

# The Washington Daily Star

## SENATE CLOAKROOM CABAL

### CAPITOL HILL: FDA Rejects Touted Miracle Cure Cancer Drug

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### Protesters March On Capitol, FDA Social Media Wants Investigations

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Keith M. Donaldson

A Laura Wolfe Thriller



The Goose, a small restaurant bar on Capitol Hill, was bursting with lusty, charismatic twenty- and thirty-somethings. It was happy hour, and the crowd was buzzing. Barstools sat askew, each surrounded by a gaggle of drinkers. The wooden tables and chairs, jammed into the small dining area past the end of the bar, were fully occupied with standees squeezed in around them.

Congress was in session.

The crowd was as diverse as were the people on the Hill. Gays and straights, males and females, color—it made no difference here. Happy hour at this popular watering hole belonged to the aides and staff who worked on Capitol Hill.

They played like they worked—at a blistering pace. They gossiped with great glee over what a senator or congressperson did on the floor or in committee. Their faces were bright with the eagerness of youth as they shared tidbits of congressional gossip, always on the alert for a new spin.

Unlike modern glass-and-brass eateries with TV sets or jukeboxes, the entertainment here came from the patrons themselves. They wanted it that way—no competition. Their burning desire was to share some ripe new morsel of inside information. Between their rush of words, they gulped in air or took a swallow of their favorite libation.

Two men and a woman sat at the end of the bar with their heads practically touching. The sandy-haired man with a rumpled and haggard look was Michael Horne, administrative assistant to Senator Roanne Dalton. He spoke in a forced hush tone to fellow Hill staffers Nancy Morris and Tyrell Ward.

“I’m telling you, Senator Dalton’s not going to cave in.”

“She could lose her seat on the committee, Michael,” Nancy said, as she tucked some of her long, light-brown hair behind an ear. “Tom Kelly is not someone a junior senator—”

“Or any senator,” warned Tyrell, a trim African-American male. “You remember what happened to Wolford. Kelly demoted him to an afterthought.”

“The Majority Leader’s not putting my senator on a scrap heap.”

“Such loyalty,” Nancy parried, flipping her hair for the umpteenth time.

“Yeah well, we’re working on some stuff that should make Kelly sit up and listen,” Michael replied.

“He’s a fourth-term senator and fifth-year Majority Leader whose sights are set on higher things. I doubt there is anything—”

“He would do well to curry favor with Senator Dalton, Nan. He does *not* want to take her on in open session. He’s ornery, I’ll give you that, but not stupid. We’ve attempted to sit down with him, but he keeps giving us the cold shoulder.”

“Why do you care, Michael?” Tyrell pressed. “Aren’t you the guy who was moving on once Senator Dalton got her feet wet? I mean, she’s duly elected to a full term now. You said—”

“And I may. I’m just not in any hurry. Besides, she’s savvier—”

“Yeah, yeah, we know how political those beauty pageants can be. Didn’t you also say you weren’t interested in working for a beauty queen living on her late husband’s reputation?”

“Don’t be too harsh on our confused friend, Tyrell. He may like his female senator more than we think.” Nancy winked at Michael.

“Oh please, give me a break, Nan. The only switching I’ll be doing is in the job market.”

His companions laughed. Actually, Michael did like his boss. His being gay may be to his advantage; he wasn’t sexually attracted to her. He had never expected her to run for the Senate office she had been appointed to after her senator husband was killed in a plane crash that also took the life of his AA.

“Go on and laugh, but the current Senator Dalton is not riding on her late husband’s coattails. She has a PhD in history and has been, as you so deftly pointed out, through the beauty pageant wars.” Michael downed his drink. “I need to get going.”

“Why?” Tyrell asked. “I thought we were going . . .”

“Standing us up?” Nancy pouted.

Michael caught the bartender's eye. "My bill, Sal."

"Gotcha," the bartender replied from down the bar.

"Help me out here," Michael asked. "What can Kelly and others gain from a cancer drug being turned down?" He didn't add Senator Pembroke's name because he chaired the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee, where Nancy worked. Her committee had oversight on the FDA.

"Oh, come on," Nancy protested.

"You're not saying a United States senator—?"

"Put it any way you want, Ty," Michael shot back. "The drug lobby is second only to terrorism and the NRA when it comes to putting on the pressure."

Nancy became concerned. "Maybe I shouldn't be hearing all this."

Michael knew she was right. What kept the three such good friends was never getting into serious stuff. Besides, gossiping and rumor-mongering was more fun and less dangerous.

"We're not talking policy." Tyrell grinned. "Besides, what do we know anyway?"

"True," she said weakly. "I just don't like to hear things like that."

"How do the spy boys say it? *We never had this conversation*," Tyrell smirked, eliciting grins from both. "That's better. This is a place for gossip and conspiracies, nothing real or serious."

Bartender Sal slapped a bill down in front of Michael. "How about you two?" he asked, as he backed toward a beckoning voice.

Tyrell looked at Nancy. "You good for another?"

"Sure, I don't have anything except a pile of laundry to go home to."

"Another round, Sal," Tyrell called out.

Michael put some money on the bar and picked up his briefcase. "I've got new stuff to read before I meet with the senator first thing in the morning. One envelope was dropped off as I was leaving the office with just my name on it. I opened it only to find a sealed letter with a note taped to it that read: *Do not open this where anyone can put their eyes on it*. There was no author."

"Sounds mysterious. Maybe a new admirer?" Nan quipped.

"Who knows. I'll find out after I get home."

Tyrell grinned. "Ah, no rest for an AA."

Michael smiled. "I'm taking the train up to Baltimore tomorrow evening, so I won't . . ."

Sal arrived with two drinks and cleared Michael's bill.

Tyrell frowned. "I thought you weren't seeing him anymore."

"I'm not. Just tying up some loose ends. Maybe we three can catch something in Georgetown over the weekend."

"We'll talk," Nancy said.

"Take care, bro," Tyrell added affectedly.

"Always do." Michael gave them a half wave and squeezed his way through the standees and onto Pennsylvania Avenue. He was dressed for winter, but a warm front had come through during the day, turning the evening into a balmy one.

He liked living on Capitol Hill and being close to work. He also liked the village atmosphere. The Seventh Street Market gave him convenient shopping. Although Michael had the look of an overworked, out-of-shape, young college professor, he was an avid biker, spending many weekends on the paths along the National Mall and Potomac River.

He enjoyed working for his female senator. Barely six years his senior, she had promoted him to AA when she decided to run for the seat to which she had been appointed. Roanne Elizabeth McAllister Dalton was a beautiful woman, was very intelligent, and knew how to win.

He crossed Pennsylvania Avenue at 2nd Street SE and walked east on Independence Avenue. Senator Dalton had surprised him with her panache. They had met during the five years he had worked as staff for her husband, but they'd never talked beyond pleasantries.

He turned left on Fifth Street, walked a couple of blocks, and then turned onto his street. His apartment had a large bedroom, a private bath, and a closet kitchen on the third floor of a converted house. Maybe someday he'd be able to buy one of the smaller townhouses. That was too far off to think about now.

He neared his building and reached for his house key. Hearing a rustling sound, he started to turn around, but never finished his move. He felt a sharp pain on his head and sensed he was falling. Then everything went black.

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Across the street, a woman looking from a second-floor window witnessed the mugging and immediately called 911. She watched as the assaulter hurriedly rifled the victim's pockets and then dragged the lifeless body off the sidewalk, rolling it down the short flight of stairs that led to an English basement apartment. The mugger picked up a briefcase and ran off, just as the witness's emergency call was answered.