

HILLTOP SUNSET: A BRYNN BANCROFT MYSTERY

EXCERPT

Chapter 01

Brynn jerked in reaction to the news from her employee Jillian Hillcrest, and shaking, dropped her cell phone while disconnecting. Her ex-husband, Liam, picked it up and handed it to her.

Brynn hoped her voice was steady. “They think Isabel might be in California,” she said.

Liam put his arm around Brynn, avoiding the last of the deep bruises caused by the woman they just learned was back in their state. “Do they know where in California? Is she near here?”

Brynn swallowed and shook her head.

“But how do they know she’s in California?”

Brynn looked at Liam and said, “An FBI agent, who was actually on vacation, spotted her in a large group of Canadian tourists in Yosemite. She’s a redhead now, but he took her picture, and they’re sure it’s Isabel.”

Liam frowned. “Well, why didn’t they arrest her?”

Brynn studied the bottle of Merlot, their half-full glasses, and the local artisan cheese and crackers on the table in front of her. The montage looked appealing, but it represented a bittersweet occasion. The couple planned this weekend at their winery to commemorate the finalization of their divorce following 14 years of marriage.

“I don’t know. Maybe since he was on vacation, or wasn’t sure. But he didn’t.” She continued to stare at the wine and cheese scene on the table in front of her. It seemed so normal. Then she turned to Liam and said, “Well, there’s nothing I can do about Isabel. What about us? What’s next?”

Liam responded, “I suppose you’re right about Isabel, but please be careful, Brynn. Watch out for her. We’ve been over this—check out people who come to the winery and to your office.”

They had discussed the topic of Isabel-watching often since Isabel had almost killed Brynn and Jillian before eluding the police two months ago. Brynn said, “I promise. But let’s get back to us. What’s next?”

Brynn studied her ex-husband. Liam Bancroft was a handsome and appealing man, who kept in shape by jogging regularly and whose charismatic personality added to his good looks. She wondered if she’d miss looking up into his intense blue eyes or gently pushing his dark hair away from his eyes or exploring his muscular chest. She felt a familiar tingling signaling her desire for his body. She looked away, waiting for his comment.

“We will always be friends.” He actually managed to make a sound like a laugh. “We just absolutely cannot be married. It doesn’t work.”

Brynn studied Liam’s smiling face with mixed emotions. She wasn’t sure if she was disappointed or angry, but she sensed she was displeased with the realization that she was no longer married to him. She would have to think about that later. For now, out of pride, she pretended to agree with him, although friendship sounded like a consolation prize.

She picked up her glass. “To friendship,” she said.

Liam joined her and picked up his glass to toast. “May we stay close friends. And here’s to our winery. Thank you for taking the time to help build it.”

He had purchased the winery as an investment, and Brynn had agreed to manage it to drive it to a level of profitability making it a true business. The former owners—a couple who, after 40 years, decided to retire and see the world—had developed and created some very drinkable wines, but had done little to promote them or make the winery more profitable. When Brynn saw it, she fell in love with the stone buildings, the smells of fermentation mixed with outdoor earth odors, the sounds of the rushing stream, and its hilltop view of the vineyards of Sonoma. She readily agreed when Liam asked her to help and subsequently she also invested in it.

“I can’t begin to thank you for your support following Isabel’s attack.” She stopped and shook her head, still missing the weight of her long blond hair, which the surgeon had shaved to treat her head wounds. She now had a few inches of fuzz. “I sure do miss my hair.”

Liam studied her face. “You know, you’re even more beautiful without your long hair. Your face is gorgeous and more visible.” He looked at her with a man’s appreciation. Even with the loss of a few pounds as a result of her recovery from the beating, Brynn’s 5-foot 7-inch body was perfectly proportioned and was in great shape for a woman nearing 40.

“That’s the kind of support I truly appreciate!” Brynn smiled.

Liam laughed. “By the way, now that we’re divorced, I assume you’ll change back to your maiden name?”

Brynn shook her head. “No, I plan to keep ‘Bancroft.’ I’ve spent my entire career as Brynn Bancroft, and after weighing the pros and cons of changing back I’ve decided to stay Brynn Bancroft.” Then her phone rang. “Oh, it’s Tim,” she said with a grimace. “Let me see what he needs. We’re reporting earnings this week.”

Brynn remained Chief Financial Officer of Harmonia, a small biotechnology company in Silicon Valley, although she had officially resigned. She didn’t want to leave the growing company, but the wife of the CEO, Tim Wharton, had detected that Brynn was having an affair with her husband and demanded that she resign. Brynn did so and landed a new position in Huntsville, Alabama, which she planned to start in six months after helping Liam with the winery.

However, in the meantime the replacement CFO Harmonia had hired did not work out, and they had to start the process all over again. So Brynn had agreed to stay on until they identified someone. Initially, she enjoyed continuing to fulfill her financial responsibilities. She had always appreciated the unarguable clarity of numbers and what they said about the success or failure of a business or even of a person. The numbers at Harmonia spoke well of the company, even though it was not yet profitable—as many biotechs aren’t, given the long drug-approval process. Nonetheless she reveled in watching the company grow. She saw progress through increasing partner revenue, number of investors, and higher stock price. Lately, however, she was anxious to move on and, for the first time in her career, was finding some aspects of her job to be dull.

“Hi, Tim. What’s up?” she said.

“Are you available for an early-morning meeting tomorrow?”

Brynn sighed. "How early?"

"Can you make it by 6:00?"

Brynn had planned to stay at the winery that night and drive into work in the morning, arriving sometime before noon. If she were to attend an early-morning meeting, she would have to go home that evening to avoid getting up before dawn to drive to the company's offices in Redwood City. "Is it imperative that I be there?" She knew it was fruitless to ask if she could phone in. Tim would have offered that option; he preferred face-to-face meetings when there were items that needed resolution.

"Yes. I'm sorry, but it's the only time we can get everyone together. We could really use your input. Also, Jillian should attend. She'll need to finalize the script." As the VP of corporate communications, Jillian was responsible for preparing materials for performance announcements.

"I'll be there. And I'll check with Jillian to make sure she's available."

The CEO said, "Thanks, Brynn. Sorry to cut into your winery time. I really appreciate your sticking around to help out. I may have a lead for another CFO candidate. But it's too early to talk about her publicly. She's only said that she's willing to discuss it with us."

"Well, that's something. Listen, I need to go. I'll see you in the morning."

For the second time in ten minutes, Brynn disconnected her phone. She quickly texted Jillian to assure her attendance at the meeting. She was now more despondent with the realization that she would have to go home that evening—a two-hour drive to her house on the peninsula south of San Francisco. "Bummer."

Liam shook his head. "You have to go back tonight?"

"Yes."

He cleared his throat and took hold of her hand. "Brynn, this may not be the best time to tell you, but I need you to know before you hear it from someone else." He hesitated, watching his ex-wife closely. "I'm seeing someone, and we're getting serious."

Brynn's mood continued to plummet. Liam had first asked for a divorce, largely, he said, because she really didn't seem to want to participate in his life,

perhaps evidenced by multiple extra-marital affairs by both of them. They had almost parted years earlier but had managed to stay together through the efforts of a marriage counselor. This time, however, Liam refused, and Brynn didn't care enough to resist his request. So they had divorced.

Of course, she expected that someone as good-looking and personable as Liam would be attractive to many women. However, he had been such a big part of her life over the past few weeks that she had begun to depend on him. She looked at his concerned face and knew it hadn't been easy for him to tell her. "Of course you are! It's all right, Liam. You deserve the best. And she better be the best or I'll knock her teeth out."

Liam smiled. "Thanks, Brynn. I hope you'll continue to stay here at the winery and work your financial and administrative magic."

"I wouldn't dream of leaving. I really appreciate your allowing me to help. I've enjoyed it." She picked up her glass and waited for Liam to pick up his and they toasted—as dejected a toast as Brynn had ever made.

Chapter 02

Brynn begrudgingly left the winery earlier than originally planned and spent the night in the home she and Liam had purchased together and shared for almost half of their marriage. They had agreed they would both continue to make the payments in exchange for Brynn's living there and allowing Liam to store a variety of gear and clothing. She loved the house and appreciated the arrangement. Liam subsequently moved to a condo in nearby San Mateo closer to his office.

Her alarm woke her with just enough time to shower and dress. She hoped the dawn meeting was going to be worth it. She backed her Mercedes E-class Cabriolet metallic blue convertible out of her garage and steered it through the sparse early-morning traffic on her way to meet with Tim, Jillian, and others to finalize their announcement for the next day.

Despite the darkness and chilly air, Brynn drove with the top down. She loved feeling the wind on her face and in her hair—regardless of its length. She had left the winery the night before shortly after Liam suggested that Brynn meet his new girlfriend the following weekend at the winery. The cottage on the property had two bedrooms, and Liam wanted his newest love interest to enjoy the peace and beauty of the hilltop setting. Brynn could stay in one room, and they could stay in the other. It would be perfect, he said.

Brynn shook her head and wondered if Liam was insensitive or just clueless. *Why would I want to meet and greet his new girlfriend?*

She automatically glanced at her dashboard to check her speed and fuel level and was surprised when she looked up and saw a car less than 30 feet in front of her. She easily steered the Mercedes around the braking white sedan and glared at the driver as she went by. The red-haired woman looked away, but Brynn saw her face briefly, and instantly felt a blast of fear travel from her stomach throughout her arms and legs. The driver looked like Isabel, the person responsible for one of the most horrific nights of Brynn's life, a week recuperating in the hospital, and many subsequent weeks of pain. When Brynn tried to get a better view of her, the white

car left the freeway, moving too fast for Brynn to clearly see the license plate number.

She arrived at her office ten minutes later, still shaking. She reasoned with herself that the other driver couldn't have been Isabel. How would the woman have known that Brynn would be on the freeway? She assumed that she was simply imagining it was Isabel as a result of the call the previous afternoon from Jillian suggesting that an FBI agent had seen her in California. Why would Isabel come back? It didn't make sense. If she succeeded in eluding law enforcement officers, she'd be crazy to return to California where she was wanted for numerous crimes, including murder.

Brynn quickly raised her convertible top and checked the semi-dark parking lot carefully. She was relieved to see lights on in the building and pleased to see Jillian drive up. She stepped out of the car and waved to her employee.

Jillian had also suffered from the swings of Isabel's baseball bat. Her dark hair was also just growing back, and her face displayed light greenish bruises beneath makeup. She walked with a slight limp from the orthopedic boot she was still wearing as a result of an injured leg. She greeted Brynn with a wave, and the two walked toward the lobby.

Brynn looked at Jillian, not sure whether to share her morning's possible-Isabel encounter, but decided to tell her. "I think I may have seen Isabel this morning."

Jillian stopped and stared at her. "What! Why? What happened?"

Brynn and Jillian had experienced similar emotional impacts resulting from their ordeal with Isabel. But Brynn was sensitive to Jillian's reaction, recognizing that Jillian had more familiarity as a victim of criminals than Brynn. In addition to her being attacked by Isabel, she had been kidnapped and held for several days by a murderer less than a year ago. Brynn said, "I think it was she, but I'm not sure. A white car braked suddenly in front of me, and when I drove by the driver looked away and then took the next freeway exit. It could have been Isabel."

"But it could have also just been someone who forgot to get off the freeway and hit the brakes at the last minute. It could have, couldn't it?"

Brynn sighed. "Yes, it could have. But I wish I could stop shaking."

Jillian nodded. "I know what you mean. I've been on edge ever since Loren called to tell me Isabel had been sighted. He and Chad continuously plot my increased protection, which doesn't help calm me down."

Chad, Jillian's ex-husband after ten years of marriage and now fiancé, had rescued Jillian from several dangerous situations over the past year. He and San Francisco homicide Inspector Loren Sherwood shared concern for Jillian and Brynn's well being when Isabel managed to elude capture and fled the area. Inspector Sherwood kept in close contact with the FBI and other law enforcement to learn of any developments in the search for Isabel.

Brynn smiled when she heard Chad's name. "I'm so excited about your wedding, and that you've chosen the winery for your ceremony and reception. Liam and I discussed it this weekend, and we have some ideas about turning it into a New Year's event."

The new subject seemed to buoy both women, and by the time they reached the conference room full of Harmonia executives, they were chatting and laughing.

Chapter 03

The next day, Harmonia announced its financial performance results with no major issues, and the company's stock continued to recover lost ground. Jillian was back at her desk later that morning handling her share of investor calls. Brynn was sitting in her office when Tim entered and closed the door. She said, "To what do I owe the honor of a visit by our Chief Executive Officer?"

Tim—whose dimpled smile and salt-and-pepper hair continued to attract Brynn—plopped into her guest chair. "I've been speaking with a variety of other CEOs who are noticing an increase in new and interesting methods of embezzlement by their employees. As a result, we've arranged an exclusive small conference of Silicon Valley companies to hear some presentations on how to prevent fraud and embezzlement. Any chance you could attend? It's a two-day conference next weekend in Santa Cruz."

Brynn grimaced. "Really? I'm a short-timer, you know. Your next CFO might want to implement his or her own anti-embezzlement procedures."

Tim nodded. "The Board would really like someone to attend, and you're the most logical person. You could make it your last project before you leave."

"Ahhh, the Board. The real reason for your request." Brynn smiled, aware of Tim's commitment to appease the Board of Directors whenever possible. "OK, I'll go. But I'm sure we don't have any issues here at Harmonia."

"I know. But you might learn about some procedures to assure we continue not to have any. It should be pleasant. You might enjoy a weekend at a luxury resort." Tim stood up to his full six-foot height. "How are you doing, by the way? We've been so busy lately, we haven't had a chance to talk."

Brynn stared at him for a long time, but he never looked away. She broke the connection, recognizing the familiar tingling that signaled her desire for him. She breathed deeply, shook her head, determined to present a strong appearance, and said, "It's probably better that we don't talk. However, I'm doing quite fine. My divorce is final, and I just found out that Liam is actually seeing someone new."

“I’m sorry. That couldn’t have been a fun experience. If there’s anything I can do—”

Brynn looked up at her former lover, longingly, and said without much conviction, “No, I think the two of us have done enough. I’m moving on now.”

Tim nodded. He knew about Brynn’s less-than-idyllic childhood. He recalled discussions of an abusive father, a mother who died when Brynn was still a teenager, and a less-than-helpful younger brother—none conducive to sustained relationships. Only her superior intelligence and a supportive relative somewhere in her family enabled her to excel enough to get a Harvard MBA and eventually work her way up to CFO by her late 30s. Her beauty and hourglass figure had probably both hurt and helped her as well.

He bent over her desk and looked straight into her eyes, fully aware that no one could see him with the door closed. “I understand. Despite what happened, I do appreciate my relationship with my wife. You know that, of course. But I’ll always love you, too. I miss you.”

Brynn stared back at the distinguished 50ish CEO. From a business perspective, he was as ethical as they come. But, she realized, he just couldn’t “keep it in his pants.” She had always suspected that she wasn’t his first affair. And she understood from his hopeful expression that he was inviting her back into bed. And she was definitely tempted. “Thanks, Tim. But that’s the last time I want you to tell me that. OK? We’re done. I’m only staying here until you find a replacement CFO. Then I’m gone, and we’ll probably never see each other again. It’s what’s best for both of us.” Brynn had never actually faced her parting from Tim, and saying the words disturbed her. She was not accustomed to being without a lover.

Tim blinked, then nodded, turned quickly, opened the door, and left his former mistress’s office, not noticing when Brynn started to say something, but somehow managed to stop herself. She sat staring at her computer for a few moments, then checked her calendar and scheduled the conference on it. The materials Tim had left indicated that hotel and meals were included, but it looked like she had to make her own reservations. With that task accomplished, she focused

her attention to returning her share of investor calls generated by their performance announcement.

Chapter 04

The following Friday, Brynn pulled into a parking spot in front of the building with a sign that said “Conference Center Headquarters” and parked her Mercedes next to a large BMW. She had encountered congested traffic on the drive from Redwood City to Santa Cruz on a Friday afternoon. Her whole body had stiffened—most likely due to her not-quite-healed injuries. Even her fingers protested when she flexed them around the steering wheel. She was irritated—a feeling made all the worse because she hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast.

She entered the building to pick up her registration packet and the key to her room. A tall, lanky man in a well-fitted dark gray suit preceded her. When he finished, he turned and smiled, presenting to Brynn an almost-handsome fine-featured face, with thin lips, graying hair, and a slender, broad-shouldered but slightly stooped physique. Brynn found him appealing. He reminded her of the stereotypical professor, but with a dash of sex appeal. She envisioned him naked, with a book in his hand and a pipe in his mouth. She responded to his overture with her own smile.

He said, “Oh, hello. And who are you?”

Brynn wasn’t sure she liked the direct approach, but she responded with her name. “And you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. How rude of me. I’m one of the speakers, H. Todd Logan. I like to get to know my audience. Where are you from? Actually, have you had dinner? They have a buffet for us right here. Would you care to join me?”

Brynn surprised herself by following the speaker through a door to a table full of trays of food exuding odors of caramelized onions, sautéed garlic, and freshly baked bread. Normally she would have turned down such an abrupt invitation believing that to accept it would show weakness. After all, she could hardly be perceived as a woman without a mate. However, she found his eagerness appealing. It made her want to engage. Her mood started to improve.

The pair selected from a variety of meats, vegetables, salads, and desserts. Brynn appreciated the choices and also the attention from her new friend, who escorted her to a table, pulled out her chair, and asked if she wanted wine with her dinner.

“Thanks so much. I’d love some. Do you go by ‘Todd’—rather than ‘H’?”

Brynn smiled.

He laughed. “Why, yes I do. And please call me that, rather than ‘H.’ It’s not my favorite letter since it stands for ‘Hiram,’ a name from my grandmother’s past.”

Brynn’s mood definitely was improving, and she enjoyed conversing with Todd over a much-appreciated dinner. She was fast forgetting Liam, her divorce, work, and even the threat of Isabel.

“You said you were one of our speakers. What will you be speaking about?”

Todd finished a bite before responding. “I am head of cost accounting at Jasper Foods. I’m offering tips on how to prevent embezzlement in companies with high turnover and complex cash flows.”

Brynn was familiar with the large Fortune 500 holding company that specialized in food products. She held stock in the company and had researched it thoroughly. She asked Todd a few questions about his job there, but at the moment preferred to discuss more personal topics. “And what do you do when you’re not working or offering tips at conferences?”

“I love to sail. I have a 26-foot boat moored in Alameda.”

“That sounds like fun! I’ve always wanted to learn to sail.”

Todd seemed pleased. “I’d be delighted to be the one to teach you.”

“Do you have a wife who might object?”

“No, not even a girlfriend. What about you? Do you have a husband who might object?”

“Not even a fiancé. I’m recently divorced.”

Todd sipped his Chardonnay wine. “I also like to travel, explore new places, and drive fast.” He laughed.

Brynn liked the sound of his laugh. It came from deep in his throat and seemed very deliberate and precise. "I think I'm going to enjoy your presentation," she said.