

The Hill People

A Laura Wolfe Novel

By Keith M Donaldson

SYNOPSIS

This second book in the thrilling Laura Wolfe series pits the savvy investigative reporter against pharmaceutical lobbyists and crooked United States Senators bent on keeping a miracle-cure cancer drug out of the hands of the American people.

Rookie U.S. Senator Roanne Dalton suspects her senior colleagues are working with drug company lobbyists to pressure the FDA into rejecting a drug touted as the cure for cancer. Short of committing political suicide, Dalton is powerless to act, but when local newspaper reporter Laura Wolfe wins the Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting, Dalton requests a private meeting and tells Laura what she believes to be happening and asks Laura to help.

Not one to abandon a challenge, Laura is granted permission by her editor and dives into the investigation, soon discovering that those who work on Capitol Hill live in their own world. She is given a cover story so as not to raise suspicions about who is being investigated. It was slow going until Dalton's top aide introduces Laura into the Hill's fabled underground where gossip starts turning to leads and murder.

As her developing story takes on more twists and turns than a hairpin curve, Laura lands right in the middle of a deadly conspiracy, one that might spell the end of her journalism career—and her life.

1

Senator Tom Kelly's Office

"I've always admired your view of the Capitol dome, Tom," said Stanley Horowitz, the top pharmaceutical lobbyist in Washington, as he turned away from the third floor window in the Russell Senate Office Building. "It's awesomely patriotic and inspiring, especially at night with the lights shining on it."

Tom Kelly, the six-foot-two, raw-boned Majority Leader of the United States Senate smiled. He and Horowitz were in his private senate office—not his Majority Leader's office. He never met the feisty lobbyist there. Feeling relaxed, he leaned his butt against the front of his huge mahogany desk, arms crossed. He had occupied this space for the last 12 of his 22 years in the Senate. Black and white photos of smiling faces adorned his walls—trophies of a gilded past. "I'd trade it in for the one looking south at the Washington Monument, Stanley."

That elicited a smirk from Horowitz. "Can you actually see it from the Oval Office? I can't remember."

"You can see it from the mansion's residence."

"Oh to wake up and see the rising sun reflecting off that white obelisk."

"Don't go poetic on me, Stan; I couldn't stomach it."

"Poetic I'm not, Tom, but a realist I am."

The pharmaceutical lobbyist was right, Kelly thought. He was a hard-nosed bastard—no soft edges. Even his smile had down-turned lines.

"However," Horowitz grimaced, "for us to realize your fondest dreams of waking up and catching that view, we need to tend to business."

"Senator Dalton was the only one not on board, and for that I blame her overly eager AA, Michael Horne. He's the one doing the digging," Kelly replied calmly, while inside he was pissed off. He pushed off from the lead edge of his desk and moved around behind it.

"Horne's controllable. What about Crawford and Witherspoon?"

"Gavin Crawford and Jean Witherspoon are cautious senators. Nevertheless, they always follow the caucus when unanimity's required. They were never *not* on board, Stanley."

Kelly noticed Horowitz sidle into the spot in front of his desk that he had just vacated, all the while staring at him. Kelly met the wiry lobbyist's gaze.

"It wouldn't look good," the pharma said tersely, "for the Majority Leader, a potential presidential nominee, to be incapable of roping in his own senators on something so simple"

"It's a done deal," he replied indifferently, and plopped into his executive chair.

Horowitz lived on intimidation. He wondered what the lobbyist's life had been like before he had built his high priced law firm and taken over the pharmaceutical lobby. He was considered to have more power than did any non-legislator on the Hill.

The pharma leaned in over the desk, his eyes like slits. "Rogers' cancer drug *cannot* be approved. We've done our job on the FDA's administrative committee. They like the thousands of reasons we've given them to *see* it our way, and I don't want—"

"Harley Rogers is a tough old egg, admired, with a lot—"

"He doesn't have the clout of a two-year-old. His crumbling company proves that," Horowitz said intensely, some of his spittle landing on the desk.

"He's a decent, well respected guy, Stanley."

“Don’t get all wishy-washy on me, Tom, it doesn’t become you,” his intensity increasing. “Harley Rogers went back on his promise to reduce the scope of Tutoxtamen, which was that it would cure only one type of cancer. He tricked us into thinking he was going along, now he’ll suffer the consequences. Do you understand what curing over ninety percent of those afflicted with cancer could do?” He slapped the desk for added emphasis.

“Rogers wants to become a damned historical figure—the creator of a miracle cure. The Salk vaccine would look like a cough drop compared to what his drug would do. You damn well better not weaken on me, Tom.”

Kelly felt a strong urge to want to stomp this arrogant egomaniac into the rug, but coolly suppressed his desire. “I am not weakening, Stan. I just wish it didn’t have to be Harley.”

“Well it is. His drug can never see the light of day. We need unanimous support from your party, up front, to give backbone to those squeamish prigs at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). A couple are already waffling.”

“Fred Pembroke assures me they’ll stamp it *not approvable* and send it into the purgatory of your dreams,” Kelly said smoothly to the bristly pharmaceutical king pin. “And don’t worry about Dalton—she’ll come around. She may be pure as the driven snow, but her husband was no saint. We can use that if necessary. We’ll be FDA’s firewall, Stan,” he said assuredly, as he leaned forward in his chair.

“Tutoxtamen will get buried in bureaucracy.”

2

My weekday mornings for the past three months had been serene—seeing my husband, Jerry, off to work and caring for my infant son, Tyler. However, today my maternity leave was history and I was a mess. During my nearly 15 years as a newspaper reporter, I had never had domestic responsibilities. But today, I was beginning the life of a working mother.

In the three plus years Jerry and I had been married, we either lived on his Catalina 350 sailboat, *Scalawag*, docked in the Washington marina, or in my one bedroom apartment in the Cleveland Park section of the nation's capital. Last fall, with Tyler's birth imminent, we bought a suburban Arlington, Virginia, house, which was close to the Clarendon Metrorail station.

We still have more furnishing to do, but it's comfortable. Right now, though, I felt like I was in an alien land. I loved my three months home with Tyler. Today, however, I wouldn't be playing with him, taking him for a stroll, doing laundry, giving him baths, or cleaning up after him. I was turning him over to the care of a nanny.

I went to the top of the stairs and called down to Jerry. "Did you tell Anna to be here at 8:30?"

"Yes, Laura," my husband answered in a most placating tone, "it's the same time it was the last time you asked," he announced from the dining room, where he was most likely playing with our son.

"Smart ass," I muttered under my breath and returned to our bedroom.

Jerry insisted he drive me in this morning. I've made the trip before—Tyler and I had Metroed into the paper just before Christmas, so I could show him off. It's an easy commute, for which we paid a healthy premium. It fit our criteria, though; a back yard and a short walk to stores and especially Metro.

I checked myself over in our floor length mirror, on the inside of our closet door. I had made a rare trip to a beauty salon on Saturday for a trim, shampoo and set. My light brown hair, which didn't quite reach my shoulders, had the *bounce* I liked. For today only, I put on my navy blue skirt suit. Normally, my dress was casual. After a quick examination, I thought I looked fine; the five extra pounds I had gained since the last time I'd worn it weren't noticeable on my five-seven frame.

I picked up my purse and checked the contents. No cell phone! A spike of adrenaline shot through me as I began a frantic search, and stopped almost as fast, when it dawned on me it was in the kitchen sitting in its charger, where I had been putting it since the day we moved in.

I heard Jerry's voice. Anna must have arrived. I checked the clock radio on the nightstand - 8:23. I liked that she was early. I went downstairs and found Jerry with Tyler in his arms talking slowly to Anna. Jerry was wearing his *Tyler* apron.

Anna wasn't brand new to me. I'd had her come to the house for short visits, as fit her schedule, over the past two weeks, so she could get to know Tyler and for me to get to know her. I was also able to acquaint her with where things were and what Tyler liked. I liked Anna. I was just being my normal apprehensive self; scared to death.

At 37, Tyler might be my only child. I'd never had an interest in marriage and rarely dated until Jerry came along. The most unlikely person, but mutual friend, Max Walsh, Captain of Homicide for the Metropolitan Police Department, or MPD, introduced us. I was a reporter and Jerry a defense attorney—not the sort of people cops normally befriended. Nevertheless,

Max played matchmaker and I fell head over heels in love; a sort of destiny thing.

I knew Max from covering homicides in Washington. When I joined the *Washington Star*, I was a seasoned beat reporter, having worked in three other cities over a ten-year span, and knew my way around murder investigations. He and I formed an immediate rapport. About a year later, he introduced me to Jerry. Later, I teased that I would never forgive him for taking so long. Not. He stood up for us and is Tyler's godfather.

"Good morning," I said cheerily, when I reached the first floor.

"Good morning," Anna said haltingly, with a smile. Her English was so-so, but we'd worked out some short phrases and words for her to use if she needed to call my cell, which is the way we would communicate, cell to cell. She wouldn't answer the house phone.

Tyler squirmed in Jerry's arms, his eyes bright and happy, as I approached him. That's right, young fella, you just keep remembering I'm your mama, I thought, smiling. I took him carefully, holding him out so that some misdirected food morsel on his bib didn't transfer to my dark jacket. I gave him a big smooch, and then handed him over to Anna.

"Don't forget your cell phone, hon."

Jerry knew my mind and knew it was going off in myriad directions. In fact, he had sat me down last night for a little *chat*.

He said, "I'd noticed a change in you over the weekend. You were fretting. Tyler is in great hands, with Anna. You—what makes you, *you*—your diligence and caring—your vivid imagination and flakiness, sometimes simultaneous, is what separates you from everybody else. But here, there is nothing to be fretful about. Going to work tomorrow is not a worrisome situation."

He then marched me upstairs and made love to me.

My mind returned to the present. "Remember, Anna, call me anytime. Okay?"

Anna smiled. "Si, eh, yes."

With one apprehension taken care of, I shifted my concerns over to what my editor, Avery Lassiter, might have in store for me. When we talked last week, she told me I wouldn't be getting any beat assignments. I suspected that might have been somebody else's decision. She knew I liked being a beat reporter and that I'd go back to it in a minute, regardless of any celebrity I'd gained from breaking last year's serial killer case.

Jerry nudged me and handed me my cell phone. "It's time."