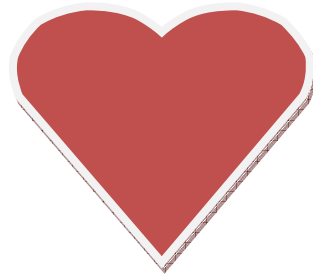


For Now and  
Always

A short story written by Jessica Coulter Smith



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## Hearts on Fire Books

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**Jessica Coulter Smith**

**Other books by Jessica Coulter Smith**

Whispering Lake  
Moonlight Protector

*Coming Spring 2009*

Moonlight Hero

## Chapter One

*Present Day - Anaheim Hills, California*

Jenny flipped her hair out of her face and glanced at the man lying in bed next to her. She'd only been seeing Seth for a few months, but she knew he was different than the others. She sighed and looked at the clock. It was only seven o'clock on a Saturday morning. While she could stay in bed longer, there wasn't much point since she was awake already.

Rolling to the edge of the bed, she sat up. Stretching, she stood and walked to the bathroom. Flipping on the light, she closed the door so she wouldn't wake up Seth. Jenny pulled her hair out of her face and quickly washed her face and brushed her teeth. Brushing out her long blonde hair, she pulled it into a pony tail.

Turning off the light, she walked back into the bedroom. Seth was still sleeping soundly. Walking over to the bed, she watched him for a few minutes. He was tall, well over six feet, with sandy hair, blue eyes, and an athletic build. She could look at him all day and never grow tired of his seeing his face.

Jenny turned to the dresser and pulled out a pair of yoga pants and an aqua tee shirt. Grabbing a bra and panties out of another drawer, she quickly dressed and slipped out of the bedroom. Deciding to let Seth sleep a little longer, she went to the kitchen to figure out something for breakfast.



In the other room, Seth slowly woke up. Reaching out beside him, he searched for Jenny. Opening his eyes, he saw that the bed was empty. He grabbed her pillow and buried his face in it, inhaling her sweet scent. Jenny was the best thing that ever happened to him.

Before he met Jenny, he had just been drifting through life from one day to the next. Seth's parents had been independently wealthy. When they passed away in a boating accident, he had inherited all of their money and the family business. You would think that he would be happy, but money wasn't enough.

Stretching, he rolled out of bed. Quickly pulling on some clothes, he went in search of Jenny. Seth spotted her the moment he left the bedroom. Her small living room opened into her even smaller kitchen. Jenny was standing at the stove making breakfast.

Careful not to alert her to his presence, Seth stood quietly – watching her. Even doing mundane tasks, Jenny had a grace and elegance most women would envy. Jenny wasn't tall, but she wasn't exactly small either. Standing at five feet five inches, she had long straight blonde hair, sky blue eyes, and a lithe dancer's form.

Jenny was everything a man could hope to find. She was bubbly, energetic, and always ready to explore the unknown. She also had a heart as big as the sea. Whenever someone was sick, Jenny was the first one to show up with homemade soup and some magazines.

Clearing his throat, Seth decided to make his presence known. Otherwise, he would stand there all day watching her, wanting her, loving

her. He'd known for a little over a month that he loved her and wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Seth just wasn't sure how Jenny would react if he asked her to marry him. His wealth had a tendency to unnerve her, which is why he was usually at her place instead of the mansion he owned in Malibu.

Hearing Seth, Jenny turned, smiling as she saw him. From the first moment she had seen him, he had had the ability to steal her breath away. He was well-to-do, too good looking for words, and for some inexplicable reason, he wanted to be with her.

"Good morning," she said.

He smiled. "Morning. You should have woken me."

Jenny shook her head. "I figured you needed your rest."

She blushed remembering the previous night. They had gone to a movie and dinner. When Seth had brought her home, she'd invited him in for a glass of wine. One thing had led to another and they had spent the entire night making love.

"I was thinking about going to the Santa Monica Pier today. Would you like to go with me?"

"I'd like that, but I'm supposed to have lunch with a friend today."

Seth nodded, he was disappointed, but he didn't want her to break her plans. He knew that Jenny didn't have many friends and it wasn't often that she did anything fun with them. He wasn't going to begrudge her having lunch with one of them just so he could spend more time with her.

**Jessica Coulter Smith**

“Maybe we can go next weekend,” he replied.

Jenny smiled. “That would be great.”

Fixing their plates, Jenny placed them on the small bistro table that dominated her tiny breakfast nook. Her entire condo was less than a thousand square feet. Since she was single and didn’t have any pets or kids, she hadn’t seen the need for a lot of space.

They ate their breakfast and discussed their plans for the week. Seth’s business pretty much ran itself, but he still liked to pop in from time to time. Jenny worked for a small publishing company designing book covers. She could probably work from home a few days a week if she really wanted to, but Jenny kind of liked going in to the office.

## Chapter Two

*A few hours later*

Jenny was seated across from one of her best friends, Alex. She had met him the first week she had moved to California about six years ago. Actually, she had literally run into him. As she had walked out of a store in Venice Beach, Alex had been walking down the sidewalk. Jenny had barreled out of the store, not paying attention to where she was going, and had found herself face to chest with Alex.

Jenny and Alex had never dated. They had been too afraid of spoiling their friendship, but Jenny would be lying if she said he wasn't attractive. Alex was six feet five inches tall, which put him a foot taller than Jenny. He had dark wavy hair and warm brown eyes. He worked out in the same gym as Jenny so she knew for a fact that he was well built.

The day was so beautiful they had decided to eat their lunch out on the patio. Alex had talked her into meeting him in Huntington Beach. He lived nearby so Jenny was fairly certain he would end up talking her into a swim at his place.

Alex owned a small white stucco home with an in-ground pool in the landscaped backyard. There had been many a day that Jenny had spent time by Alex's pool, sunning herself and swimming in the nice cool water.

"So, how's work," Alex asked.

“It’s good. The business is starting to grow so I’ve been making more and more covers. I think we’re up to twenty submissions per day now.”

“That’s great!”

Jenny nodded. “What about you?”

Alex shrugged. “It’s okay I guess. I had to let a few people go last week so I’ve been doing more of the work myself. I don’t mind being outside, but I’ve gotten spoiled and I prefer having more free time.”

Alex owned his own landscaping business. He’d built it up from scratch about five years ago at Jenny’s insistence. Once she had seen what he could do, she had urged him to make a career out of it. Now, he had twenty employees and a steady stream of customers. He was usually booked for three months solid.

When they finished their lunch, the waitress left the check for them. Jenny and Alex reached for it at the same time, their hands brushing each other.

Alex smiled at her. “You know I’m not about to let you buy your own lunch.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. It was an old argument. “As if I can’t afford a bowl of pasta and a soda!”

Alex laughed. “I know you can, but I asked you to come out here for lunch so I’m paying.”

Jenny sighed. She knew better than to argue. Alex always got his way. “Fine, I know better than to try and dissuade you.”

Alex paid for their meal and walked Jenny outside. He wasn’t ready for the day to end just yet. He knew they were just friends and that she had been seeing someone, but there were times

he wished he would have asked her out on a real date.

“How about going to my place for a swim and some dessert?”

Jenny laughed. Alex was so predictable. “I think I can swing that. Actually, my whole day is free.”

Alex gave her a huge grin. “Great! I’ll meet you there. I’m just going to make a quick stop on the way home. Do you have your key?”

“Yes. I’ll probably be out by the pool.”

“Of course, where else would I find a water nymph?”

Jenny laughed. She had always been able to swim like a fish and had loved the water since birth.

They went their separate ways. What they didn’t realize was that they were being watched. Across the street, Seth sat in his car. He hadn’t meant to spy on Jenny, but he had been in the area and had spotted her having lunch with another guy.

Jenny had told him she was meeting a friend for lunch. Was this the friend? Why hadn’t she told him she was meeting a guy? Every time he saw her smile at the other man, his gut clenched. Without realizing what he was doing, he began following her when she drove off in her little green bug.

He was surprised when she stopped outside of a small house two miles from the restaurant. Was she visiting someone else now? Maybe she hadn’t been lying and she really had just met the guy for lunch as friends.

Seth watched Jenny walk up the small walkway to the front door. After fumbling with her key ring a moment, she unlocked the door. What was going on? Why did she have a key to this place and who lived here?

Sliding down in his seat, Seth decided to wait and see what happened. He felt horrible for spying on her, but he couldn't seem to help himself. He was crazy about her, wanted to marry her, and now she was acting suspicious. Surely she wasn't cheating on him!

Fifteen minutes later, another car pulled into the driveway. The same man from the restaurant climbed out of the black truck and walked up to the door. Opening the door, he went inside and disappeared from Seth's view.

Seth felt sick and hurt. How could Jenny do this to him? She had just been in his arms last night and now she was meeting another guy? How long had this been going on?

Rolling down his window, he breathed in the fresh air. They weren't too far from the ocean and he could smell the salt in the air.

Seth sat there for thirty minutes or so. As he was about to start his car, he heard Jenny squeal. The air rushed from his lungs. The only time she made that sound was when she was truly having a good time.

Before he knew what he was doing, Seth was out of the car and walking toward the gate at the back of the property. Amazingly enough, the gate was unlocked. As he pushed it open quietly, he stepped into the lush backyard. The landscaping was amazing. Even more amazing was the sight in front of him.

Jenny was in a pool in a two piece bathing suit with another man's arms around her. As he swung her around in the water, she squealed with glee. She looked so happy! Seth had a hard time breathing.

Oblivious to the man standing in his yard, Alex tightened his arms around Jenny in a bear hug. Her back was to him and he rest his stubbly chin on her shoulder, which made her squirm even more.

"Alex, cut it out!" Jenny giggled. He knew that her neck was sensitive and the silly man was rubbing his five o'clock shadow against her sensitive skin.

He grinned and kissed her neck before releasing her. "Your wish is my command."

Jenny turned and splashed him. "You're such a doofus sometimes."

Alex laughed. "Only you can get away with calling me that."

"Oh yeah? And what would happen to someone else?"

Alex got a calculating look in his eye. Uh-oh. Too late, Jenny realized she had issued a challenge without meaning to.

"No, Alex! I didn't mean it! Alex!"

Jenny shrieked and tried to swim away, but Alex caught her. Pinning her to the side of the pool, he tickled her mercilessly. She was laughing so hard she was crying. As she wiped the tears from her eyes, she spotted Seth standing near the gate.

Pushing against Alex's chest, Jenny swam to the other end of the pool.

"Seth, what are you doing here?"

Seth glanced between her and Alex. He wasn't sure what to say or what to do. Part of him wanted to turn tail and run, pretend he hadn't seen her with another man. The other part, wanted to confront her.

"I was driving through the area and saw you enter the house. When I heard you in the backyard, I thought I would surprise you and meet one of your friends."

Jenny smiled at him, unaware that anything was wrong. "Well, come on."

Seth was startled. She actually wanted him to meet her other boyfriend? Was she trying to rip out his heart?

Alex had slowly swum up behind Jenny. Assessing Seth, he knew exactly what the man was thinking. He knew he should correct the situation immediately, but the little devil on his shoulder wouldn't let him.

Turning, Jenny bumped into Alex. She laughed up at him. "Alex, this is my boyfriend Seth. Seth, this is my friend Alex."

Seth walked closer, nodding to Alex. "It's nice to meet you."

Alex forced a grin. "You too."

Finally sensing the tension, Jenny glanced between the two uncertainly.

"What's going on?"

Seth shook his head. Was she really that naïve? "I come in here and see you in the arms of another man. What am I suppose to think Jenny?"

Jenny stepped closer to him. "Seth, please don't feel that way. Really, Alex and I are just friends. I've known him since I moved out here."

Seth looked at Alex. He could tell the man liked her as more than just a friend. The question was, did Jenny know?

“And you, can you honestly tell me that the two of you are just friends,” Seth asked Alex.

Alex shrugged. “If you’re asking if I’ve ever kissed her, nothing more than a brief peck under the mistletoe.”

Seth knew he should just accept that answer and walk away, but he couldn’t. “Why do I get the feeling you wouldn’t mind it being more than that?”

Jenny was getting angry, something that didn’t happen often. “What’s wrong with you Seth? How dare you come in here and question me and my friend!”

Stalking out of the pool and over to her towel, she wrapped it around herself. “You obviously don’t trust me. Maybe you should just leave.”

Seth opened his mouth to respond, but Jenny had already turned and marched into the house. His anger deflated immediately. What had he done? Why had he pushed? He should have just accepted her answer, smiled, and left them to have fun. But no, he couldn’t do that. Instead, he had to drive away the one person who could make him smile, the only woman he loved.

Before he could make an even bigger ass of himself, he turned and left the backyard. Walking to his car, he decided to give Jenny some space. He’d call her in a day or two and try to make it up to her.



Alex watched Seth go. He should say something; try to patch things up between the

couple. Instead, he didn't move until after the gate had swung shut. Climbing out of the pool, he grabbed his towel and went to check on Jenny.

Stepping into the cool kitchen, he found sitting at the table, crying. He swallowed, felt like hell for being the cause of her tears. Walking over to her, he placed a hand on her shoulder.

Jenny looked up with tears streaming down her cheeks. She stood and wrapped her arms around Alex, burying her face against his smooth tan chest. She didn't understand how Seth could be so cruel. Where was the funny, light-hearted man she had come to care so much about?

"I'm sorry, Jenny. Please don't cry."

She sniffled. "Why are you sorry?"

"I should have said something, done something... made him stay so you could talk things out. Instead, I let him leave, knowing he had hurt you, knowing that I had done nothing to stop it."

"It isn't your fault, Alex. You and I both told him we were just friends. It isn't your fault that he was suspicious and didn't believe us."

Alex sighed. He briefly tightened his arms around Jenny, knowing he was about to screw up their friendship. "It's more complicated than that Jenny."

She looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

Alex backed away, ran a hand through his hair, and tried to figure out what to say. "We may have both told Seth that we were just friends, but..."

"But what? Just tell me Alex."

He looked at her, wondering if it would be for the last time. “We said everything the right way, but there was one thing that I couldn’t help.”

“Alex, you’re killing me. Please just tell me what’s going on.”

“The one that I couldn’t help was the way I look at you.”

Jenny was confused. “The way you look at me?”

Alex looked tortured. How could he tell her that *he* was the reason her boyfriend had left?

“Don’t you know what an amazing woman you are? You’re funny, beautiful, talented! Seth said the things he did, because he realized that I have feelings for you that go beyond friendship.”

“What?” Jenny was shocked. She slowly sank into her chair. Alex had feelings for her? More than friendship type feelings? This was too much! She didn’t know what to think or what to feel.

“I think it’s best if I leave for now,” she whispered, getting up and heading to the guest room to change her clothes.

Jenny dressed and drove home. Out of habit, she left her bathing suit in the bathroom hamper along with her wet towel. She wasn’t sure if she would be back or not. There was a lot to think about right now.

### Chapter Three

*Two weeks later*

Jenny hadn't left her apartment for anything other than going to the office to pick up her laptop and to get some groceries from the store. She holed up in her apartment, worked from home, and ate a ton of junk food.

Seth and Alex had both called, apologizing for what had happened. She had ignored the phone both times. That had been a week ago, and Jenny still hadn't called either of them back. What would she say?

Wearing a pair of threadbare holey jeans and tee shirt that one was one size too small; Jenny had her hair up in a pony tail and hadn't bothered with make-up in days. If she had walked out on the street, someone would have mistaken her for a bum.

Startled, Jenny heard a knock on her apartment door. Who on earth could it be?

Looking through the peep hole, all she saw were flowers. Thinking it must be a delivery guy at the wrong address, she opened the door. Shocked, she couldn't move or speak.

"Hi Jenny," Alex said in a quiet voice. He had dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep. His voice was thick with emotion. "Can I come in for just a minute?"

Jenny backed up to allow him into her tiny apartment. She felt conflicted. Part of her was happy to see her best friend, the other part was confused over how she should feel.

"What are you doing here, Alex?"

He sighed. "Since you wouldn't take my call, I wanted to come and apologize in person. I brought you these," he said, handing her the mixed bouquet.

The flowers were beautiful. Jenny sniffed them and went into the kitchen to put them in some water.

"Thank you for the flowers. Alex, I didn't call because I didn't know what to say."

He held up a hand to stop her. "I know and I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make things weird between us."

Jenny shook her head. "It isn't that."

He tentatively stepped closer to her. "Then what is it?"

Jenny looked up into his warm brown eyes, filled with concern and uncertainty. What could she say to him? That she didn't know what to think or how to feel?

"I don't know, Alex. I don't know anything right now. It's why I haven't called."

He reached out, wanting to pull her into his arms, but not sure if he should. He had made such a mess of things!

"I'll go. Again, I'm really sorry, Jenny."

She watched him walk to the front door. "Alex, wait."

He turned, curious.

Jenny quickly walked over to him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him. Alex returned her hug.

"It's okay, Alex. I know you didn't mean for things to end the way they did."

He swallowed. "I think part of me did know it would end that way. I think I wanted him to leave that day."

Jenny looked into his eyes and saw love shining down on her. How had she never seen it before? Alex loved her!

"Maybe it was for the best. I wasn't comfortable in Seth's world. How could we have ever had a working relationship?"

Alex felt hope. Was she saying what he thought she was?

"I'm still sorry Jenny."

Jenny placed her fingers over his lips. Feeling their warm, firm, soft texture, she was overcome with the need to feel his lips against hers. Pushing up on her tip toes, she pulled his head down and kissed him.

Alex was surprised. He tightened his embrace and kissed her back. Kissing Jenny was every bit as wonderful as he had thought it would be.

Jenny gave herself up to the kiss. Never had she felt anything like it. She had been with guys before, but kissing Alex was better than anything she had ever felt before.

Breaking the kiss, she looked into his eyes. "I love you, Alex."

His eyes widened in surprise. "Say that again."

She smiled. "I love you. I think I have for a long time and just didn't realize it."

He tenderly smiled back at her, caressing her cheek. "I love you too."

Pressing herself closer to him, she kissed him again.

## Epilogue

*A year later*

Jenny and Alex had been married for six months. It seemed like a lifetime ago that he had come to her apartment to apologize to her. After they had finally come up for air, Alex had asked her to marry him... and Jenny had accepted.

As she put dinner on the table, she glanced at the clock again. Where was Alex? He should have already been home.

Jenny picked up the phone to call and check on him when she heard the front door open. Rushing through the house, she smiled when she saw him.

“I was getting worried.”

He grinned at her. “I’m sorry. Traffic was horrible. I should have called, but I was in a hurry to get home.”

Alex walked over and pulled Jenny into his arms, kissing her. If he lived to be a thousand, he would never tire of his wife. Every day with her was special, filled with love, laughter and smiles.

“Why don’t you come to the kitchen for dinner? I just put everything on the table.”

Following his delectable spouse to the back of the house, he was surprised. There were candles lit around the kitchen, giving it a cozy romantic feel.

“Everything looks wonderful, honey. What’s the special occasion?”

Jenny slowly walked to him and placed her hands on his chest. “I went to the doctor today.”

**Jessica Coulter Smith**

His brow furrowed and he looked at her in concern. "Are you okay? I know you haven't been feeling well, but I thought it was just a flu bug."

Jenny shook her head. "Not exactly."

Alex was starting to get worried. What was wrong with her?

"Jenny, please tell me what's wrong."

She gave him a hesitant smile. "I'm pregnant. You're going to be a daddy."

Alex stared down at his wife in shock. Pregnant? She was having his baby?

A huge smile broke across his face and he picked her up and swung her around. Laughing, he smiled down at her and kissed her soundly.

Jenny laughed. "I take it that you're pleased?"

"Very much so," he murmured against her lips. Alex kissed her until they were both gasping for air.

"I love you, Jenny. I've loved you since I first met you. I'll love you for now and always."

The End