

The Woolcroft Affairs

‘Well go on,’ Sylvia said, snuggling up to me.

The breeze was picking up and rattling the bough of the jacaranda against the window, teasing the raw edges of my nerves. My imagination was on fire, but Sylvia hadn't noticed.

‘I remember the secretary leaving me in the outer office for twenty minutes before she showed up again. I would have walked out except that I needed the money,’ I said, settling into my pillow and trying to ignore the noises outside the window. ‘When the secretary came back, she said, quite insolently, I thought, "Ms Woolcroft will see you now.”’

‘She held the door open and I went through. I couldn't help noticing she checked me over thoroughly with her washed-out green eyes. She must have been desperate.’

Sylvia prodded me with her elbow. ‘You're not that bad,’ she said, laughing. ‘Not even now.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘I took no notice. The last thing I needed was complications. It was before we were married anyway,’ I reminded her.

Sylvia nodded. ‘I know. It's all right.’

I glanced over at the bedside table, at our wedding photo, and beside it the picture of my only daughter Tracy, taken six weeks before she died. She had pretty eyes, and her golden hair fell in natural soft curls that were the envy of all her friends. I don't think I'll ever stop missing her. Her death had destroyed my first marriage, driven us both close to the edge.

'So what happened next?'

'I went in. The stone walls made the room look cold and dark, and gave it a mediaeval feel, even though it wouldn't have been more than a hundred years old. It made me feel like shuddering.

'Mrs Woolcroft had a tone that said: *don't mess with me, I'm busy*. "Sit down," she said. I sat. She wore a black business suit, and her hair was cut short. Apart from that she was attractive. I tried not to think about it. I had a job to do and I didn't get paid that kind of money often. The woman was seriously rich.

'I decided to get straight to business, but I tried to sound casual, as though the money she was forking out meant nothing. "You called me about your husband..."

"Yes," she snapped. She twiddled her pencil, and I watched her slender fingers, and wondered why she wore no rings. She was agitated, and I had the feeling that the moment she started to spill, she would spew out her story without a break. It was just a matter of starting her off. I tried again.

"Tell me about how you discovered he was..."

"Screwing around?" She snapped her pencil in two. "How? How does anyone know that? You just do. Something in the eyes. A smell—no more than a single molecule perhaps—perfume? Too tired when he got home? You just know."

'Then she clammed up. I decided to take a gamble on a hunch. It would either loosen her up or get me fired. "It takes one to know one?" I said.

"What are you suggesting?" Her temper broke like the pencil, and she stood up and stormed to the window and looked out. I could have kicked myself. The tension in the room felt like a taut rubber band ready to snap. I was just about to apologise when she turned to face me again. Her stare was like stainless steel. "You're sharp aren't you?" She sat back down at the desk. "All right. It's true. I have had a few trysts of my own. But they were little more than dalliances. I suppose you think I'm being hypocritical, setting you up to trap my husband."

'I lied as convincingly as I could. "Not particularly," I said. "I get these jobs all the time."

Sylvia settled down in the bed beside me, 'You always were good at bluffing.' I put my arm around her and squeezed her tight. I needed some comfort tonight. The jacaranda brushing against the window didn't help my nerves any.

'So you got the job?' Sylvia prompted. I looked at her blankly. 'I'm just trying to see the point...'

‘All right,’ I said. ‘I’ll cut right down to it. I accepted the job and set about trapping her husband. At first I believed her story that she just wanted to teach him a lesson, to make him faithful, or at least have something she could use against him.’

‘You dug up the dirt on him?’

‘Oh yes. And there was plenty of dirt to find. Not so much on women. I found out he was dealing. I didn’t realise at the time, but thinking back, that’s really what Mrs Woolcroft wanted me to find out, I think. He turned out to be one of the biggest drug tycoons in the country, and he was keeping all the money to himself.’

Sylvia took my hand in hers. I glanced over again at the photo of Tracy and it turned my blood to ice. ‘What kind of drugs?’ she asked.

‘Cocaine mostly, plus crack and some heroin. Stuff like that. He was importing from Thailand and elsewhere in Asia, and distributing it to Sydney and Melbourne. And there was I following him, taking pictures, looking for evidence of affairs, and finding out about these much more sinister goings-on. I was getting in too deep for my own good. I knew I ought to get out of it, or close my eyes to it. But I couldn’t. I kept thinking of Tracy, of finding her body in that dirty little alley at the Cross. It had only been a year. I kept seeing her punctured skin, all the bruises.’ Sylvia squeezed my hand hard.

‘It was as if Woolcroft had killed her. Which, indirectly he, or someone like him, had. I turned the evidence over to the police. I was a good private investigator. I had lots of incontrovertible evidence against him by the time I was through. I went after him like a man possessed by a demon.’ I chuckled nervously. ‘You know, Mrs Woolcroft didn’t even pay me. I gave her all the pictures she wanted...’

‘So he was having an affair is well?’

‘Plural. Ted Woolcroft was a bastard in every way you can think of. Ruthless. I found out he had been behind the deaths of several people, and others who had disappeared were linked to him. I couldn’t prove that though, and neither could the police. That’s why he only got ten years. No parole.’ I shivered suddenly, and pulled the blanket up to my neck. ‘I’ll never forget that last day in court. He glared at me with eyes glinting like bloodstained knives in the cold sun. He snarled as they dragged him out. "I’ll get you if it’s the last thing I ever do. You’re a dead man." That was the last I saw of either of them. It was ten years ago.’

I felt Sylvia’s hands turn clammy and cold as she squeezed my hand.

‘Ten years?’ she whispered, her breath echoing around the room. ‘That’s what this is about? You’re telling me we’re in danger? That they’ve let him out of prison now?’

‘Yes.’

The breeze of the moonless night rustled the leaves and branches outside our thin glass bedroom window.

And we waited.

THE END