

Mrs. Meadows

Ray Stanton slouched on his second-hand sofa that took up most of the space in his tiny living room and left no room for an end table along the only wall. His bare feet perched on an old trunk that served as a coffee table. The TV, tucked into a corner, blared a summer night's ball game. The beer bottle in his hand, once ice cold, quickly turned warm in his summer hot apartment, almost as quick as he downed the contents. When he began to doze off, the bottle slipped from his hand and fell to the floor, quietly bounced on the carpet's pile and slowly rolled away.

The loud noise and commotion growing outside his door startled him. Anxious, to see what happened, he walked over and swung his front door open. This old building did not have peep holes on the apartment doors. You either had to open the door to look, or not open and stay uninformed behind it.

He saw two men in suits and two uniformed officers in Mrs. Meadows' apartment 3B. Walking across the hall, he stood in her doorway in his t-shirt, jean shorts and barefoot. Mrs. Meadows' apartment laid out the same as his, only reversed. However, she had placed a more practical loveseat and end table against the only wall, where Ray had placed his second-hand sofa .

Mrs. Meadows sat on her loveseat, head back on the rim, body in the sitting position, hands at her side, palms up, knees slightly spread open, and naked.

One of the men in a suit yelled out.

"Who is that? Who the hell, are you. Lopez. Now."

The other suited man quickly stood in front of Ray Stanton, blocking his view of the naked Mrs. Meadows, but not blocking his view of the yelling suit.

"Yo, who the hell are you?" The first suit yelled.

"Ray Stanton. I live across the hall in 3C. Is Mrs. Meadows okay?"

"Lopez, get his info and get him the hell out of here. We'll talk to him after."

Detective Lopez took out his note pad. "Name?"

"I just said it."

"Name?"

"Ray Stanton."

"Is Ray short for Raymond?"

"Yes, but I go by Ray."

"Right. Raymond Stanton. Address?"

"Seriously?"

"Address?"

"Here. I live right here in this building."

Detective Lopez sighed. "Just tell me the address."

Ray Stanton told Detective Lopez his address, but pointed to his door with 3C on it.

"Phone number?"

Ray Stanton gave Detective Lopez his cell number.

Lopez finished writing.

"Stanton, hold up." The first suit called out. "You said missus Meadows? She's married? Where's her husband? Divorced?"

"None of those. And, who the hell are you?"

The first suit quickly stepped toward Ray, who did not move or flinch.

"That's Detective Kevin Rasch, pronounced Ray-shh, to you. Got it? Now answer the damn question."

"Mrs. Meadows' husband and young son were killed in a auto accident, several years back. She moved here about three years ago."

"How long, you been here?"

"About three and a half years."

"You and her have a thing going on?"

"What? No."

"Why not? She's what, in her thirties, forties, and you're what twenty something? Sounds doable to me."

"Mrs. Meadows once told me 44 and I'm 27, to be specific. Regardless, we didn't have anything going on."

"Right?. Go wait in your apartment. We'll be over soon to get your story. Get out. Now. Lopez."

Detective Ed Lopez escorted Ray Stanton back to his apartment and once inside, Lopez pulled the door closed. When Ray tried to open it, Lopez, who stood right there, shook his head and pulled the door closed again.

An hour and a half later, the knock came fast and loud on his door. Detective Rasch led the charge and stood inside before Ray fully

opened the door. Detective Ed Lopez right behind him, closing the door after he entered.

"Okay kid, I'll give it to you straight and I expect the same from you. I'm very sorry to say, Mrs. Meadows is deceased. We don't know how yet, natural, suicide, or other means. The coroner finished her preliminary, but we have to wait for toxins, DNA and whatever else is uncovered. The coroner said it would take a while to get the results. All we know right now."

Ray Stanton sat down heavily into his sofa.

"How? Why? I mean. Holy shit. Who did this to her? I mean. What the hell?"

"Easy, kid. We don't know much yet, but, the coroner also determined, Mrs. Meadows had sex shortly before she died. Found fluid leaking, meaning still fresh, within the last few hours. So, I gotta ask kid. That gonna come back to you? Be straight with me now. If you and her had a thing, just tell me. I won't judge or comment. I just need to know. Did you two get it on today?"

Stanton shook his head. "No detective, I assure you, we did not."

Detective Rasch looked hard at Ray, nodded and continued.

"Okay. Tell me where you were earlier today?"

"At work. I work at *Tourneur de pages*. I believe it's French for books or something. Anyway, a small neighborhood book store. The owners are getting older and basically, hired me to do the heavy lifting. so-to-speak. Louise, the wife, handles the books and Fred, the husband, basically supervises me. My usual hours are 11 to 7 weekdays, but since the store closes at eight, I sometimes stay later. Some Saturdays. Store is closed on Sundays. Anything I can do for them to help out. Tonight, I got home around 7:30 and since Mrs. Meadows' apartment door stood closed, I came straight in here."

"So when her apartment door is open, you go in there when you come home?"

"What? No. In the summer, since these shit-box air conditioners don't do much for a third floor, top floor, apartment, we discovered that if we both open our doors and our bedroom windows, we get a nice cross breeze. This time of year, when I come home her door is usually open, for some relief and I leave mine open, hoping to cool off before bedtime. Mrs. Meadows has it much worse. Her apartment is on the sunny side of the building."

"I'd ask what the hell you just said, but I really don't give a damn." Detective Rasch spit out. "So, if I heard you right, Mrs. Meadows' door closed when you got home? Did you knock or try to contact her?"

"No. If her door is closed, I don't bother her, but open, I might stick my head in and say hello. I should also mention, during the summer, she usually dressed only in her underwear. Nothing sexy or anything like that, but you know, underpants and a loose top. She once told me, more layers makes her underwear stick to her skin. Since her apartment really heats up during the day. Just thought you should know that. Maybe, she gets naked when her door is closed. Just saying. As I said, I work all day, so I really don't know what she did during the day, but like I said, her place really gets hot during the day, so maybe she really did get naked, during the day."

"Yeah, we got it. Meadows' place gets hot."

Detective Rasch looked at Ray, at Detective Lopez and shrugged his shoulders.

"I mean, it's no big deal, right?" Ray Stanton looked at each detective. "I mean, it's not like I'm always over there, in fact I'm rarely over there, other than to say hello. And, leave our doors open for the breeze. Oh hell, who cares what you both think. I swear, there is nothing going on between Mrs. Meadows and me."

"Girlfriend?" Detective Rasch pointed.

"What? No. Not currently."

"Why not?"

"The last girlfriend I had, said I work too much. Maybe, she's right. Anyway, no."

"What else can you tell us about Mrs. Meadows?" Detective Lopez held his pad in his hand. "Boyfriend, or a gentleman caller, or woman friend going in and out of there? Anything like that?"

"I really wouldn't know. And even if I did, I surely wouldn't know what relationship they might have had. As I said, I'm not here during the day. I think Mrs. Meadows works, or volunteers sometimes at a florist down the street. She mentioned once, she helped out there."

"How about your neighbors? Would they know any more about her?" Detective Lopez looked up from his notes.

"Mrs. Roberts in 3A is in her eighties. I believe she is home most of the day. She might. Arthur, I don't know his last name, in 3D works nights. I believe the overnight shift. I've seen him leave around ten most nights and I've seen him in the mornings around eight. Not sure what he might know."

"We'll talk to them next. here's my card, call if you remember anything else. We'll be in touch."

Ray Stanton took Detective Lopez's card and nodded. Lopez nodded to Ray as they both started to leave.

"Detective. Just a minute."

Both Detectives turned to face him.

"How did you know to come to Mrs. Meadows' apartment? I mean, who called you. Why did they call you? Sounds rather strange, someone would call out of the blue. Don't you think? I mean. They had to be in her apartment to know. I mean. Who? Who would know?"

Detective Lopez pulled out his note pad.

"Got a 911 call for a welfare check, this address, apartment 3B, an unconscious woman. A man's voice on the recording. The two officers knocked on the door around six. Tried the door. Unlocked. They went in. Saw her. Checked. Called us." Lopez closed the note pad.

"What man? Who called? Again, who would have known? Unless they were in there together."

Detective Rasch stepped toward Ray. "Listen, kid. We're still working the case. Still flushing out the details. Anybody, you can think of would make that call?"

"No sir. I mean, Detective. I sure don't. But, I would be most anxious to find out. I mean. How did he know? He had to have been in there to know. Maybe, that guy attacked her. Maybe, why she is naked. Do you think he killed her? Oh my God. I can't believe this happened. I mean, not to Mrs. Meadows. Oh my God! No!"

"Hold on, Stanton. Get a grip, will ya? We don't know what the real cause of death is yet. Too early to say what anything means. Maybe nothing. We are still looking at everything. No answers yet."

"Deliveries?" Detective Lopez interrupted. "Maybe, a delivery driver found her, called it in. How do you get your deliveries in this building?"

"Usually downstairs, with the rest of the mail. No driver wants to walk up three flights, he don't have too. If it needs signing, the super on the first floor, 1A, handles those. Big sign on the door."

Detective Lopez nodded as did Detective Rasch. Once again they started for the door. Ray let them leave and stood in the doorway as they went to Mrs. Roberts' door. Fifteen minutes later, the detectives knocked on Arthur's door. Knocked again, probably had to wake him. Finally the door opened and the detectives entered Arthur's apartment. Ray had enough and closed his door.

He sat into his sofa. Needed another beer. But, he drank the last one earlier. The bottle still on the carpet. His thoughts raced. What happened to Mrs. Meadows. Who could do something like that to her?

Who? Why? What the hell? To Virginia. It seemed funny constantly referring to her as Mrs. Meadows. For the last three years he knew her as Virginia. He called her Ginny once, but she quickly corrected him. Her name, Virginia, not any of the derivatives. He appreciated that as much as he preferred Ray over Raymond. They had that in common.

Ray thought back to the many encounters they had. Well, maybe not so many, but they seemed to interact quite a bit. Mostly, in the summer of course, when their doors open afforded both of them some relief from the excruciating heat.

He needed another beer.

The game still flickered on the TV in the background. He had muted the sound when the Detectives walked in and now the sound didn't matter anymore.

He still needed another beer.

Two weeks later, Ray Stanton came home earlier on a slow Thursday to find Mrs. Meadows' apartment door open and a woman standing in the middle of the room, her back to him. He stepped into the doorway.

"Mrs. Meadows?"

The woman turned, and at first glance, appeared to be a younger version of Mrs. Meadows. Ray actually took a step back. The woman smiled broadly as she turned to face him.

"You must be Ray Stanton."

"Yes. But, how would you know? May I ask, who you are?"

"Detective Lopez, filled me in. Said I should talk with a Ray Stanton in 3C. One of Mrs. Meadows' neighbors, who seems to know a lot about Mrs. Meadows life for the last three years."

"I'm sorry. Where's my manners? Would you like a cold beer? I have some cold ones in the fridge?" Ray pointed.

"No thanks, Ray. I need to get my head around all this."

"Not sure I understand."

She walked up to him and extended her hand.

"Sorry. Hi, I'm Lisa Hayes, Virginia's sister. Hayes is her maiden name. I'm twelve years younger than her. A late life surprise for my parents, no doubt. Virginia went off to college when I was six, but we stayed in touch like sisters do, especially when I turned eighteen and went off to college. Much easier then."

Lisa Hayes took a deep breath.

"Did my sister seem depressed, or anything bothering her, you may have noticed?"

"No. Nothing I noticed. The heat always a big bother, especially since she had the sunny side apartment, but other than the heat, she seemed fine. I mean, she always appeared in good sprits as far as I could tell. Why, do you suspect something?"

"No Ray, I don't. But, I know how much the accident affected her and often wondered if it may have gone deeper."

"Not that I noticed. She told me about the accident. Said, she had a couple of tough years, but she had moved on."

Lisa pointed and they both sat on the loveseat.

"Thanks. Would you mind, if we can discuss more later? If that would be okay with you?"

Ray nodded. "Sure."

"I have been tasked with emptying and closing out her apartment. My parents are older now and certainly, not something they should have to deal with. I already spoke with the super and extended the apartment lease for another month. Gives me five weeks to get this done. Of course I won't be here all that time. Probably, won't need all that time either, but I felt it should give me enough time. I mean, with work and all, to accomplish the task. Besides, the super wouldn't go less than another month's rent. Not a very friendly fellow, that super."

"No he's not. Of course, I'll help anyway I can."

Lisa took Ray's hand in hers.

"That's very kind of you. So, what did you and my sister talk about? What did you two do together?"

"Well, I work a lot and I believe Mrs. Meadows, I mean Virginia."

"Is that what you called her Mrs. Meadows?"

"Sometimes. But, after a while, I called her Virginia. And yes, I got the lecture about not using any of the derivatives of the name. Virginia is her name. Period."

Lisa laughed out loud and held his hand even tighter.

"Yes, the lecture. Story goes, when she was in grade school, an older male teacher kept calling her Ginny. Well, she refused to answer, unless he used her given name. And, she told him as much. A trip to the principal's office. She won the argument and from that moment on she became Virginia."

"Wow. Now I understand her stern, but polite reprimand."

"So tell me more." Lisa continued to hold Ray's hand.

"Virginia once told me, she helped at the florist down the street. I don't know if a job, or she volunteered."

"Really? She did like her flowers, that's for sure. A bit surprised, I don't see any here."

"They wouldn't live in this heat, especially in this apartment. This is the sunny side of the building. Good for flowers. Bad for people. She probably gave up trying."

"How did you two meet?"

"Well, I officially met Virginia, when I helped her carry up some groceries one night. Remember, we are on the third floor and no, this building doesn't have an elevator as you may have discovered. Anyway, we got to talking and since we were still in the heat of summer, we discovered, having both of our doors and bedroom windows open, we were able to create a nice cross breeze. So, we'd have a couple of beers together, or if it was her night, a bottle of wine. We'd talk about everything and nothing really. What we did that day. Work. Stories from our past. What happened in the news that day. General stuff, really. Conversations. You know. A couple of months passed, before she told me about the accident."

"Did she ever tell you why she moved here?"

"No. I did ask once, but she simply said, what she could afford."

Lisa nodded and sat back into the loveseat, but still held Ray's hand. Ray looked at her. She appeared to be in deep thought.

"Would you like to share those thoughts?"

Lisa opened her eyes and looked up at Ray. Smiling, she sat forward and placed their hands into her lap.

"I can tell you how Virginia Meadows wound up here."

Lisa took a deep breath. Enclosed his hand with both her hands and held on tight.

"After the accident, I moved into the house with her. Helped her take care of everything. You know, the usual mess after someone dies. In her case two deaths. Funeral arrangements. Financial affairs. So much more. Anyway, she moved into the guest room and I moved into what was once their bedroom, but she had it completely redecorated to be the guest room now. I suppose she needed to escape the memory. Her son's room left just the way, the last day her son spent there."

Lisa paused and rested her head on Ray's shoulder. Ray put his arm around her and held her for a minute. She released and sat up.

"The house living lasted for about six or seven months. Virginia decided to put the house up for sale, which took three more months, I believe. Virginia and I moved into an apartment together. Unfortunately, the house sale did not bring her much. Not sure of all the details, but I believe they had a second mortgage. When the dust settled, she pocketed very little real cash. We lived in our apartment around a year and a half, maybe a little more. Not sure exactly."

"Then she moved here?"

"No. She quit her job, left the state and turned up on my doorstep eight months later."

"Did she say where she had been?"

"No. And when I pressed, she said if I didn't drop it, she would leave. So, I dropped it."

"Any thoughts?"

Lisa smiled, held his hand tighter, leaned a little closer.

"Personally, I believe she went off to meet a guy. There had been a guy in high school she had a crush on. She told me how she had it bad for him, but nothing ever came of it. I looked him up. He lives in another state and had already been divorced around the time my sister left our state. I don't really know anything for sure, but my best guess, he is that guy."

"Sounds intriguing."

"Let's just say, she had a fling and leave it there. She did live with me again for about six months. One day, said she had to move on. Get a new place. Get a job. Get on with her life. I didn't argue and simply offered support. I do know she looked at a couple of places, before she moved here. By the way, all her stuff is second-hand. Over time she got a piece here and there." Lisa laughed. "Of course, there is really not much in the way of furniture here."

"Thanks for the update. Sure paints the picture a little clearer. I don't want to change the subject, but are you hungry? Would you like to get something to eat? I know a place."

"Ray Stanton, you're on. I'm famished. I haven't eaten since the plane and only munchies. I put myself in your hands."

"Lisa, I believe my hand, is in your hand at the moment."

Lisa laughed out loud and kissed Ray on the cheek.

"You're precious."

They sat at a table in the back. Lisa ordered a Vodka Martini, with two olives and Ray ordered a beer.

"Hope you don't mind, but it has been a long day and I need something stronger than a beer."

Ray shook his head. "Martini works."

They placed their orders and another round. Lisa took a long sip of the second martini.

"Ray, I have to ask you something, but if it is too personal, you don't have to answer."

Lisa took another sip. Ray waited.

"Detective Rasch became almost unglued telling me how you insisted you never had sex with my sister, which in his mind meant you probably did. Can I ask why? I mean, even if you really did, it's okay."

Ray took a big gulp of his beer.

"Lisa, Virginia and I were friends. Nothing more. I mean. Yes, a beautiful lady and all, but we never. Well, we never. Given the opportunity, I suppose I would have, but we didn't have that kind of connection. I mean. Damn, this all sounds so cold. Well, given the chance, no question I surely would have. But, on the flip side, we never had any intimacy. I mean. Hell, you and I were more intimate, just holding hands than Virginia and I ever were."

"Really?"

"Yes. Mrs. Meadows and I never held hands, or anything like that. Not even a hug. I don't think we ever made contact."

"Thank you Ray, for your candor."

The food arrived and they ate in silence. After dinner, they ordered coffee and desert. Lisa put her fork down.

"So Ray, Why don't you have a girlfriend?"

"Jesus, did Lopez tell you that too?"

"No. Detective Rasch did. Said you must have had something going on with Mrs. Meadows, because a guy his age always has a girl around and being so chummy with Mrs. Meadows, it's pretty obvious why not. Only a fool would believe different. So, what is it?"

Ray Stanton smiled and sat back into his chair. He looked across at Lisa, turning his coffee cup on the saucer.

"Fact is, I work a lot. A girl my age wants to go out all the time, party on the weekends. Like that. I don't have the time for like that. Had a girl quite a while back. She said that very thing. That I work too much."

After, we split, I didn't try again. Mrs. Meadows, and I, were friends. I would come home from work and if her door open, which it usually would be during the summer months, we'd get together and talk, or watch a movie together, or whatever. Sometimes, in the winter months she'd knock on my door, or leave her door open for when I came home, so we could visit. Truth be told, she seemed as lonely as me. We filled a void for each other. No sex involved. Just friends. A hell of a lot better than some nagging girlfriend to come home too."

"Sorry Ray, I didn't mean to upset you."

"All good. Now hopefully, at least, you understand."

"I do. I promise, I won't mention it again."

"Can I ask? Do you have a boyfriend or?"

Lisa laughed.

"I suppose it is only fair. Actually, I don't. Probably for the same reason you don't, I work too much. You probably did the math already and know I'm 32. I almost got engaged once, but we drifted apart. Truth be told, I got offered the job in another state and that pretty much ended it. I don't mind saying, I've had a few encounters. I don't know what else to call them, but again work gets in the way."

Lisa finished her coffee and looked up at Ray.

"I'm not ashamed to say, once I hit 30, I focused more on my job than I did partying and dating and all that. So, I'm a washed up 32 year old, who enjoys her job, rather than having some man hanging around."

"Personally Lisa, I think you look great. And, no I did not do the math, so I didn't know you are 32, which doesn't matter anyhow. You look great. I better stop. I'm repeating myself."

"Aren't you sweet, Ray? Shall we go?"

Lisa and Ray left the restaurant and slowly walked back to the apartments. When they got to Mrs. Meadows' apartment door, Lisa opened it and turned to Ray.

"Thank you for dinner and your candor. I appreciate hearing about my sister and how comforting it must have been for you both, especially for her. I look forward to having you around to help these next few weeks. Thank you. Actually, I look forward to just having you around."

Lisa reached up and kissed Ray on the lips. The second kiss included more than lips.

"Good night, Ray."

The door closed to Mrs. Meadows' apartment. Ray stood there for a full minute, trying to digest what just happened.

For the next ten days they worked hard, sorting through, organizing and packing Mrs. Meadows' belongings into boxes to be shipped. Lisa offered him any of the furniture, if he wanted it, but he declined. The furniture offered too many memories for him, especially knowing Mrs. Meadows may have died on that loveseat. The following week, Lisa had to go back home to work. Said, she might not be back for ten days or so, to finish up.

They did not discuss, or mention, that kiss.

Ray Stanton went about his day, working, coming home, eating and watching the ball game, now even lonelier without Mrs. Meadows to converse with. Every day, after work, as he turned the key in his door, Mrs. Meadows' door remained closed. He truly missed those days seeing her door open.

On his Sunday off, he grabbed the key Lisa had left, opened Mrs. Meadows' apartment door and went in. The boxes filled one side of the living room. The bed stood unmade. The two nightstands pushed to the side, drawers open, empty. He sat in one of the kitchen chairs and looked around. A voice came from the doorway.

"Such a shame, can you even imagine?"

Ray looked over to see Mrs. Roberts standing there.

"Poor Mrs. Meadows, such a lovely lady."

"Yes, Mrs. Roberts, that's for sure."

"I hear you're helping pack up her things."

"Yes. Lisa, I mean Ms Hayes, I mean Mrs. Meadows' sister."

"I know what you mean, Ray."

"Yes. Well, I offered to help."

Mrs. Roberts came over and sat down on the other kitchen chair.

"Ray, did you love her?"

"What? Who? I mean. No. We were just friends."

Mrs. Roberts patted his hand.

"It's okay, Ray. You don't have to say anymore. Right nice of you to befriend her like you did. She sure appeared very lonely. You gave her hope in a desperate situation."

"Huh? What do you mean, desperate?"

"Woman lost her family and damn near lost her way. You changed that. You offered her hope. Gave her comfort. I dare say without your

friendship, she would have given up a long time ago. You saved her, whether you want to believe it or not."

"Mrs. Roberts?"

"It's okay, Ray. It's okay. Even if you don't know it, you loved her in your own way. You should feel very proud of that."

Mrs. Roberts patted his hand and walked to the door.

"Even if you still don't know it."

Mrs. Roberts left him sitting there trying to digest all she had said.

Ray finally got up, closed and locked the door to Mrs. Meadows apartment, and slowly went back into his.

Lisa Hayes returned twelve days later. Ray Stanton's door stood open.

"Ray, I'm back. So good, to see you again. Listen, I have arranged for a second-hand furniture place, to pick up all of the furniture on Friday. Gives us three days to finish up. I think we can do it by then. Sorry to say, I have to leave the following Sunday to be back at work on Monday. Sorry, work has been really busy and. Well. I really need to get back by Monday."

Ray nodded he understood, but before he had a chance to say anything, Lisa turned to him, putting both hands on his shoulders.

"Of course, I'll buy you dinner Friday night. The least I can do, to thank you for all your help. Won't that be fun?"

"Sure."

"Okay then, let's get started."

Ray followed Lisa into Mrs. Meadows' apartment. By the end of the day, Thursday, they had everything packed. Ray noticed the stripped bed.

"Would you like me to loan you some bedding for the night?"

Lisa looked at the bed and shook her head.

"I'll be fine. A box there has a blanket in it and I believe the pillows are in the other one. I'll be fine. Thanks for offering."

Ray nodded.

"Listen Ray, I don't mean to be rude, but I have some work to finish for a team meeting first thing in the morning. I need to prepare. So, if you'll excuse me, I need to call it a night."

"Sure, no problem. What time are the furniture people coming tomorrow?"

"Some time after two, I believe. It's okay, I'll probably be busy most of the morning."

"I should be home around four. I asked for half day tomorrow and they said okay, so I'll see you then."

"Great. Thanks, Ray."

"Hey, what about food. You need to eat something."

"What are you having?"

Ray thought for a minute. "Don't know."

"Tell you what, Ray. Order us a pizza and we'll split."

"Sounds good. Anything special?"

"Pepperoni and sausage works for me."

"Lisa, you are a woman after my own heart."

Ray knocked on her door with the pizza box in hand. Lisa only took two slices.

"I thought you said we'd split."

"That's all I need for now, but if I need some later I'll come knocking."

Ray stood there motionless and silent holding the box in the air.

"Pizza, Ray. Pizza. I'll come get some pizza."

"Right. Yes. Of course. I knew that."

Lisa smiled wickedly, and slowly closed the door.

Friday afternoon, Ray came home just as the movers were taking out the last of the pieces of furniture. He stood in the doorway of Mrs. Meadows' now empty apartment, except for the boxes. Lisa quickly came toward him.

"Ray, I need a big favor from you."

"Sure. What do you need?"

""You sure you don't mind?"

"I don't think so."

"Don't panic. Nothing crazy. I couldn't get anyone to pick up the boxes for shipping until next Tuesday. Well, as you know, I have to leave on Sunday. Would you mind taking care of those for me? I realize you have to work, but they said they would be here first thing Tuesday morning. Hopefully, they won't make you late."

"Yeah, I can do the boxes for you. I'll let Louise know, I might be running a little late on Tuesday."

"Louise?"

"Louise, is my boss at the bookstore. She's old enough to call your sister, Virginia, kid."

"Of course." Lisa gave a him big smile. "One last thing? Once the boxes are picked up, would you mind giving the super the keys? Tell him I'm done with the apartment. They can have it back. I have a couple of weeks left on the rent, but I don't care anymore."

"Sure, no problem."

"Thanks, Ray. I don't know what I would have done without you?"

"Well Lisa, you offered to buy me dinner."

"That's right. Same place?"

"Works for me. Let me clean up real quick and I'll meet you at." Ray looked at his watch. "Say fifteen minutes."

Lisa smiled and winked, and slowly closed the door.

After dinner, another two martinis, for her, two beers, for him, coffee and desert, they walked back to the apartments. Outside Mrs. Meadows' apartment, Ray turned to her.

"Listen, since you don't have any furniture anymore in there, you're welcome to stay with me tonight."

"Why Ray, are you asking me to sleep with you?"

"Yes. I mean, no. I mean, you know, sleep here."

"With you?"

Ray took a deep breath.

"Look you're welcome to the bed, I'll take the sofa. Remember my sofa is big enough to sleep on. If I had taken the love seat, we would have had to sleep together."

Lisa stood there looking at him. A smile formed on her face.

"Or we can share the bed. I noticed you had a double bed, or is it a queen? Anyway, no need for you to sleep on a lumpy sofa. If anything. I should sleep on your lumpy sofa."

"Lisa. I honestly don't know what to say."

"It's simple, Ray. Maybe, it's the two martinis, but I'd like to spend the night with you. Not just in your apartment, but actually with you."

Lisa leaned into Ray. Her lips met his. Their bodies pressed together. Ray fumbled for his keys and finally got his door open.

"Mind if I use your bathroom first?"

Ray watched as she walked down the hall to the bathroom. He stood there waiting, not exactly sure what to do. Lisa emerged in only her panties. Her hands on her breasts. A moment later, Lisa fell into his arms. They kissed. She worked the buttons on his shirt.

When Ray woke up the next morning, he felt the empty space next to him. He sat up, dropped his feet to the floor, got out of bed and walked out of the bedroom. Lisa sat on the sofa, her feet up on the trunk. She had on panties and his shirt, working on her laptop. He sat next to her in his boxers. She turned to him, set her laptop down and pushed her legs up under her.

"Ray, It truly has been wonderful being with you these last few days. Thank you, for all you help, concern and support. I wanted last night to happen since we first kissed. I hoped you felt the same. I don't know when, or if, we'll see each other again, but I will forever cherish the time we had together."

Lisa leaned in to kiss him and wound up on top of Ray. Hands started to move and after, they sat naked together on his sofa.

"Okay, you started it this time."

"Are you complaining?"

"No Ray, I'm not. I'm thanking you."

They spent the rest of Saturday together, mostly talking and more stories about Mrs. Meadows. Dinner at the same place Saturday night. Later Saturday night, as the lay together, naked In Ray's bed. He couldn't help but think about Lisa leaving tomorrow, possibly for good and held her just a bit tighter. She stirred next to him. He pulled the sheet up over them and waited for Lisa to fall asleep. Gradually, he did as well.

On Sunday morning, Ray carried Lisa's two bags down to the taxi waiting to ferry her to the airport. They kissed goodbye. Ray waved as the taxi pulled away. Slowly, he made his way back up the stairs, opened his door and took a last look at Mrs. Meadows' apartment 3B door, before going inside and closing his door.

On Tuesday, Ray watched as the shippers taped, sealed and added address labels to the boxes, before carrying them down the stairs. Fourteen boxes later, they were finished. Ray stood there in the empty apartment 3B. Nothing more to do. He made a cursory pass to insure the apartment indeed empty.

Ray closed the door and turned the key. He waited until the end of the week to surrender the key, because until then, apartment 3B would still belong to Mrs. Meadows.

Before the week finished, Ray Stanton had purchased a love seat, end table and a functional coffee table. The discount furniture store also agreed to remove his old sofa and trunk.

In the subsequent weeks, a parade of people were ushered through Mrs. Meadows' apartment 3B by the super. First up, a young couple, followed by an older gentleman, an older Lady and a young girl. Since most of these showings were on weekends, Ray witnessed them first hand. After an open weekend, another couple, followed by two guys, who left immediately and never went in. Then no one for the next three weeks. At least, no one he saw.

On the following Friday afternoon — Ray arrived home early, because he had worked late Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, Louise sent him home at three — he heard a knock on his door. The knock came again before he could open the door. Sure a potential renter had made a mistake, he yelled out.

"Okay. Okay. I'm coming. Hold on."

Lisa Hayes stood outside his door. He stood silent.

"Hi Ray. So glad you are home. I knew you wouldn't be this early. Sorry I knocked again. I mean. So glad you are home. May I come in?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. Surprised to see you. By the way, they haven't rented Mrs. Meadows' apartment yet. You're not still paying rent, are you?"

Lisa shook her head, walked into his apartment and stood waiting while he closed the door.

"I see you've updated the furniture since the last time."

"Yes, thought I should change things around."

"I agree Ray, but the layout looks quite familiar."

"Yeah. About that. The one thing I always missed about the old setup, I did not have an end table. I always had to set my beer. I mean, my drink or what-have-you on the old trunk, which besides being further away, I had to be careful how I set anything down. Those straps. Well, I wanted a flat surface table. The discount store gave me a great price on the three pieces. They also took my old sofa and trunk away."

"Is that the real reason, Ray?"

"Certainly. Well, certainly the one I keep telling myself."

After an awkward silence, Ray noticed Lisa had papers and a delivery envelope in her hands. He motioned for her to have a seat. They both sat on the new love seat, turning slightly to face each other. Their knees touched and Lisa's skirt rode up her leg. Ray looked at her bare leg then up at her. Lisa smiled.

"Well, I do feel at home here."

"I'm glad you do. Sure happy to see you."

Ray patted her bare leg. She held his hand there.

"I have so much to tell you."

"I'm sorry, Lisa. Can I get you something to drink?"

"A martini."

"How about a cold beer?"

"I'll wait until dinner tonight. Maybe some water."

Ray stood up to get her a glass of bottled water. When he returned, she had kicked her shoes off and slid one leg under her, completely turned to face him. The skirt pulled up to compensate. Ray handed her the water. She drank almost half before setting the glass down.

"I've just come from meeting with the Detectives. Of course, I knew you wouldn't be home yet, but I would have sat outside your door until you did. I needed to be with you right now. I couldn't think of anybody else I would rather be with at this time. I hoped we could go to dinner again later and maybe I could stay over tonight. I need you to hold me right now."

Lisa started to cry. Ray reached over to pull her toward him and held her tight as she sobbed heavily. She circled her arms around him and held him tight.

"Lisa, you can stay as long as you like. I'm here for you, whatever you need. Sure, we'll get dinner later. You can have your martini or two. We can come back here and I'll hold you all night. And all day tomorrow. Whatever you need. I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Ray. I feel so safe and comfortable in your arms."

Ray held her tighter.

After about ten minutes, she finally pulled away.

"I must look a mess."

Ray looked her over. Her makeup had run, especially around her eyes. Her skirt, up around her waist, exposed her underwear.

"Do you have a shirt I can borrow?"

Ray retrieved one of his shirts and handed it to her. She left and went into the bathroom. When she came out, she had his shirt on and laid her clothes out on his bed, including her bra. She sat cross-legged on the loveseat, facing him. The shirt tails covering her underwear.

"Sorry for the way I look. I needed to get out of those clothes. Promise, I'll freshen up and dress for dinner."

"You always look good to me."

Lisa smiled and reached for the papers on the coffee table.

"Like I said, I have lots to tell you."

She shuffled the papers.

"I met with the Detectives earlier. Well, actually with Detective Lopez. Detective Rasch, couldn't be bothered with me. He left the room after a few minutes. Which worked out better. Lopez seemed to relax as he went over everything with me alone."

Lisa paused and took a deep breath.

"They made an arrest in my sister's death, but not for her death specifically. Wait, let me tell you what I do know."

Lisa took another deep breath. Ray patted her leg. She smiled.

"Okay. It appears, sometime around 1:30pm or so that day, a package delivery came to Virginia. Although, the building rules say to knock on 1A, the driver had been instructed to get her to sign personally, or so he claimed. The guy went up to her apartment, found the door open. After what you told me about the heat, I'm not surprised. Well, apparently when he stepped inside, he said, the lady just sat there naked. Probably due to the heat. The guy said, claimed really, his story. He tried to rouse her but the lady seemed incoherent and not real responsive, but alive. He swore when he left the lady was alive. He said he became overwhelmed by her being naked. Said he couldn't resist. The kid told the detective, he thought the lady might be drunk or high on something. She just moaned off and on, while he had sex with her. The lady offered no resistance, almost like it is okay with her. Lopez asked the kid, didn't the fact she seemed unresponsive to being violated suggest she might be in distress. The kid said, he just thought the lady was drunk. Lopez told me, he thought about punching the kid, but resisted and just grabbed him and shook him, asking how stupid can you be. Lopez said, Rasch came in and took over. Lopez said he left the room, so he doesn't know what Rasch might have done to the kid. The kid is only 20 years old. I can't even imagine."

Lisa paused and took another drink of the water.

"So he had sex with my sister and just left her there. Oh get this. The kid scribbled my sister's name on the receipt, to prove he did get her signature personally. Can you beat that?"

Lisa held up the delivery envelope.

"After he delivered this, he just left her there."

Tears formed in Lisa's eyes and she put her head down.

"It's okay. Just use my shirt."

Lisa used the shirt tail to wipe her eyes.

"I'm okay." She dabbed again. "Really, it's okay."

Ray held her hand. She took a breath and continued.

"About an hour or so later, he used a pay phone to call 911 to report an unconscious woman in an apartment. The kid gave the operator the address and apartment number. At least, he did have some decency. That's why they did the welfare check at my sister's apartment. Eventually, the police matched his DNA to an earlier arrest for a DUI when the kid was only 17. How they matched him to, you know."

Lisa sat back, the papers dropping to her lap.

"Lopez said they threatened the kid with murder, because the lady he screwed — Lopez said that, not me — had died and he killed her. The kid broke down immediately and told them everything. Lopez said, they are still holding him. Said, he'll talk to the DA, to decide what to do with the kid. Probably, workout some kind of plea deal with the kid, to keep the gory details quiet."

Ray got up and filled her glass back up. She took it and drank half of it, before continuing.

"The kid didn't cause her death, and probably not even if he had called right away. Lopez said the coroner informed him, Virginia suffered from heat stroke, and a weakened heart, which is probably what caused her death. Personally, I think she died of a broken heart. She suffered so after the accident. The heat just helped it along."

Ray nodded. Lisa squeezed his hand.

"As you may remember that week felt especially hot. They also discovered her AC didn't work, it just blew out hot air. I can't imagine how hot her place became. The coroner had also noted Virginia was quite dehydrated. That suggests to me, Virginia probably knew what was happening to her and no longer cared."

"Lisa, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize it had been that bad in her place. I would have helped her. I would have had her stay with me. Boy, would they have talked if I did that. But, I would have. I mean, I would have done anything to help her. I should have let her stay in my place during the day. Or, gave her my key."

"I know, Ray. I know you would have. I have to say I still believe she was quite depressed from the accident, probably more so than any of us imagined. Maybe, she just didn't care anymore. I'm starting to believe she just gave up."

Lisa removed the package from her papers and held it in the air.

"Here's the kicker. The package, the kid delivered to Virginia. Let me start at the beginning. About six months after the accident, an attorney friend, a good friend of our dad actually, offered to help Virginia out with the details. As I understood it, the attorney would handle the legal side of the accident. If the accident would be determined the other person's fault, The lady, who hit them did run the red light and may have been speeding. And, because this attorney is a good friend of my father's, he agreed to handle the case on a contingency basis for 25% of the settlement and Virginia would only have to cover his expenses."

Lisa removed the papers from inside the package.

"The police took the package that day and used it to find the kid. They also opened it to discover just what he delivered, that had brought him directly to her apartment. Anyway, how Lopez explained why the package had been opened. The package actually contained a letter from the attorney and a check for Virginia."

Lisa held those papers in front of her.

"The letter explains the details of the settlement and her share of the funds. The case settled for \$190,000.00. The attorney took \$47,500.00, the 25% for his fee and \$4,008.47 for his expenses. A check is made out to Virginia Meadows for \$138,491.53. She received a check for 138 thousand dollars on the day she died to pay for the loss of her husband and her son. I want to believe the irony in that, but I just can't. I just can't. The only relief I get from this, her case settled and the other side admitted guilt. Just knowing the accident could have been avoided, if not for the woman's carelessness, somehow suggests we don't have to struggle anymore over what caused her husband and son to die. 138 thousand dollars for the life of her husband and son and she probably didn't even know it. Son-of-bitch. How absolutely unbelievable."

Ray reached over and pulled her toward him and held her tight. the tears flowed again, coupled with uncontrollable sobs. Ray held her tighter. Finally, the sobs stopped, but the tears still flowed. They held each other for quite some time.

Lisa pulled away and sat back into the arm of the loveseat.

"I spoke with the attorney and he said he would help me with Virginia's affairs and all this, of course. I found her bank statements. She had a checking account with around \$5,600.00 and \$10,000.00 in savings. Looks like all the money left from the house sale. I thought she received around 28 or 29 thousand from the sale. Lopez also gave me a necklace and her watch she had on when they found her. Lopez had her checkbook, for safe keeping, he said, which he returned. Oh, I also have a copy of Virginia Meadows' death certificate."

Lisa pointed. "All that is left is all these papers."

Lisa sat quiet. Ray let her and did not pepper her with questions. She put all the papers back into the package and set it on the table. Somewhat unsteady, she reached for the water, drank the rest and put the glass down. Without a word said, Lisa turned and cuddled into Ray's arms, but still remained silent. A couple of minutes later she finally spoke.

"Ray, what time is it?"

"Almost five."

"Shall we get ready for dinner?"

"Anytime you're ready."

Lisa got up, went into the bedroom, removed the shirt, slipped on her bra and turned to Ray in her white bra and panties, holding up her top and skirt.

"Will this be okay? I only brought an overnight bag."

Ray walked up to her.

"That will be fine. I can give you another top if you like."

Lisa dressed and went into the bathroom to fix her makeup. Ray freshened up, changed and waited for her.

Arm and arm they walked to the restaurant. Lisa had her martini, in fact she had two as usual. Ray had his two beers. Lisa playfully threatened to get him to drink martinis at dinner. After dinner, they walked back to his apartment. Inside the door, Lisa kicked off her shoes, unzipped her skirt and let it fall to the floor, removed her shirt and dropped it to the floor. She put her arms around Ray's neck.

"Ray. I want to spend the weekend with you. Can I? Please?"

"Lisa, you can stay as long as you like."

Lisa climbed into bed in her bra and panties. Ray stripped to his boxers and climbed in beside her. She cuddled into his arms and in a moment she fell fast asleep. Ray held her. She appeared to find peace in his arms. He held her tighter. Whatever else, for now, she needed him to comfort her. Gradually, he fell asleep.

Lisa spent most of Saturday working on her laptop. Ray quietly watched golf on a muted TV. AT 4:00pm, Lisa closed the laptop, stood up and stretched.

"That's it. The rest can wait until Monday. Tonight, you and I. Dinner. Martinis. And, you. How delightful. My full attention on you."

Lisa came over and sat next to Ray on the loveseat.

"I'm sorry, Ray. I didn't mean to work all day. But, I promise, I'm all yours tonight. Whatever you want. Whatever you need. I'm yours."

On Sunday morning, while they lay in bed together, Lisa rested her head on her raised hand and looked over at Ray, who turned toward her.

"Thanks, Ray. I feel so relaxed around you. Thanks for taking care of me this weekend. Our time together has been wonderful. I'm sorry I have to leave today, but I need to get back to work. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, of course. Think you'll ever get back this way again?"

"Hard to say, really. Of course, to come see you would be the only reason, and certainly worth the trip. But, honestly, we are so busy at work and I've been away a lot taking care of things. Well, you know what I'm trying to say."

"Sure."

"Ray, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to blow you off. On the contrary, meeting you and spending time with you has been more than wonderful. So soothing, in my time of need. I don't know how I would have handled all of this without you. I'm sure neither one of us thought this would happen, but you were so tender and understanding and I felt so comfortable being with you. I could say let's get together at my place, or sure, I'll come back often to be with you, but we both know the reality of it all. I'm. Oh hell, let me show you how I really feel right now."

Lisa rolled over on top of him and since they were both still naked from the night before, they easily fell into a rhythm together for the next hour or so. They had become quite relaxed in each other's arms, which made this feel very natural.

After, Lisa stood naked in front of him.

"Okay I grab a shower?"

Ray nodded. She bent down and kissed him. He pulled her on top of him. They kissed again. She pushed away and stood up. Ray nodded.

While she used the shower, Ray dressed and stood waiting.

Lisa came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her and stood next to Ray.

"If you would like, Ray. I can check my schedule and see if I can work in another weekend, but it would be at least a couple of weeks, maybe more, before I could get back here. But, I could try. Really, I could try."

Ray took her in his arms.

"Lisa, it's okay. I really do understand. We each have our own lives and while we were able to enjoy these few precious moments, we both understand the reason why, and why this would be much more difficult to continue. So, let's just enjoy what we had and not worry about what could have been. I'm truly sorry we had to meet under these circumstances, but I'm happy for every minute we had together."

Lisa let the towel drop and embraced Ray in a passionate kiss.

"Ray, I will never forget you. I will never forget the wonderful time we had together. Thank you for everything. Thank you for understanding. Thank you for being you." Lisa stepped back letting Ray have a full view. "Anything I can do for you before I leave?"

"You already have. Lisa, you already have. I will forever cherish our time together."

Ray passionately kissed Lisa again. She stepped away and walked naked into the bedroom to get dressed. Ray watched and let out a deep sigh, followed by a big smile. Reality set in hard.

Later, they went down to the waiting taxi. Kissed good-bye. Watched, as she got in the taxi. Watched, as it drove away. Turned and went inside. As he entered apartment 3C, he looked over to apartment 3B. Mrs. Meadows is gone in every way possible now.

Toward the end of the month, workers began to replace the shit-box air conditioners in all four apartments on the third floor. These would be brand new, more efficient and stronger units. The workers also installed ceiling fans in the bedroom and living room.

Mrs. Roberts stood next to Ray, while the workers finished her apartment. She told Ray, the owners were afraid of lawsuits after Mrs. Meadows passed and why they decided to do these repairs. Fear, not comfort of the tenants, motivated these turds. Yes, Mrs. Roberts really did say "turds."

A month or so later, a new tenant finally moved into Mrs. Meadows' apartment 3B. Ray Stanton watched through his open door as the young girl moved her things in. Light brown hair, slim, possibly in her twenties, dressed in a loose top, jeans and her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Ray focused in. The woman stopped and looked at him through the open door.

"Hi, I'm your new neighbor."

"Hi. Ray Stanton. Let me know, you need anything."

"Jennifer Walsh. Sure will, thanks. Okay, how about you let me know a good place to eat around here. I don't have any groceries yet."

"Sure. How about you let me take you to dinner tonight? Welcome you to the building."

"Listen, Ray is it? Okay. But, only, if you promise to let me buy you dinner next time."

"It's a deal. So Jennifer. May I ask a personal question? Are you seeing anyone? I mean. I sure don't want to get in the middle of anything. You know. And, for the record, I'm not in the middle of anything either."

"Thanks for asking, but nope. I'm all yours, Ray. Looks like we're going to be much more than neighbors together. Sure something I look forward too."

Ray stood silent for a moment, but finally spoke.

"Okay then. 5:30 or 6 work for you?"

"That'd be great. Thanks. See you at 5:30."

Ray watched Jennifer walk back to apartment 3B. She left the door open and he could see her moving boxes around inside. Suddenly, she stopped, turned and looked at him. He felt awkward, being caught watching her. She walked toward the open doorway.

"Listen Ray, I do have some cold beer in the fridge, if you'd like to have a refresher now. It's still a couple of hours 'till dinner. How about a cold beer? Get to know each other better."

Ray Stanton smiled so hard his face hurt. He walked into apartment 3B. Jennifer's apartment now. She already had the beers in hand, pushing one in his direction.

"So Ray, what do you do?"

"I work in a local bookstore right down the street, pretty much full time, I'm afraid."

"Is it the French store?"

"Well, it has a French name, but a regular bookstore."

"Right. Well. Surprise. Surprise. I work at the coffee place, two blocks down from your store. And, I must confess, fulltime also. Usually the afternoon shift."

"Me too. I work 11 to 7, but often stay later."

"Tell you what, Ray. When you get off work, if you so desire, come on down to my place. You can walk me home, or we can get a drink, a bite to eat, or whatever. Ray, I can't tell you the number of dates I had that ended as soon as I told them I work so much."

"You're not gonna believe this, but me too. Since I sometimes also work Saturdays. Wow. Maybe, you and I can do something together in our off hours, whatever those may be."

"That'd be great. And listen Ray, no hard feelings or an attitude, one of us, had to blow off something, because of work."

"Jennifer, that's a deal."

They shook hands. Jennifer pulled Ray in to hug him. Ray returned the hug.

"So Ray, let's get some personal stuff out of the way. I'm 25, from the suburbs. I will admit, I lived with my parents until recently. 45 minute drive in every day. Can't tell you how happy I felt, after I found this place. I mean, right near work and affordable. Haven't had a boyfriend or anything serious in quite awhile. Yeah, a date here and there. You know."

"Fair enough. Okay. 27. Lived here for the last three and a half years. Nothing serious either for quite some time. Had a fling or two. You know. Mostly, I come home, have a beer, watch a game on TV and start over the next day."

"Well Ray, that's gonna change. Either we'll do something, hang out here, or your place with a beer and a game on TV. Whatever the day dictates, Of course, if either one of us needs alone time totally understandable. No attitude about it."

"Sounds like a play to me."

Jennifer stuck her hand out again, and they shook hands.

"Ray, how about you let me finish getting organized and I'll see you in about an hour and a half for dinner. I promise, I'll be cleaned up and dressed."

Ray smiled, turned and left her apartment, closing her door as he did. He closed his door as well.

"When he opened his door at 5:30, Jennifer stood there waiting. Her hair fell to her shoulders. Dressed in a flowing dress that accentuated her figure and flats.

At dinner, Jennifer ordered a beer, which made Ray smile.

"So Jennifer, I do have one last question. Do you prefer Jennifer, or Jenny, or any other?"

"Ray, to be honest, I really do prefer Jennifer. My grandmother called me Jennifer from the day I was born and it stuck. No one really called me anything else. Jennifer it is. Although, one thing you may never call me is: honey, or babe, or sugar, or any of that crap."

"No problem, I wouldn't use any of those ever. I like Ray, short for Raymond, of course. But, I don't mind either."

"Okay then. Jennifer and Ray it is. Any other questions?"

"Nope, I'm good."

After dinner, they walked home and stood outside apartment 3B, while Jennifer opened the door.

"Good night, Ray."

"Good night, Jennifer."

She reached up and kissed his cheek. Ray watched her go inside and stood there as her door closed. He stood for another moment in front of apartment 3B, surely Jennifer's apartment now. He took a deep breath and went into his apartment.

Mrs. Meadows' apartment 3B a faint, but found memory, slowly fading away ...