



LADY'S GAME

A PRICE DENOTTA MYSTERY

INSTALLMENT 9

The corner's office was located in the back of a seedy-looking office building one block off the town square. The governmental structure, which had at one time appeared stately and impressive, had peeled and faded into a mottled pale green and brown.

Price climbed the steps, keeping a nervous eye on the people he passed, as well as the ones loitering outside the building on smoking breaks. He knew that his paranoia was unfounded, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched.

The inside of the building was not much different from the outside in terms of color or state of repair, preserving the original fifteen-foot ceilings, heavy oak doors — now dark with age, and cut-glass light fixtures from the mid-nineteen-hundreds. A framed, laminated map of the building's inside offices told him that the corner's office was sitting on the right back side of a floor designated as B1. About one hundred steps and a flight of stairs later, he was standing in front of a door with words *Coroner's Office* stenciled on the textured glass.

"May I help you?"

The words rang out as soon as he had opened the door, the tone sounding anything but helpful. He looked at the stern-faced older woman sitting in the windowless office with interest. How many years had she spent locked in this

under-ground prison? Did she have a family — friends? Or was this pitiful space the sum total of her life?

He put on his best smile. “Hello. I’m Detective Price Denotta, and I was needing some information on the Stedman Case.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “May I see your badge?”

Did he need one? Her words stopped him even as his brain scrambled for the words he needed to overcome this obstacle. He pulled a newly printed business card out of his wallet. “I’m assisting Police Detective Frank Daniels on the case.”

Her face relaxed slightly, and he knew that Officer Daniels was familiar to her. “Then why isn’t he here?”

“He is gathering information from the scene and interviewing neighbors. I am supposed to bring him a copy of the coroner’s report.”

She appeared to be satisfied with this information but continued to find roadblocks. “I can only hand over the file to a member of the police force.”

“Hmmm....” Price said, pursing his lips as if mulling over her predicament. “Well, I wouldn’t want to cause you any trouble. Would it be possible for me to just glance through the file for a few minutes?”

She hesitated, but then shrugged, eager to finish with the man intruding on her daily routine, not to mention her lunch. “I guess you could look through the file, but it can’t leave this office.” Such an act would have not been permitted before all the *freedom of information* mumbo jumbo, but now the rules were blurred and able to be bent. Leaving her desk, she retrieved a manila folder from the file cabinet on the opposite wall and handed it to Price.

He sat down and opened it immediately. Inside were the usual forms and reports as to cause of death as well as detailed physical information from the autopsy. Price scanned the pages, but found nothing useful. He was about to read the reports a second time when he came to a picture taped to the back of the folder.

The woman was attractive, middle-aged with short-cropped hair, dark with silver threads.

“Who is this?” he asked, holding up the picture for the secretary to identify.

For a moment, she looked blank, and Price wondered if he could have given him the wrong folder by mistake.

“The victim — Mrs. Stedman. Pretty, wasn’t she? Mr. Stedman was quite broken-up about it.”

Price heard the words in disbelief, his head beginning a slow spin. The woman in the photograph was not the Mrs. Stedman he knew. She was a complete stranger. So, who had he really been working for? What should have been an open and shut case was steadily taking on the more puzzling aspects of a Sherlock Holmes mystery.

End of Installment Nine

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