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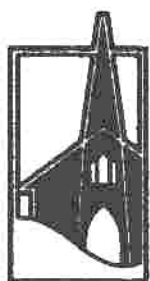
# Jillian Hart

## A McKaslin Homecoming



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# Jillian Hart

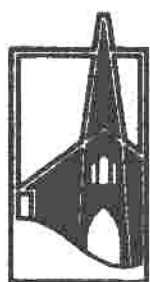
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**Praise for bestselling author  
Jillian Hart!**

**A McKASLIN HOMECOMING**

“[An] exceptionally tender story.”

—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews*

**FOR THE TWINS' SAKE**

“Jillian Hart writes a sweetly  
heartwarming romance.”

—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews*

**SWEET BLESSINGS**

“Jillian Hart conveys heart-tugging  
emotional struggles and the joy of  
remaining open to the Lord's leading.”

—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews*

**HEAVEN KNOWS**

“These sweet and gentle romances offer the  
same rich detail and charming characters  
readers have come to love in her other works.”

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**HEART AND SOUL**

“Jillian Hart tantalizes readers  
with the story of a tough man falling hard  
for a sweet woman.”

—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews*

**HEAVEN SENT**

“A moving story loaded with love and a  
heap of heartache sure to gain fans.”

—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews*



Perfect love drives out fear.  
—1 *John* 4:18







## *Chapter One*



Lauren McKaslin climbed out of her little compact sedan and into the heat of the central Montana afternoon. She looked around at the sprawling two-story house on the rise above her—her grandmother's house.

Nothing about it seemed familiar. She'd hoped to remember some part of her early childhood, jog some memory of visiting her grandmother here, but she had no memory at all. As always, the past remained as void as a black hole hovering in space, its gravity so powerful that no light or substance could escape.

She studied the surrounding countryside and tried to breathe in some of the peaceful calm, but it was impossible. She'd come to meet the grandmother she couldn't remember. The one her mother had told her had passed away.

Well, wasn't this the ultimate moment of truth? She'd driven a long way and she'd worried every mile

of her trip from Southern California. Her heart beat a panicky staccato against her ribs and her hands were cold despite the ninety-six-degree shade. Since she'd started college, she'd been alone. Her mother didn't approve.

*Please, Lord, let this turn out like I hope. I really want a family.* It wasn't only her grandmother she'd come to meet. That was a scary thought, too.

The gravel crunched beneath the soles of her worn-out rubber flip-flops. Her throat was dry as she closed her car door. It sounded like a slam in the far-reaching stillness. The only other sound was the whisper of the hot breeze in the maples overhead.

It's going to be okay, Lauren. Remember how nice Gran was on the phone? But that didn't stop the anxiety washing through her. Shyness rolled over her in a wave. But something worse, something as heavy as lead, was sitting in the middle of her stomach. Fear. Maybe it was because of her mother's response when, as a teenager, she'd wanted to contact her long-lost family. *She won't want you any more than she wanted me. Go ahead. You'll see. As for the rest of 'em, they didn't want you then, they won't want you now.*

Her life had been so bleak at the time, those words had seemed reasonable. And for the last few years she'd been afraid to find out. What if she learned her mother was right?

Don't think about that, Lauren. Her mom had rarely been right about anything. She was probably wrong

about this, too. Still, the doubt had taken hold and, like a vicious dog, had sunk in its teeth and would not let go. She felt very small standing in the shade of the enormous, upscale house. Even while she smoothed at the wrinkles in her walking shorts, she imagined she was very rumpled.

“Hello there.”

She startled at the rumble of a man’s voice—vibrant and resonant and deep. Then she saw him. He was nothing more than a part of the shadows in the shade of the porch. The shadow became a tall, wide-shouldered man. As he ambled toward her with an easygoing stride, he came into the touch of the dappled sunlight and she could see him clearly. He had a rugged, granite look to him. Dark brown hair tumbled over a high forehead. A confident sloping nose, a hard line of mouth, dark eyes and a chiseled jaw all complemented his square, handsome face. His big hands gripped the polished porch rail as he focused on her.

Shyness rolled over her in a bigger wave. Who was he? Before she could get up the courage to ask, he walked down the steps in her direction.

“Are you looking for Mary?”

She nodded, realizing that with every step he took, he became bigger. Not that he was scary looking, it was just that she didn’t trust men that much. Also, as far as she could tell, they were absolutely alone, aside from the half-dozen horses in the field beyond the impressive house and the acres of grass and white rail



fencing and fruit trees. She liked to keep her distance from strange men.

But then he smiled and that simple change softened his strong features. He was near enough that she could see the warmth of his eyes, which had initially seemed so dark. There was friendliness in those depths.

Nothing to be worried about. She'd grown up in the inner city and old habits die hard. "Y-yes, I'm looking for Mary. She's expecting me."

"All I know is that she gave me a call about thirty minutes back, said she was running late and asked me to be here to meet her houseguest. I suppose that would be you?" He arched one brow and this, along with his grin, made him look like a stalwart, salt-of-the-earth kind of guy.

Not that she was one to believe in that kind of thing, but he was clearly a trusted neighbor of her grandmother's. Her uncertainty ebbed a bit. "She's running late? I can just sit here and wait for her."

"In this heat? Come in and I'll get you settled. She said she wouldn't be long." He kept coming—all six-plus feet of him—moving like a muscled tiger, sleek and confident and powerful. "I'm Caleb Stone. I live next door."

"Next door? I only see horses next door."

His grin widened, revealing a double set of dimples. "That means down the road. You're a long way from home. I noticed your California license plate."

"Uh, I'm just here for a quick visit. This part of the country is beautiful. Secluded, but beautiful."

And so was she, Caleb Stone thought. When Mary had called him up, interrupting him in the middle of fixing his after-work supper, he'd wanted to know the who and what of her request. She'd been tight-lipped about it. He'd been curious about her keeping quiet, but now he understood. The family resemblance was pretty strong and that meant that this woman could only be the lost granddaughter come home.

"You're Lauren, aren't you?" He said it in a friendly way because she seemed like a worrier. She glanced uncertainly around her with wide eyes; her hands, holding on to her keys and backpack strap, were white-knuckled. She stood perfectly still next to her decades-old sedan, looking wholesome in a simple summer shirt and modest shorts.

"How do you know who I am?"

"There's a strong family resemblance. I didn't know that Mary had kept in touch with you."

"She hadn't. This was all sort of a last-minute thing."

Interesting. "It's a long way to come at the drop of a hat."

"Yes. Do you know how long Mary plans to be?"

He came closer until he could see the light scatter of freckles across the bridge of her nose and the uncertainty on her heart-shaped face. "She said I ought to get you settled."

"I don't feel right going into her house without her. If you don't mind, I'll just wait in the shade for her. And

you can go home. It's dinnertime. You must have plans."

"I've got lots of time." He wondered about her, this granddaughter and sister no one had talked about in, what, twenty years? It was as if she'd died, right along with the mother who'd taken her and fled all those years ago, destroying the family. Yep, call him curious. "I've got no place else to be, so I'd be happy to get your things. Want to unlock your trunk for me? I'll get your bags."

"Oh, I don't mind doing it. Really." She whirled around and with a snap of her flip-flops was heading toward the back of her little old sedan.

He'd been reading people for a lot of years—it came with being a cop—and there was something about her, something essentially lonely about her. He couldn't pinpoint it. Maybe it was the hesitant way she'd greeted him or her reserved manner. As he followed her to the back of her car, where she was unlocking the trunk with the twist of a key, he kept back his questions. He had a lot of them. Mary had buried her husband more than two years ago and she'd never come back from the blow of his sudden loss. He wondered why Lauren hadn't stayed in contact with the family. What had she been doing all this time? And, the toughest question of all—was she anything like that mother of hers? He didn't think so, but sometimes people hid the most crucial information.

There were two medium-sized duffel bags in the tidy trunk and he'd beat her to them. "Don't worry, I've got them."

“But—”

“You’re in Montana now. You’ll have to get used to men being men.” He flashed her his most disarming grin and shut the trunk. “Hey, don’t worry. Most of the time I’m perfectly harmless.”

“And what about the rest of the time?”

“I’ll let you figure that out.”

That’s when it happened. Her reserve melted away and she smiled. Just a little, but the effect was dazzling. She sure looked like goodness. That was one image he wanted to believe.

Then he saw something else beyond Lauren’s shoulder—a streak of white against the amber-tipped grasses of the horse pasture. The swinging gate was wide open. Unless his eyes were playing tricks on him, Malia was up to her old tricks. That troublesome mare!

He set the bags on the walkway’s top stone step. “How good are you at herding horses?”

Lauren missed a step. Had she heard him right? Had he said—“herding horses”?

“We have an escapee.”

“What?” Then she turned to follow his gaze and saw the open gate and the horses racing away down the gravel driveway, tails flying.

“C’mon.” He flashed her that dimpled grin in a way that made him seem like the perfect Western man. He gestured toward the detached garage set so far back she could only see the front doors.

“I don’t know how much help I’ll be.”



“You’ll do fine, city girl.” He said those words warmly, but there was a hint of something else underneath.

Lauren wasn’t sure she ought to step into a vehicle with a stranger, but he was already running. She watched as he disappeared around the side of the house’s raised flower beds. Should she accept his request? How could she help? He might be a stranger to her, but it was clear her grandmother relied on him. Okay, so she had trust issues. It was simply an old habit—and a hard-learned lesson in her life—that you were better off keeping to yourself. Strangers were people who hadn’t taken advantage of you yet. Or, in most cases when she was growing up, people who hadn’t taken advantage of her mother yet.

The best defense was a solid independent streak and a look that sent people scurrying. This time she was having difficulty summoning up that look or the belief that Caleb Stone wasn’t just how he seemed—an all right guy. He drove into sight in a blue medium-sized pickup with the window rolled down. Leaning out, he met her gaze. His truck ground to a halt in the gravel, kicking up a cloud of dust.

“Get in. Your grandmother’s horses are getting away.” His grin broadened and the big rugged man became someone else with that smile. His dark eyes crinkled pleasantly in the corners. The hard angles of his face softened. Everything about him screamed capable. Trustworthy. Honest.