

ROSETTE

WR

# FAITH

MERRY K. STAHEL

Once they finished lunch, they hauled buckets of the flowering bushes to the jobsite.

Faith pulled on her gloves and grabbed one, only to turn around and run right into Ben.

"Whoa!" Ben put his arms around her and the plant, holding steady. He gazed into her eyes for eternity, then bent his head and brushed his mouth against hers. Time fell away as they explored everything the kiss promised.

She forgot to breathe, forgot to think, forgot everything as joy flooded her being.

He stepped back, a contented smile on his face. "I plan to do that more often."

"I hope so." For the rest of the day, Faith didn't feel the hot sun, the strain of back muscles, or the calluses forming on her hands as they worked side by side to plant the Rose Of Sharon bushes on the path to the gazebo. It felt good to work with a companion on something they both loved. *We have so much in common, God. Is what I am beginning to feel real? Guide me in righteousness, God, because I think I'm beginning to like this man a lot more than as a boss.*

Faith

by

Merry K. 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.

## **Faith**

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## **Praise for Merry K. Stahel**

### *Child of My Heart*

LOVED IT!!! This is one of those little numbers that you read and when you get to the end you just want to start all over again.

~ Seriously Reviewed

This short story has it all, and is well worth picking up.

~Fennel, Long and Short of It

Child of My Heart was such a sweet read that captured my heart from page 1...I must admit I CRIED!

~Val, You Gotta Read

## **Dedication**

For Richard

“For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou  
lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people,  
and thy God my God...”

# Prologue

One year. One beautiful, blessed, joy-filled year.

Faith glanced around the apartment, purposely not looking at the eviction notice on the kitchen table. She took a deep, cleansing breath.

“I’ve been through worse. I can do all things through Christ, Who strengthens me.” Her chin wobbled. Tears filled her eyes. *Could she?* Could she move out of the only real home she’d ever had? Every nook and cranny spoke to her heart, to the deep well of loss where Jack’s memory now resided.

They’d married, they’d loved and laughed. And a year ago, on the anniversary of their first year living in the apartment, Jack, and his brother, and their father died in a car accident.

Her sister-in-law, Olivia, was moving on. *Her* eyes now shone with the tentative, trembling hope of new love.

But Faith still clung. Clung to Jack’s memory. Clung to his mother—the only remaining link to the happiest time in her life.

A light knock sounded on the door. Faith opened it and focused on the eviction notice in Olivia’s hand.

“They’re not only evicting everyone in this apartment complex, they’ve made an offer for every house across the street, even Dulcie’s,” Olivia said, breathless. “That side of the street is to be the parking lot.”

Faith gaped, unable to think of a word to say. What would her mother-in-law do? What would they all do? Finally, her thought found a voice. "What will Dulcie do without a home?"

"She's on her way over so we can talk about it." Olivia grabbed Faith and hugged her tight, then stepped back, still holding hands. "It'll be OK, Faith. Dulcie and I, we'll be with you, whatever you decide."

"What about you?" Faith asked.

"Jason has asked me to marry him." Her joy radiated. "He has a house over on Second Street. It's really pretty, and has a little yard. We can get a dog. And a cat."

"What about Mark?" Faith's tone was a thread.

"Faith...I loved him so. But he's...gone. I want children, a family..." Olivia's expression saddened when she said Mark's name, but hope still radiated in her gaze. Faith wished she could find that same strength.

"Well, my girls, it looks like God is planning a new stage in our lives." Dulcie's gentle voice spoke at the open door.

"Mom." Faith held out her arms and received her mother-in-law's hug.

They sat at the kitchen table as Faith made coffee and took out a plate of cookies.

"Girls, I want to go home," Dulcie said it gently.

"But they're buying your..." Olivia's voice faded as Dulcie shook her head.

"Home. Back to Colorado."

Faith's heart dropped to her feet.

"But you've lived here in New Mexico for so long!" Olivia exclaimed. "You can't leave us!"

"Livvie, I love you both. But I doubt I'll marry

again at my age. And both of you should go on with your lives without worrying about me. You're both young enough to find other husbands..."

"I don't want another husband!" Tears streamed down Faith's face.

"Oh, Faith," Dulcie leaned over to hug her. "I know that hole in your heart is the size of the Grand Canyon right now, but honey, life goes on. You will always remember my Jack with deep love, but one day, you'll also understand that God left you here for a reason, and it probably includes finding another husband and having the family you've always wanted."

A fresh wave of grief sluiced over Faith. Dulcie had lost her husband and her sons. Yet she still believed in her God and had time to comfort her daughters-in-law. Would Faith ever have room in her heart to love so much that she knew God sheltered her lost ones?

All three women cried as the life they'd patched together after their men died began to unravel. But then, a strength settled in Faith's bones. "I'm not staying." She sat up straight. "I'll go with you to Colorado. I'll help you get settled. I'll help you shop; I'll help around the house. I'll get a job. I'll drive you to church and pray in the little chapel that you always told us about. Maybe God will fill my heart there. I'll...I'll stay with you. Stay with you until my last breath."

"Faith—"

"Me, too!" Livvie jumped up and began to pace.

"Olivia," Dulcie's tone was firm. "I want you to stay. You have a young man who believes in God and who loves you as much as Mark did. You need to explore that bond. I expect to be invited to the wedding, and I will want to receive the baby announcements. I

can visit and rock them to sleep. It's only four hours away by car."

"Mom..." Livvie choked up.

"I'm coming with you," Faith said again, unmoved. She brushed tears from her cheeks.

"Are you sure, honey?" Dulcie's expression was uncertain.

"You are the only mother I've ever known." Faith's heart stuttered and then settled. It felt right. Faith had lived in foster homes most of her childhood. When she met and married Jack, she was excited to have a ready-made family who would love her always. Instead, she'd lost Jack, too.

"I'm happy you want to be with me, daughter." Dulcie smiled, her eyes bright with tears.

# 1

Ben's gaze was drawn to the office window. The one-way glass allowed him to see the entire grounds of the nursery. And his new employee. *What was her name? Faith. That was it.*

She was dragging a large landscaping brick over to the old potting table someone had dumped on the side of the compost bin. She propped the broken leg with her hip, placed the brick under it, and then tested the table for stability. Evidently satisfied, she picked a flat of bedraggled plants up off the ground and placed them on the table. Unwinding the hose, she turned on the water and trickled it over the little pots.

Ben was intrigued. Had Kathy sent her out there to water the plants? Usually, the nursery plant manager picked the weak plants out of the new arrivals and had one of the employees take them to the compost bin.

And then it hit him.

Faith was trying to save the little plants.

What kind of person saw hope in broken limbs, sun-burnt leaves and exposed roots?

Intrigued, he decided to do a walk-around.

Kathy saw him coming and fell in step. "I had Faith plant a bunch of petunias in the barrels out front." Kathy grinned at him. "I figure they'll be frothing in a week and everyone will want petunias."

"How's our new employee?" He asked.

“Quiet. I’m glad I hired her. Customers like her, she knows her job. Loves the plants. She hums to them when she thinks no one is listening.”

Ben raised an eyebrow.

Kathy touched his arm. “You know she’s Dulcie’s daughter-in-law, right?”

Ben stared at his manager. “No, I didn’t know. Mom said Aunt Dulcie and one of her daughters-in-law had returned. We’re having a family get-together next month to welcome them home. Aunt Dulcie asked Mom to wait a bit until they got settled.”

And then the loss intruded. “Which...which...”

Kathy looked at him with sympathy.

“Jack. She was Jack’s wife.”

*Ahhh...* Sorrow lay heavy in his heart. His cousin, Jack, had been Ben’s best friend until he’d moved away ten years ago.

Someone called Kathy away and Ben continued to walk, thinking about his boyhood friend. And Jack’s pretty young widow. He watched her walk down the aisle between fountains and lawn furniture. Her chestnut ponytail swung with her movement in a way that was almost mesmerizing. She reached out and brushed the display of wind chimes as she went by. The tinkling pipes wafted soft music into the air. Ben raised his head and took a deep breath of God’s fresh spring air.

“May I help you?”

Ben looked back down at Faith, who’d materialized in front of him. She had the greenest eyes he’d ever seen. They were surrounded by dark lashes. She was lean and athletic, not too tall, but the top of her head would fit against his shoulder perfectly. He filed away the thought, wondering where that idea had

come from.

"Got any ratty plants no one wants?"

Her gaze shot to the compost bin for a second; then she bit her lip, and nodded. "Are you looking for specific plants or just anything?"

*Doesn't she know who I am?*

"Just anything."

"Come with me."

Ben walked with her side-by-side down an aisle of young lilac trees and forsythia bushes already blooming.

"It's like a bridal bower, isn't it?" She said, waving at the plants. "I think it'd be pretty to have a wedding with all these lilacs."

"Women seem to like that." He answered. "Not the forsythia?"

"I like how they smell, but I don't like yellow much. I'd rather have the lilacs. I like their color."

"Ahhh." Ben followed her to the compost bin.

"They're bell peppers. And a tomato plant. And cucumbers, and this is squash."

"Why are they back here?"

She looked sheepish. "I'm supposed to throw them away into the compost bin." Her eyes were actually sparkling with tears. "But they want to live, too. Do you...do you want to buy them?"

"No." He shook his head and decided not to tell her he was her boss. Kathy said a few people had already commented on how friendly and knowledgeable Faith was concerning plants. "I think I'll buy healthy ones. Thank you for showing me."

"You're welcome."

Another customer walked up and claimed her attention.

For the next week, in between helping his Dad set paving stones for a customer's large patio area, Ben watched Faith tend her little garden on the table. More plants ended up back there—sickly, little broken things, struggling to live. He watched from various vantage points as she moved pots, slung bags of peat moss, helped move rockery and fountains. He watched as she set the chimes to ringing every time she walked by. And each afternoon, she'd head back to the compost bin to tend her patients. As plants got well, she'd move them to the sale tables of vegetables and flowers.

Ben smiled, intrigued with the secret garden and the woman whose gentle hands tended the ugly little plants. Each day, as he moved out and about, he could see Faith with customers, smiling and ready to help. One afternoon, he drove into the greenhouse yard, back from delivering a fountain, climbing out of his truck and dusting at his jeans.

Faith turned from helping a young woman choose a hanging pot of bleeding hearts for her front porch. The woman went off happy, clutching her flowers.

"Would you like to see some nice plants?" Faith's smile was full of sunshine as she recognized him.

"Yes." Ben smiled back.

She led him to the table.

Ben stared in surprise. He knew they were the same plants, he'd watched her tend to them throughout the weeks. Lush greenery, small buds and even miniature vegetables hung amongst the leaves.

"They just needed a chance."

"I see that." Ben nodded. "You know there's only one problem. Most of the veggies and flowers have been bought by gardeners." He waved a hand at the vegetable tables, with only a few pots. "People have

planted their gardens for the spring.”

“I know. I was thinking we’d sell these later when rabbits or deer dig in people’s gardens and ruin their crops. Lots of people around here depend on their gardens for food, to help with expenses.”

“Do you?” Ben asked.

“No...no, we don’t have the...no,” she said, a light blush running up her cheeks.

Ben tried to remember what his mother had told him about Aunt Dulcie’s return. She’d sold her home in New Mexico and bought a little house down the street from his own Mom and Dad. She existed on a small pension. The family get-together was next week. He’d probably learn more then.

“Why don’t you take them home? They were originally to be thrown away, anyway.”

Her expression hardened. The change was so sudden after her sunny disposition that Ben was stunned. “Are you suggesting that I steal from my employer?”

“No, I’m giving them to you.”

“You can’t give me something that doesn’t belong to you.”

*She has no idea I own this place.* “Faith, I own the nursery. If you want to take the plants home and start a little garden so you can have fresh vegetables, I’m fine with it.”

She gaped. “I...I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” She looked close to tears. “I didn’t know...” Her expression changed to shame. He saw the instant she realized she’d tried to sell him his own plants.

“Hey, it’s OK.” He brushed her arm, horrified that he’d caused her to cry.

She swallowed the tears and looked up at him. The shadows of pain and loss still haunted those ex-

pressive green eyes. "I'll pay for them."

"No, you won't. We were throwing them away, they have no value."

"They have value now."

"Because you worked to save them. I didn't. Besides, one man's trash is another one's treasure. Any of the plants Kathy tells you to toss out, you have my permission to take home and raise as your own."

"I...I...thank you."

"No problem. I have to get back to work. Dad and I are putting in a deck and patio area, the customer's already bought all my slate pavers."

"I didn't realize you owned all this." She spoke shyly, embarrassment still clouding her face. "I thought you were one of the workers...the landscapers."

"I'm both. I do landscape design and even get to help lay bricks, pavers and wooden decks."

"Why don't you hire someone..." Her voice trailed off and she covered her mouth.

"Because I actually like doing the work, too." Ben grinned. "My Dad is a bricklayer, I had to help him summers. It came in handy when I bought the nursery. We're an all around landscaping business. Best of both worlds."

"It's very nice." Faith was sincere.

"Thanks. Keep up the good work." And he sauntered off, still smiling.

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"Kathy, could you do me a favor?" Ben found her in the main building near the rows of terra cotta pots.

"Sure...Within reason." She tacked on, smiling.

"Aunt Dulcie doesn't have much money, and I'm sure Faith is working to meet expenses. You know

she's reviving the plants we're tossing out, right?"

"I didn't think you'd mind, as long as she did her other duties."

"Find a few more vegetables and maybe some berry bushes or fruit trees to get rid of. I told her to take them home, since she's worked so hard to keep them alive."

Kathy smiled. "Make sure that little home garden is well-rounded?"

"Yes," he said, relieved she'd gotten his meaning.

"You know, that's why we love working here. You're a fair and generous boss. Can't tell you how much that means to us."

Ben's face heated up. "I just think if it were my widowed mother and wife, someone would look out for them, too."

"Uh huh. About that wife thing, maybe you need to be working on it." Kathy, happily married, occasionally mentioned his single status. She winked, smiled, and left him standing there, pondering mothers and faithful wives who loved deeply.

He stepped out into the sunshine and saw Faith with a customer near the chimes. She reached to touch them and the customer laughed. Then the woman brushed her hands on the different chimes, setting them all into motion. The air rang sweetly with the sound of bells. The simple delight on Faith's face made him suddenly want to see that look turned towards him. The gentle happiness stayed on his mind for the rest of the afternoon.

That evening, as he flung open a window before climbing into bed, he heard chimes wafting on the breeze. His conversation with God trailed off as he faded into sleep, but his last thought was of Faith's

laughter and her smile...

*Ben was standing in a lilac bower in his church, a woman walking towards him swathed in a white veil. As she neared, sun broke through the clouds and shone on her chestnut hair, even as her green eyes lit with love for him. His heart stirred, and he knew she was the one woman he would love forever. She reached for his hand, a sound shattered the silence...*

and he sat bolt upright in bed, with the clock alarm shrieking in his ear.

## 2

“Faith, come sit with us.” Ben and several other workers were gathered at one of the stone tables where everyone ate lunch. The staff took turns watching the cash registers and helping customers so the others could eat together. Faith was getting to know all her co-workers in shifts as the weeks flew by.

Ben used the half hour to spend time with each of his employees. He was a very caring boss and worked hard so everyone was happy. He knew the names of all their children, and often prayed with different people when a loved one was sick or simply needed prayers. She liked that. She liked him.

“Oh, let me finish moving this peat moss up front.” Faith smiled. “I’ll grab my lunch and be right back.”

She returned a few minutes later, touched the chimes to get them ringing as she passed, and then sat on one of the benches.

“I got a deal on some apples when I was at the orchard buying trees today.” Ben reached into a box at his feet and gave her a small bag.

“Oh, how much do I ...”

“Nothing!” The other two men at the table said in unison.

The older man continued. “Ben’s always buying fruit when he goes to the orchard. He likes us sampling

and giving opinions so he knows what to buy tree-wise for next year.”

Kathy plopped down next to Faith and was treated to a bag of apples, too.

Everyone opened their bag and took out an apple. For the next few minutes, Faith listened as they each critiqued the quality, flavor and texture of the different varieties.

“Your turn, Faith,” Ben said.

Faith crunched into a tart Pippin apple. “Mmmmm...I like the crispness but I think this would be a good baking apple. Some cinnamon and sugar would compliment the tartness beautifully.”

Ben hauled out another bag of apples and handed them to her. “Well, go ahead and test that theory.”

“I...” She stalled as she noticed everyone smiling; no one seemed to think it was a big deal that she got extra fruit. “Thank you.” His kindness still amazed her. Never had a boss been so caring of her. *Could it mean more?* Faith blinked, hoping her inner feelings weren’t written on her face. But stranger still, her own heart didn’t push the thought away.

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“Your boss is so generous.” Dulcie commented, later that evening. “Thank our dear Lord, you found a job right away and one where the company values its employees.”

“I do every day.” Faith gathered up their dinner dishes and started washing. “I am trying to pray to God each day for our blessings.” She didn’t mention that as often, she cried for their losses to a God she wasn’t sure listened to her woes.

“We have a gathering to attend this weekend, Faith. My sister has put off having a homecoming

party for us at my request. I wanted to be all settled in. With these apples, we can bring a pie to the potluck."

"Oh, that'd be great." But Faith's heart thumped as she contemplated Dulcie's news. Would the adopted family accept her, a stranger in their midst, with no blood ties? She'd moved here to remain with her mother-in-law, but would they see it as mooching? How many women nowadays stayed with their mother-in-law after the death of a husband?

Faith prepared for bed and opened the window to catch the evening breeze. Velvet skies, scattered with stars and an almost full moon caught her attention. "God, I'm starting to feel good about being here. My job is good." Faith paused as a picture of Ben, ruffled black hair, and smiling brown eyes, popped into her head. "My boss...he's a nice man, God. He takes care of people. He took care of me today. It's been so long since someone cared about me...oh, not cared about me like Mom. You know what I mean, God. Like Jack. Ben cared about me as a woman. Oh, he gave everyone something so I know I'm not anything special..." Faith's prayer tapered off as she remembered the extra fruit. "OK, he gave me extra, God...but that doesn't mean...does it?" Confusion reigned as Faith contemplated her heart, her mind, her memories. "God...maybe I better say goodnight. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen."

And even in her slumber, Faith was not the least bit surprised when Ben's smile shone through her dreams as he handed her an apple in a bower of lilacs.

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The sky looked ominous with huge thunderheads piling on top of each other across the distant horizon as Faith made her way into work the next morning.