

LADY'S GAME

A PRICE DENOTTA MYSTERY

INSTALLMENT 1

Vincent Price Denotta folded his newspaper and glanced at his watch—four forty-five. Another day down—four more to go. At this rate, his newly opened detective agency wouldn't last a month. Two weeks in business and out almost two thousand dollars. He picked up the telephone receiver to make sure it was working. It was. Rats! Feeling hopeless, he was in the process of cleaning his desk when a loud knock shook the office door.

He stared at the silhouette of a woman through the textured glass. "Come in." The door swung open. "Price Denotta?"

She crossed the room in a graceful glide. Her voice sounded low and husky, not what he would have expected from the dark-haired five-foot-four petite woman. She was attractive in an Ivy League sort of way—a business woman—mid-forties—self-assured—wealthy.

"At your service," He stood and met her extended hand with a firm shake. "Won't you have a seat?"

She complied, her black stockings making a sexy shushing noise when she crossed her legs.

"How can I help you Ms....?"

"Stedman. My husband is trying to kill me."

The words seemed oddly melodramatic in the quiet office with its old oak desk and the late afternoon sun prying through the slatted blinds.

"Have you contacted the police?"

Her gaze remained steady. "No, I can't."

"Why not?"

His words seemed to catch her off guard, and she became suddenly defensive. "That's really none of your concern, Mr. Denotta. I want to hire you to do a job. Everything else is immaterial."

Her thin aquiline nose jutted out as she said that and her nostrils flared, reminding him of a thoroughbred. He could have easily taken exception to her statement, but curiosity held him back.

"What job did you have in mind, Mrs. Stedman?"

"I want irrefutable proof that my husband is trying to murder me. I'll pay you five hundred dollars a day, plus expenses."

The job sounded easy enough, except for the part where her husband succeeded and she ended up dead. “Shouldn’t you be spending your money on a bodyguard or better yet, a divorce?”

“A divorce is out of the question. He would take half of everything I own. As for the bodyguard, I have one already. Can you start tomorrow?”

“I can start today.”

“Good.” She reached into her purse and placed several stacks of wrapped bills on the desk. “Here is five thousand to start. You are going to play the part of my visiting cousin from Iowa. I’ll put you up in one of the guest rooms tomorrow.”

He eyed the money with longing and a keen sense of regret. “Lady, I don’t work like that. I’m a lousy liar and a worse actor. On the other hand, I’m a pretty decent detective. Let me do my job, and I promise I’ll get you results.”

She hesitated. “But you’ll need to observe him, and check out the house.”

“I’ll do that, but on my terms, my way.”

She appeared to be unconvinced, and he could tell she was used to having things her way. After a moment, she nodded. “We’ll try it your way, but if you’re unsuccessful, we’ll do it mine. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

After she’d gone, he counted the money. Five thousand—just as she’d said. Still, he wondered why she’d lied to him and what she was really trying to purchase.

End of Installment One.

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