find. With the valor of a lioness, she threw rocks and sticks at the remaining attackers. Their grimaces told the story. This clash had gone too far. Should she run for help? Or stay to fight and risk a beating—or worse?

But then, the impossible happened. Scrawny Boy rose to his feet.

Though his arm was a bloody mess of torn skin and jagged bone, he advanced toward the other boys with the fury of a cyclone. Jenny stood with her hand tightened around a rock, ready to assist. But her champion dispatched the attackers with uncanny efficiency.

When the dust cleared, Scrawny Boy towered over the bodies of the beaten bullies. His haunted gaze met hers. Then, he collapsed.

Jenny rushed to his side. Whipping out her cell, she called 911 while holding his good hand, pleading for him to wake up. Eventually, his dark eyes opened—the most intense

she'd ever seen. Relief washed through her. "I'm Jenny. What's your name?"

"T-Troy," he managed through his cracked, swollen lips. "Did we kick some serious ass today, or what?"

A strange feeling bloomed inside her. Jenny didn't understand it, but she did know that Troy meant more to her now than just a friend. Henceforth, Jenny and Troy became inseparable.

After Troy completed months of grueling physical therapy, they finished building the dam. By that time, a November chill permeated the air. But Jenny had completed her first masterpiece, and she wouldn't have wanted anyone except Troy by her side. As they stood contemplating the widening pool of churning water, Jenny slipped her icy fingers into Troy's prosthetic hand.

Several years later, they attended high school together. Every Saturday afternoon, they met at Jenny's house to eat pizza, drink goji berry smoothies, and watch sci-fi films until

well after dark. Also during that period, Jenny's keen intellect led her to develop an obsessive interest in science. Her ambitious, singular nature conspired to alienate her from the other students.

So did her friendship with Troy, who remained scrawny even as his height shot north of six feet.

Bullies targeted the eccentric couple almost weekly. Except for the humiliation of having her locker defaced or her e-reader smashed, Jenny went through the ordeals relatively unscathed.

Troy, on the other hand, bore the bruises, knife wounds, and broken bones on her behalf. Whenever she urged him to stop protecting her so relentlessly, he simply shook his head. "You're going to do something great one day. And I'm here to make sure that happens."

Upon graduation, Jenny and Troy ditched the usual parties, opting instead for a firefly-lit picnic at Gallagher Creek.

Jenny went to college. Harvard Medical School, in fact. Troy moved to Boston so they could maintain their weekly film

marathons. Since Jenny resided on campus, he worked odd jobs to pay rent on a studio apartment. While perusing the metropolitan sights one night, Troy defended her against a mugger. The act cost him the vision in his right eye. A running joke between them was the shitty pay rate for guardian angels.

Nine months later, during a stroll around Harvard Square, Troy shoved her from the path of an oncoming car. Jenny escaped without injury. Troy, however, was not so lucky.

Now paralyzed from the neck down, he required institutional care. After graduating from Harvard, Jenny obtained a doctorate in neuroscience. Other intensive studies like mechanical engineering followed. For Troy's birthday one year, she gave him a powerchair of her own design. The controls responded to an implant in his brain, increasing his mobility a hundred fold with the touch of a thought.

But the freedom meant nothing to Troy without Jenny by his side. Swamped by an inhuman workload, she could no longer meet with him to gorge on pizza or even a single goji berry. As the weeks passed, they saw less and less of each other. First, Jenny could only visit him monthly. Then,

every few months. Six more months dragged by for Troy. Ten.

Then, seven years.

She called him, of course, and emailed often. But gone were the halcyon days of building dams together and spinning dreams beneath an ocean of stars. Instead, Jenny spoke of things like chemical synaptic transmission and synthetic genomics. Troy didn't care what she said, as long as he could hear her voice.

He worried about her incessantly. Would she be safe without him? Troy berated himself so much over his inability to stay healthy on Jenny's behalf that he eventually sank into a deep depression. She was the love of his life, and he had failed her. Utterly.

A Monday morning in June dawned, bright and warm. Troy wanted to sleep for the rest of his life, but then the duty nurse bustled into his room and announced he had a visitor. "She's a real looker," Beth added with a wink.

Troy blinked sleep from his eyes as Beth raised his bed.
“Who is it?”

“A woman. Says her name’s Jenny.”

Shock reverberated throughout his body, or at least he imagined it did. She’d last emailed three months ago and hadn’t given any indication she was coming. *Who cares—it’s Jenny!* Troy imagined himself leaping from the bed and greeting her with a fierce embrace. In reality, Beth transferred him carefully into his chair.

When Troy saw Jenny in the lobby, his heart burst with joy, chasing away the dark shadows in his heart. “You came,” he said, his voice breaking.

Jenny strode gracefully toward him, smiling. The familiar crinkling of her eyes seemed to give him the strength of a thousand men. She stroked his prosthetic hand. “I’ve

missed you.”

Troy could hardly speak through his happiness. “Me too. Go for a walk?”

Nodding, Jenny kept pace by his side as they left the building. Over the course of the morning, they traversed the city sidewalks and talked. Or rather, Jenny talked. Troy was content enough to listen.

Their conversation turned to nostalgic subjects, like the films they’d watched and the jokes they’d shared. The exchange continued as they stopped at a sidewalk cafe for iced coffee. Troy felt embarrassed by his helplessness and the spectacle of being in a powerchair, but Jenny seemed to enjoy fussing over him. As they resumed their walk, she explained that she’d soon be taking a position with the GAI Corporation to continue her research.

They started passing through a construction zone. An army of men and machines swarmed over the skeleton of a future aeroball stadium. “Good money?” Troy asked.

Jenny grinned. “Insanely good money.” She slowed her pace, then stood still. “Troy, when I take my new job, I want you to come live with me.”

His powerchair stopped with a jolt. His eyes burned. “I... can't. I'd just be a burden.”

Jenny bit her lip. The action made her look so sexy that Troy nearly imploded with the pain of having lost all chance of intimacy with her. When she looked at him, tears filled her eyes. “I ruined everything, didn't I? Being away for so long.” She grasped his hand. “Believe it or not, I did it for you. For us.”

Troy frowned. “What do you mean?”

Before she could answer, dozens of shouts rang through the air, laced with fear. A tingling pressure Troy hadn't felt in years shot through his neck. He glanced up. A broad metal

beam from the construction site plummeted right toward them.

Right toward Jenny.

With a rough shout, Troy urged his powerchair forward. He knocked Jenny from the path of the oncoming beam. Saw her distraught expression as she fell backwards. Heard her cry of warning far too late.

The beam hit him with the force of an oncoming train. His powerchair exploded around him. When his body hit the ground, it lay twisted unnaturally. Troy knew this because he could see his back. But none of it mattered as long as Jenny was safe.

And then he saw Jenny's face as she kneeled beside him. She called out his name repeatedly, her voice sounding hoarse with worry. Darkness rushed in, and the last thing he heard her say was, "Don't worry, Troy. It's my turn now."

Impossibly, Troy awoke several minutes later. At least, it seemed like only a few minutes. Despite the fact that surviving the collision was statistically impossible, he felt great—*phenomenally* great. Gradually, the light in the room grew brighter. Instinctively, Troy rubbed his eyes.

The shock of the behavior, one which he'd been incapable of performing for years, alarmed him so much that he bolted upright—only to discover Jenny standing before him. Her smile was brighter than the sun.

“Jenny?” Troy paused. His voice had rumbled, sounding stronger somehow. Then he smiled wryly. “I get it. This is heaven, right?”

Jenny shook her head. “No, but maybe a little taste of it. Welcome to our new life together, Troy.” She gestured toward his body.

Troy looked down at himself. He gasped. Naked except for briefs, his body was the same, yet different. Sculpted.

Toned. Healthy. “*How, Jenny?*”

“I rebuilt you. Your brain was the only part I could salvage from the accident. My team and I transferred your neural network into an android body. You’re the first of your kind.” She brushed away a tear. “Now we can finally be together—the way we always wanted.”

Troy rose from the bed and folded her into his arms. “I couldn’t have asked for a better guardian angel.” He kissed her gently on the mouth. “Take me home now, Jenny.”

Wrapping her arms around Troy’s neck, Jenny smiled at the thought that she was finally in the right place at the right time.

About the Author

Heather Massey is a lifelong fan of science fiction romance. She searches for science fiction romance

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