

**Excerpt from**  
***Open Meetings***  
A Jillian Hillcrest Mystery  
by Joyce Strand

**Chapter 1**

“You absolutely cannot print anything I told you. They'll kill me.”

Jillian Hillcrest looked up from the lunch menu. She saw a non-descript, thin, brown-hair-in-a-bun, middle-aged woman dressed in jeans and a white V-neck top frantically approaching her lunch companion, a local reporter. Jillian watched as the reporter quickly stood up, uttered a brief “Excuse me” to Jillian, and put his arm around the woman, leading her outside. He appeared to be trying unsuccessfully to calm her along the way. She continued to plead with him that he must never repeat what she had told him.

Jillian was interested in what the woman was saying to the reporter. Somewhere in his late 40s, the tall and slightly stooped Miles Smith was a stringer for a local newspaper and also had a blog focusing on city, county, and state government. He had a history of investigative journalism that impressed and fascinated Jillian. For example, he had uncovered a county assessor's officer who collected for property value assessments that weren't done, and then funneled the money into personal bank accounts. So she was intrigued about whatever it was the frightened woman did not want Miles to print.

As the Vice President of Corporate Communications for Harmonia Therapeutics, a small, local biotechnology firm, Jillian was meeting Miles to discuss her company's role in an upcoming statewide conference of city and county officials. Harmonia had made some noteworthy contributions to the community, including the donation of annual scholarships to outstanding high school science students, employee participation at a variety of fundraisers for youth events, and counseling for local businesses by several Harmonia executives. Miles wanted Jillian to attend the conference so she could be part of the panel he was chairing on the relationship between businesses, city and county governments, and the media.

However, at the moment, Jillian was more interested in the distraught woman pleading with Miles. He returned to their table

alone after a few minutes, telling her, “I am sorry about the interruption.” Miles enunciated every word to its fullest, no matter what he was saying. He gave the impression of being a bit of a nerd, and his lanky frame, wire-rimmed glasses, and receding hairline reinforced that. “I am working on a story about my hometown up in Troutville, and Margaret was helping. She was here on business and saw me come into this restaurant. She seems a little concerned about nothing-tempest in a teapot, as the saying goes. Just a story for my blog. It is not a big deal. Now, where were we?”

Jillian's instincts told her that Miles was minimizing something that was bigger than a teapot; he just wasn't ready to share it. Nonetheless, she sublimated her chronic sense of need-to-know and turned back to the menu to select her favorite-penne Bolognese-while promising herself to have only carrots and tomatoes for dinner.

The two colleagues spent the remainder of lunch discussing her role in the upcoming conference, and although Miles nodded frequently, Jillian sensed that he was distracted. Normally he would provide more details than were necessary to make his point. Today Jillian had to ask him direct questions to engage him.

“Miles, can you tell me exactly what you want from me for your panel?”

The reporter hesitated as he considered the reason they were having lunch together. “Of course. That's why we're here. Harmonia participates as a company in the community. Why does Harmonia participate in the community? What does Harmonia get by involving its employees and management team with local businesses, the youth, and other citizens?”

Jillian considered this response. “OK. That's easy. I can offer that information. But why would the attendees of the conference care? Aren't they largely city, county, and state officials and businessmen who represent their Chambers of Commerce?”

Miles bit his lip, looked at the ceiling, and rubbed his fingers across the white linen tablecloth. “Well, the ultimate goal, of course, is for you to share how Harmonia's activities with the public can be used by city government officials-even police departments-to help them communicate to the people they represent. There have been a lot of news stories recently about corrupt city officials and police officers especially. How do honest representatives of the citizenry overcome that image? Of course, I'm looking for legitimate tools to open the communication channels. I'm not looking for propaganda or slanderous methods of influence.”

“Of course.” Jillian was beginning to understand how she could contribute. “So, as a panel member, you're asking me to suggest some PR tactics to help honest city governments communicate better with their constituents. Right?”

Miles nodded vigorously. “That is correct. I want you to suggest PR activities from the business world that might help honest and hard-working city officials to connect with the people they serve.” He looked thoughtful and appeared to be searching for ways to help Jillian better understand her assignment. “I'll hunt for some articles that will help you comprehend what many honest officials need to overcome. The number of abuses seems to be increasing.”

Jillian was savoring her pasta but guessed that Miles was not a foodie, since he had barely touched his lunch. Also, he was fidgeting in his seat, and Jillian suspected he wanted to leave. “Listen, I'll take care of the bill if you want to leave. My treat. I can send you a list of key points and some backup materials about Harmonia and our community programs by the end of the week.”

“Thanks, Jillian. That would be very helpful. I'll get you some articles and also arrange to introduce you to the rest of the panel.” Miles stood up without further comment, grabbed his briefcase, muttered “Good-bye for now,” and left the restaurant.

Jillian finished her coffee and paid the check, and then looked around for her cane, which she needed as a result of a broken leg that had almost healed. Following the murder of a very dear friend a few months earlier, she had been in a car accident. She still had moments of anxiety and regret when she remembered that last dinner with her friend, the night before she had been killed.

As she limped slowly out of the restaurant, she welcomed the warm summer sun and thought about her situation. She was basically content that her life was almost back to normal. However, she was a little uneasy about the words of Miles' friend. She wondered what story the reporter might be working on that would cause the woman to be concerned for her life.

Unfortunately, her reflection was short-lived. As she limped toward her car, her mobile phone rang. Jillian saw that it was her boss calling, so she answered as quickly as possible while juggling her cane and her purse. She soon realized that her day was about to go south when she heard the disappointing news.

## Chapter 2

Jillian arrived back at her office in nearby Redwood City within a half hour of the call from her boss, Brynn Bancroft. Brynn, a Harvard MBA, had started at the company as the comptroller and was promoted within two years to Chief Financial Officer. Brynn was extremely bright-a MENSA member-and also was a well-endowed woman, blond and blue-eyed. She understood the world of finance, was a clear thinker, and an able and willing decision-maker. She was, unfortunately, in the midst of a divorce as a result of many miscues with her husband, including infidelity. Jillian knew that she had had an affair with the CEO, which, she hoped had ended. She winced as she recalled accidentally walking in on the two of them at a hotel room in Geneva.

Jillian's thoughts were interrupted as Brynn greeted her despondently. "Bad news," she said. "We just got some discouraging results from the lupus trial. It looks like the initial positive reaction is temporary for a significant number of patients in Phase Two. Bottom line, it appears to work better for some patients than others. We will need to alert the FDA, of course, and simultaneously prepare to announce the bad news."

Until then, the Harmonia lupus drug candidate had been proceeding well. It was a therapy for lupus, an autoimmune disease difficult to diagnose and cure in which an over-active immune system causes a myriad of detrimental symptoms, such as renal failure or joint inflammation, frequently mimicking rheumatoid arthritis and occasionally resulting in death. Harmonia had just finished Phase 2 clinical trials in patients to ascertain drug efficacy as a therapy for lupus. The preliminary results were promising, and plans were already underway for the broader Phase 3 trials with a larger number of patients.

Upon completion of the Phase 3 trials, which could take three to six months, the company would consolidate and analyze the results and then file for approval with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The FDA would then review the data, convene an advisory panel, and decide whether to approve or not-this would take a minimum of ten months. So even if the drug candidate seemed a likely product, approval and distribution to patients were still at least 18 months away. Investors had purchased stock based on the likelihood of this timeline, so the company was obliged to notify them as soon as possible if the timeline was impaired.

Because the lupus drug candidate had been more effective with some patients but less so with others, analysts and patients would be doubtful of the company's resolve to continue, as it would

most likely necessitate additional design of the protocols for the clinical trials, and of course, additional clinical trials-all requiring more funding. Jillian therefore surmised the executive team and the Board of Directors would seriously consider discontinuing this lupus drug candidate in order to focus on the remaining drug pipeline, assuming that was best for the company long-term.

Jillian issued a press release the next day an hour before the opening of the U.S. stock markets. That meant that she and Brynn were in the office at 5:00 a.m. Pacific Time to respond to calls, as the relevant stock exchange opened for trading at 9:30 a.m. Eastern Time. Jillian had arranged a conference call for investors at 6:00 a.m. Pacific Time. The CEO, Tim Wharton, along with Phil Montgomery, the well-respected founder of Harmonia and currently the Chief Science Officer, and Brynn conducted the call and responded to questions, primarily from analysts. Jillian had drafted a brief script to assure that they covered the key points. However, at that time, the only plan they had was to investigate their options, an unsettling response to investors.

Between calls Jillian watched the stock price drop as some investors tried to sell as much stock as possible in light of the negative news. Several analysts reacted quickly, publishing notes pointing to the other products in the company's portfolio, but no one expected the company to continue with this product, and they were concerned whether similar drugs in the company's pipeline were affected. Above all, short-term investors especially couldn't envision what the company could do to make the drug more effective, nor was Harmonia rich with cash to fund more trials.

In the middle of the day, she received a call from Miles who thanked her for the meeting the day before, and said he wanted to meet with her that day or the next if possible. She politely declined because she was in the middle of a mini-crisis, but suggested that possibly the two of them could get together later in the week. She just couldn't leave her phone right now.

“Well, OK, I guess. It's a little urgent given my schedule and the imminence of the conference. Listen, just in case I can't meet with you in the next few days, I'll send you some articles to help you prepare. Could you be sure to watch for them?”

“Sure, Miles. No problem. Send them here to the office. You have the address.” Jillian was anxious to get off the phone, as she knew she had at least a dozen calls to return in the next ten minutes, and that it would take her at least a half hour to get back to the callers, and more were phoning as she was speaking to Miles. Also, the conference in question was almost a month away, so they had plenty of time to prepare. Miles seemed a little over-anxious.

He disconnected reluctantly, and Jillian felt a pang of guilt for a moment. Then she delved into the urgent calls.

## Chapter 3

Brynn Bancroft sat at her desk reflecting on recent events. Although it was almost 9:00 p.m., she was in no hurry to go home. Her personal life seemed to match her professional life at the moment, and she could find little joy in either. She had not seen her husband in months. After 14 years of a somewhat tumultuous marriage, during which both Brynn and her husband had strayed several times, he left their house a few months ago and never returned. She had received notification from his attorney regarding the divorce, and other than some minor requests, she was not contesting it. When she went home at night, the 4000 square foot house in Los Altos Hills—a wealthy enclave of Silicon Valley—was empty. They had decided not to sell it until the housing market rebounded, in order to recoup their investment. So her husband had agreed she could live there, assuming she made the monthly mortgage payments.

At work, she fortunately was busy, but the relationship between Tim and her was awkward. Her affair with the CEO had been short, but intense. She missed their time together, but both of them knew it had to end. They both respected Tim's wife too much to continue, and they both knew Tim would never leave Stephanie voluntarily.

Brynn considered looking for another job, but she really enjoyed her work at Harmonia as CFO. It was only her second job after college. Shortly after receiving her MBA from Harvard, she spent eight years at a large pharmaceutical firm in New York in various positions in their finance department. When her husband was transferred to Silicon Valley, she gladly gave up her job there and eagerly searched for a smaller company with high-growth potential, believing that would be more exciting. She took the job with Harmonia early in its history. Despite the recent setback with the lupus drug candidate, the company was doing quite well, and Brynn believed it had tremendous potential. So she had decided to remain at Harmonia regardless of the situation between Tim and her.

The setback with the lupus drug candidate was unfortunate. However, the stock had previously had a run-up due to its promising results. They still had several of their own drug candidates in the pipeline and a few partners even had products on the market that used one of their technologies, which provided the company with royalty revenue. At the end of the day, their stock had returned to a price of several months prior to the release of preliminary Phase 2 data results from the lupus product candidate, and seemed to be stabilizing there, largely due to encouraging notes from their analysts, who still believed in the fundamental

value of the company. Although the current plateau was hardly as positive as the stock's value before the recent announcement, the company's market cap was certainly respectable for a small biotech company.

Unfortunately, that would be of little comfort to the 10 to 20 people they might have to lay off. Brynn knew all of them. With only 200 employees, it was easy to get to know everyone. Although they would do everything they could to help the laid off workers financially, this would be a demoralizing and emotional time for the company. It would be their first layoff, and would change the atmosphere significantly from that of shared goals to one of management versus employees.