

FAIR DISCLOSURE

Chapter 1

The scream startled Jillian Hillcrest. It seemed to come from the stage of the small, darkened community theater. She turned when her ex-husband, Chad, reached for her hand. He and others in the audience were searching the group of startled and motionless actors on the small stage. They appeared as confused as Jillian.

“Oh my god! Is he dead?” They all heard it clearly. The woman’s voice came from backstage behind a side curtain. “Oh my god. Oh my god.”

The three actors started moving toward the voice. A tall, silver-haired man from the front row—who Jillian recognized as the director—ran onto the stage. “Could everyone please stay seated until we know what’s happening. Please keep your seats.” He looked up to a booth behind the audience and asked, “Could you turn on the houselights. Thanks.”

Jillian was impressed that he was composed enough to control the situation. She had met him only a couple of times. His name was Dwight Langley, and he was the husband of her colleague Isabel Langley, one of the actors in the play.

When those on stage reached the origin of the voice, Jillian heard other screams and thought she recognized Isabel saying, “It’s Vance. I think he’s dead!” A male voice exclaimed, “What’s happened to his head?” A woman cautioned, “Don’t touch that! It’s bloody!”

Jillian recalled Vance as the young man Isabel had recently introduced as a possible summer intern for their biotech company. Isabel, Jillian’s marketing communications manager, touted him as a financial wizard and recommended him as a summer research analyst intern. Jillian hoped it wasn’t he. He was barely in his twenties.

Chad put his arm around her, worried that the sudden interruption might trigger anxiety caused by her recent kidnapping. She had been kept for several days in a dark room with little food, water, or any amenities, and forced to drink wine to get her drunk. Only recently was she able to turn off the lights to go to sleep. She had also lost weight; her usually slender 5-foot 7-inch frame was almost emaciated. She had started to eat normally again only a few weeks ago. Chad felt Jillian start to shake, but she took a couple of deep breaths and seemed steady.

Dwight took the stage again. “Everyone is to remain here until the police arrive. We have called the paramedics and the police, and they will be here in a few minutes. Please stay in your seats.”

Someone from the audience—many of whom were standing and getting ready to leave—yelled, “What’s going on? Why are the police coming? What’s happened?”

Dwight responded quickly, “There’s been what might be, er, attempted, well, maybe foul play, and one of our volunteers has been seriously hurt. We do have someone checking him out right now, and an ambulance is on the way. However, until we know what happened the police ask that we stay here to help them investigate further.” Dwight looked around for what else to say, but didn’t seem to find anything, so he walked to the back of the stage toward the actors and the scream.

The murmur from the audience in response to his statements suggested it was unlikely that the group would stay put very long. People seemed aghast that they needed to remain in the theater due to one of the stagehands getting hurt in an accident. However, for the moment, no one moved.

Jillian tried to get Isabel’s attention by waving at her. Isabel was one of the actors on stage. This was the first time Jillian had attended any of her performances, and she had been impressed by her employee’s skill on stage at turning herself from a sophisticated young marketing professional into the mother of a Polish–Jewish American teenager.

They heard sirens approaching. So far, despite protests, everyone remained in or near their seats, while the cast and crew stayed on stage. The door opened loudly allowing a view of an ambulance with blinking lights. Two uniformed men stepped into the theater pushing a gurney loaded with an assortment of what appeared to be medical bags. Jillian assumed they were paramedics. Dwight descended from the stage and greeted them, leading them up the five steps and then backstage.

Soon the door opened again and a uniformed policewoman entered equally forcefully. One of the actors called to Dwight who came from behind the curtain and led the officer to the paramedics and the victim.

Other than trying to get Isabel’s attention, Jillian had been quiet until now. “What is happening? I hope that’s not the young man Isabel brought to my office yesterday.”

Chad was relieved that Jillian was calm. “Who was that?”

“He was a really smart young financial guru Isabel recommended for our summer intern program. I’m in charge of the program, so I’ve been interviewing various candidates. I was really impressed with him. He was very aware of what’s happening on ‘The Street.’” As VP of Corporate Communications at Harmonia Therapeutics, a small biotech company, Jillian’s responsibilities included investor relations. She always appreciated the contributions of analysts to help examine various financial models to explain the company’s performance to investors.

The police officer walked onto the stage, her leather belt with its dangling baton and gun quite conspicuous. "Thank you for your patience. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you all to remain here until we can talk with each of you. A gentleman has been seriously injured under suspicious circumstances. We're taking him to the hospital for medical attention."

The two paramedics emerged from behind the curtain pushing the gurney with a young man who, despite a bloody bandage covering much of his head, Jillian immediately recognized as the one she had interviewed the day before. She involuntarily cried out, and was embarrassed when people turned to look at her. "Sorry. I think I know him."

The police officer continued, "SFPD inspectors are on their way here now. They will want to interview each of you. It looks like there are about 200 people here, so it could take a while. If you need to use the facilities, please let me know."

Dwight moved forward to address the audience. "Coffee is on the house, and we'll keep the snack bar open. Also, we're getting some pizza." Two women with trays of small cups of hot coffee and water started in the front rows and handed out the steaming liquid or cold water. Another man and woman followed with additional trays and started at the back of the theater to serve the beverages. Jillian marveled at the efficiency of this small, community theater.

Two men entered the theater authoritatively. Jillian and Chad both gasped when they saw them. One of the two was a good friend of theirs, Inspector Loren Sherwood, who had been deeply involved in their lives over the past eight months in his capacity as a homicide investigator. Inspector Sherwood heard their exclamations and nodded when he recognized them and waved briefly as he headed directly for the stage. Jillian murmured, "I guess this means that someone tried to murder Vance. Otherwise why would Loren be here? Isn't he a homicide investigator?"

Chad nodded. "Regardless, I can't believe that of all the inspectors in the SFPD they sent him to cover this. It's like he's destined to permeate our lives."

Inspector Sherwood and his partner, whom Jillian did not recognize, greeted the police officer, who led them backstage behind the side curtain where the paramedics had just removed the victim. Jillian and Chad could hear voices, although it was difficult to understand what they were saying. It sounded like they were questioning the original screaming woman. The inspectors stayed there for what seemed a long 15 minutes to those waiting in the audience; finally they reappeared with Dwight.

Sherwood said something to the uniformed officer who nodded and turned to the audience. "We'll start with the front row. Will all of you in

the first row please come up on stage. Walk to me first and be prepared to show some identification and contact information so we can get in touch with you if needed. Then you will go to one of the two inspectors on stage, who will speak with you briefly. We promise to make this as quick as possible. However, it will take as long as it takes to make sure we have what we need.”

The two inspectors commandeered furniture from the set on stage—Sherwood sat on a small sofa and set up his recording device and notebook on a coffee table, and his partner sat on a kitchen chair and used the kitchen table for his devices.

Dwight took the opportunity to announce that the pizza had arrived. The same coffee volunteers carried the boxes up the stairs on either side of the 15 rows, offering small pieces of basic cheese pizza, garlic bread, and napkins. Jillian and Chad each gratefully ate a piece of the bread and the pizza. They had come directly to the theater and had only had time for some crackers—planning to have a late snack at Jillian’s afterward.

The first row of audience members filed up to the stage. Some were ready with business cards, others wrote down their contact information on paper provided. Each then moved to one of the inspectors who asked basic questions such as, “Do you know Vance Rohrer? Did you see anyone besides the actors go backstage?”

Until they reached the fourth row, no one knew him so the line moved fairly quickly. However, a woman in the fourth row had met Vance that evening prior to the performance. Inspector Sherwood, who was the one interviewing her, was interested in the timing of that meeting. The attractive middle-aged blond, dressed in a stylish black pantsuit with a striking large silver pendant around her bare and plunging neckline, identified herself as a friend of Dwight, the director. She said that Dwight had introduced Vance to her as a potential job candidate for her company.

Sherwood looked up from his notes, “What time was that meeting?”

The woman shrugged. “It must have been maybe a half hour before the play started. Dwight had to leave right away so that he could help with any last-minute director things. I talked with Vance for maybe ten minutes. I didn’t see anything else, really. I just met him and couldn’t say—”

Sherwood interrupted, “Where was this exactly, by the way?”

“Oh, we were backstage. Dwight was showing us around. We were very interested, you know. I had never been backstage before.”

Sherwood looked confused. “And where was Mr. Vance Rohrer when you last saw him?”

“Oh, he was right by that side curtain there.” She pointed to the opening near where the victim had been found. “There was a young woman who kept asking him for things, but he kept telling her that everything was ready. I believe he said she was the stage manager. He seemed like such a bright young man. I do hope he’s OK. We could really use him. Do you know what happened? It must be awful.”

Sherwood broke in to the woman’s conversation. “We’ve spoken with the young woman. She was the one who discovered him and screamed. He was hidden behind a pile of boxes. Did Mr. Rohrer seem nervous or concerned about anything?”

“I’m not sure I’d know. This was the first time we’d met, and he was looking for a job, after all. So he could have been nervous about that. However, he seemed quite calm and self-assured. I wouldn’t say he was nervous. You know, we really do need to go. So if you don’t mind—”

Sherwood held up his hand. “What did you talk about?”

“Basically he told me his qualifications. He seemed very bright and knowledgeable—more than just a so-called number cruncher. I think he’ll make a really astute financial analyst.”

“Did he mention anyone else?”

The woman stood up, ready to go. “Not really. We only spoke for a few minutes. I made an appointment to meet with him next week to learn more. I hope he’ll be able to make it.”

Sherwood looked up from his notes. “Can you think of anything else?”

“No, I can’t. Sorry. I really need to leave.”

“Thanks. You can go for now. We might get back in touch with you to sign a statement, pending the outcome of our investigation.”

The woman started to ask a question, decided against it, and headed toward the door where a young male companion was waiting for her anxiously pacing in the small space. He kept typing on his cell phone. He looked relieved when she joined him.

Jillian and the remaining audience members had all listened to this discussion—the acoustics from the stage were quite accommodating—and Jillian found herself wondering when Sherwood would inform the group why homicide inspectors were there. The man seated next to Jillian sighed with relief. “I was afraid she’d ask him some more questions. I really want to get out of here. I’m sorry about the young man, but it has nothing to do with us.”

Jillian nodded. “I know what you mean. We were so looking forward to a relaxing and fun evening tonight. It was a busy week.”

Chad was occupied talking to the couple in front of them. The woman asked, “I wonder if they’ll refund our money. The director didn’t say.”

Chad responded, “Well, community theater isn’t the most profitable business, so they might not. But I hope at least they schedule another performance for us all to attend. I was enjoying it and would like to see the entire play.”

The man rolled his eyes. “I don’t think I’ll want to come back to this theater.”

At some point during this discussion, additional SFPD personnel arrived. They placed yellow tape around the corner of the backstage area near where Vance had been found. They then disappeared behind the curtain presumably to photograph the area and do whatever forensics officers do to gather evidence. With all the people who had walked through the area, it seemed unlikely to Jillian that they would be able to isolate any useful information.

Jillian watched as the people in the row in front of her walked up to the stage. She and Chad were seated in the next-to-last row, so the inquisition was almost complete. She was actually looking forward to speaking with Inspector Sherwood. She hadn’t talked to him in a few weeks.

She looked at Chad, who was now busy on his phone checking his e-mail. “I wonder how Isabel is doing. She isn’t on stage any more. I’ll see if our favorite inspector will let me check on her.” She looked around at others who were busy on their phones. “I bet there’s a lot of tweeting going on. This is too interesting an event not to share.”

Chad looked up. He wasn’t a big tweeter and didn’t really care about sharing on social networks. He was more concerned about Jillian. “Are you doing OK?”

Jillian thought about it. “Yes, I am, but a glass of Cabernet would be very nice about now.”

Chad raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Really?” Jillian had not had any wine since her ordeal with kidnappers several months ago.

Jillian nodded. “Maybe.”

“Well, we can try it tonight. For right now, let’s go see our friend Inspector Sherwood.”

They filed onto the stage. The line was moving rapidly because no one else knew Vance nor had seen him that evening. Jillian and Chad reached the police officer, showed her their driver’s licenses, offered business cards, and then moved to Sherwood.

“Hi, Jillian. I can’t believe that we’re meeting again. You seem to draw criminal attention.” He laughed. They had become quite good friends. “Did you know Vance Rohrer? Please say no.”

Jillian nodded. “Actually, I met him yesterday, but I didn’t see him here tonight.”

Sherwood grimaced and shook his head. “So tell me how and why you met him.”

“Well, you may not know it, but Isabel, one of the actors, is married to the director, Dwight Langley, and works with me at Harmonia. In fact, that’s why I’m here—to see her. She brought Vance to the office yesterday to interview for an intern position at Harmonia. He seemed very bright, an MBA student well informed about Wall Street and biotechnology stocks. I was definitely considering hiring him.” She looked around and said in a much quieter voice, “Why haven’t you told anyone what happened? Did someone deliberately kill Vance?”

Sherwood glared at her and spoke equally quietly, “First, he’s not dead. Otherwise the body would still be here. He’s at a hospital where they’re working to keep him alive. However, someone definitely tried to kill him. It was no accident. Someone hit him over the head with—” Sherwood looked around and noticed several people trying to hear what he was saying. “I’ll fill you in later.” He changed back to conversational tone and volume. “Did Mr. Rohrer seem upset, worried, concerned about anything yesterday?”

Jillian was disappointed with his answer. She wanted to know more, but said, “No, quite the contrary. He was very outgoing and also said he was excited to be helping with the play. Apparently he is quite studious and spends most of his time reading case studies and learning about how the financial markets work. So he was really looking forward to breaking up his routine by volunteering to help here at the theater.”

“OK. I know where to reach you.” He studied his notes and then said, “How well do you know your employee and her husband, by the way?”

“I know Isabel fairly well. She’s worked with me for almost a year. She is professional and productive. I don’t know her husband very well at all. I’ve spoken with him briefly a couple of times when he’s met Isabel at the office and at company parties.”

Sherwood looked pensive. “Did you know that he’s an investment advisor?”

“Well, actually he works for an expert networking firm and does research for institutional investors. But, yes, I knew that. Is it important?”

“What’s an expert networking firm?”

Jillian laughed. “Well, his firm has a network of contacts who are experts, who offer information to typically large institutional investors to learn about companies they might want to invest in. They help connect the investors to the experts. Why?”

“I don’t know. Just wondering if you’d run into him professionally. Isn’t he someone who would recommend your stock? And wouldn’t his wife working at your company represent a problem?”

“He works mostly with high-tech stocks, not biotech. So, no, he wouldn’t be studying Harmonia.”

Sherwood cocked his head, “What’s the difference?”

“High tech focuses on companies that manufacture computers, smart phones, and software. Biotech is all about developing medicines using biological processes or organisms. They are totally different fields. Usually different investors and analysts follow them.”

When Sherwood did not ask a follow-up question, Jillian looked around and still did not see Isabel. “Can I check on Isabel to be sure she’s all right?”

Sherwood shook his head. “Sorry. We’re interviewing the entire cast and crew separately. They won’t be finished for a while. You might want to call her later.”

Sherwood smiled as he looked over at Chad. “Chad—have you asked this woman to marry you, yet?”

Chad laughed. “You bet. I’m still waiting for an answer.” Jillian and Chad had gotten married just after graduating from Cal. They had divorced ten years later, mostly out of disinterest. However, recent events had brought them back together, and Chad had sworn to Sherwood that if Jillian survived her recent kidnapping ordeal he would re-marry her. “By the way, Jillian wants to have some wine tonight. What do you think of that?”

Sherwood arched his eyebrows, almost as surprised as Chad had been. “Well, you can’t keep a wine aficionado away too long. Good luck with that.” Having been involved with Jillian’s experiences with her kidnappers, he knew she had not been drinking wine recently and recognized that it was a sign of recovery if she did. “I wish I could join you, but I’ll be tied up here for quite a while.”

Chad would have enjoyed Sherwood’s company. As far as he was concerned, the only reason Jillian was alive was because of Sherwood’s perseverance and skills. “We’ll get together. I’ll call you.”