



LADY'S GAME

A PRICE DENOTTA MYSTERY

INSTALLMENT 5

Price watched the hospital room fade and slip away, tunneling his vision inward, as his body returned to an unconscious state. While the darkness around him thickened, the scene in front of him matured into images of vivid color. Red and white-striped umbrellas shaded cloth-covered, round polyurethane tables at a small outdoor restaurant. He, Price, was sitting at one of the tables looking bored. She, Mrs. Stedman, had been late that day he recalled, remembering his irritation at being forced to wait in such a conspicuous location.

He was on the verge of leaving, when she had suddenly appeared in a red polka-dotted blouse, a red, silk suit, and a floppy red hat, leading him to wonder if she had dressed deliberately to match the café's bright décor.

"Sorry, I'm late," she had said, giving him a flirtatious smile that told him she wasn't the least bit sorry she'd kept him waiting. She hesitated for the smallest instant beside her chair, but he was not in the mood to play gentleman to her lady, and so ignored her unspoken invitation.

“You wanted to see me?” he questioned, as she tucked and wiggled into her chair.

Manicured hands sporting red-sculptured nails rested on the table between them, and he was momentarily distracted by the size of the flawless, pear-shaped diamond residing on her third finger. “I think he’s seeing someone,” she said in a stage whisper, her eyes cutting to the waiter approaching the table.

He ordered coffee from the formally attired attendant, while she ordered a slice of strawberry pie and a large Diet Dr. Pepper, oblivious to the irony presented by her selection. Captivated by her, the young man lingered by her side well past the time needed to record the simple order until Price tapped impatiently on the table. Embarrassed, the man scurried off, while Mrs. Stedman’s laugh tinkled across the space between them.

“He was sweet,” she said, as if defending the boy’s actions to a jealous lover.

“You were telling me about your husband.”

She lowered her eyes and returned easily to the role of wounded wife. “I’m sure he’s having an affair.”

“How are you sure?”

She shrugged. “Too many late nights, a whiff of perfume—a woman can always tell.”

“But you don’t have any concrete evidence?”

“No.”

The waiter was back with their order. This time he didn't dawdle.

“How long has this been going on?”

Her clearly defined brows puckered as if she were formulating intricate computations. “About eight months. I remember because he stood me up for a dinner party, and we had fought. Mayor Higgins was throwing his annual election dinner, and I had tickets. He doesn't run every year, but he does collect every year, and this was our first year to receive tickets—a social coup by anyone's standards.”

Price sat back. “How long did you say you and your husband have been married?”

She looked down at the huge rock on her finger. “I didn't. We've been married almost eighteen years.”

“And this is the first time that you've ever suspected him of cheating?”

Several conflicting emotions flickered across her face as she searched for the right response. “Yes, Mr. Denotta,” she said, meeting his eyes in an earnest stare. “He had never cheated on me before; of that, I am sure.”

She was trying hard to convince him—too hard, and he made a mental note to find out why. He took a sip of his coffee as she finished off the strawberry pie and whipped cream. Again, red and white—the stage had been perfectly set. But what was his role? Had he had been

cast as one of the actors in her little melodrama? Or was he the audience for which the play had been written?

End of Installment Five

C. R. Myers is an award-winning author of more than fifty published novels, including the BobbiCat children's books, and a long-time Bullard resident. www.crm Myers.com