



LADY'S GAME

A PRICE DENOTTA MYSTERY

INSTALLMENT 19

Price stood outside the Freemont Hotel, the forgotten cell phone clutched in his hand. If the mystery woman was Rachael Elizabeth Stedman, the wife of Tony Stedman, then why hadn't she been the one pictured beside him in the newspaper stories? Could the woman in the morgue be the imposter? No, too much exposure to pull that off. Then what was going on? He punched in Frank's number on his cell phone.

"Frank, we need to verify the marriage license of Tony Stedman and the woman in the morgue—Doris, I think. Then we need to locate the divorce papers for at least one of the women, if such papers exist. Next, I'd be interested in the contents of any wills, insurance policies, or prenuptial agreements."

"So, you're thinking this is about the money?"

"It's always about the money. That's what you drilled into my head on the last case."

"Glad you remembered something I taught you," came the gruff reply, but Price could hear the smile behind his words. "I'll get my men right on it. Was Stedman registered in any of the hotels you had staked out?"

"All but the last one. Odd, but could have been just an oversight. I'm going to look around the neighborhood just to cover all the bases. Let me know when you have something."

“Will do. By the way, I’ve got a man tailing you just in case they really are trying to kill you.”

“Should I pretend I didn’t know he was there?”

Frank’s soft chuckle could barely be detected over the phone. “I’d appreciate it if you would. He’s a rookie, and he needs the practice.”

After signing off, he re-entered the Freemont to investigate the number of hotel exits and their accessibility to the public. Working under the scrutiny of hotel security, he located three outside doors—one of which could not have been seen from where Denotta was staked out. Choosing this one as a starting point, he pushed the long bar and the door swung noiselessly open onto the back left side of the hotel grounds where a manicured lawn separated him from the street beyond. Located directly across the road were several large brick buildings sitting behind the sign, *Douglas State Hospital*. Following a hunch, he located the front entrance to the hospital and went inside.

“May I help you?”

The words were framed as an offer of assistance, but the tone behind them said *Get out* in no uncertain terms. Denotta, however, was not intimidated either by her unfriendly tone or by the white, sterile environment confronting him. “What kind of hospital is this?” he asked, noting the multiple security gates barring entrance to the glassed-in front desk dominating the main lobby.

“We are a mental health facility. Are you wanting to fill out self-admittance forms?”

He pulled his ID from his pocket, confident this would adjust her chilly attitude. He was right. After learning that he was a Private Investigator, she went from chilly to frigid. “Our records are private,” she stated with an ill-concealed snarl of dismissal.

“I wasn’t asking to see your records,” Price assured her, trying to smile in spite of his annoyance. “I just wanted some information about the hospital.

“Here, then,” she said, shoving a brochure toward him.

He opened the tri-folded color glossy and tried to look interested. By the time he reached the picture on the back page, he truly was interested. Staring back at him was the face of Antonio Stedman, followed by a long paragraph describing his generosity toward the hospital.

“Have you met Mr. Stedman?” he asked, still riveted by his discovery.

“Of course. He’s our main benefactor.”

“Did you know his wife as well?”

The look she gave him was one of *Ah Ha* combined with pure malice. “So, that’s what this is all about. I told you before that we don’t release our private records. Now, get out before I call security.”

Price turned and left with a large *Ah Ha* expression covering his face, as well. So, one of the Mrs. Stedmans had been a patient at the state mental hospital. Now, the questions were which one and why?

The shot came out of nowhere—a car backfire on a busy street—a burning sensation in the middle of his back—the concrete sidewalk hitting his face—cool darkness and running footsteps. *What if he never got the answers?*

The rookie punched in *911*.

End of Installment Nineteen

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.crmeyers.com