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Child
of MY
HEART

He glanced at the toys again. He couldn't just walk away. It would be wrong, and it would haunt him for the rest of his life if he did. But what was he going to say?

Before he could formulate an answer the door opened.

Hannah MacKenzie was pretty. Her blonde hair, cut in a swingy chin-length style, framed her heart-shaped face. Dark lashes framed sparkling green eyes. Eyes that captured him in their warm gaze and made his chest ache. She was the girl of his dreams. The woman who had haunted him for the past year. The one who always said 'I love you' before disappearing into the mist after Joel and Rachel in his dream world. The recurring dream had haunted him throughout his tour of duty, but he hadn't minded. It had actually kept him sane in an insane situation. He'd grown to love that dream—that woman.

This was not good.

Child of My
Heart

by

Merry Stahel

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Child Of My Heart

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Dedication

For two beloved children – kidnapped by a hostile government, imprisoned without a fair trial, stripped of their constitutional rights and deprived of the love of their family, Pasco County, Florida, November 18, 2005. Deliverance from evil achieved September 2008.

Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the
afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid
them out of the hand of the wicked.

Psalm 82: 3-4, KJV

CHAPTER ONE

"We saved the baby. But I'm sorry, Ms. MacKenzie, your mother is...gone."

Hannah's mind went blank. Grief welled so fast it suffocated. *No!* the child in her mind screamed. *No! Mom! You can't leave me all alone, you can't!*

Her mother was a young and vivacious forty-two-year-old with plenty of life still ahead. She wasn't lying dead in a cold operating room.

This was a nightmare.

A nameless black void enveloped her in a vast aloneness. Everyone was gone—her father, the tiny newborn sister who'd died before Hannah was born, and now, her mother.

It couldn't be.

She'd prayed all the way to the airport.

It couldn't be.

She prayed on the entire flight to Kansas City, too.

And when she rented the car to drive the two hours to tiny Flint, Missouri, population 3,765, she prayed for two things. One, that her mother would live. And two, that she'd not get stopped for speeding.

Only one prayer was answered the way she wished.

"Would you like to see the baby?" The doctor's voice was hesitant. She focused on him and realized he'd been patting her hand while she cried.

Hannah wiped her eyes on the already damp and

twisted handkerchief. She looked down at the tiny flowers embroidered on one edge, thinking how her mother had always insisted on carrying a real hankie instead of throw away tissues. A sob escaped.

"What baby?" she finally asked.

"You have a baby brother." The doctor's voice was tentative, as if he was afraid to speak too loud.

"What?" She shook her head, confused.

"Your mother was pregnant...didn't she tell you?" A frown and worried look accompanied this statement.

"My mother..." Hannah's voice trailed off before she realized what he was saying.

Her spirits rose. Her mother wasn't pregnant. Barbara would've mentioned such an important change in her phone calls to Hannah. The dead woman wasn't her mother! Happiness filled her heart so fast it was dizzying.

"My mother wasn't pregnant. There must be a mix up." Her voice was full of hope.

Maybe her other prayer was being answered as she wanted, too.

But the doctor was shaking his head.

"Ms. MacKenzie, Barbara Dearborn is your mother, yes?"

Hannah nodded.

"She has passed on, Ms. MacKenzie. Several people in the O.R. knew her well. She really had no chance, but we worked hard to keep her alive long enough to save her baby."

"What baby?" Hannah cried again.

The doctor looked as confused as Hannah felt.

"Your mother was about eight and half months pregnant, Ms. MacKenzie. She delivered a baby boy just before she passed away."

"That's not possible..." Hannah's voice trailed off.

The doctor lowered his voice and patted her hand again. "Ms. MacKenzie, all I know is, your mother has passed on, and her newborn baby boy is in our nursery. Other than you, I understand he is quite alone in this world."

Slowly, Hannah's mind began to grasp what the doctor was saying.

"Where's his father?"

"I have no idea."

"You must have some inkling or you'd not have told me the baby was alone."

The doctor seemed reluctant to speak.

"Several people here at the hospital know your mother, and they said a sperm-bank was involved. Evidently, your mother wanted another child with no strings attached."

A baby with no strings attached? Her mother had always said a child should have two parents. She'd been grateful that Hannah had known and loved her own father before he passed away. And when her mother met Vince Dearborn, Hannah was thrilled to have him as a step-father. Hannah's sadness at his passing was as great as when her own father died. It seemed inconceivable that her mother would want a baby without having a father to go with the child.

Had her mother changed so radically?

Hannah shook her head. Obviously, she had. Because in all the phone calls over the last eight months Mom had not said one word about being pregnant. Perhaps she feared Hannah would disapprove. And would she have? Hannah examined her heart and wondered. Another sob escaped as she remembered the laughing mother who pushed her

high on the swings and even higher through her life. Had her mother gotten lonely when Hannah left for college?

A sudden guilt washed over her. She'd not visited home enough. Sometimes when her mother called, she'd cut her off, anxious to go study with friends or attend one of the college's many events. Maybe if she'd spent more time talking to her mother instead of unloading her own problems. Maybe. If. Two ambiguous words that brought no comfort.

The jumbled mess of feelings finally overloaded and blessed numbness descended. So her mother had a baby.

And he was alone.

Just like Hannah.

"I'm sorry for not answering earlier. Yes, I'd like to see him," she finally said.

The doctor seemed relieved. He stood up and took her hand.

"Come."

They walked down a silent hallway to the nursery. Evening visiting hours had come and gone. The bustle of a busy hospital had subsided. Only the desperate were still here hoping their presence would somehow breathe life into broken bodies.

The nurse's station was empty. Hannah glimpsed a woman clad in bright scrubs entering a door. Next to the door was a large window. She walked up to the window and peeked in. Two bassinets were full. One had a pink card at the end.

The other bassinet had a blue card.

The baby stirred and opened big blue eyes. His mop of hair was dark and his lashes were so long they brushed his cheeks. He looked nothing like Hannah.

Nothing like her mother.

And he stared straight into her soul.

A golden cord stretched between them and something in Hannah's heart loosened, untangled, suffused her being. A tiny smile crossed the baby's little face and then he closed his eyes. Hannah stood there, silent and lost, staring at the tiny one who had just touched her own heart.

"Ms. MacKenzie?"

Hannah snapped back to the present so fast she felt dizzy. She looked at the doctor, disoriented.

"You can take him home tomorrow."

"What?" She felt stunned, blindsided by the doctor's words. "I can't take him home! I don't have...I'm not..." She couldn't think of any pressing reasons for not taking him. There had to be some reason. At least one, right? She had no way to take care of a baby. Well, she did. But he needed a good mother. She planned to have kids someday, but not right now. This was so unexpected.

OK, Hannah, lame excuses all.

She had to stop calling the boy him, too. Mom must have decided on a name. Hannah wondered what it might be.

"Then we'll place him in foster care." The doctor's bluntness was surprising.

"Wait...I'm sorry; it's all going too fast." Hannah stumbled over the words, numbness seeping away and confusion whirling.

"Ms. MacKenzie. I know this has been a horrible shock to you. I know you have a funeral to plan and your mother's things to pack up and a house to sell so you can get on with your life. But we have to make a decision about your little brother in the next day or so

because he can't stay here. So, either you take him home or he goes into foster care. Whatever else your mother wanted, I'm sure uppermost in her mind is that her little boy be loved and cared for. I think she'd want you to do it."

Hannah wanted to howl. She wanted to scream at an unjust God and a world that wasn't fair. This child needed his mother. She wanted to rip something to shreds to release the sudden anger. Anger fueled by her loss of the woman whom she and this baby so desperately needed now. How would she ever measure up to this little boy? She wasn't a mom!

She didn't even have a boyfriend. College, and then work, had consumed her life until now. She'd finally landed a dream job as an occupational therapist for a sports facility in Texas. She was far enough to be independent and close enough to drive or hop a plane for a visit home.

And now this little one had needs that surpassed her own.

She turned to look at the boy who lay sleeping in the cold, sterile nursery.

His eyes were open. The tiny smile spoke volumes. That odd golden feeling wrapped around her soul, and Hannah stared deep into his gaze. Galaxies spun, stars sparkled, and she tumbled head over heels into a warm and loving place. For a moment, she heard her mother's tinkling laughter, and Hannah swore she felt Barbara Dearborn's hand on her shoulder.

"He loves you..." Her mother's faint, familiar voice whispered around her heart. "And you love him. Everything will work out for the best. He will be the means to make your life whole. Believe it, Hannah."

"Well?" The doctor's tone broke through the

shining light and brought Hannah back to earth with a thud. What was happening to her?

"I'll come and get him tomorrow." She gave him a brief, sad smile. "I'm going back to my mother's place this evening to...to..."

She was grateful when the doctor nodded with understanding even though she'd not completed the sentence.

Hannah took one last look at her sleeping little brother and left the hospital.

It seemed strange to walk into the home she'd grown up in without hearing her mother's cheerful voice. Hannah wandered from room to room, smoothing a cover, plumping pillows, righting a picture that hung askew.

In her mother's room, she stood looking out the window lost in the sense of aloneness. As the room grew dim she reached down to turn on the lamp. There on her mother's bedside table was a small day-planner diary. Maybe it would tell her what happened with her mother and this pregnancy.

Hannah settled on her mother's bed and began to read.

Hours later, she understood it all. Her mother had met a young woman at her exercise class and had befriended Rachel. Over the course of time they'd grown to love each other and Hannah's mother, feeling Rachel's intense pain at never being able to have a baby, had offered to act as a surrogate parent for Rachel and her husband, Joel.

The clinic had used an anonymous sperm donor and Barbara's gift of an egg. Rachel and Joel planned to be present at the baby's birth and had already named him Seth Aaron after a beloved uncle.

Mom's car accident had changed everything. The baby came a week earlier than the due date, and his delivery at the local hospital meant no one knew of the change of plans.

Hannah stared at the photograph that her mother had sandwiched between the pages. A young brunette girl and a handsome black-haired man were in the wedding picture. This had to be Rachel and Joel.

The baby bore a striking resemblance to Joel. Their anonymous donor must have looked a lot like his adopted father.

Hannah fell asleep in her mother's bed and dreamed of Seth Aaron. He stood in a glowing light with a smile on his face. Behind him were the young couple, a man and woman who smiled and held hands. Her mother stood next to them bathed in a glow of love and light.

"He's ours." The young man's tone was soft. "And he's yours, too. Bring all our love together, Hannah."

"It's for the best," her dream mother whispered. "I love you, Hannah."

Hannah woke with a start to broad daylight. She went through the motions of her morning routine pushing away the sense of regret. Now that she knew the baby wasn't hers to keep, a keen sense of loss cried at losing the connection to her mother.

With a heavy heart Hannah knew what had to be done. She would be giving up her little brother before she ever got to meet him. Her mother had made a great sacrifice to ensure that Rachel and Joel would be happy, and Hannah would keep her mother's promise.

Although there was no last name, Rachel's address was jotted down in Barbara's day-planner. Hannah would go visit and explain her mother's death, and

Rachel and Joel could arrange to take little Seth home.

Maybe they would keep in touch and let her visit him. Her only family now.

It took her a few minutes of driving to find the address.

Her heart fluttering with worry, Hannah walked up the pathway of the pretty little house eyeing the many cars parked along the street. She didn't want to announce the news of the baby boy's arrival during a party.

She took a few deep breaths and rang the doorbell.

A tall black-haired man in an Army uniform answered the door. The sense of attraction hit her so hard she almost staggered. Something in her body and soul connected to him. In another time and place she would have liked to act on that feeling, but not today. Today was about the brother she would never know and the family who'd loved him before she even knew he existed.

She looked at the man hesitantly. His eyes were red-rimmed and radiated a sadness that made words stall in her throat. "I—I'm looking for Rachel or Joel."

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure who you are, but Rachel and Joel..." He broke off and swallowed hard, staring at the ground for a few silent moments before looking at her again. "... were killed in a plane crash yesterday." His voice was abrupt with grief.

"Oh, no," Hannah whispered. For a moment time swirled and danced. This couldn't be happening. These things only happened in stories. The baby boy in the hospital didn't have parents. Not Barbara Dearborn, and now not even his own. Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them back.

"Please come in. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shock

you."

She could see the people behind the uniformed man talking quietly in somber tones. Faces were etched with grief.

"No, it's OK."

"You look as if you're about to faint." His voice held concern, and that thread of attraction that had first tugged on her found its way through the shock. She studied her hands, unable to meet his gaze.

"Did you know Rachel well?"

She looked into his face. "No. She and my mother were friends. My mother gave something to her. To Rachel."

"Oh, I see." He'd turned cold and distant. "Rachel has...had something of your mother's and you want it back."

"No, that's not it. I didn't know Rachel. I'm sorry. I'm intruding." Hannah heard herself babbling, and cringed inwardly. "It's hard to explain. Can I give you my card and you give me a call when...when...this is over?"

Hannah cringed again as she stumbled over the words, knowing she wasn't handling this situation well, but unable to get past her own shock and grief. He probably thought she was some kind of idiot. Her words seemed so insensitive. "I mean, at a more appropriate time," she offered.

"Yes. Sure." His voice was icy.

She fumbled in her purse, drawing out the card, and handing it to the man.

"Please call me. It's important."

"Yes. I will."

Feeling an insane desire to run, she turned to go. As she opened the car door she looked back.

The man had turned back to go inside. He waved his hand as if to brush away their conversation. Hannah watched a paper flutter behind him and into the wind. It landed at her feet. She bent to pick up it up.

He'd thrown her card away.