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Ives

# The Homemaker

**Author's note:** For a time in my childhood, we lived in a tiny town in South Georgia. Across from the post office, an old Victorian home was situated among pecan trees. I was fascinated by the house and often walked its perimeter and peered in the windows. I daydreamed of fixing it up. Unfortunately, after decades of neglect, the old house was demolished. Yet, the old place held such a firm place in my heart that I wrote a story about its restoration. So while the characters and locations in this book are figments of my overactive imagination, the house was once very real.

# The Homemaker

South Georgia

My school bus had passed the old Victorian home every weekday. It stood like an elderly church lady — graceful in decay — among the spreading pecan trees. The paint had flaked off and exposed the gray wood bones beneath. One side of the balcony had collapsed and fallen at a slant below. The windows were broken out on the top floor, letting the rain blow in from the summer heat storms that rolled up from the fields in the late afternoons.

I would sit on those torn vinyl bus seats, with my head pressed against the cool window and my stomach tight from leaving my parent's trailer, where the air

was tinged with the sour smell of flat beer and the sweaty bodies of my father's friends passed out on our sofa. I would imagine how the old house once was: pristine white, with matching porch swings and a yard blooming with pastel lantana and white and pink azaleas. The characters from whatever romance I had stayed up reading the night before would lounge on the porch swings or watch the moonlight from the balcony. I saw myself there, too, except I looked different. I was slim, no curves at all, and attired in an old-fashioned white dress with lines of lace and tiny buttons running down the bodice. I would be in the kitchen, pressing dough into a pan, making pies with the pecans that dropped from the trees, letting the golden scent of butter and brown sugar warm the rooms of my fine home.

In the last month of my junior year at the Tri-county high school, I sat in front of the guidance counselor's metal

desk. Mrs. Stowe had fat eyelids and cheeks, tight lips greased with lipstick and loose skin under her chin. Her hair was a reddish-brown, but I could see gray roots growing out from her scalp. Her office was a cinderblock room painted cream. On the walls were posters of well-dressed young people holding textbooks and looking out with bright gleaming eyes as if they could see a horizon of career happiness in information technology or nursing.

Mrs. Stowe held my academic record in her short, blunt fingers. “So,” she began, as her eyes scanned the document, searching for my name. “Amber Turner. A two point eight.” All she needed to know. She laid down my record and clasped her hands together. “You’ll be graduating next year. Have you thought about what you’re going to do?”

In my mind, I tried to squeeze myself into the posters where I stood beside the pretty people with my flat dull brown hair — “stringy” my mom called it

— hanging about my shoulders, my equally dull gray eyes and a loose floral blouse that hid my oversized breasts. But I didn't see a glorious horizon sitting in a swivel chair and staring at a computer monitor or thumping people's arms searching for veins to stick. Instead, there I was, in my starched white dress, standing on the porch of that old house, holding a vanilla cake with fluffy seven-minute frosting.

“Umm, I like cooking and, you know, stuff,” I mumbled.

Mrs. Stowe nodded her head, encouraging me to continue, as if I had considered my future in terms as hard as the folding chair I sat in. But whenever I thought of my life — my *real* life and not the time I spent drifting in romance novels or daydreaming about the house — I felt weighted, like an anchor stuck at the bottom of a silent murky lake. I wasn't as smart as the other girls, didn't have their Britney Spears sparkling beauty. They were slim, cool and clear,

like the expensive perfume bottles on the cosmetic shelves at the mall. I had curves — lots of them — and breasts that belonged in those movies my father's friends watched.

“You've only got another year of school,” Mrs. Stowe said. Although she was staring right at me, her eyes were flat and appeared to look at nothing. She must have grown tired of delivering the same lecture to students she believed were too stupid to understand. “You need to start thinking about how you're going to support yourself. You just can't float through life thinking Mommy or Daddy or somebody will take care of you.”

I made a small whimper as my hands gripped the cold metal edges of the chair. Mrs. Stowe nodded her head, as if she thought she had somehow pierced me with her words. My mouth felt sticky like I had just eaten potato salad. I wanted to cry, *You have no idea, do you?* But I remained silent.

“Now, I have some computer tests you can take that will help you figure out careers you’d be suited for,” she said.

That summer, I was on the steps outside the trailer reading an Amish romance novel I had bought at Goodwill. The air in the late afternoon was sticky with the humid heat. My skin stunk of mosquito repellent and sweat pooled in my bra. But I preferred being out in the burning sun rather than inside, where I could hear the cursing of my dad’s friends, high on meth, shouting at NASCAR on the TV.

Sharee’s blue Focus sped down the highway that ran in front of our yard. The car windows were rolled down, and the hard bass of a 50 Cent song boomed like thunder. She sped up the drive, and the dogs ran out to chase the car. Her older brother Jeff was in the passenger’s seat, and another guy I didn’t recognize sat in the back. Their bare shoulders were

sunburned. The way Jeff stared at me, dark and hungry, made my stomach hurt.

“Amber, come on, girl!” Sharee shouted and patted the car door. Her eyes were rimmed with heavy black liner and her dyed blonde hair was tangled by the wind. “Let’s order some pizza and watch a movie at my house.”

Jeff mumbled something to the other guy and they both snickered.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“Now, y’all shut up.” Sharee smacked her brother’s forearm. “They’re drunk,” she told me. “I can kick their asses if you want me to. C’mon.”

So I got into the back seat next to Jeff’s friend, a guy with spiky blonde hair and acne pitting his cheeks. He didn’t say anything but sat, hunched, sucking on a cigarette.

Jeff turned and eyed me, his gaze fixing on my breasts. “Dude, let me sit next to Amber,” he told his friend. The blonde guy didn’t show any expression but compliantly pushed opened the door.

“Hey, babe,” Jeff said, as he slid in next to me. He had a skinny hairless chest and wore an orange swimsuit and flip-flops. The side of his lip rose in a part smile, part sneer, and he edged closer until our shoulders touched. His skin felt like wet rubber. I shoved myself against the door so I wouldn’t have to touch him and wrapped my arms about myself.

As we drove, the thudding bass pounded my eardrums; the hot breeze rushed against my cheek and tossed my hair forward. Ahead, I could see the old house. Fat bushes of pale pink, yellow and white lantana grew up its sides.

“Stop!” Jeff shouted above the roar of wind and hip hop. “I gotta take a piss.”

Sharee made a fast turn, the brakes squealed and I was flung against Jeff. I felt his hand brush across my breasts, as if by accident, and I jumped away. The car bounced up the rutted dirt driveway and stopped at the back of the house. Jeff headed off into the high grass in the pecan grove behind the house, his flip

flops popping against his heels.

I got out, shaded my eyes and gazed up at the abandoned home. The kitchen extended off the back to form an L with the rest of the house. The rooms opened onto the porch or balcony that wrapped around the back. If I lived here, I thought, I would stay on the top floor and leave the doors open at night, letting in the breeze sweetened with honeysuckle.

“Why don’t they just tear this place down and put a trailer park here or something?” Sharee said. She had told Mrs. Stowe that after graduation she was going to help her Daddy in his growing trailer park enterprise.

I walked up the steps, feeling the rotting wood give under my feet. On the back door was a metal latch and padlock. I carefully stepped on the sturdiest wood planks as I edged down the porch, wary of the dirt daubers flying about their muddy nests in the corners. I cupped my hands on the tall windows and tried to

peer inside. The leaded glass distorted the thin wood slats running horizontal on the walls. This had been a bedroom.

Someone had taken black spray paint and written “fuck you” and drawn an inverted pentagram – the devil’s symbol.

Otherwise the space was bare but for a blackened fireplace framed by a carved wood mantel.

“Let’s go inside,” I heard Sharee say behind me.

The porch creaked; Jeff’s friend stepped up with the cigarette still in his mouth and the tire iron from a car jack in his hands.

“Hey, don’t do that,” I said.

But he had already swung, and the glass shattered. He hit the window again and again, smashing away the sharp edges and broken wood. “Go in,” he told me through his cigarette.

I ducked and stepped inside. My sneakers crunched on the broken glass and dry dirt. The air was sticky with powdery dust, and orange wasps swarmed

around the naked light sockets in the high ceiling. I followed the dim light to a short hall that opened to a living room and staircase. My nerves tingled like they did at church sometimes, and I closed my eyes. I could feel the residual energy from moments that had passed.

Sharee and Jeff's friend shuffled in behind me, breaking the silence.

"My dad says you can reuse the wood in places like this," she said, scanning the walls and ceilings. "That they make some pretty floors in fancy houses."

I said nothing and headed up the stairs to get away. I had to be alone. On the second floor, the air was stale and hot in my lungs. Four doors emptied off a central room. I slipped into a bedroom with tall windows that overlooked the pecan grove. Again my nerves crackled, like a current had passed over my body. I felt the house all over me, as if it had been waiting, watching me pass in the school bus all those years.

I heard the popping of Jeff's flip-flops. I turned to leave, but he blocked the doorway. "Amber, baby," he said, walking toward me, forcing me deeper into the room. The bulge in his orange swimsuit swelled.

"When are you gonna let me see them big tits of yours, huh?" he asked, taking my arm. He leaned down and licked my neck with the tip of his tongue.

"Let go of me, you jerk," I said, pushing at his chest.

"Now, don't be like that. You know I was kidding." Yet he kept his rubbery grasp tight on me.

"I said —" A gun blast cut through the air and rattled the cracked window glass.

"Shit!" Jeff shouted and shot out of the room. "C'mon!" he called back at me. I stayed frozen.

"I done called the po-lice!" A man's voice boomed out. "Y'all better get on outta there!"

Later, I learned it was Mr. Powell who had ventured out into the pecan grove with the shotgun he kept behind the seat of his Explorer. He was visiting his momma when he heard the music thumping from Sharee's car.

I knew him from church. Every other Sunday, I would walk down to Bethel Baptist. The building was square and striped with thin white clapboard siding. The parking lot wasn't paved, just clumps of grass and loose pebbles. Bethel Baptist met every other Sunday because the congregation had gotten so small they had to share a minister with a church in a neighboring county. Maybe fifteen or so elderly people would attend, sitting reverently on the pews in their fine clothes. That's what I liked: their dignity and silence. The minister had a calm voice, speaking of grace and mercy. I felt safe there. Mr. Powell sometimes came with his momma. She had a hunched spine and used a walker to get around. Her hair was pure white, like fluffy

cotton. She always wore a strand of pearls, looping down from her bent neck, and matching clip earrings. She and her son would sit next to me and we'd share a hymnal.

On a Wednesday, almost three weeks after high school graduation at the football stadium, Dad was complaining that I just lay around reading romance novels and that I needed to be “paying some damn rent for your room and buying groceries for all you eat around here.” One of his friends said he could get me a job as a waitress at this club downtown. The next day, Dad and his friend drove me to the club in the truck. We went by the courthouse and then over the railroad tracks to where the lumberyard used to be, stopping at this place that looked like plywood hammered onto a frame. Inside, the club smelled of crusty grease and flat beer. Dark paneling covered the walls, and the only light came from the neon beer signs over the bar and

a long florescent tube over a pool table. I was introduced to a pale man with rough, flaky skin and wearing shorts and an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt.

“Here’s the girl I was telling you about,” Dad’s friend said. “The one who could work at that Hooters place.”

The owner’s gaze moved from my face, to my breasts, and back. My gut turned, and I took a step back.

“Come on back tomorrow around four and I’ll try you out,” he said.

Dad and his friend stayed at the club, eating wings and drinking beer while they played pool. I sat in a booth, sipped a coke, pulled a paperback from my purse and strained to read under the dim light. My hands were shaking, and I felt like I might puke all over the table. But I swallowed hard and focused on the words.

*Hannah ran out to the edge of the woods. She prayed to God, asking for his guidance about her confused feelings for*

*Matthew. She couldn't marry yet, not with Abraham one year in the grave. The carriages were coming down their drive, and her sister was bringing up jars of preserves from the root cellar. Outside the barn, her father, Abe, and the other men gathered...*

A few hours later, I had to drive everyone home.

Mom was lying down in the back room, coming down from a high. Everyone was gone, except for a man snoring on the sofa. The den carpet was littered with Doritos crumbs. Aluminum cans, snuffed-out cigarettes and needles cluttered the side tables. I picked up the remote, turned off ESPN and walked into the kitchen. I set the oven to 350, opened two cans of chopped pineapple, and dumped the contents into a glass baking dish, then mixed in pats of butter and brown sugar. I shredded some cheese and then crushed graham crackers with my hands and sprinkled the crumbs on top.

When the casserole was done baking, I wrapped the dish in kitchen towels and carried it as I walked along the highway's edge to the Wednesday night supper at the church.

I was sitting alone at the end of the folding table in the fellowship hall, eating coconut cake from a Styrofoam plate, when Mr. Powell and the minister came up to me.

"They are telling me you made that there pineapple dish," Mr. Powell said. His belly hung over the belt of his tan pants. He wore a pale blue oxford without a tie. On his fingers were a wedding band and a thick college ring.

"Yes, sir." I was nervous, my gaze darting between the men.

Mr. Powell pulled back a chair, sat down and dabbed his red creased forehead with a paper napkin. "That sure was good."

I mumbled a soft "thank you," but I wasn't sure he heard it.

“Reverend Mitchell thinks you might be able to help me. You see, my momma needs someone to look after her. We had this full-time gal, but she got mixed up with a fellow over in Valdosta. Don’t require much work. You just got to stay with momma and drive her to the store when she needs to—”

“Yes.” I said, sliding forward in my chair. Surprised at my own boldness.

Mr. Powell picked me up early the next morning when the light had just broken and the air was still dewy and cool. I saw him coming up the drive in a gray Explorer and headed out of the trailer before he could get a glimpse inside. He stepped down from his SUV, and his eyes scanned my home from over the roof of his car. I could see his tongue working inside his mouth, like he was chewing something as he thought.

I hadn’t slept the night before and had stayed up making drop biscuits. I was so terrified he would change his mind

about the job that my hands were shaking. I gripped my round plastic food container and held it to my chest.

“Well, get on in,” he said finally, and I let out my pent-up breath.

I didn’t say anything on the way, but listened to Mr. Powell talk about his daughter who was marrying a lawyer in Atlanta. She and his wife were up there trying on wedding dresses. And his son, who had attended the private school, was starting his second year at UGA in pre-med — all honors classes.

Mr. Powell drove past the old house. The tall grass was seeding and the lantana growing on the side of the porch was a bushy riot of pale pink, yellow and white. The windows reminded me of the eyes you see on folks in the nursing homes — empty and waiting. As I looked out the windshield, I felt the same sensation I did that night when Sharee and I had broken in. That the place could see me.

“I done told Randall Bozeman he needed to cut the grass,” Mr. Powell said, jerking his head toward the house. “Don’t none of them Bozemans take care of nothing.”

“Do you think anyone could fix it up like on *This Old House*?”

“Shoot. It’d be easier just to start over. Everybody wants an old house until they live in one.”

We turned onto the road running along the pecan grove and pulled into the gravel circle drive of a flat white bungalow. In the center of the yard was a stone bird bath nestled among azalea bushes. Around the perimeter were scattered bright pink crepe myrtles. Several pots filled with tiny purple flowers were set on the concrete pad in front of the door.

I stepped down from the Explorer and gazed through the neat rows of pecan trees. I could see the gray bones of the old house through the leaves. At that moment, I wanted this job more than I

had anything before. Anxiety dug like a cat's claw into my chest. What if these nice people found out about my family? What if I screwed up and Mr. Powell said I couldn't come back?

But he came for me every day. I would use the spray head to give Mrs. Powell a shower as she sat in the special chair set in the bathtub. Then I would dry her off and help her dress. Her hands shook so bad that I had to apply her Mary Kay makeup for her. She wanted bright blue eye shadow that matched her eyes and pink lipstick. I drove her Buick to the beauty parlor every Tuesday so she could get her fine white hair fixed.

She would sit at the kitchen table while I made meals. I baked biscuits, pastries and casseroles using the recipes that she had written on index cards. She would tell me stories about the people whose names were scribbled on the recipes. Ann's whipping cream cake. Hilda's green bean salad. The recipes came from old neighbors, church

members, and some were her mother's and grandmother's.

In the afternoons, if the temperature wasn't too high, she would sit under the large umbrella I opened on the picnic table and give me orders about how to take care of her garden. I learned how to fertilize her azaleas and grafted hydrangeas and forsythia. I would use her old gardening gloves and a shovel to plant yellow pansies around her mailbox in the winter and hot pink impatiens in the spring. At the hardware store, Mrs. Powell picked out lattice that I leaned against her house, and I wove a fragrant jasmine vine through the crisscrossing slats.

Sometimes, when Mrs. Powell was napping, I walked up to the old house.

Plywood covered up where we had broken in, so I would cup my hands and peer through the windows or just sit on the steps, close my eyes, and listen to the rising wind rustle the pecan leaves. I began to make up my own romances in

my head about people who might have lived in the house, and I envisioned them walking about a beautiful garden of stone walls and falling ivy, like in Mrs. Powell's gardening books.

I was outside cutting big blooms of purple hydrangeas to put in a vase when I saw a white truck drive up behind the old house. A man of medium height, clad in jeans, a red cap and a white t-shirt over his muscular shoulders stepped down from the cab. He walked around the house with an uneven gait, not exactly a limp, but a slight drag to his left leg. He returned to his truck, leaned against the hood and took off his hat, revealing a dark bronze face and head full of shiny black hair. A Mexican.

I heard my own sharp inhalation. The only Mexicans I knew worked in the chicken processing plant or on building crews. I was terrified that he had come to see about tearing down *my* house. Maybe they were finally going to do like Mr.

Powell suggested. Demolish it and build something new.

He drew out a key from his front jeans pocket, opened the padlock on the back door and disappeared inside. I walked to the edge of the pecan grove, gripping my fistful of flowers, and waited for him to come out until I finally had to leave to get Mrs. Powell up from her nap.

I helped her to the bathroom and then led her to her favorite spot on the sofa. I pulled up a TV tray and turned on PBS to a travel show on Greece. I returned to the kitchen to get out some butterbeans I had been simmering on the stove. As I put them in a bowl, I looked through the kitchen window. The truck was still there and the back door still open. But an hour later, as dusk was setting in, I returned to make dinner and saw that the truck was gone.

That night, and for several other nights, I lay in my bed with my door locked and a pillow around my head so I didn't have to hear the noise coming from

my parent's den. My house was going to be demolished. Put down like a sick dog. A knot in my stomach burned, and I drew my legs up. Perhaps I had believed that all my fantasies and stories about the place were like tiny prayers to save it for me. That if I cared for something enough, the invisible hand of God would intervene or such. But that was stupid. *I* was stupid. God didn't care about old houses, not when so many people were suffering in the world. Like those starving children with swollen bellies on the covers of pamphlets they gave out at church.

I studied my dresser. Purple cotton PJs stuck out the top edge of the stuffed drawer, the surface stacked with cracked paperback books that I got at Goodwill. The chain with my gold cross hung off the side of the mirror. This was all that was mine. All I owned. I thought about the guidance counselor's words: "You can't just float through life thinking Mommy or Daddy or somebody will take care of you."

I didn't see the white truck again until the third of July. Mr. Powell, his family and the minister's family were going to spend Independence Day at Mrs. Powell's. I was preparing all kinds of food for them: red velvet cake, lemon ice box pie, green beans, cheese grits casserole and collards. The kitchen smelled of rising cinnamon buns and simmering black-eyed peas. I was whipping egg whites into soft peaks with the handheld mixer when I saw the truck pull up. The Mexican got out, wearing the same attire as last time. He went around the back of his truck, pulled the tailgate down and lifted up a sheet of plywood. He shoved the wood over the rotting steps, creating a ramp to the door. My grip on the mixer slackened, and the beaters reared up and splattered egg whites across my blouse.

"Ugh!" I set down the mixer and bowl and tried to clean myself with a paper towel, but hot tears blurred my vision. Then I did something I hadn't

done since I was ten and huddled in the school bathroom during the class Thanksgiving play. I wept.

The man continued to haul equipment inside: a saw, a sledge hammer and saw horses. He didn't come out for several hours while I was snapping beans, cleaning collards and fixing the television remote for Mrs. Powell. But I knew he was in there, taking down the fixtures and doors for selling and ripping up the wood to make pretty floors for rich people's homes.

Around five, he stepped outside — his gait was stiffer than before. He pulled a bottle from a cooler in the back of his truck and drank from it. I had the most un-Christian urge to kick his lame leg, shout at him and call him all those bad names Dad's friends call Mexicans. I quickly prayed for forgiveness, but that didn't make the tightness and hurt in my chest go away.

Mr. Powell's family members were beautiful people, the types that made me feel clumsy and dull like I did back in school. His daughter was a blonde young woman — real honey blonde, not like Sharee's hair — with smooth clean skin, bright eyes and a dazzling smile. I couldn't help but stare at her, marveling at how everything seemed brighter in her presence. I could see why a fancy Atlanta lawyer would give her that beautiful engagement ring that once belonged to his grandmother. She held Mrs. Powell's hand and told her that the wedding ceremony was going to take place at a beautiful church in a part of Atlanta called Dunwoody. The bridesmaids would wear pale pink silk tea gowns and hold bouquets of white lilies. Mr. Powell's son was lean, tanned and a bit gawky. He and some of his friends had just spent a week up on the Appalachian Trail. He seemed nervous and kept brushing his hands over his pants legs.

After awhile, I excused myself and went out back where Mr. Powell and the minister were cooking hamburgers on a portable grill. I started to set the picnic table with red plastic utensils and plates decorated with American flags. Up at the old house, the Mexican was hauling lumber from his truck bed.

“Looks like we’re gonna get a new neighbor,” Mr. Powell said, derision coloring his words. “Probably move all his friends in, too. You know how them Mexicans are. Bozeman ought to have torn that place down years ago.”

The minister studied the ice in his glass and then took a long sip of tea. “Randall Bozeman told me that the boy works out on the base. That he’s a captain. Did several tours in Iraq before he got his leg blown up.”

Mr. Powell visibly flinched. His face became even redder.

“Paid cash for the place and says he’s gonna fix it up,” the minister finished.

My gaze flew to the house. The Mexican had hoisted the wood onto his shoulder and was limping inside. A tight squeak escaped in my throat, but nobody heard.

After dinner, I stood at the kitchen window, wrapping leftover red velvet cake in tin foil for the minister to take home. The light was beginning to fade, and the air was cooling down as evening approached. The Mexican's truck was still there.

Mr. Powell came in to get a pitcher of sweet tea from the refrigerator. He followed my gaze. After a moment, he said, "Amber, why don't you take him some of that good icebox pie you made?"

So with the pan in my shaking hand, I passed through the pecan orchard. The tall grass left little black seeds on the hem of my skirt.

He wasn't outside, but I could hear the shrill sound of a saw running upstairs. I walked up the ramp and knocked on

the door. It slowly swung open as if it wasn't shut properly. I took a step over the threshold. A blue cooler sat in the doorway to the kitchen, and several sections of sheet rock were propped against the wall.

The saw wound down.

"Hello?" I said. My high voice echoed through the empty rooms.

"Be there in a minute," a man's voice shouted down.

I heard dragging footsteps on the floor above and then clomping down the stairs. The Mexican appeared at the end of the hall. A sheen of sweat shone on his high cheek bones and forehead. His eyes were as shiny as obsidian.

He wiped his forehead with the back of his arm, causing his hair to spike in the front.

"I'm... um...Amber," I said, swaying on my feet like a little girl.  
"I...er...stay with Mrs. Powell back there, and we...uh...we had some leftover pie.

We thought you might want some.” I held out the pie.

“Oh, wow, thanks.” He took the pan. His long fingers were powdered with sawdust. “Did you make it?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“I’m Victor Diaz,” he said as he bent over and put the pie in the cooler. Then he reached in for a Diet Coke. “Do you want one?”

I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

“So, you are the first neighbor I’ve met.” He had an easy tone over a hard edge that reminded me of a police officer’s.

“Are...are you going to live here?”

He screwed off the top of the bottle and carbonation rushed up. He took a large swallow and wiped his forehead again before he answered my question. “Do you have a problem with a Latino neighbor?”

My head heated with embarrassment, realizing he thought I meant something else entirely. “No, no, I

mean, I thought...I was scared that you might tear the place down. I love this house. I have since I was a child. I used to imagine it all fixed up and with a nice garden.”

He studied me for a minute. Some of the hardness left his eyes.

“Do you want to see what I’ve done?” he asked. “It’s nothing exciting at the moment. Just tearing out the rot and pulling out old wiring.”

My “yes” came out like a rush of breath.

He followed me up the stairs. I noticed he used his hands when he spoke. He didn’t flick them about in abrupt gestures like Sharee. He spread his fingers over the walls when he talked about trying to save as much of the old wood as he could. He tugged at the old electrical wires when he explained how he would have to rewire the house and add blown insulation. When he said we should go to the other room, he placed his hand on the back of my shoulder to lead me. The

pressure of his fingers sent a giddy yet gentle sensation over my skin. I had been in the same room with Jeff over a year ago, his hand on me as well. But with Victor, I wasn't afraid.

Through the dusty windows, I could see the tops of the pecan trees. The sky was darkening to purple and the chirping of cicadas drifted up from the grass. Beyond the grove, flames flickered from the citronella candles Mr. Powell was setting about his mama's patio.

"I have to go," I said, although I didn't want to. For a moment, I stood still, letting my gaze drift over the walls and thin boards running across the high ceiling. "I'm glad you're fixing it up," I whispered.

As he followed me down the stairs, he had to grip the railing so hard that his knuckles whitened. I almost reached out to hold his elbow like I did Mrs. Powell's, but I stopped myself.

At the back door, he held out his hand. "It was nice to meet you," I said.

I put my hand in his. There was a reassurance in his touch. His eyes were guarded, but an easy smile played on his lips. I wondered about all he had seen in the war – perhaps the death of his friends or Iraqi people. What was he doing when he was hurt? Had a bomb gone off? How long had he been in the hospital? Could the doctors save his leg, or did he wear a prosthetic?

“I enjoyed meeting you as well,” he said, and held on for another moment, before releasing my fingers. “If you want to come back, you know, I will be here most late afternoons and weekends.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling my neck and face flush. I turned and hurried down the ramp, feeling self-conscious. But I realized I was being ungracious and spun back around.

“I’m always here,” I said. My nerves were crackling, and I fell over my words. “I – I can bring you food. And—and I can help you. I mean, if you want...”

The wind blew Victor's hair, and his skin looked golden in the jewel light of dusk. "I would like that," he said softly.

Warmth flooded my chest and took my breath, like I had come across an old, almost-forgotten photograph from years ago. As if this moment was already a cherished memory.

**The End**