



Lady's Name

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LADY'S GAME

A PRICE DENOTTA MYSTERY

INSTALLMENT 22

“The first time I saw Tony Stedman I thought he was the most handsome man God had ever made. We met at a dance,” Rachel stated, feeling her front pocket for a smoke. “He didn’t notice me—not at first, but I sure noticed him: that blue/black hair, the laughing hazel eyes, and the biggest dimples I’d ever seen. All the women were staring at him, and some of the men, too. Back then he was movie-star gorgeous and filled with charm, a kind of Cary Grant/James Dean rolled into one.”

Price shifted in his chair, trying to find a comfortable position for what looked to be a long evening. Now that she was ready to talk, he was oddly reluctant to hear her part in the crime. For although the facts were stacked against her, he had held out a small tendril of hope that she was blameless, ignorant of what her husband had done. She had paused in her narrative, focused on something in the distant past, a movie playing on the screen of her mind that obliterated her present reality, including him.

“ I watched him dance with first one and then another of the young debutantes as they eyed him with wishful glances, laughing at his remarks, and trying to out-flirt each other in order to secure his attention. I, of course, just watched from the sidelines and was more than a little surprised when he walked determinedly in my direction.”

“Did he ask you to dance?”

“He did.”

“And he was so enchanted that he didn’t leave your side for the rest of the evening. Right?”

She shook her head, studying the cherry end of her cigarette. “No, actually I was the one who was enchanted. He left the party with Patty De’Orburville, presumably to spend the night. I didn’t see him again for three months.”

“So how did you and he end up together?”

She smiled modestly. “It wasn’t easy, but with enough *chance* meetings and some well-chosen volunteer work, he did finally become aware of me. We were the talk of the season.”

“And you were married?”

“Yes, we were married within the year.”

“Was it all you hoped it would be?”

She wrapped her arms around her knees, hugging them to her chest. “It was more. We traveled, we partied, we bought houses, and we were so much in love.”

“And the first Mrs. Stedman?”

“I didn’t know about her.”

“Did she know about you?”

“No, I don’t think so. Tony had business everywhere. He was always flying from coast to coast. She had no reason to be suspicious.”

“How about you? Were you suspicious?”

She cocked her head to the side. “No, I wasn’t. He often kept odd hours, sometimes gone for days at a time, but I never thought it strange, and certainly didn’t suspect another wife.”

“But wasn’t her picture in the papers? Weren’t there any news stories that mentioned her?”

Her shoulders lifted in a gentle shrug. “Tony is a very private person, as are most businessmen. How many billionaires can you name?”

He could see her point. “So, when did you find out about her?”

“Before the Wellington Art Exhibit about two years ago. Well, that’s when I began to suspect something was going on.”

“Did you confront him?”

“No. I wanted to find out for myself what was going on, so I started my own investigation.”

“And?”

“And I was quite successful,” she admitted with a mysterious smile, making him curious as to what had actually happened.

Price didn’t have to remain curious for very long. Once she had started, Rachael was very willing to tell her side of the story. As he listened, watching the different emotions play across her features, he couldn’t help but be sympathetic to the beautiful woman whose life had taken such a bizarre turn. Was she blameless? He very much doubted it, but he found himself rooting for her despite his better judgment.

“I hired a local PI to follow Tony. I felt foolish doing it, but I had to know where he spent so much of his time.”

“And what did you discover?”

Her mouth took a cynical downward plunge. “That he had another wife.”

“Were they separated?”

“Only when he was with me. Other than that, they were very much together. I wanted to die when I found out, but then I thought of something better.”

Price hated to hear what came next. “Did she know about you?” he asked to delay the inevitable.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m sure she didn’t. At least she died happy.”

“But couldn’t have been very happy that she died.”

The look she gave him was wilting. “Listen, if you don’t want to hear what happened...” she started, letting her voice trail off.

“Sorry. Just my warped sense of humor. Please, go on.”

“Look, I’m not trying to justify what we did, just explain it. I wanted him. I wanted it all.”

She hadn’t said it in a mean way. He understood wanting—needing, but he drew the line at murder. Apparently, she hadn’t. “What did you do?”

“Nothing at first, but just strengthen my position. I do know something about making myself valuable. I made him want me more than ever, and then I made him need me. I concentrated my every effort to make him know that he couldn’t live without me. That’s true power.”

“How did he react?”

Her smile was smug. “He wanted to spend every minute with me. It got so bad, he didn’t want to go home to her at all.”

“How do you know?”

“I kept the PI; that’s how.”

Price nodded, but didn’t comment. He was amazed at how well she had thought everything through.

“The PI said that he was staying away from his other wife longer and longer. He said they were beginning to argue, and she cried a lot.”

“Didn’t that make you feel bad?”

“Pleeeese!” she answered, dragging out the word. “Do you know what he’s worth?”

“So why didn’t he just divorce her?”

“Too dangerous. Some noisy reporter might find out about me. We had no choice really. Tony could have gone to prison.”

“So, what did you do?”

“Tony figured it all out. He bought a house down here, and brought me with him. She didn’t know. I made appearances with him, but was careful not to have my photograph taken.”

“But surely someone could figure it out. She had had her picture taken.”

“Tony paid off the local papers to let him handle his own pictures, so he just plugged her face into the pictures digitally and sent them in. The reporters had no reason to doubt him, and they had never met me.

Price ran the scenario through his mind to see if it were plausible and decided that it was.

“We didn’t have to wait long, you see. Just long enough to get you set up.”

“To take the fall, you mean.”

“Yes,” she answered, even managing to look a little abashed. “Nothing personal, you know.”

“Of course not. Why would framing me for murder be personal?”

“So what about his wife? How did you set that up?”

This smile was genuine. “Oh, that was the really interesting part.”

End of Installment Twenty Two

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