



LADY'S GAME

A PRICE DENOTTA MYSTERY

INSTALLMENT 21

Price stood on the hospital steps and waited while Frank parked the police car against the curb. "Feel up to an interview?" Frank asked, as Price slid into the front seat and fastened his seatbelt.

"Give an interview?"

"Conduct one. Seems we've just picked up a friend of yours, and she's asking for you."

"A friend? The police have Rachel Stedman?"

"Call came in while you were checking out."

"Have they charged her yet?"

"Not yet. Don't want to make any mistakes."

"Why would she ask for me?"

"Maybe she wants to see a friendly face. Maybe she thinks you owe her because she let you live. Maybe it's a setup."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Talk to her. Get her to confess."

"And if she won't?"

"Look, I'm not suggesting that you strong-arm her or knock her around. Just be your charming self and see what falls out of the tree."

Price nodded, trying to appear more at ease than he actually was. Twenty minutes later he faced her across the length of a small cell and had to admit that she still looked good—classic, with a Lauren Bacall-style, grace, and charm. After brushing at an imaginary speck of lint on her black suit, she motioned to the room’s only chair and settled back on the bare mattress behind her, a study in elegance.

“Mind if I smoke?”

“Nasty habit.”

“I have vices,” she said flatly, in bold understatement, her gray-green eyes shining up at him without emotion.

He smiled, appreciating her dry humor, and reached into his pocket for a light. “You wanted to see me?” he asked, after she’d blown the first ring of smoke and re-crossed her slender ankles.

She smiled almost shyly, flicking her tongue lightly across her lips before forming an answer. “I like you,” she said, sounding completely sincere. “I wanted you to hear the truth.”

“I’d like the truth, but are you going to be telling me *the* truth or *your* truth. In the past, I’ve noticed a vast difference between the two.”

She blinked rapidly, but showed no other reaction. “I’m not a bad person,” she purred, hinting broadly with her body language that she was or would be if the cause were right.

He rose to his feet and turned to leave. “No more games, Mrs. Stedman. You’ve been caught—it’s over. I don’t have the time or the inclination to be your afternoon’s entertainment. Either you have something to tell me or you don’t.” Without looking back, he raised his arm to signal the guard.

“Wait.”

“Does that mean you do?” he asked without turning.

“I’ll start from the beginning if you like.”

“Sounds like you’re planning a confession.”

“On the contrary, I’m mounting a defense.”

“I’m not an attorney.”

“But you’re still on my payroll. I hired you to protect me from my husband.”

He turned, intrigued in spite of his better judgment. This woman was trouble, no matter how nicely she was packaged. “That was before you framed me for murder and tried to kidnap me. I find that sort of behavior puts a decided strain on a working relationship.”

She looked away, taking a long drag on her cigarette before answering. “I’m sorry about that. He forced me, you know. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“Right, I’m sure you did your best to protect me.”

Her eyes dilated into black orbs. “I’ll prove it to you.”

“Sure you will.”

“If I do, will you help me?”

He stared at her, willing himself to look behind her beautiful face—her game face. “Okay, I’ll play. Ball’s in your court, lady. Next move’s up to you.”

“You did what?” Frank Daniels didn’t bother to hide his outrage or exasperation with the detective. “What does she have to do before you stop believing in her?”

Price shrugged. Daniels was right; he did want to believe in her despite the mounting evidence against her. “Is it wrong to want someone to be innocent?”

“No, but there’s a line—invisible but firm, that can’t be crossed. You can’t get emotionally involved. As detectives, we have to remain detached, aloof, and let the evidence speak for itself.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“That’s why we have judges and juries. So what do we know about her?”

“Well, not much besides the fact that she hired me and was legally married to Tony Stedman.”

Frank paced the floor of his windowless office, just as he’d done while Price visited Rachel Stedman. “You agreed to help her if she’d come clean. Right?”

“I told her I wouldn’t help her if she didn’t. She’s supposed to call me when she’s ready to talk.”

“Maybe she won’t have that chance.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that someone pulled strings to get you back out on the streets where you would be vulnerable. With her on the inside, a confession/suicide would tie up any loose ends very neatly.”

“You think she’ll be killed right here in the police station?”

Frank leaned against the corner of his desk. “I said it would tie up any loose ends and close the case.”

“What do you suggest we do?”

“Talk to her again. Now. Once her information is on record, she’ll be safe.”

Price stood and stepped to the door. “And if she won’t answer my questions?”

“That’s her choice, Denotta. You can’t force her to save herself; just throw out the lifeline and hope she grabs on.”

Getting back in to see Rachael wasn't as easy as it had been the first time, requiring Daniels to do some fancy footwork on Denotta's behalf including promises of full disclosure. Price was reluctant to agree to the necessary stipulations, but the Police Chief was adamant and in the end a compromise was reached.

"Back so soon?" she purred as he entered the holding cell.

"You may be in danger," he declared bluntly.

Her laugh echoed through the hollow chamber. "You think I'm not aware of that? Tony's a powerful man with an extensive network of henchmen. I won't last long in here."

"Then tell me what you know. Once the information is out, you'll no longer be a threat."

"And I'll be safe? You really believe that, don't you?" She moved a step toward him. "I'll never be safe," she said in a hushed whisper.

He opened his mouth to protest, but the look on her face stopped him. What she had said was true, and they both knew it. "Maybe you're right, but you can't just give up. Let me try to help you. Last time I was here you said you wanted my help."

She stared down at her fingernails as if looking for an imaginary chip in the flawless manicure. "I had hope then. I was stupid."

"No, you weren't. Give yourself a chance."

She stared at her nails a moment longer before giving him an answer. "All right. Where do you want me to start?"

"At the beginning. How did you meet Tony Stedman?"

End of Installment Twenty One

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