

Prologue

Try to understand that I was obsessing about my pathologist the day I found myself on that bus with a Henckel carving knife stuffed in my handbag.

“My pathologist,” I always called him. The use of the possessive was probably a bit unusual, pathology not normally qualifying as one of those medical specialties that attract the patronage of such needy pronouns as our *family doctor*, her *psychologist*, your *cardiologist*, or even my *urologist* because, for obvious reasons, a pathologist rarely develops a personal rapport with his clientele. Even the police tend to refer to him or her as **the** pathologist, maintaining an emotional detachment despite their recurrent professional relationship.

We’re a rarity, those of us who stake out a serious claim to our pathologist. I’m one though. Clare Mitchell is another. Darwin Whitefeather was one, too.

His name was Dr. Leo Wolstencroft and you could probably blame him for everything that happened.

Part I

The Incident

Chapter 1

Nessa was already halfway out the apartment door and zipping up her jacket before she thought of the knife. When she slipped back inside to retrieve it from her cutlery drawer, it was more a question of adrenalin than premeditation.

Outside it was frigid and pristine, the polar opposite of her inner psyche which was torrid and ugly because, ever since the phone call, an insatiable fury had been burning there. Nessa's moods swung wildly back and forth between the twin afflictions of depression and rage. Most days, she suffered the lethargy of the former and, if it were true that depression was simply anger turned inward, then the depths of her self-loathing must have been bottomless. Depression drained her of everything except despair. She much preferred the rage because of the energy it brought with it.

Outside, the road lay camouflaged under layer upon layer of soft, dry powder and topped off with a thick crust that gave off a satisfying crunch with every footstep while, at the same time, muffling out all but the most insistent of background noises – a foghorn down on the river somewhere, probably a truck ferry or a container ship bleating its way blindfolded upstream to Fraser Port.

So white, so pure, so peaceful. And still it kept falling, a sheer organza curtain of feathery snowflakes the size of popcorn.

Because of the weather the B-Line bus was not only late, it was full even before it left Richmond Centre and, by the time the woman with the two babies struggled onboard, there was only the one seat available. She had a baby tucked in each arm and shopping bags hanging off her like Christmas tree ornaments. "I thought the bus would never get here," she volunteered as she collapsed beside Nessa. "Then I was afraid I might not make it onboard."

"Yeah," Nessa agreed.

"I didn't think it would be this bad. Couldn't get the car out of the driveway, couldn't bring the stroller because of the snow, couldn't even strap one of them into the BabyBjorn. Would you believe I lent mine to a friend who just had twins of her own? How stupid was that . . . ? So here I am." She was trying to stuff her various bags down by her feet but was finding it almost impossible with her arms full of sleeping infants.

"Want me to hold one of them for you?" Nessa heard herself volunteering. Part of her wanted to take it back. Another part, the part in charge, needed to hold that baby so badly she thought she might die if the answer was no.

"Would you? That would be wonderful." The twins' mother relaxed her elbow and let the closest infant slide into Nessa's upturned hands. "They're getting so big, my arms are killing me."

"How old are they?" Nessa settled the child facing her with both hands supporting the back of its head while the mother rearranged her shopping bags and answered Nessa's question with a yawn. "Three months. Three long, sleepless months."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"How old are yours then?"

The question hit Nessa like a vicious punch. "Oh, I don't have any," she sputtered. "I guess that's how it sounded, but that's not what I meant. You're very lucky." Nessa undid a snap at the neck of the pale green snowsuit and gently loosened the hood, brushing it away from the baby's chin where it was partially obscuring its perfect little mouth. "She's beautiful. It *is* a girl, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Both of them. But we didn't want to know ahead of time, so we ended up with lots of greens and yellows."

“Pink’s overrated, I’ve always thought.” Nessa’s experience had mostly been with boys. Her youngest had been a girl though, a porcelain doll with a voracious appetite who never slept more than twenty minutes at a stretch.

“Purple’s *my* favourite,” her seatmate volunteered.

Nessa nuzzled her face into the folds of the baby’s neck and breathed in the sweet scent of baby flesh. “I just love that smell. There’s nothing like it. Far better than any soap or perfume. It’s even better than chocolate.”

“Did you ever think of having one yourself?”

“Biggest regret of my life,” Nessa admitted, but tried to keep it light – regretful but not despondent, envious but not resentful, injured but not dangerous.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay because suddenly all Nessa could think about was that knife.

“Anyway, you’re not too old,” the woman assured her, oblivious to the pain she was inflicting. “I’m 39.”

Nessa took a deep breath and forced the corners of her mouth upwards, although the net effect was more of grimace than a grin. “I’d have to find a man though, wouldn’t I?”

“Not necessarily,” the other woman countered, her tone so humourless and insistent that Nessa wondered if perhaps her tactlessness were deliberate.

Don’t be ridiculous! she told herself.

But suspicion thrives on rage. It wasn’t about to be banished without a struggle.

“These two were *in vitro*,” the twins’ mother prattled on. “I guess we’d put parenthood off a bit too long. It took the first time, both eggs. We were *so* lucky. Expensive though.”

“Priceless.” The baby’s mouth was twitching, lopsided little smiles flickering across its lips and searing Nessa’s heart. “Absolutely priceless.”

The bus made it up No. 3 Road easily enough because Richmond’s alluvial topography was as flat as a mortuary slab but, when they were leaving the island via the Oak Street Bridge, the rear of the bus slew sharply to the right.

“Whoa,” the woman commented as the driver regained control and slowed to a crawl. “What a day out there.”

It had been snowing almost continuously for two days and the southern coast of British Columbia was hovering on the brink of paralysis. Its side roads were almost impassable and its main thoroughfares little better. The rest of Canada would be watching Metro Vancouver’s pathetic struggles on television and sniggering, smug in the warm aura of their superior winter acumen – their snowblowers, their kamiks, their parkas . . . their snowplowed streets.

“I should never have ventured out. And all for a few last-minute Christmas presents. What was I thinking? Because I live in Kits, you know . . .”

Nessa felt a shiver of recognition escape from her subconscious. *Kitsilano*.

“. . . Not exactly convenient. Kind of crazy actually, but I had phoned around and I knew the Bay at Richmond Centre had exactly what I was looking for. I had no problem on the trip out and, of course, it was fine in the mall. I was able to borrow a double stroller from the customer service kiosk and,” she looked down at her mound of shopping bags, “I guess I got carried away.”

“I guess,” Nessa agreed.

“They were such great deals. *Sixty* percent off.”

Nessa’s hand was burning as she slowly unzipped the baby’s snowsuit, revealing plush velour sleepers and the gentle swell of the baby’s chest. The knife was conveniently close at hand. Her handbag was jammed between her thigh and the window, and Nessa imagined she

could feel the rigid bulk of its handle digging into her flesh. *In and out*, it seemed to be telling her. *In and out*.

When the other twin woke up crying, the mother stuffed a soother into its mouth and tried to calm it by rocking it up against her shoulder. Nessa's baby remained tranquil, its little face so innocent it almost broke Nessa's heart. Moisture was welling up in her tear ducts, but she blinked it away and the mother didn't seem to notice. "What about you?" she was asking.

"Huh?"

"What brings *you* out on a day like this?"

"Oh." Nessa was watching the hypnotic ebb and flow of that tiny chest and it seemed to be calming her. "A dental appointment," she decided.

The woman grimaced sympathetically but unnecessarily. Nessa wasn't sure yet what had brought her out today, but it wasn't the dentist. If circumstances had been different, she might have ridden that bus all the way downtown.

But it turned out that the mother of the twins was getting off at Broadway, so Nessa did, too. When she offered to help, the twins' mother sighed her gratitude. If she had known Nessa's record, she would have grabbed back her daughter and run. Instead, she swung carelessly into the aisle with only the one twin and all the shopping bags.

Nessa hung back and, one by one, allowed other passengers to elbow their way out in front of her. The gap between the two women kept growing wider. By the time the twins' mother reached the back exit, there were perhaps a dozen people between them. That's when the baby finally opened its eyes, took one look at Nessa, and started to cry. The mother looked back anxiously over her shoulder but there were too many people between them. There was nothing she could do.

"There, there," Nessa tried to soothe the infant, but the stranger's voice only heightened its distress. Its tiny body stiffened and so did Nessa's. *Stay calm*, she told herself. *Stay calm*.

"Hush, darlin'. Hush." The baby's face was bright red now. It was sobbing so intensely that it seemed to be neglecting to inhale. *Breathe*, Nessa thought, but it was herself she was admonishing as much as the child.

Nessa turned back. The mother was halfway down the stairwell, caught up in the exodus from the bus. She didn't even notice.

Forget the knife, Nessa pleaded. *Please God, don't let me think about the knife*.

The crying had unleashed a torrent of unspeakable memories. Not of adoring, angelic babies, but of furious, inconsolable ones screeching endlessly throughout the long, lonely days and the even longer nights. *Simon*. Three weeks old, her breasts empty and nipples raw. Bouncing him up and down in her arms, harder and harder. *Hamish*. Pacing the hallway with him shrieking until he was blue in the face, until he exhausted himself, until he finally slipped into a fitful state of unconsciousness only to reawaken minutes later, the whole ghastly performance repeated over and over again, day in and day out. *Lara*. Her little princess. Everything pink and feminine except her Herculean lungs. With Lara, Nessa had never been alone, never quite so desperate. With Lara, Stefan was always there beside her . . . Well, almost always.

Exhausted, frustrated, powerless, angry. How could she have felt that way about her own children? Such a wicked mother.

No! The rage was threatening to turn inwards on her and she would not allow that to happen, not today. It was her pathologist's fault. It was her pathologist who had destroyed everything, even her memories, and she couldn't stop thinking about that knife. *In and out. In and out.*

She pushed her way to the front of the bus, the incoming passengers shaking their heads

irritably and the driver muttering at her to exit through the rear. When she finally reached the curb, the baby's mother was about twenty feet away from her and panicking as the accordion doors hissed shut behind her. "Hey," the mother called out. "You!"

Nessa ran. She knew what had to be done and nothing could stop her. She ran to the corner and across Granville. The pedestrian symbol was flashing red but the traffic light still signalled green. Halfway across, she slipped and almost fell, but caught herself and kept going. She ran along Broadway all the way down to Balsam, then veered north. She ran over icy patches and through resistant snow banks. She ran until her lungs hurt. But first . . .

First she had shoved the screaming infant into its mother's outstretched arm.

* * *

Her destination was a modest, million-dollar abode in Kitsilano. She had finally understood the inevitability of this fact the moment she stepped off that bus.

When she reached it, the owner was outside clearing his driveway. He had already worked his way from the garage almost out to the roadside, and he paused in the midst of one of his final furrows when he saw her approaching. "Can I help you?"

"My name is Nessa Malkin, but you would know me as Clarke."

"Would I?"

"Yes."

"Say again." Dr. Leo Wolstencroft's face was red, sweaty gray hair clung to his forehead, and his coat hung open to reveal, incongruously, a pinstripe shirt and loosened tie.

"Clarke, *Vanessa* Clarke."

"Sorry. The name's not ringing any bells."

"You don't remember?"

"Should I?"

She shook her head in wonder. This was her own personal pathologist yet somehow he had discarded her from his memory like some useless piece of junk. Even her name meant nothing to him now. *How was this possible?*

"Vanessa Clarke," she insisted.

"Oh, I get it!"

But he didn't get it. He didn't get it at all, because he was smiling apologetically and saying, "You're a reporter, aren't you?" and now she was the one who was momentarily confused.

"Look, I'm sorry, but I'm not talking to the press." He let go of the snow shovel and raised his hands in mock surrender.

When the shovel crashed to the pavement, Nessa bent down to retrieve it. "Okay. Fair enough," she said, then stood back up to her full height and slashed the plow-shaped blade across his face. The blow caught him on the temple and knocked him off his feet.

"What the Hell!" He had been thrown backwards, his legs stretched out in front of him on the driveway in a V and his back up against a snow bank. He was rubbing the side of his head, dazed and petulant but remarkably calm. "What was that for?"

"That was for Clare Mitchell," she informed him as she dropped the shovel and knelt in front of him.

His eyes widened in recognition, yet still not in fear. He didn't even seem to notice the knife until she had buried it up to the hilt in his belly.

It surprised her how easily it had gone in, and perhaps it surprised him, too, because his mouth was hanging mutely open and his eyes were gaping down at the black handle protruding from a rip in his trousers just to the left of his zippered fly. He looked more intrigued than terrified by what he saw there, and she wondered if he were already visualizing

the damage to his internal organs, if perhaps her pathologist were itemizing the highlights of his final autopsy.

It was a bit of struggle getting the knife back out – much more difficult coming out than going in – but she did manage to retrieve it.

In and out.

“That was for Darwin Whitefeather,” she told him and she thought that he might have understood although, by then, his eyes were starting to lose their focus and there was a fountain of blood spraying out of the hole in his belly.

“And this one,” she specified as she drove the Henckel in one more time for good measure. “This one is for me.”

* * *

The trip home on the bus was pretty much the same as the trip out, except in reverse and without the babies. And somehow that seemed kind of appropriate.