



Reunited for the Holidays (Texas Twins Book 6)

By Jillian Hart

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Jillian Hart grew up on the original homestead where her family still lives, went to high school where *Twin Peaks* was filmed, earned an English degree, and has travelled extensively. When Jillian's not writing her stories, she reads, stops for café mochas, and hikes through the pine forests near her home in Washington State.

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Dr. Brian Wallace plucked the ceramic frog out of the flower bed, tipped it upside down and shook hard. The spare front-door key fell onto his palm as he squinted into the watery afternoon sun. It was good to be home. Late November air crisped over him and he shivered, goose bumps traveling down his arms. Weak from an extended illness, he gripped the railing to steady himself. The long trip from rural Texas had taken a toll on him.

The old adage There's No Worse Patient Than a Doctor had never been more true, he thought, as he struggled up the stairs. Easily winded, he paused a moment at the top, thanking God he was here to see the colors of sunset. His near brush with death had marked him. He couldn't deny it. He'd missed his life here in Fort Worth. He missed his kids—although they were grown, they were what he had left of his heart.

He ambled to the door, leaned heavily against the wall and inserted the key. The door creaked open. Every part of him vibrated with a mix of weakness and exhaustion. As he crossed the threshold into the comfort of the house, memories surrounded him. It had been years since his children had lived here, but he recalled the pound of music from an upstairs bedroom, the chatter of his daughter on her phone, the drum of feet as one of the boys prowled the kitchen.

Emotion dug into his chest, claws sharp. Yes, looking death in the face changed a man. It stripped away everything extraneous, leaving what mattered most.

His footsteps echoed in the lonely living room. He eased onto a couch cushion, sighing heavily as fatigue washed over him like water. Maybe he should have listened to his colleague—he'd valued Dr. Travers's expertise, which had saved his life—but he'd had enough bed rest. He needed to get home; he needed to be here. The Lord had put a deep call into his heart. He couldn't explain it as he reached for the phone to try his children again. He needed to see them.

He dialed his daughter's number first. Dear Maddie. Many things had crossed his mind while he'd lain on a spare cot in the corner of a migrant worker's temporary home—a shack beside many others on a remote Texas farm. His failings and regrets hit hard, but none as cruelly as his missteps in his personal relationships. He'd always had a difficult time opening up. He had to try to fix that. He'd been given a second chance.

He waited for the call to connect. A muffled ringing came from what sounded like his front porch. The bell pealed, boots thumped on the front step and joy launched him from the couch. He set down the phone, listening to the faint conversation on the other side of the door. His kids were here? Theirs were the voices he'd missed during his illness, the ones he'd most longed to hear. He gripped the brass knob, tugged and set eyes on his children. All three of them.

Praise the Lord, for bringing them here safe and sound. "You got my messages."

"You left about a dozen." Maddie tumbled into his arms. "Dad, you have no idea how good it is to see you. No idea."

"Right back at you, sweetheart." The endearment stumbled off his tongue—he wasn't good with them—but he had to get better at speaking his feelings. He had to try harder. His dear Maddie, so like her mother. His chest ached with affections too intense to handle, so he swallowed hard, trying to tamp them down as he held her hands in his after their hug was done. "I was gone a little longer than I'd planned this time—"

"A little?" Her voice shot up. "Dad, you have no idea how worried sick we've been over you."

"I don't even know how to say how sorry I am—"

"What matters is that you're all right." Her hands gave his a warm, understanding squeeze.

"Where have you been?" Grayson, his oldest child, stepped in to join the reunion. Tall, dark and handsome. Pride swelled up, making it hard to look at the boy properly.

"Grayson." Those couldn't be tears in his eyes, of course not. Brian wasn't a man given to tears. Maybe because he had thought of his two other children when he'd been fighting for his life on that cot. Yet another son and daughter, lost to him forever. His biggest regret of all. Emotion clumped in his throat, making it impossible to say more.

"We've been looking for you." Grayson's hug was brief, his face fighting emotion, too. "We found your wallet in a ditch and we feared you were missing. The police—"

"Missing?" He swiped a hand over his face, grimacing, hating what he'd put them through. "I was in rural Texas, you know that, sometimes without phones or cell service. I would have gotten a message to you kids, but I lost my cell—"

"I know. We found your phone, too." Carter, his youngest from his second marriage, stepped in, healthy and whole, back from war. "We were afraid you'd gotten ill. Are you all right, Dad?"

"Now I am." He wrapped his arms around Carter, holding him tight. When he ended the hug, he held on, drinking in the sight of the boy—okay, he was twenty-three, but Carter would always be his youngest, a seasoned soldier home from deployment safely. When Brian let go, it was hard to see again. He was grateful to God for returning his youngest son home unharmed.

"We heard you caught a virulent strain of strep." Carter ambled into the living room, making himself at home.

"And that you'd been treating a family who were dangerously ill." Grayson headed straight for the couch.

"We feared the worst, Dad." Beautiful Maddie with her auburn hair and a stylish fashion sense swept through the doorway, anguish carved into her dear face.

"I never meant to worry you." He shut the door, swallowing hard. His case had been severe and there'd been days, even weeks, where it hadn't been certain he would live. He didn't know what to do with the emotions coiled in his chest, so he shrugged, tried to play things down. "I survived, so it wasn't so bad."

"This is just like you. Always keeping us out instead of letting us in." Maddie sounded upset, on the verge of anger or tears, maybe both.

He hated upsetting her. Frustrated at himself, he crossed his arms over his chest. *Remember your vow, Brian. You have to try harder.* "I didn't mean it that way, honey. There's nothing to worry about now. I'm on the mend. That you kids are here, that you came, means everything."

It wasn't easy, but he got out the words.

"Oh, Daddy." Maddie swiped her eyes. "Don't you dare make me cry. I'm choked up enough already."

"What do you mean? What's got you choked up? Is something going on?"

"Dad, you'd better sit down for this." Grayson patted the seat beside him.

"This can't be good." He studied Carter's serious face and the troubled crinkles around Grayson's eyes. "Something happened while I was gone. That's why you were trying to reach me?"

"It's not bad news, but it could give you a real shock." Grayson cleared his throat, waiting until Brian eased onto the cushion. "There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to do it. We found Mom."

"Uh..." Brian's brain screeched to a halt, unable to make sense of those words. He was hearing things. No doubt due to his exhaustion and weakened state. "Sorry...say that again? Your mom's buried. She died when Carter was three. You remember the car accident."

"Not Sharla, Dad. Our real mother, at least for Gray-son and me," Maddie added.

"Your real...? *What?*" That's as far as he got. The mention of the mother of his other son and daughter floored him. How could they know? All they could remember was Sharla, his second wife, the woman he'd married when the kids were very young. "Wait a minute. I don't understand. You're not making any sense."

"I know it's a shock for you, Daddy." Maddie settled on the couch across from him. "But it's true. Take a deep breath. I found our birth mother."

"No." He shook his head, refusing to see how that was possible. The only person Maddie could be talking about was Isabella...his first wife, his high school sweetheart, the woman who'd broken his faith in true love.

"I found Violet—" she began.

"Violet?" He blinked, his brain spinning.

"Thanks to a lucky coincidence, Violet and I came face-to-face in a coffee shop and I found Mom from there." Maddie's hands cradled his.

Isabella was gone, tucked away in the Witness Protection Program with their two other children, never to be seen again. Their lives depended on it. "My mind's playing tricks on me because I thought you said—"

"Yes, I did. Mom is in Grasslands, and we're all together. Violet and Jack, well, they used to be Laurel and Tanner."

Laurel? Tanner? He shuddered, fighting the memory welling up of the U.S. Marshal driving away in a black SUV. Isabella in the window, cradling a six-month-old in her arms, and a little chestnut-haired boy, just two, waving bye-bye.

He swallowed hard. His lost children were here, in Texas. In Grasslands? *Within driving distance*? All this time he'd grieved for them, missed them with his entire heart for twenty-five years and now the two sets of twins were reunited? They'd found one another?

No, he shook his head, refusing to believe it. It couldn't be true. The hardest thing he'd ever done was let them go. But he'd had to make an impossible choice to protect his family from unspeakable danger.

"We're together now, Dad." Maddie's happiness was real. Her hands around his were real. "The only one missing is you."

Her words finally sank in. Realization crashed over him like a cold ocean wave, washing away disbelief.

This was r...

Users Review

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