



LADY'S GAME

A PRICE DENOTTA MYSTERY

INSTALLMENT 8

Price walked through the outside doors of the hospital as quickly as possibly without drawing undue attention. His escape from the private room had been tedious and nerve-racking, using up a precious thirty-two minutes of his allotted one-hour timetable while Daniels enjoyed a quiet lunch. The worst part was the seemingly interminable walk past the nurses's station, but once in the elevator, his chances of being caught diminished dramatically.

Now, moving down the crowded sidewalk, he felt anonymous, almost invisible, but not quite safe. He knew his foray into freedom was an illusion at best, a transitory state with an uncertain timeline and an inevitable end. He paused to look down at his watch and gauged the probable distance to his apartment. Could he make it there, pack some essentials, and get away before the police arrived to lock him up?

He felt a bump on his arm and frowned at the smartly dressed lady in the green hat, elbowing her way to the stoplight. She was followed by a string of nuns in religious dress, two men in black, and a frustrated mother, dragging two screaming children. Thinking he would make

better time in their wake than on his own, he stepped quickly in line with the entourage.

They had traveled a little over three blocks before coming to the bus stop. The nuns boarded immediately, right behind the bouncing green hat, while the two men and the bedraggled mother walked on. Price followed the nuns, sliding into an empty seat without misadventure. For the moment, he was safe.

“Mind if I join you?”

The question bypassed the dull ache in his head and bounced around his brain for an answer. “Of course not,” he said, minding very much. The large woman’s face wrinkled into smile lines while her body spread over the bench like melted butter. He hugged the end, trying to ignore the solid press of warm flesh against hip and thigh. She talked all the way to his stop, accepting his head nodding as active participation in the conversation, for which he was grateful.

Walking into his apartment was a relief. Never had the watermelon colored walls and olive green trim looked so welcoming, and for once, he forgot to cuss the insane decorator who had designed the offending color scheme. Home, sweet home. He wanted nothing more than to curl up in his bed for a week and let the world pass him by. Then again, being confined to a jail cell would give him plenty of time to rest and reflect. Right now, he needed to grab his things and get out.

Fifty-five minutes had passed since Daniels left for lunch. His time was running out. Moving quickly, he threw some things into a bag and reached under the bed for the safe. Perhaps storing Mrs. Stedman's cash payments in a portable fireproof box wasn't his wisest choice, but right now, he was very glad he had made that decision. The money would be more than enough to keep him out of sight for the next few days, and hopefully, a few days would be all he would need.

Back on the street, Price hailed a cab and headed downtown. His first stop would be the coroner's office. He had been across the room when Stedman had shot his wife at close range—a fact that should be easily confirmed by the autopsy. Next, he would visit the chauffeur and find out why the man had lied. Without the incriminating testimony of the driver, he would have a chance to prove his case. Suddenly, everything seemed so simple—too simple.

Information he would discover at the coroner's office would send him back to square one and two steps beyond. What had happened to him in the last forty-eight hours had him standing firmly on the edge of the abyss. The facts he would learn in the next few minutes would send him tumbling over.

End of Installment Eight

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