

**THE DISCRETIONIST**  
**LANCE HAWVERMALE**

## **Dedication**

To my dad, Dennis “Bag” Hawvermale, U.S.M.C.

“A gentleman is simply a patient wolf.”

—Lana Turner

## Chapter 1

“No matter what happens in the next few minutes, don’t turn around.”

The driver nodded and kept his eyes on the glittering street beyond the windshield because when a client wanted discretion you had, sensibly, two options: shut up and take the money, or shut up and take the money.

“This submarine of yours have one of those partition thingies?”

The driver didn’t bother to nod this time—*partition thingy?*—just extended a hand and touched a finger to the magic button. With a gentle hum, the blackened glass rose ghostlike behind him, closing off his world from the sweaty Shangri-la the client was about to create in the back.

He waited.

No one waited like the driver. Other chauffeurs gathered in the casino parking garages for gossip, caffeine, text messaging, and—inevitably—smoking. In the strata of Las Vegas social groups, theirs was an archaeological history of shooting the breeze while their betters wiggled martinis at one another and hid behind their sunglasses at Texas Hold ’Em tables, preening like miniature gods. But the driver needed no cigarettes and even less camaraderie from those who understood the trade. Alone, his thoughts walked the steps of his imagination, and what he found at the path’s end was always himself.

The door opened. Closed.

The driver felt the car’s weight dip gently. He knew the vehicle intimately, like a captain with the first and only ship of his command, and judging by the minimal shift, he guessed the new passenger to be no more than a hundred and fifty pounds, give or take. And so the limousine welcomed aboard another actor, though the driver didn’t care whether they knew their lines or not. All that mattered other than the sun rising tomorrow and his shoes staying shined was the client’s fifty-one dollars an hour, plus tax.

## Chapter 2

Later he let them out a block from where their wives were feeding slot machines.

When he opened the door for them, he caught his own reflection in the polarized glass. The cascade of colored lights here on Karen Avenue subtly transformed him. His skin was the kind of black that was neither so dark as to make his client uncomfortable nor so light that the man didn't look at him like he was a servant when he climbed out the car and said, "Nice tux."

"Thank you, sir." The driver had never worn a simple chauffeur's uniform.

The client hefted an uncertain smile to his face as another man followed him out, slightly ruffled. "I appreciate your circumspection this evening. By that I mean—"

"I know the meaning of the word, sir."

"Oh . . . yes, of course." The man tried to keep his smile in place. A hairline of sweat lingered on his upper lip. "Then I'm also sure you accept the good, old, devalued American dollar in lieu of a credit card." He palmed something from an inner suit pocket and offered his hand.

The driver, as he had done so many times before, shook.

"And if I should require your boundless prudence again in the future?"

Now it was the driver's turn to delve into his pocket. His tuxedo jacket wasn't custom-made but had at least been tailored so as not to give away its off-the-rack ancestry. From within it he retrieved a card.

### ONE COOL GENTLEMAN LIMOUSINE SERVICE

The client accepted the card. "Very well, then."

With that, the two men struck off down the glaring Vegas sidewalk, veering apart from each other as they approached the Sahara.

The driver didn't even watch them go.

He closed the rear door without bothering to check on the aftermath, the spilled Courvoisier, the condoms in the tiny waste bin, the insistent scent. In the two years that he'd been the owner and sole operator of One Cool Gentleman, he'd shuttled senators, high-rollers, low-rollers on a weekend lucky streak, convention-goers, a handful of celebrities, mafiosi, honeymooners, and pricey prostitutes en route to or from the job. They could all be read, their lives examined and revealed by the flotsam they left behind. But they'd purchased from the

driver more than just a ride; they also bought a few blessed miles of anonymity. And they remembered as much when they signed for the tip.

The driver slipped behind the wheel. The dashboard clock read 11:17 PM.

Feeding time in the city had begun, and the animals waited.

### Chapter 3

At midnight the women started singing.

Somewhere in heaven, the driver knew, Whitney Houston was scratching at a sudden rash. The five bachelorettes had reached the chorus of “I Wanna Dance with Somebody,” the only part of the song they managed without breaking into giggles and partially drunken words their mothers hadn’t taught them. Because they’d insisted he didn’t raise the privacy divider—the better to pester you with, my dear—he played out his prisoner’s role of captive audience of one. At least they smelled nice.

He guided the car into a gentle turn.

The singing had, at least, trimmed off the conversation they’d been having about someone named Derek and the God-if-only-he-could-touch-me things *they* would say to him if they were that lucky bitch Laretta. And other tidbits: Jessica’s new boyfriend, a promotion at work, the economy, open-toed pumps. They said *boobs* a lot.

The driver slowed, edging toward the curb.

“ . . . *with somebody who loves me!* ”

They broke into a cheer in which the driver detected a few ounces of sadness. He didn’t intend to make note of the occasional strain in their voices, their unspoken sense that this marriage might change things between them. But his radar sometimes swept the local skies before he could turn it off. Thankfully it was time to shift into park and get out.

He held their door open. How many times had he performed this particular action in the previous twenty-three months? How many times had he reached for a hand to help a lady plant her narrow heel safely on terra firma?

The first one smiled at him a little bashfully. She was probably the one he’d heard whispering about him being kinda cute. The next one wore a cocktail dress that was likely worth at least two payments on the limo. Two of them were white, two were black, and damned if the last wasn’t Hispanic, a perfectly divided demographic right here on the sidewalk in front of the MGM Grand.

The tallest and least inebriated of them gave him a little wave. “Thank you so much.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.”

“Oh, you don’t have to call her ma’am,” another one said. “That kind of chivalrous nonsense goes straight to her bleach-blond head.”

“And tequila goes straight to yours, Shondra,” her friend returned.

Shondra pinched the corner of the driver’s tie and gazed up at him. “I don’t suppose you have time for a little nightcap? Sort of take the edge off . . .” She gave his tie a tug. “Hey, this isn’t even a clip-on. I’m impressed.”

Offering her a prefabricated smile, he carefully removed her hand before she could storm the Bastille of his bowtie. “I’m honored by the invite, but I’m on the clock.”

“Sure, honey. Your loss.”

Thankfully they’d paid in advance, because suddenly they drifted away, one of them removing her shoes as they went.

The driver checked himself in the glass. Women had this thing about touching a man’s tie. He hadn’t worn a ready-tied variety since that night a year ago when the sorority girl had reached for him with the quickness of a lioness and tried to untie it. When she realized the bow was pre-made and fastened around his collar by a strap, she’d laughed a mere foot from his face, while her embarrassed friends tried to lead her away.

Satisfied that all was well, he got back in the car and went to meet his one true love.

## Chapter 4

Tully waged war with salami. As long as the driver had known him, Tully had craved little more than various incarnations of that particular cold cut. He called it a surrogate; ever since he gave up the sauce, Tully had screwed his cravings to wintergreen gum, salami on rye, and porn.

Munching the last of his sandwich, Tully dumped himself into the passenger's seat. He was fifty-six but could've passed for seventy. Faded tattoos that had lost their meaning covered both arms, hieroglyphs of a younger man's life. "Hey, maestro. You ever get the feeling that Jesus was like an Amway salesman?"

The driver checked his mirrors and pulled into the street. "Is it going to be one of those nights?"

"One of *what* nights?"

"You know what I mean."

"Listen, I told your pops I'd look after you, and now what's happening? *I'm* the one in need of lookin' after. You know how dedicated I am? I go to these meetings at midnight, goddamn *midnight*, because that's when the addicts in this town need help the most. Myself included."

"So?"

"So I'm dedicated, that's all I'm saying." He paused, exhaled. "You doin' all right?"

"Yeah, Tull. I'm chill."

"Now what the hell does that mean? Chill? That's something a punk-ass kid would say. How old are you? Thirty yet?"

"Almost."

"Then do me a favor and say *cool*, capiche? We've been sayin' that since the fifties and it's worked out just fine. Can you do that for your old man's ex-partner?"

The driver permitted himself his first real smile of the day. "Whatever you want."

Tully swallowed the remains of his sandwich and wiped his mouth on his arm. "God, I'd lick the condensation off a goat's balls for a cigarette."

"Not in the car."

"So you always say."

"Impossible to get the smell out of the upholstery."

“Is all you care about this damn car? You know what you lack most in this second-rate life here on planet Earth?”

“What could that be?”

“Passion. You ain’t passionate about shit.”

“Sure, I am.”

“Yeah, well then I’m Ray Charles because I sure the hell don’t see it.”

The driver said nothing more. He thought if he tested Tully’s hypothesis too thoroughly, he’d do nothing but prove the man’s point.

A silent minute passed.

Tully twisted in his seat. “You know I’m madly in love with you, right?”

“I’m afraid to answer that. What do you need?”

“Hey, give an old flatfoot the benefit of the doubt, will ya? I’m not askin’ for any favors, for chrissakes. At least not any *additional* favors. I mean, these rides are enough. I’m already in your debt until the next life and all that shit. But I mean seriously. When I think about it, you’re all I got. And *no*, I’m not about to start getting all touchy-feely and slap you on the back or anything and call you the son I never had. But I just wanted to say it. If we get hit by a bus tonight on the way home, for instance. Just so you know.”

The driver had long been familiar with Tully’s monologues and his routine expressions of brotherhood. Some of that simpatico stuff was only leftovers from the days Tully had spent on the beat with Malcolm, the driver’s father. Some of it was straight from the AA playbook, as recovering alcoholics were encouraged to make amends and build bridges. But the rest of it, the core of it, was as true as the limo’s engine, a motor with its own beating heart that took men where they needed to go.

“I hear you, Tull. We’re cool.”

“Good. Very damn good. As long as we ain’t chill.”

The driver laughed. “Perish the thought.”

After he dropped Tully off at his apartment—though Tull insisted on calling it a *flat*, as if that could class it up a notch—he spent an hour at the car wash with his jacket off and his shirtsleeves rolled up, vacuuming out the telltales of the day’s clients and realizing with no surprise at all that he’d already forgotten their faces.

He didn’t mind. It was safer that way.



## Chapter 5

Before picking up his next client the following day, he visited the pillar of salt his father had become. The Horizon Health Care parking lot was no place for the black Chrysler 300 with its seventy-inch stretch, its custom wet bar, and its fiber-optic lighting. The car and its upkeep were the driver's only overhead expenses. Everything about him was frugal save this Greek galley that sailed the seas of Las Vegas. In the trunk he kept two spare shirts and pants with creases like paring knives.

The nurse's assistant at the desk knew him by now. "Always good to see you, sir."

The tux, as always, took credit for the *sir*. The driver had often thought that if the gang-bangers wanted true respect from the world at large, they'd swap their red and blue rags and high-top shoes for a suit and the *sirs* it procured. "You doing okay, Laci?"

"Well, Hollywood hasn't called yet with any movie offers."

"But other than that?"

"Other than that I'm peachy. You?"

"I guess peachy works for me, too." He gave her a little nod. She was white and pretty and probably close to his age. Maybe if he ever found time to date . . .

He entered his father's room without knocking.

The former police sergeant occupied a wheelchair that faced the window. The limo's nose was just visible on the right, while on the left was a row of desert willows. It wasn't much of a view. The driver assumed his customary perch on the sill, positioning himself so that he blocked his father's field of vision. The man's eyes didn't shift. They stared at nothing.

"Tully says yo," the driver told him.

Nothing moved but his father's chest, rising and falling, rising and falling.

"Yeah, I'm still giving him rides two nights a week. You believe that? Man doesn't think he needs a car, so he sort of depends on me, you dig?" He slipped his hands into the smooth fabric of his pockets. "Still making payments on the beast, but I'm getting it cut down. Apartment's cheap, and I haven't run out and bought one of those fancy 3D TVs. I'm saving, right? Just like you used to say, laughing all the way to the bank."

None of this ever got any easier.

The driver crossed the room and poured himself a glass of water, then returned. “Hey, you want to hear a joke Tully told me the other night? It’s a cop joke, so you’ve probably heard it before, but whatever. There’s this officer who’s decided to stake out a bar for DUI violations. When the bar closes up for the night, the cop sees this dude stumble out to his ride. He tries his keys on three or four cars before he finally finds the right one, then he sits behind the wheel for five minutes, messing around with his phone and his keys. While he’s trying to get his car started, everybody else who was in the bar gets in their cars and drives off, so pretty soon he’s the only one left. Eventually he cranks it up and starts to pull away, so the cop flashes him and pulls him over.”

The driver watched his father. The man was a figure carved from wax. His hands protruded from the sleeves of his robe and lay motionless in his lap. The attendants hadn’t shaved him in a day or two, and with biting clarity the driver remembered how those whiskers felt when rubbing against his cheeks. His father had loved football and his job and his son, with the order depending on the day.

The driver looked out the window for a moment, then sighed. “So the cop pulls this guy over. He gives him the Breathalyzer. But the results turn up a zero reading. The officer, he doesn’t know what to think about this, so he asks the guy if he’s had anything to drink. The dude smiles and says, ‘Nope. Tonight I’m the designated decoy.’ ”

The driver waited. He actually waited for his father to respond.

“Jesus.” He left the window and paced a few feet across the floor. His father was brain-dead and would grow old in that chair. Tully called it the Goddamn Throne of No Return.

“I’ve got to go, Pops.” He squeezed his father’s shoulder and left through a rear exit so as not to have to meet the intensity of Laci’s smile.