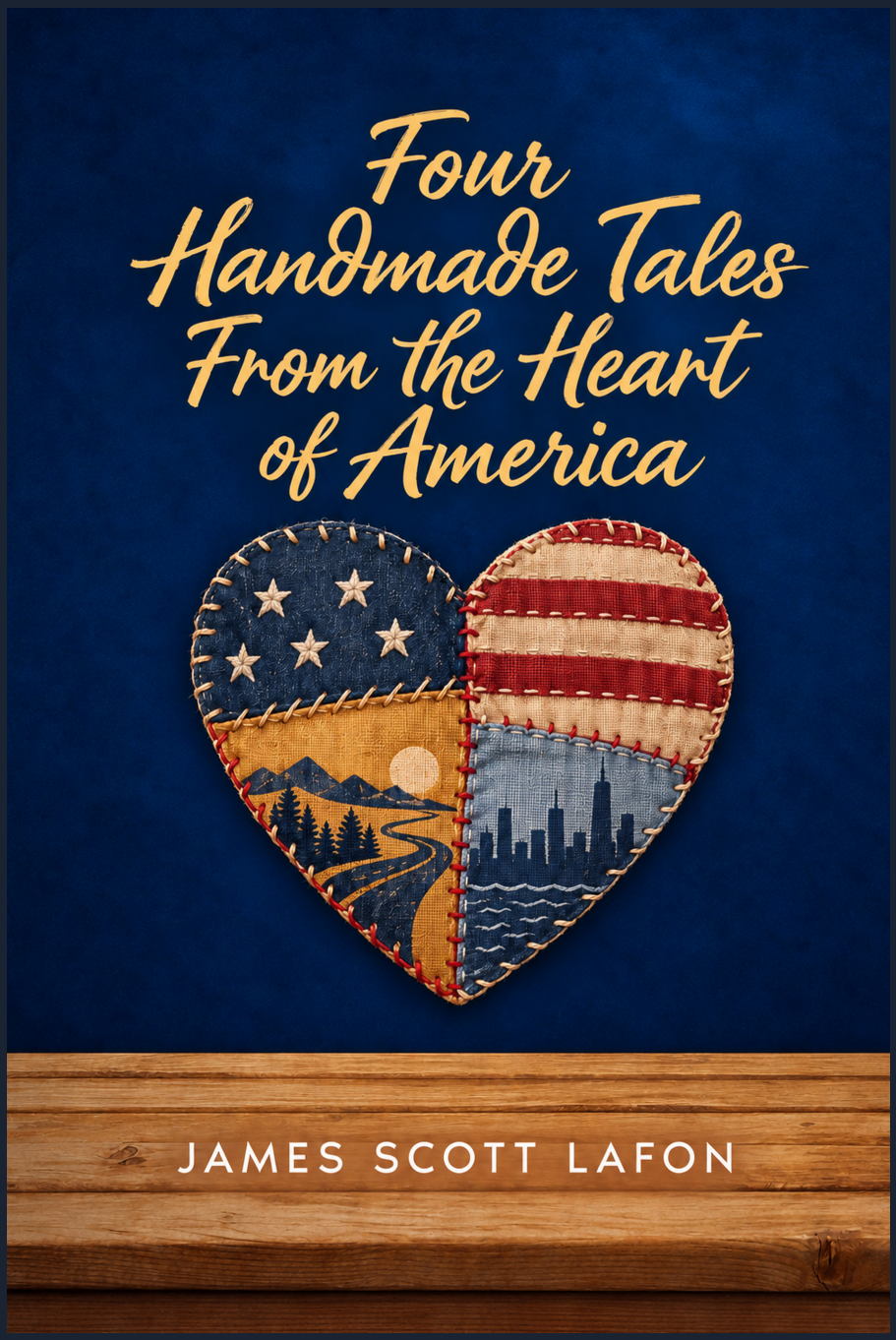
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Four Handmade Tales From the Heart of America

James Scott LaFon

BookGist Summary

Four Handmade Tales From the Heart of America

by James Scott LaFon

Genre: FICTION / Short Stories (single author) (FIC029000)

Key Takeaways

• Ordinary work—managing rentals, teaching, selling cars, driving taxis, nursing, or repairing engines—reveals how people handle responsibility, money, family, and change.

• Relationships endure through practical care as much as grand declarations: showing up, sharing labor, keeping promises, and making room for one another's needs.

• People are complicated and cannot be judged reliably by first impressions; good intentions do not erase poor choices, and mistakes do not tell a person's whole story.

• Financial pressures shape nearly every life in these stories, from landlords and renters to retirees, workers, entrepreneurs, and families deciding where they can afford to live.

• Community depends on mutual aid: a landlord considering nurses as tenants, a golf tournament funding care for disabled people, and neighbors helping a family honor a deceased relative.

• The past remains present through memory, family patterns, old objects, and unfinished bonds—but people can still choose what to carry forward and what to change.

• Small rituals—stargazing, fishing, dominos, golf, cooking, and sharing meals—offer connection and perspective amid uncertainty.

• Ambition can open new possibilities, but a satisfying life may also mean recognizing when a simpler, more flexible choice is wiser than ownership or status.

• The four tales use humor, local detail, and everyday conversation to portray distinct American communities, while linking them through universal concerns about belonging, loss, work, and hope.

Who Should Read This Book

This collection is for readers who enjoy character-driven fiction rooted in recognizable places and working lives. Its ideal reader will appreciate stories about family ties, second chances, aging, money, community, and the everyday decisions that reveal who people are. The detailed settings—from Pueblo rentals and Albuquerque golf courses to the Las Vegas Strip and Saint Thomas—also suit readers who like fiction with a strong sense of local life, food, work, and regional customs. Readers looking for fast-moving, tightly plotted novels may find the book's conversational pace and broad cast less conventional; several stories favor observation and relationships over dramatic resolution. Its approach is closer to linked community portraits and ensemble fiction than to a single-hero narrative. Readers who value humor, warmth, imperfect people, and ordinary rituals as sources of meaning will find the most to enjoy.

Chapter Summaries

Alfonzo Barrett Counts Stars in His Driveway

Landlord Alfonzo Barrett reflects beneath the stars on his rental business, the coming month's financial and legal chores, and his tendency to give troubled tenants too much time. His wife, Amanda, urges him to protect the property they built through years of work. Their conversation shifts from tenant problems to their new granddaughter, Amelia, and the couple's long marriage. Alfonzo's affectionate, wry narration establishes the book's blend of domestic humor, practical concerns, and big questions about life.

Alfonzo and Zack Open the Rental

Alfonzo and his young relative Zack prepare a college rental after its tenants move out, making a long list of plumbing, electrical, painting, yard, and repair tasks. Alfonzo recalls how he and Amanda built their modest property business while working other jobs. Zack is a physics graduate whose degree has not yet led to the career he wants, so he earns money as Alfonzo's handyman. Their workday brings out their differing ambitions and Alfonzo's hard-earned advice about work, marriage, and the imperfect realities of being a landlord.

Amelia Is a Fantastic Name

Amanda speaks with her daughter Rebecca about baby Amelia, sends her a handmade pair of pajamas, and learns how the parents chose the child's name. The phone call makes Amanda reflect on motherhood, her children's distant lives, and the demands of work and family. She and Alfonzo coordinate the rental work before she heads to her nursing shift. Her thoughts move from the newborn to patients in intensive care, underscoring how care and vulnerability connect the private world of family with her professional life.

The Perkinses Get Notice to Move

Peg Perkins is shocked when her landlord gives her and her husband, Claude, notice to leave the home they have rented for years. Claude, a retired Army sergeant accustomed to frequent moves, tries to reassure her while finishing a round of golf with his friends. The couple considers whether to seek another house, an apartment, or additional work. Their conversation reveals the effects of rising prices, Claude's military past and a friend's PTSD, and Peg's possibility of earning money through a friend's food truck.

Emily Hancock Meets Principal Jackson

Newly graduated math teacher Emily Hancock arrives at Pueblo County High School for an interview carrying carefully prepared credentials, a teaching philosophy, and a sample lesson. Principal Jackson asks about her classroom goals, the classes she is willing to teach, and how she would establish rules. Emily explains that she wants students to become less fearful of numbers and to take responsibility for their work. Jackson decides to recommend her for a position and points her toward Barrett Rental Properties, linking her new job to Alfonzo's story.

Nurse Barrett Gets a Request

During her hospital shift, Amanda talks with traveling nurse Marisa, who hopes to rent a house with two friends. Amanda promises to ask Alfonzo, knowing that his recent experience with irresponsible tenants has made him cautious. Amanda then helps an elderly patient who needs water and reassurance. The brief encounter reflects her patient, attentive approach to care, while her thoughts about her family and granddaughter show the personal concerns she carries into work.

Zack Asks About Teddy

After finishing a rental, Alfonzo and Zack share a beer and discuss their next repairs, upcoming business, and Zack's hopes of finding work in a national laboratory. Zack also asks about Alfonzo and Amanda's estranged son, Teddy, whose homelessness and drug problem worry his parents. Alfonzo admits that he fears hearing of Teddy's death but still hopes he might return. The chapter contrasts the constant, practical churn of rental work with the irreplaceable importance of family.

Down at City Hall

At City Hall, project manager Barney Smith and his boss, Mr. Redding, discuss plans to house homeless residents while practicing putting in the office. They weigh the difficulty of finding landlords willing to rent to clients who need government support. Redding describes proposed laws that could require larger landlords to set aside some rentals for subsidized tenants and could control rents. Their conversation exposes the tension between public responsibilities and owners' rising costs, while showing how policy decisions affect the housing market.

Stargazing With Mrs. Barrett

While relaxing in their hot tub beneath the stars, Amanda asks Alfonzo to consider renting the vacant house to Marisa and her two working friends. Alfonzo sets out his usual requirements—paperwork, a deposit, a lease, and notice before leaving—but agrees to consider them. Amanda also proposes a road trip to visit their daughter and granddaughter, with possible stops at Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon. The couple confronts their deeper worry about Teddy and decides they should try to find him, making a family search more important than rental business.

Zack Takes the Sign Down

Zack inspects the cleaned rental and finds it ready for new tenants. He notices a cleaning worker's business card and lets his thoughts drift toward the possibility of meeting her, a lighthearted counterpoint to his career uncertainty. Alfonzo tells him the house will go to three nurses Amanda recommended, and that he and Amanda are leaving town to see their family. Zack removes the For Rent sign and reflects on the difference between physics and property management: both involve patterns, but rentals also reveal human choices and consequences.

Raphael Works at Second Hand Sports

Raphael Garcia works at an Albuquerque used sporting-goods shop, pricing clubs and calling customers. He buys an old set of Ping clubs from a widow whose husband has died, and thinks about the ways golf can consume people's time and relationships. He invites Skye, his girlfriend and a dancer, to the charity scramble he will play with friends. Their conversation shows how they negotiate differences in work, money, and attention, while Raphael's exchanges with golfer Harry establish the team and tournament ahead.

Greg Richards Follows the Money

Greg Richards remembers an adviser's blunt business-school lesson: money tends to follow people who work around money. Rather than become a golf professional, Greg earned an MBA and became an investment adviser at Charles Schwab. Now he balances market analysis with clients' emotions, advising one business owner about risk and helping a recently widowed client understand her husband's investments. He also thinks about his girlfriend, Kelsey, who is weighing a run for Congress, and the uncertainty that could bring to their

relationship.

Felix Sanchez Sells Teslas

Experienced car salesman Felix Sanchez shows a retired Sandia Labs employee a Tesla and answers questions about charging and ownership. His easy rapport reflects years in sales, but his own life is less settled: his divorce has strained him, his children are distant, and his sales numbers are slipping. Felix's cousin Raphael calls to confirm the charity golf tournament, where the team hopes to win for Casa Angelica. After his manager warns that his hours may be cut, Felix heads out to practice putting and look for new customers.

Skye and Alex Talk About Men

At the club where they dance, Skye asks her friend Alex about a wealthy customer and opens up about feeling uncertain about Raphael. Alex advises her to identify what she wants from a relationship rather than simply trying to meet men's expectations. Skye recognizes that Raphael's everyday support matters to her: he calls, helps with practical problems, and stays affectionate despite her work. Their conversation explores attraction, money, independence, and the imperfect compromises people make in choosing partners.

Kelsey Weighs a Run for Congress

Kelsey Higgins trains her client, lawyer Ronald Stevenson, while he tries to persuade her to run against the incumbent representative. He argues that voters may welcome a new candidate and offers his political network's support. Kelsey is unsure whether politics suits her and expresses her interest in physical education and personal responsibility. The chapter uses their workout as a frame for the larger challenge she faces: deciding whether to take on a demanding new role.

Raphael Hits the Driving Range

After work, Raphael practices his iron shots at Los Altos and repeatedly hits his target. His friend Frosty, a plumbing-business owner, praises his game and offers him a better-paid office-management job. Raphael is tempted but has not decided whether to leave the sporting-goods store. He also knows Skye wants him to think beyond his current work, though he remains focused on the next day's tournament and the friendly rivalry with Frosty's team.

Harry Practices His Putting

Harry practices on a putting mat set up in his living room, despite his wife Harriet's wish that it be stored in the garage. He promises to take it down after the tournament, treating the compromise as one more small negotiation in a long marriage. Harriet asks about the competition, Greg, and Kelsey's possible congressional campaign. Harry avoids making decisions for his daughter and focuses on preparing for the round, his wife's dinner, and the pleasure of playing golf with friends.

Dolores Watches Her Grandkids

After her divorce from Felix, Dolores lives with her mother and helps care for several young children, including her grandchildren. She and her mother manage the children's outdoor play, snacks, and rest while sharing memories of family life. They discuss Felix, who is selling cars and has moved on with his life, and Dolores's return to her childhood home. The scene offers a quieter portrait of rebuilding after a marriage ends, with family routines providing both work and comfort.

Felix Stocks Up at the Happy Joint

Felix visits a nearby cannabis dispensary to buy products he uses to cope with the stress of divorce and work. He tells the clerk about taking his uncle's prized putter from the casket, justifying it by describing the dead man's debts and betrayals. Their conversation mixes gallows humor with Felix's conflicted sense of right and wrong. He hopes the putter—and perhaps his cannabis—will help him play well in the tournament, while admitting that life could be worse.

The Desert Rats Tee Off at Los Altos

Raphael, Felix, Greg, and Harry gather at Los Altos for the Casa Angelica charity scramble. They warm up, compare equipment and confidence, and travel to their starting hole, where the city's noise gives way to the concentrated ritual of golf. The men's banter reveals their friendship and personal concerns, including Harry's hopes of impressing his wife and Greg's uncertainty about Kelsey's political plans. Their team, the Desert Rats, settles in to compete for a cause that supports people with severe disabilities.

Everything Rides on Hole 12

Near the end of their round, the Desert Rats realize they need a birdie on the final hole to post a winning score. Each golfer takes a turn from the tee, and Felix's long drive and Greg's powerful shot leave the team in a strong position. Harry's approach lands close enough to create a makeable putt, and the others reach the green with their hopes rising. Harry sinks the decisive short putt, giving the team the birdie they need and turning a shared effort into a jubilant finish.

Skye and Harriet Wait for the Golfers

At the tournament luncheon, Skye and Harry's wife, Harriet, talk while waiting for the players. Skye describes her relationship with Raphael and her work at the club; Harriet speaks warmly about her long marriage and asks about the team's chances. The golfers arrive, report that they believe they have won, and head for lunch. Greg and Kelsey join the group, and the women and men share in the relaxed anticipation of the awards, highlighting how the tournament brings together partners, friends, and competitors.

Ben Baca Runs the Awards Ceremony

Ben Baca hosts the Casa Angelica fundraiser's awards ceremony, where a representative thanks the golfers for supporting people with severe disabilities. Raffle prizes and friendly heckling keep the crowd engaged as the volunteers draw winners. The Desert Rats are announced as champions, thanks in part to Harry's final putt. Greg accepts the trophy, praises the event, and publicly mentions Kelsey's possible congressional run. The friends celebrate their victory together, savoring both the competition and the charitable purpose behind it.

A Body Outside the Bellagio

Detective Jones investigates a man found dead outside the Bellagio. Tourists Pete and Marian Prelude describe seeing a black Infiniti leave the scene, while a homeless witness, Jackson, says the victim sometimes helped him and once spoke about working at Area 51. Jackson also mentions a woman named Francine and possible links to gambling. Jones treats each detail as a lead rather than proof, reflecting the slow, methodical work of homicide investigation and the strange mix of visitors, residents, and vulnerable people who share the Strip.

Detective Jones Calls Aaron

Aaron Arkansas, a diesel mechanic in New Orleans, receives a call from Detective Jones telling him that his uncle Rick has been murdered in Las Vegas. The news revives childhood memories of Rick, a physics-minded man who had worked at Area 51 and maintained a close bond with Aaron. Aaron recalls Rick's recent warning about a safety-deposit-box key and a letter, as well as his request to be returned to New Orleans if anything happened. Despite work pressures and the long drive ahead, Aaron decides to go claim his uncle and carry out his wishes.

Rico and Sal by the Pool

At his pool, criminal boss Rico Romano asks his bodyguard, Salvadore, whether he recovered a notebook Rick possessed. Sal says Rick resisted him during their confrontation; the scene reveals that Sal shot Rick and left his body outside the Bellagio. Rico orders Sal to have the getaway car repainted and keep searching for the notebook. Their casual talk about violence, accounting, and popsicles exposes a criminal world in which killing and concealment are treated as routine business.

Uncle Rick's Letter in the Banana Box

Aaron searches a childhood banana box and finds the letter Rick left with the safety-deposit-box key. It tells Aaron to take a notebook to the police, return Rick to New Orleans, and pass along a final message to his landlady. Aaron's recollections of family, his girlfriend Rachel, and Rick's unusual beliefs accompany his decision to drive to Las Vegas alone. He considers inviting Rachel, but she cannot leave work, so he prepares for the long

journey and the risks implied by Rick’s warning.

Francine Identifies Uncle Rick

Francine, a casino employee and Rick’s companion, tells a coworker about identifying his body. She remembers their modest dates, shared interests, and the companionship they found in one another, even though their relationship was unconventional. She also recalls telling Detective Jones about names Rick mentioned—Rico and Salvadore—and a possible loan. Her grief centers on the ordinary occasions they will no longer share, and she concludes that being missed may be one of the clearest signs of a life well lived.

It’s a Long Drive to Las Vegas

Aaron persuades his garage boss to let him take unpaid leave and begins the roughly 1,700-mile drive from New Orleans to Las Vegas. As the landscape changes, he uses music, roadside stops, and memories to keep himself awake and process the news about Rick. He also replays a conversation with Rachel: she has suggested they live together, and he decides their relationship deserves a more serious commitment. The journey combines practical road-trip details with Aaron’s growing awareness that his uncle may have been involved in dangerous business.

Meeting Miranda

Aaron reaches the Jade Apartments and meets Miranda, the manager and Rick’s neighbor. She gives him a key and comforts him when he explains that Rick has died, recalling him as a considerate tenant and friend. Inside, Aaron finds the apartment ransacked, with drawers emptied and a window open. He locks up, sleeps with his pistol nearby, and leaves Rachel a message saying he will move in with her, while the arguing neighbors upstairs provide an ironic soundtrack to the night.

Aaron Opens the Safety Deposit Box

Aaron cleans Rick’s damaged apartment, packs personal mementos, and says goodbye to Miranda before opening the safety-deposit box. Inside he finds Rick’s final papers and a spiral notebook containing information Rick wanted delivered to the police. The notebook confirms that someone was searching for evidence, and Aaron understands that its contents may explain the murder. He heads to meet Detective Jones and arrange for Rick’s cremation, determined to fulfill his uncle’s instructions without getting drawn further into the danger.

Aaron Meets Detective Jones

Aaron meets Detective Jones and hands over the notebook from the safety-deposit box. Jones recognizes that it could help build a case against Rico Romano, whose alleged crimes include fraud, bribery, money laundering, and assault; he suspects Sal the Assassin was involved in Rick’s death. Jones advises Aaron to leave town quickly and explains how to claim

Rick’s remains. Aaron is relieved to have done what his uncle asked, but he wants no part in the investigation beyond providing the evidence.

It’s a Long Drive Home

Aaron arranges Rick’s cremation and starts the drive back to New Orleans with the urn beside him. The funeral home’s sales pitch and paperwork contrast with Rick’s request for a simple farewell, and Aaron chooses a modest urn and declines a formal religious service. On the road, Aaron talks to his uncle as if he were still present, reflects on the evidence given to Jones, and imagines sharing Rick’s story online with Rachel’s help. Their conversation about living together turns toward marriage, while Aaron tries to return his attention to work, family, and the road home.

Uncle Rick’s Parade

Back in New Orleans, Aaron, Rachel, friends, and family prepare an exuberant funeral parade for Rick. They decorate Aaron’s pickup with a Louisiana flag, a Statue of Liberty ornament, lights, and theatrical alien figures, while Dr. Funk and his band provide music. The procession reflects the city’s tradition of mixing grief with celebration. Aaron plans to place Rick’s urn in a columbarium, honor his request for a parade, and help Rachel launch a YouTube project about aliens and government secrecy—an unexpected continuation of Rick’s interests.

The Thomases Ride up Crown Mountain

Taxi driver Poppy takes cruise passengers Savannah and Carson Thomas up Saint Thomas’s steep, winding road to Crown Mountain. Their teasing conversation touches on the island’s driving customs, local food, shopping, beaches, and Carson’s interest in rum and diving. Poppy offers to show them more of the island than a standard tourist stop would reveal. The chapter introduces Saint Thomas as both a spectacular destination and a place where locals make a living through tourism, while showing Poppy’s knack for turning a ride into a personal tour.

Poppy and Kingston Wash the Taxi

At home, Poppy and his ten-year-old grandson Kingston wash the taxi together before school. The task is a familiar ritual, shaped by Poppy’s belief that cleanliness and careful procedures matter, especially in a job where customers depend on the driver. Their conversation covers Kingston’s school, soccer, and parents, who are separated and live in different places. Poppy’s wife Tamsin sends Kingston off with lunch, and the family’s everyday care offers a portrait of stability built through shared routines.

Poppy Goes House Hunting

Poppy takes Spenser and Cassandra Ridgecrest around Saint Thomas as they consider buying a home. They want views, comfort, independence, and security, but Poppy

encourages them to slow down and understand the island before making a decision. As they tour neighborhoods and talk about farming, fishing, and local history, Poppy describes the island's rhythms and risks, including the way newcomers can become restless. His work is more than transportation: it lets him explain the community and help visitors discover what they actually want.

Tamsin Makes Her Rum Cake

On Emancipation Day, Tamsin prepares her family's rum cake using a recipe passed down through generations and refined with her own touches. She thinks about her daughter Faith, who works on a cruise ship, and her grandson Kingston, who is being raised by his grandparents. Tamsin also speaks with her mother, Mumzy, about an upcoming hip appointment and asks Poppy to help with the ride. Baking, family history, faith, and the island's natural surroundings form the quiet center of her holiday, while the cake becomes a way to bring the household together.

Poppy and Kingston Run Errands

After school, Poppy takes Kingston to the hardware store for mosquito oil and a replacement spray handle, explaining why he learned to repair things rather than pay others. He encourages Kingston to develop practical skills while affirming that the boy's father is still loved despite the family's separation. They pick up Mumzy for a doctor's appointment, and Kingston works on math in the taxi. The errands connect generations through small acts of responsibility, while Kingston's questions reveal his awareness of the complicated arrangements surrounding his parents and grandparents.

Poppy, Tamsin and Kingston Play Dominos

Poppy, Tamsin, and Kingston play a long domino match on the back porch, keeping score and teasing one another as the games unfold. Their conversation turns to Kingston's school performance, his concern about seeming too smart, his mother's coming visit, and a planned fishing trip. Tamsin hums Amazing Grace as the family continues playing, and Poppy wins the match. The game is both competition and companionship, offering a dependable ritual amid the family's separations and the unpredictability of life on the island.

Poppy Plans His Busy Day

Poppy walks before sunrise, reads his messages, and plans a day of taxi work involving a hungover captain, the Ridgecrests, a teacher interviewing at a school, and a customer needing help with a car. The island's beauty and its everyday problems coexist in his early-morning thoughts. At home, he shares a playful, affectionate moment with Tamsin before setting out. Their easy intimacy underscores the stability of their marriage and gives Poppy a personal source of comfort before the day's obligations begin.

The Captain Wakes at Sapphire Beach

Poppy retrieves the Captain, an aging sailor who has spent the night sleeping on a bench after drinking too much. Their conversation mixes concern about the Captain's habits with banter about his romantic life, his boat, and his unconventional retirement. Poppy invites him to fish with Kingston and Spenser, while the Captain describes the freedom and limitations of living aboard a sailboat. Their friendship is built on reliable rides, candid advice, and acceptance of one another's quirks.

Kingston's Dad Lives in Miami

In Miami, Kingston's father Malik builds a new life through freelance programming and short-term rental investments. He reflects on the ambition and disagreements that contributed to his divorce from Faith, while preparing for Kingston's visit and considering activities they can enjoy together. A message from Faith says she hopes to move back to Saint Thomas and find government work. Malik recognizes that their relationship has changed beyond repair, but their son remains a bond between them, even as he begins a new relationship with Isabella.

The Ridgecrests Make a Decision

Poppy meets the Ridgecrests after showing them homes across the island, and they explain that they have reconsidered buying a property. Rather than maintain a house through hurricanes and pay ongoing fees, they plan to rent short-term accommodation and spend their money traveling more widely. Poppy accepts their decision and helps them plan a day of shopping, swimming, and sightseeing. Their choice illustrates a central tension in the story: the dream of owning a piece of paradise may be less appealing than enjoying a place without taking on its burdens.

Sunday Morning at Hull Bay

Before the island wakes, Poppy and Kingston gather their fishing gear and food at Hull Bay. They plan to catch snapper and are joined by Spenser and the Captain, bringing together friends from different parts of Poppy's working and family life. As the fishermen set their bait in the early light, Poppy and Tamsin's hopes for their daughter's return surface in conversation: perhaps Faith could find work or start a bakery. The morning's shared fishing becomes an act of fellowship and a moment of peace, even as the family's future remains unresolved.

Notable Quotes

> *"Real estate isn't always peaches and cream."*

> *"Houses, like people, age. They have aches and pains."*

> *"Rentals are where people rest their bodies and souls before they change, or their circumstances change."*

"People are never what they seem to be."

"Buy low and sell high."

"It takes time to slow down enough for joy to hit you."

"Fishing as the sun rises is as close to a prayer as most of them will ever say."

Full Summary

Alfonzo Barrett stands in his Pueblo driveway counting stars and wondering whether they have places to rent. He jokes that he would take any alien who pays on time, respects the property, and doesn't sublet without permission. Inside, his wife, Amanda, is crocheting pajamas for their new granddaughter, Amelia. She warns him not to let tenants bamboozle him, recalling a couple he gave too much time before evicting them after the husband's drinking cost him his job. Alfonzo had hoped they could work things out; Amanda reminds him that they have worked hard for what they own. He promises to be more careful, though his instinct to give people another chance remains.

The next morning, Alfonzo heads to a vacant rental near the university. Three college students have left unpaid utility bills and a damaged house, so their deposit will go toward what they owe. Zack, a physics graduate who hasn't found work in his field, helps Alfonzo repair rentals. The two men inspect the jobs ahead: plumbing, electrical faults, a leaky swamp cooler, broken tiles, yard cleanup, a damaged fence, and furniture and textbooks left behind. Every vacant day costs money. Zack, meanwhile, knows that good grades haven't guaranteed him a suitable job. He jokes about a date that evening, while Alfonzo repeats his father's advice to put work before women. Their banter doesn't make the work lighter, but it gives the day its rhythm.

Alfonzo's life as a landlord grew out of a life built alongside Amanda. They met young, studied at the University of Colorado in Pueblo, and married after their daughter was conceived. Amanda became a nurse; Alfonzo worked for the city housing department before managing properties became more profitable. Her hospital job still provides their benefits, while they have saved and bought rentals over time. Pueblo, he observes, offers a university, a Riverwalk, a state park, and an art scene, but jobs can be hard to find and the prairies begin just beyond town. Their properties, like their neighborhood, are aging. Houses may have cracked slabs and squeaky doors, but, he reflects, it is people who carry memories, changing them to suit their needs.

Amanda's phone call with their daughter Rebecca turns to the baby and the name Amelia. Rebecca describes the newborn's eating, sleeping, and fussing, while Amanda is delighted that the name suits her. Rocky, Rebecca's husband, is caring with the baby, and the couple

hopes to buy a house as his work improves. Amanda remembers how she and Alfonzo managed childcare: she worked nights, he worked days, and later the children went to school. She is still working at the hospital, keeping her nursing license current as she prepares to move from intensive care toward neonatal intensive care. Their arrangement is practical: she keeps her job and household running; he manages the rentals.

Their son, Teddy, is a more painful subject. He left Pueblo for California, married and divorced, and now seems to be homeless and struggling with drugs. Amanda rarely hears from him and worries about his son, whose custody went to Teddy's former wife. The family's closeness is uneven: Rebecca shares baby pictures, while Teddy has largely disappeared from their lives. Amanda nevertheless packs the pajamas for Amelia and leaves for a hospital shift, where routine care—checking charts, giving medication, and helping patients walk—continues amid illness and uncertainty.

Elsewhere, Claude and Peg Perkins receive a certified letter from their landlord: their lease is ending, and they must leave by July first because the owner plans to sell. They have rented the house for five years, paid on time, maintained it, and grown attached to its new appliances and granite counters. Peg calls Claude on the golf course. A retired Army sergeant who has moved repeatedly during his military career, he tells her they can manage another move. Yet the house has been affordable, and rising prices and inflation make the next step uncertain. As Peg packs, she sorts through photographs of their wedding and children, keeping pictures even when family relationships have not turned out as she hoped.

Claude considers a smaller home or apartment and wonders if he may need part-time work. Peg would rather he not return to work after years of service and combat. She might earn extra money helping their friend Margie with a food truck, which caters weddings, parties, and events. Their conversation moves between practical choices and old bonds: Claude plans to visit Randy, a friend with PTSD whose war experiences still haunt him, and Peg remembers her father singing "Autumn Leaves." A notice to move becomes more than a housing problem; it forces them to decide what they can afford and what kind of life they want next.

Emily Hancock, a new mathematics graduate, arrives at Pueblo County High School for an interview with Principal Jackson. She has brought her résumé, references, teaching philosophy, and lesson plan, and hopes to find a job even if it means moving from Colorado Springs. Jackson asks about her willingness to teach both advanced mathematics and remedial courses. Emily says she will teach what she is assigned and wants students to become less afraid of numbers. Her classroom rules are straightforward: respect others, think before speaking, follow instructions, ask questions, and listen when the teacher is talking. She says she wants to teach, not babysit, and will try to resolve problems before using detention.

Jackson likes her preparation and recommends that personnel offer her a position. He also suggests Barrett Rental Properties as a fair source of housing, saying Alfonzo is his friend.

Emily accepts the likely move with relief and plans to tell her boyfriend, Parker, who has a sailboat and knows Lake Pueblo. A job offer brings possibility, but also the ordinary calculations of a new teacher: where to live, how to move, and whether a relationship will move with her.

At the hospital, Amanda's colleague Marisa asks whether Alfonzo might rent a house to her and two friends. Marisa is a traveling nurse; one friend works with disabled students in public schools, the other as a city accountant. They are tired of apartments and want to share a house. Amanda knows Alfonzo can be soft-hearted and tells Marisa she will ask. She also thinks of her own parents in Baltimore, whose health is declining; Alfonzo has offered to let them live in one of the rentals for free if they move to Pueblo. For now, Amanda returns to a patient who needs water and help settling down, delivering care with the calm attention her work demands.

After finishing the rental with Zack, Alfonzo reflects on the rent he hopes to charge—about $2,200 a month—and on how little first impressions reveal. When Zack asks whether he has heard from Teddy, Alfonzo admits he expects a call from a medical examiner more readily than a call from his son. Zack believes Teddy should return and help with the business, but Alfonzo knows that changing toilet floats is not the life Zack wants; the young physicist has applied to national laboratories. Alfonzo's own schedule is full: a court judgment against a former tenant, cleaning, a rental sign, and more repairs. The work keeps coming, even as the family worry remains.

At City Hall, project manager Barney Smith and his boss, Mr. Redding, practice putting while discussing housing for homeless residents. Smith says landlords have resisted leasing homes for group housing, even when the city offers extra rent; construction, utilities, maintenance, and operating costs are also rising. Redding insists that government must help people who need housing, rather than leave them panhandling or sleeping outside. He describes a proposed law requiring owners of more than five rental properties to rent a quarter of their units to tenants who need government assistance. Low voter turnout, he argues, makes such legislation possible.

Smith points out that landlords' costs keep increasing. Redding is blunt that the city's responsibility is to protect constituents, and he also mentions a proposal to control rents so properties remain affordable. The conversation turns on a tension Alfonzo knows from the other side: public need is real, but rental properties carry costs and obligations of their own. Redding returns to his putt, while the proposed rules promise to reshape the work Smith is trying to do.

At Los Altos, Raphael Garcia works through a bucket of balls before the fundraiser, striking his nine-iron toward the same sprinkler again and again. Frosty Finnegan, a plumber who owns a twenty-truck business, watches and praises his solid shots. He offers Raphael a

better-paid job as his dispatcher and office manager, saying he could use someone he trusts. Raphael admits he isn't handy with tools, but Frosty says the work is in the office. Skye has been urging him to think beyond selling used sporting goods, yet Raphael deflects the decision: first, he wants to beat Frosty's team tomorrow.

Harry Higgins prepares for the same tournament by practicing on a putting mat laid across the living room. He says he needs the practice, even in the middle of the night, but his wife, Harriet, wants the mat put away and the garage cleared so it can stay there instead. Harry promises to take it down after the tournament and keeps his word. He holes a putt as Harriet asks whether their daughter Kelsey might run for Congress and whether Greg, her boyfriend, will be there. Harry won't presume to know what Kelsey will choose, and insists that her relationship with Greg is not their business. Still, he hopes their family may someday include another golfer. The prospect of Harriet's meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and gravy is as welcome to him as tomorrow's round.

While Felix Sanchez's marriage is over, Dolores has returned to the home where she grew up. She helps her mother care for six small children in an informal daycare, including her own grandchildren. On a summer morning, she towels off the children after they play in the sprinkler, serves them cantaloupe and iced tea, and settles them down to rest. Her mother asks whether she and Felix are speaking. They rarely talk, Dolores says; they divided their property, and he doesn't call. She thinks he can sell almost anything, but doesn't take good care of what he sells. Even so, she is grateful that he gave her two children, and her mother has given their grandchildren a place to spend the day.

Felix, meanwhile, stops at the Happy Joint to buy cannabis before the scramble. The clerk, Reynaldo, is incredulous that Felix took a TaylorMade Spider putter from his uncle's casket. Felix says his uncle owed him money and would never have needed the club again; he also condemns him as a liar and thief, despite the fact that his aunt loved him. Felix plans to use the putter at the tournament, hoping it will help him play well—or at least forget a bad round. He's struggling after his divorce, and his sales manager has warned that his hours may be cut if his Tesla sales don't improve. Felix says he understands, but his work, bills, and golf are all he can manage for now.

On tournament morning, the Desert Rats—Raphael, Felix, Greg Richards, and Harry—gather at Los Altos for the Casa Angelica fundraiser. The golf scramble supports children with severe disabilities, and the foursome hopes to defend the win they earned the previous year. They check in, collect their bags, and warm up on the putting green. Felix turns off his phone after Raphael tells him to stop taking calls, while Greg and Harry arrive after sharing a bucket of balls and working on their swings. They start on the thirteenth hole, playing a flat public course lined with trees and complicated by water, rough, and traps. The men encourage one another to keep their tempo and enjoy the day, even as Harry admits he would like to bring

home a trophy to show Harriet, who thinks golf wastes their time.

The team reaches the twelfth tee after playing seventeen holes. Their score is good enough that one more birdie would give them a 51, and Greg believes that may be enough to win. Raphael's drive fades across the fairway; Harry's lands safely in the middle. Felix then swings freely, sending his ball farther down the fairway, and Greg follows with the team's best drive of the day, leaving a sand-wedge approach. Harry hits the green and stops ten feet from the pin. Raphael's shot finishes fifteen feet away, Felix comes up short in the wind, and Greg lands within three feet. Their last putt is downhill, breaking from right to left. Felix reads the line, but Harry gets the first chance. He asks Raphael to pull the pin, takes his familiar practice strokes, and sinks the putt. The foursome erupts; the decisive birdie gives them the score they needed. They take a selfie by the green, sign their card, and head back to the clubhouse.

Skye is already waiting in the banquet room, though she has to work later. Some golfers recognize her from the club where she dances; a few smile, while others pretend not to see her. Harriet joins her, and they talk easily about work, marriage, and Raphael. Skye says he may need a better-paying job, but he hasn't asked her to marry him. Harriet says Harry took a long time to decide, but has always stayed. When the golfers arrive, Harry tells his wife that the team played well and that the fundraiser benefits a worthy cause. Raphael kisses Skye, and Greg soon reports that their score is the lowest he has heard. The group heads for lunch, with Felix still hoping the tournament will bring him prospective car buyers as well as a prize.

Ben Baca opens the awards ceremony by thanking the golfers for supporting Casa Angelica. Rosa Candelaria, who works there, explains that the people in its care cannot all walk, let alone play golf, and thanks the community for helping them. Harry volunteers to draw raffle tickets. The prizes include a Walmart gift card, a watercolor of the Sandia Mountains, and five lessons with the course pro. Kelsey wins the painting and is pleased to receive it from her friend Mildred Anderson; another golfer takes the lessons after the room jokes about his missed chips.

At last Ben announces the team results. The Blue Lizards and Too Hot Tacos tie for second and third, but the Desert Rats take the tournament by a single shot. Greg accepts the trophy and credits the team's generosity, then praises Harry for sinking the final putt. He also tells the crowd that Kelsey has been asked to run for Congress, inviting people to ask her about her plans. Back at the table, the friends celebrate together. Skye suggests Pappadeaux's, and Raphael agrees to take everyone. The trophy, the meal, and the company give each of them something to enjoy before the next decisions in their lives demand attention.

In Las Vegas, Aaron Arkansas is left to carry out his uncle Rick's last instructions. After finding Rick's apartment ransacked, he cleans what he can, packs photographs, old casino ashtrays, matchbooks, letters, cowboy boots and a fishing pole, and searches the refrigerator for names and numbers that might matter. Then he goes to the bank with the key Rick sent him. In the

safety-deposit box, he finds a manila envelope and a spiral notebook. Rick's note makes Aaron his executor and tells him to give the notebook to the police. It records the business dealings of the man Aaron believes had Rick killed.

Detective Jones receives the notebook at the police station and recognizes its importance. He and his team have been trying to build a case against Rico Romano, a local crime boss. Rick's records may support charges including tax fraud, bribery, money laundering and assault with a deadly weapon. Jones suspects Rico's bodyguard, Sal the Assassin, was the driver of the car seen leaving the Bellagio. Aaron has no wish to get drawn further into the case. He has given the detective what Rick wanted him to have, and now he needs to get his uncle home.

At the funeral home, Aaron resists a salesman's tour of expensive caskets and chooses a simple urn, as Rick had asked to be cremated. He watches the process, sees the flames take Rick, and leaves with the urn and a thick envelope of paperwork. The drive back to New Orleans is long, and Aaron talks to the urn as though his uncle were beside him. He tells Rick the notebook is with Detective Jones and imagines that the police will catch Rico. He also thinks about Rachel, his girlfriend, who has recently suggested that their rent increases make it foolish to keep separate apartments. When she answers his late-night call, Aaron tells her he thinks they make a good team. She teases him about marriage, but their talk makes his decision clear: when he gets home, he will move in with her.

New Orleans gives Rick the send-off he wanted. Aaron and Rachel decorate his pickup with a small Statue of Liberty, a Louisiana flag and blinking lights, while Halloween aliens stand in the truck bed beside the urn. Aaron's boss brings a polished 1948 Cadillac, and Dr. Funk arrives with his electric piano and singers. He and Rick had played drums together as children, so the band performs "Saint James Infirmary" on the way out and "When the Saints Go Marching In" on the return. Friends and strangers join the procession, some carrying signs with Rick's picture, as the decorated pickup rolls toward the cemetery. After the parade, Rick will rest in a columbarium beside family. Aaron leaves him a deck of cards, imagining his uncle playing solitaire and working at the universe's mysteries.

On Saint Thomas, Poppy Harrigan earns his living driving a taxi, and a ride up Crown Mountain gives him a chance to show visitors how much an island can offer beyond the cruise ship. Savannah and Carson Thomas won their trip in a fundraiser. She wants to find Moko Jumbie dolls for their granddaughter; he is eager for a banana daiquiri and duty-free rum. Poppy tells them about the island as they climb the winding road, where traffic keeps to the left and a careless turn could send a car over the edge. At the summit, the Thomases find the observation deck, gift shop and sweeping view of Magens Bay. Poppy offers to take them to shops and other sights, knowing a taxi driver's work is as much waiting and listening as driving.

At home, Poppy’s grandson Kingston helps wash the taxi. They soap and rinse it carefully, then dry it with clean towels. Poppy cleans the car several times a week because a tidy taxi reassures passengers, and because his father taught him that carelessness in driving—or diving—can be dangerous. Kingston likes washing cars but dreams of becoming a surgeon; Poppy jokes that he can drive a taxi on weekends after he learns to repair hearts. His wife, Tamsin, has the day off for Emancipation Day, while Kingston’s mother is working on a cruise ship. Their family life is shaped by these separations, but Poppy keeps the boy’s routines steady: school, packed lunch, homework and, when they can manage it, a fish fry together.

Another assignment takes Poppy to the Ritz-Carlton to meet Spenser and Cassandra Ridgecrest, a Texas couple considering a part-year home on the island. They first describe an ambitious wish list: a house near a quiet beach, up in the hills, with good breezes, no stairs, four bedrooms, three bathrooms, solar panels and a large cistern. Their budget reaches a million dollars, but they want to understand the place before choosing. Poppy explains that island living requires patience: repairs, parking, service and everyday errands all move at their own pace. As they look around, they talk about their life in Texas, where Spenser farms and raises cattle, and about the oil discovered on their land. He hopes to fish and sail if they move; Cassandra likes gardening and cooking. Poppy invites them to fish with him and Kingston, while cautioning them not to rush into a decision. He has watched newcomers discover that a beautiful island can feel small once they live there.

While Poppy drives, Tamsin makes the rum cake she learned from her mother. On Emancipation Day, she remembers the history of freedom in the Danish West Indies and the work her own family carried forward through generations of baking. Her daughter Faith is away, baking pastries on a cruise ship and hoping eventually to return to Saint Thomas; Kingston is being raised by his grandparents while his parents live apart. Tamsin neither excuses Faith’s choices nor treats them as the whole story. When her mother, Mumzy, calls about an appointment for her painful hip, Tamsin arranges for Poppy to take her to the doctor after his work is done. Then she mixes flour, butter, sugar, eggs, vanilla and dark rum, following a family recipe she has improved without giving away its secrets. That evening, she plans to share the cake with Poppy and Kingston, light a candle, pray for what they need, and blow it out together—a small celebration of family, care and the home they keep making.

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