



LADY'S GAME

A PRICE DENOTTA MYSTERY

INSTALLMENT 11

By the time Denotta left the library, he knew more than he wanted to about Antonio Stedman and his debutante wife, Betty Thorne Stedman, but had learned little to help him solve the case. There had been no pictures of the mysterious woman who had hired him and passed herself off as Mrs. Stedman, an omission he found puzzling, considering the prominent role she had played in the deception. Hadn't she acted the role of hostess in the Stedman home in front of the hired help? Someone had to know who she was. He would question Mary, the maid who had waited on him the day he had visited the Stedman estate.

Having decided on a course of action was only the first step in carrying it out. Now, he had to devise a plan that would let him into the house without a call involving the police, who might be running surveillance on the premises. For the next few minutes, he rode through the city, mulling over ideas involving disguises, rented vehicles, and imaginative stories promising to gain him an unobtrusive entrance into the palatial residence. In the end he discarded them all, opting for a more direct approach, whereby he advanced stealthily through the bordering woods to the back door and rapped loudly. Seconds later, a hurried scuffling and fluttering curtain told him that his knock had been acknowledged.

"Could I help you, sir?" demanded a plus-sized woman filling the doorway, her fists pressed against her broad hips in the attitude of a bouncer.

Price was reminded of a pit bull that had once lived next door to him before being removed by an edict from the neighborhood architectural committee. The woman's face hosted the same pug features, and he suspected a similar disposition rested just beneath the surface. "Hello, I'm Detective Denotta. I'm working on the Stedman case, and I'd like to speak to Mary, please."

The woman eyed him suspiciously. "We've already talked to the police."

"Yes, I realize that, but I have a few follow-up questions. Is Mary available? I promise that my questions won't take long."

"There's no Mary, here." She took a half-step back and started to close the door.

"Wait," Denotta said, quickly inserting the toe of his shoe into the narrowing space in the manner of a persistent salesman. "It's very important that I talk to her. Is this her day off? Perhaps you could give me her home number."

The woman stared down at his foot. "There is no one named *Mary*, who works here."

"But I met her a few weeks ago. Was she fired?"

The woman opened the door and stepped forward. "Listen mister, I don't know what game you're playing at, but there is not now or ever has been a woman named Mary working here. I have been the head of housekeeping for over two years, and I should know. Now, get out before I call the police."

Price backed away, knowing instinctively that the woman wasn't bluffing. Oddly enough, he knew she wasn't lying either. Although, after what had happened to him over the last month, he had to acknowledge that he could place little trust in his ability to discern truth from fiction. A sense of discouragement settled around his shoulders like a warm cloak, and he hugged it tightly, comforted by its validity. He had been searching for a woman who had vanished without leaving a trace, and in his quest had now discovered another. The ground, once

solid beneath his feet was dissolving, and unless he discovered the truth soon, he, too, would melt away, leaving fiction as the only reality.

End of Installment Eleven

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