

Echoing the balconies and curves of an old paddle wheeler, Annelise's house reigned for more than a hundred years as the showplace of a small fishing village called Apalachicola. No matter who lived there, it would always belong to Annelise, but the realtor declined to share that knowledge with the new owners, Margaret and Edwin Foster. Not knowing themselves, the Fosters couldn't tell their daughter, eighteen-year-old Elise, for who would have imagined the house was about to become a portal whereby two young women from different centuries would meet? Surely not Peyton Roberts, who passed the house every morning on his way to work. He never questioned why he always slowed the truck and tipped his hat to the memory of the lovely Annelise. Later he might have cause to wonder.

But now, all over town people were stirring, getting ready for a new day. Peyton stood on the sidewalk in front of his shoe store and stretched, fingers laced high above his head. He was no longer young, but he was still a handsome man and just cocky enough to realize it. In the dim light he squinted at the newly refurbished store next to his and spit.

In another part of town, Nadine Fletcher peered through the screen door at the padded rocker on her front porch. Gnarled hands, palms flat against the dirty screen, framed her face. Already the heat, as only Florida can brew it, seeped through each tiny square.

A few miles away Dallas Anderson remained in bed, reluctant to start the day, her silver-streaked hair smooth as a cap on her eyelet pillowcase. She'd open one eye soon and remember she was a widow, but in the meantime, she'd draw a deep breath and think of something cheerful—like the welcome jolt of a cup of strong coffee.

Peyton rolled his shoulders and twisted slightly to the right, looking toward the town's one traffic light changing colors in the mist and the emptiness of a pre-dawn morning. Turning back to the left, he dropped his arms and sprinted down the street toward the Gorrie Bridge, eager to watch day break over the water, never tiring of seeing his day unfold like a shimmering net cast over the morning-still surface of the river.

He stretched once more and then, hands on his hips, stood motionless, waiting for his day to begin.

That he was alone remained an ever-present wound. He had no one to share the beauty of shrimp boats beginning their journey to the Gulf, no one by his side as sparkling stars of sunlight went skimming across the surface of the water. He hadn't planned it this way, never imagined himself the town's lonely bachelor. He thought of Nadine Fletcher spending most of the last fifty years sitting in a rocker on her front porch. Had she grown accustomed to growing old alone, living all these years without her high school sweetheart beside her? Maybe he should ask her. He laughed to himself. *Not a chance, old buddy. Hide your sorrow in your gut where it belongs.*

There were a lot of new people in town, but he didn't look to any of them to ease his loneliness, not even the saucy divorcée who'd opened a jewelry store across the street and lined the sidewalk in front of the store with flower-laden wine barrels.

"If one of them wine barrels comes through my window," he'd warned her, "you're paying every dime, not me."

“Why in the world would one of my wine barrels go crashing through your window?” she’d asked.

“Y’all never heard of hurricanes up north? Ever see what wind at a hundred miles an hour or more can do to a house or tree, much less a wine barrel?”

“In the first place, I’m not from ‘up north’ as you call it. And anyway, how often do you have hurricanes like that?”

“Oh, it’s been a long time. A whole two years, I’d say. In ‘85 we had a couple of bad ones. I call ‘em the holiday hurricanes. Elena paid us a visit near Labor Day. We thought that was bad enough, but then around Thanksgiving here comes Kate. Looked like she was hell-bent on destroying us. Those storms travel up and down this coast like it’s a major highway. Ask the people in Port St. Joe, ‘bout thirty miles down the road, what happens when a hurricane gives birth to a tidal wave. Get ‘em to show you old St. Joseph—what’s left of it—that’s underneath the bay. September through November, keep your rosary handy.”

Nobody had to tell her Peyton was among the residents who resented the recent changes that threatened to alter what was old, familiar, and comfortable into something trendy. Bright awnings, siding, and gallons of paint had transformed withered derelicts into jewels that sparkled among faded neighbors like Peyton’s Shoe Store.

Peyton sighed and looked away from the water. He bent over and touched his hands to the ground a few times before beginning his jog back to town.