

NECESSARY VENGEANCE

Clipper LaMotte

Chapter 1

He pushed the ignition button, and the engine hummed. Virginia Wetherill rested her left hand on his arm. “Look at me, Taylor.” The interior lights that went on when the car doors opened were fading out. “Are you all right to drive? You had a fair amount.”

“I’m safe. I’ve driven far worse than this.”

“That’s not much comfort, but I won’t argue. My contact lens is bothering me, and I don’t want to drive.” She started to rub her right eye but stopped. “I can’t wait to get home and get the damn thing out.” Taylor Warner backed the car from its space and drove to the exit.

In one minute they were on the street and heading home. Wetherill sank into the bucket seat, took a long breath, and exhaled. She noted the time glowing on the instrument panel. “Can’t believe it’s only ten. I’m tired.” Warner turned on the radio. The second movement of Bruch’s violin concerto washed through the speaker system and enveloped them. He wished he could shut his eyes and listen.

They moved through the night without speaking. The windows were tinted as dark as law allowed. No one could intrude on their privacy. Warner concentrated on the road and the music. Wetherill replayed with satisfaction her performance that evening. That's what it was, a performance. Eventually she said, "Too bad we have to hold these fundraisers in B hotels. Can't afford to look too extravagant, but that food is awful."

Warner chuckled, "At least a Dewar's and soda is the same everywhere, even if the chicken isn't."

In fifteen minutes they were through the last traffic light and on a county road with only three miles and four stop signs to their real home west of Philadelphia. They had spent little time there since Wetherill had been elected. She liked the pace of her life in Washington.

There was almost no traffic. Warner could see the lights of only one car in his rearview mirror. The first stop sign was about a mile ahead when Wetherill abruptly sat up. "This lens hurts too much, something's in there. I've got to take it out. Turn the light on for me." Warner reached up and depressed a button on the overhead panel. Soft light illuminated the front of the cabin. Wetherill removed a lens case from her purse and unscrewed one cap and placed it and the case on the dashboard in front of her. She picked up the drops, unscrewed the top, tilted her head back and dropped two drops into her right eye to moisten the lens. "Keep it smooth, Taylor," she said. "I'm taking it out."

With practiced fingers she slid the lens off her pupil, pinching it between her thumb and index finger. She blinked several times, closed her eyelids, and rubbed her right eye with the fingers of her left hand. "Oh, better," she sighed. "It felt like a cinder." She opened her eyes, glanced at Warner, then focused on moving the lens toward the case on the dash. She dropped it. "God damn it! I can't see it," she said, looking

into the shadowy dark carpet. Warner said nothing. He knew she was irritated and would pounce on him if he commented. She took a small penlight from her purse and switched it on. She played the light where her eyes were searching.

Seeing the focused beam, Taylor asked, "Now can I turn off the light?"

"You mean before I find it?" she answered acidly. Then her tone softened. "It helps I think." He watched her scan her shoes for the lens with no success. Then she moved the seat all the way back and tucked her left leg underneath her on the seat, exposing most of the carpet to her search. Taylor shifted his foot from the accelerator to the brake to slow for the stop sign that, in the dark, appeared to advance toward the car. Wetherill bent forward and down to get her eyes closer to the carpet. Warner saw nothing coming either way on the crossroad, but on the slim chance that the car behind was a policeman he came to a full stop, glancing in the rearview mirror as he did. To his surprise, he saw that the following car did not stop but drifted right and was snuggling into the narrow space between his car and the road bank. This was so curious that instead of moving on, he watched. The car pulled even with his and stopped.

He managed only, "What the hell is he..."

Sharp pain seared Wetherill's ears as she felt more than heard the shattering explosion. At the same instant stinging fragments of glass drove into the skin on the back of her head. The lethal mass of shot that had exploded the window sped over her and slammed into Taylor Warner's head and neck. Wetherill emitted a cry and tried to disappear. The best she could do was turn slightly and drive the right side of her body into the space below the dashboard. She jammed the right side of her face against the center console. Her bent left leg and hip had to stay on the seat. They seemed impossibly high to her, exposed.

A second, deafening explosion sent another wall of shot slamming into Warner, this time splattering Wetherill with a sickening back-spray of blood and flesh. The force of the shot drove Warner's body hard against the driver-side door. As if in protest, his right hand flew off the steering wheel straight back toward the shooter as far as his extending arm would permit before dropping limply onto the seat.

Wetherill's eyes were close to Warner's body, and she saw it jerk violently. She did not see his foot jump off the brake and drop to the floor. The delicate bones in her ears were so traumatized by the first two explosions that the third and fourth sounded almost muffled. Most of the murderous pellets flew through the car and on into the night since less of Warner remained to stop them.

Wetherill felt the car moving slowly, but she was frozen. Then, through the ringing, she heard the squeal of tires as the killing car peeled away. Still she did not move. Finally, she forced herself to focus. *You have to do something!*

She raised her head slightly, causing wet ooze that had landed atop her forehead to dribble down her face. She shifted her right knee and felt sharp fragments of something dig in. She could see Warner's right hand on the seat, only inches from her. Blood was seeping from under the white cuff of his shirt and pooling in the palm of his hand. Bile rose into her throat. She made a guttural noise but the sound was eerily all within her head, blocked from escaping by the continued ringing. Her senses were overloaded by her terrible proximity to the mutilated corpse.

The car crept slightly faster. Willing herself to move at least her left arm, she brought it over her head, grasped the steering wheel and pulled down. In her mind's eye she could see the car gradually arc around the familiar intersection and into the bank on the right side of the crossroad. Once there it dug and slid against the resistance of the bank. Wetherill

knew she had to do more. She pushed off with her right elbow and turned her head to see the ignition button on the dash near the wheel. She released the wheel, reached and pressed the button, and snatched her hand back to protect herself from the body. The car's grinding movement stopped.

The silence that followed was worse. She pushed herself back onto the seat. Try as she could to avert her eyes, her peripheral vision flashed the message that there was far less to Warner's upper body than there should have been. Still squinting, she carried out her last task. She reached a finger up to the overhead light and pressed it off. *Merciful darkness* she thought. But the darkness made the darker shape of the body loom closer and seem more menacing.

She turned toward her door and threw herself at it. It opened a foot and then was stopped by the chewed-up bank. "Oh God, why?" she exclaimed. Desperate to exit, she stayed turned, her back to the body, and inched back toward it until she felt the space separating her bucket seat from his. Still facing her door, she arched herself over that narrow opening. She was terrified her back would touch the body or, worse, that it would fall against her as her effort to squeeze over depressed both seats toward her. It was an awkward maneuver and seemed to her to take forever. But finally her legs and feet were through the opening. She struggled to her knees on the back seat, ignoring the pain in her right one, and pulled the handle on the door behind the body. It opened, and she threw herself out, dropping hands first. She awkwardly scrambled for balance to prevent her bleeding knee from scraping the macadam. She had lost one shoe in the car, and kicked off the other. She lunged to her feet and ran down the center of the dark road back in the direction from which she and Warner had come and toward the welcoming beams of an approaching car.

The teenage boys saw a disheveled figure in the middle of the road running toward their car, arms in the air, eyes wide,

and mouth moving. The one driving instinctively slammed on the brakes. The woman kept coming, and now they could hear her screaming, "Help me! Help me!" They jumped out and jogged into the headlight beams. Wetherill aimed herself at the silhouette that appeared from the driver's side. She ran straight into him, clutched at his shirt, and buried her head in it. "My husband's been murdered! They shot him! They shot him in the car!" She sank to her knees and wrapped both arms around the boy's left leg. "Don't leave me!" She commanded. He bent at the waist and laid his hand lightly on the back of her head. He had no idea what else to do. His companion pulled out his cell phone and called 911.