

a  
place to  
land

Lauren K. Denton



HARPER MUSE



*A Place to Land*

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Sugar Bend has always been known as a place of secrets and mystery. In this small town nestled alongside Little River, words spoken in confidence turn to mist, evaporating before anyone else can take notice of them. Fish swim against the current, pushing themselves deeper into the rich river water even as the tide sweeps everything else out into the Gulf. Mourning doves float on the water's early morning surface like ducks, as if the water were a safer place than land. And long-gone memories, thick as the rain-heavy air, tend to come back at the strangest of times, as sharp and clear as if they'd only just happened.

The town of Sugar Bend sprouted in a cozy crook of the river over a century ago, and its people built stores and homes along the thin ribbon of brackish water. Now lazy roads fan out on either side of it, full of candy-colored houses, birds that chirp in the middle of the night, and dogs that crisscross the road in search of the tastiest handouts.

But on the edge of town, the secrets deepen along with the river, and as the water grows shadowy under tree-dappled shade, the mysteries darken as well. For way down deep in the murky blue-green depths, a little boat sleeps. Forty years ago it was laid to rest in its silent, watery burial ground by a pair of strong hands—hands that belonged to a girl whose life was irrevocably changed in the span of one steamy, glass-calm night.

PART ONE

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## o n e

On a quiet silver morning, before the world—or at least the rest of Sugar Bend—had awoken, Violet Figg took in the spirited birdsong from her back porch overlooking Little River. She wrapped her hands around her mug of tea and closed her eyes to listen. There by the steps was the three-part whistle of a Carolina wren. Up in the scrubby oak along the side of the porch was the soft *coo-oo* of a mourning dove. A great blue heron squawked as it landed at the edge of the grass and lifted its head high atop its skinny neck.

At the quick, squeaky *chit-chit* coming from near the back steps, Violet smiled. She'd started seeing the ruby-throated hummingbirds a few weeks ago, back in town from their yearly jaunt down to Mexico and other parts farther south. She was always happy to see them return.

This morning there were two of them, a male and a female, with wings that beat so fast they all but disappeared. Where the male had iridescent green feathers on his back and the telltale bright-red throat, the female's feathers were paler green and

she was missing that trademark ruby red. What she did have was a splotch on the underside of her neck that resembled a sun with brilliant rays shooting out from the center. This particular hummingbird had visited Violet's feeders last season, and possibly the one before that too. Trudy didn't believe her, but Violet knew her birds.

"Getting a little breakfast before you start your day, huh?" Violet rose and placed her hand against the screen, and the female turned her head toward Violet's voice. "Well, hello to you too," she murmured. She'd mix up a new batch of nectar for them when she returned from her morning survey. She glanced at her watch. Still had a little time.

At a rustle behind her the birds took one last sip, then flew away, and Violet turned to see her sister lean in through the doorway that led from the kitchen onto the porch. Trudy's blue-striped pajamas were ruffled, and she rubbed a hand over her eyes as she yawned.

At one time in her life, Trudy Figg wouldn't have stepped out of the house without her long blonde hair meticulously brushed and rolled, eyeliner in a perfect cat eye, and lips lined and glossed. She'd sheathed her lovely form in all manner of sparkly gowns and bikinis in her quest to win every beauty pageant she entered, which for the most part she had.

The gowns and bikinis were long gone, along with all traces of makeup, hair products, and her voice, but her face was still beautiful. As much as Trudy tried to run from it, it was hard to hide the still-bright eyes, Cupid's-bow lips, and smooth cheeks, despite her sixty-three years. Today Trudy sported a particularly

impressive bedhead, with short gray-brown curls sticking out all over. And knowing Trudy, she wouldn't even try to tame it before shoving a hat on her head and heading out on her daily treasure hunt.

Pausing in the doorway, Trudy tapped her watch and tilted her head in question.

"I'm always up early." Over the years Violet had learned to decipher her sister's unspoken communication, and she often knew what Trudy was thinking even when Trudy didn't reach for the ever-present notepad and pencil she kept in her pocket. Violet nodded toward the bird feeder hanging on the other side of the screen. "I saw Sunshine this morning." It was her nickname for the hummingbird with the sun rays on her neck. "She found her way back."

Trudy had already pulled out her notepad and was scratching out a note. When she finished she held it out for Violet to read. *With all those birds crisscrossing the skies during migrations, what makes you think you have repeat visitors?*

Violet shrugged. "It happens."

Trudy threw out a skeptical glance, but Violet pushed it away. "The birds know a good thing when they see it, and they've been known to go back to the same feeder year after year." She nudged her glasses up on the bridge of her nose. "Regardless, they're here and I like it." Violet faced out toward the river and the wide sky above it. Clear as a bell, light breeze. An osprey swooped over the river, a fish dangling in its talons.

Behind her Trudy began to write again. *I'm going to the*

*island before the tide comes back in. Don't call the coast guard on me like you did last time.*

“I wish you'd take your phone.” Violet wrapped her arms around herself. Early May in Alabama wasn't cold by any stretch, but she felt a chill nonetheless. “Those teenagers on the Jet Skis make me nervous. And the drunk fishermen. You know how they race each other to get out into the Gulf.”

A corner of Trudy's mouth lifted in a grin as she wrote. *Not too many teenagers out before seven in the morning. And fishermen won't start drinking until lunchtime.*

Violet opened her mouth to rattle off another reason why it wasn't safe for Trudy to be out on the water alone, but Trudy began writing again.

*I'm a big girl, Violet. You don't always have to watch out for me. I'll be just fine.*

And with that Trudy winked, then ducked back into the house.

“Just fine,” Violet murmured, her gaze still on the spot where Trudy had been standing. *I do have to watch out for you,* she thought. *It's my job.*

With Trudy gone the porch seemed more still than usual. Trudy had been quiet for forty years, but even in her silence, she could be loud. At least with Violet. Sometimes she seemed to nearly vibrate with life, but she refused to open her mouth and let any of it out.

Violet would have been happy with anything—a shout of anger, a burst of laughter, a single word. There were times, just after everything had happened, when Violet fought the urge to

grab Trudy by the shoulders and demand she speak. Or at least explain, on that blasted notepad, why she couldn't even say a word to Violet. The rest of the world, okay, but to her own sister? Her only family? But Violet had learned to let that go.

She heaved a lungful of air and slowly let it leak out. Violet loved her sister with every fiber, every shred of her being, and though the past crept back in sometimes, pressing on her shoulders and jabbing her in the stomach with its long, scabby fingers, Violet no longer allowed herself to think about all she'd given up, for love and for obligation. For penance.

Violet settled down in her rocking chair, the floral cushion shaped from years of her back-porch bird watching, and pushed off gently, setting the rocker into a slow back and forth. Before her, the sky over the river brightened by small increments. A splash of mauve here, a streak of pink there. A little while later, Trudy crossed the yard below. Dressed in a pair of black swim shorts and a yellow T-shirt, Trudy—Violet's sole companion for all these years—lugged her kayak under one arm and a bucket for her treasures in the other. The last time she'd gone to Roberts Island, she'd brought home a three-foot piece of gnarly driftwood, now well on its way to becoming a quirky lamp, which their customers would no doubt love and fight each other for. The bucket was too small for wood that large, but it'd be perfect for the shells and dried pods and fronds Trudy was always picking up and toting home.

Violet and Trudy owned and operated Two Sisters Art and Handmade Goods in downtown Sugar Bend. What started as a place for Trudy to make and sell her popular mixed-media art

pieces had grown over the years into a shop to find just-right gifts for any occasion. Trudy's unconventional sculptures were always a big hit, and their inventory also included everything from hand-thrown pottery to small canvas paintings to hand-made soap, candles, and door wreaths.

Aside from just an art shop, Two Sisters had become somewhat of a gathering spot for people who needed rest and community—men whose wives were busy shopping, lonely seniors who craved company and conversation, even a few book clubs and knitting circles. Violet and Trudy had bought the shop eight years ago from the previous owners, who'd had to sell quickly, for a song. Trudy had been selling her artwork at the annual art festival for years, but having a brick-and-mortar space allowed her to sell her wares all through the year rather than one hectic weekend. It also gave her a place to spread out her materials and work without covering their home with sand and splinters of wood. Or at least not as much as she used to.

Downstairs Trudy stepped into the shallow water alongside their dock and slid the kayak in, then carefully sat and picked up the double-bladed paddle. Only when she began paddling, her strong arms pulling the kayak through the glass surface of the river, did Violet stand to ready herself for her morning bird survey.

But just as she reached for her mug, a strange sensation washed through her, like ice water rippling under her skin. She paused, then turned to the screen door and pushed it open. There on the top step, as if someone had laid it there just for her, was a complete set of fish bones.

Violet's breath rushed out and her skin tingled, shooting up her arms and across the back of her neck. The skeleton was about as long as the width of her hand. It had a head with a gaping hole where the eye had once been, a spine with slender ribs sticking out, and at the end, the wispy, fragile bones of a small tail fin.

Despite living mere feet from the river and just a few miles from the Gulf of Mexico, the sight of the bones didn't bring to mind the river teeming with life or the many fish she'd grilled, fried, or baked in her days—instead, she remembered the last day she'd seen *him*. He'd been wearing a crisp navy suit, starched white shirt, shiny wing-tip shoes. And the girl on his arm—Trudy, in a red dress, matching lipstick, and an anxious smile. And his trademark cuff links—tiny silver fish bones winking in the light.

In a quick, angry motion, Violet scraped the bones off the top step with the sole of her slipper, where they landed with a dull clatter in the saw grass growing next to the porch. Still in a half crouch—knees aching, heart pounding—she swiveled her head, expecting to see him looming on the dock or in the grass or behind her on the porch. But nothing was there. No one watching. Just a dewy morning stretching out its arms, unconcerned by the warning bells ringing in Violet's ears.



Several years ago when Violet first began taking bird surveys for the Coastal Alabama Audubon Society, she'd wake

up ludicrously early on survey days, nervously checking and rechecking her small backpack to make sure she had everything she needed: binoculars and camera, clipboard with plenty of data sheets, three pens in case her first two ran out of ink, visor and official birding T-shirt. It was so important to her—this process of observing, counting, and monitoring the birds she'd loved for so long—that she grew shaky and nauseated. Oftentimes her anxiety was so bad that when she finally made it to the beach and the beginning of her route, her hands would tremble and the data she was supposed to collect would disappear as soon as she'd try to write it down.

It was different now, thank goodness. She'd learned to relax into it, to remember she was dealing with the natural world, where things didn't always go according to plan. It wasn't the plans she cared about anyway—the checklists and routines, the data sheets and computer logs—it was the birds themselves. Their effortless flight through the sky, the ease with which they changed course.

Even as a young child, Violet had watched everything from the tiniest blue-gray gnatcatchers with the squeaky calls to the white ibises and great horned owls that soared over her childhood home. Each species was different—Violet was able to identify most birds in her backyard by the time she was seven or eight years old—but they all had one thing in common: total freedom. Violet loved nothing more than to watch “her” birds, as she thought of them, calling and cackling, foraging and flying, all with the ease and freedom of a creature not bound by anything but the needs of its own little body and brain. Nothing

stopped them. Watching them fly was always the balm she didn't know she needed.

Today, after a breakfast of oatmeal and a handful of blueberries, she grabbed her trusty backpack—always stocked with the essentials to prevent the nervous checking of her earlier years—and drove south out of Sugar Bend toward the coast. Though the stretch of white sand fronting the Gulf of Mexico had been virtually empty when she was a girl, it was now lined with overpriced restaurants, trendy boutiques, boat-rental shacks, and tall glittering condos. But despite the constant forward motion of progress, the birds were still there, and it was Violet's duty—and pleasure—to keep her eye on them.

She parked at the resort, as she always did, and passed between the two condo towers. She'd walked the path between these condos so often, she'd worn the grass down to sandy dirt, but the man in the resort's guardhouse always looked the other way when she approached with her binoculars and camera around her neck, her wide green visor shading her face and neck from the unforgiving Alabama sun. A sign proclaimed this portion of beach reserved for "Registered Guests Only," but it had been years since he'd asked for her room number. She'd even taught him a little about identifying the birds he saw flying past his windowed box by the entrance gate.

*Poor man*, Violet often thought. Stuck inside that cramped little space with frigid air pumped out of the window unit, his only company a tiny TV in the corner and the out-of-towners who pulled through the gate all day. He probably thought

similar things about her: *Poor woman, all alone out in the heat, with only some birds to keep her company.*

Today he tipped his cap in greeting as she slid through the gap in the gate and continued to the path between towers A and B. It was still early, only seven fifteen, but the sun was already hot, the sky a clear stretch of pale blue all the way to the horizon. She pulled the brim of her visor a little lower as she came out of the shade between the buildings and stepped up onto the wooden walkway that spanned the dunes. At the end of the bridge was a small bench, and as she deposited her shoes there, she was grateful to see hers was the only pair. The beachgoers were still in their rooms eating breakfast and slathering themselves with sunscreen. She still had some time before things got busy.

As always when her bare feet finally met the sand, she paused and dug in, savoring the cool cushion that crept between her toes. People talked about the healing properties of salt water—she remembered her mother once telling her to take a mouthful of Gulf water and gargle it to soothe a sore throat—but in Violet's mind, the real healing was in the sand.

When she reached the firm, damp sand close to the water, she paused and took her clipboard from her backpack. She lifted the waterproof cover page and wrote the date and her name, then jotted down initial notes on the conditions. A quick look around with her binoculars, and she noted a group of birds to her left. *Royal terns, 3, juvenile.*

Violet had been volunteering with the local Audubon chapter for years. She attended lectures about bird migrations and

endangered species and volunteered occasionally at the local nature center, mostly keeping kids from sticking their fingers through the bars of the injured-bird habitats. She'd taken an early retirement from teaching a little over ten years ago when Sugar Bend Academy merged with a larger school in the next town, which freed her up to accompany more seasoned volunteers on their regular bird surveys. After a while she was given an official clipboard and her own route.

Her job was to walk a one-mile stretch of beach, observing, counting, and identifying all birds whether on land, water, or air. During each survey season, volunteers were charged with recording and logging official data once a week, and Violet fulfilled her duty in rain or shine, heat or chill, and filled out the data sheets in her still-perfect teacher's penmanship.

Today she kept her binoculars at the ready as she made her way down the beach. She moved cautiously, careful not to disturb the birds as they went about the business of their daily lives. For each bird she saw, she made a hatch mark on the bottom of her data sheet, noting the bird's color, age, and sex. It was a morning for the laughing gulls, with several colonies dotting the beach and floating in the shallow water just beyond the gentle waves. The gulls always added a particular zip to the day, with their cackling laughter and slashes of black and white against the azure sky.

When a string of runners passed her, the birds took flight at once, their laughter carrying over the sound of the waves and the stiff breeze. Violet did a quick count, mentally untangling

the wings into individual bodies, and noted their particulars—all juveniles, mostly females.

She continued on her route, making notes and occasionally pausing to dip her toes into the water. The time passed quickly as it always did when she was enjoying herself. When she reached the yellow chair-rental stand that signaled the turn-around point of her route, she adjusted the brim of her visor to block the sun, then headed back the way she came, continuing her observations until she reached her starting point. She made a few last notes on her sheet, including two birds she couldn't easily identify, which was rare for her, and finally tucked her clipboard into her backpack.

Back at the foot of the walkway where she'd left her shoes, she took the water hose looped over the handrail and rinsed the sand from her feet and legs. As chilly water ran down her calves and cooled the skin of her feet, something rustled behind her.

She turned just in time to see a large brown pelican stretch out its wings and take flight from the back of the bench. The magnificence of seeing the bird's huge, prehistoric wingspan up close blotted out all else, and she stood still, watching the bird as it soared away from her.

It swooped low over the beach, then glided even lower over the rolling waves, its wings flapping only once or twice as the ground effect kept it aloft. Finally it came to rest on the water, pulling its wings into its sides and bobbing on the surface. Violet's skin thrummed when the pelican cocked its head and glanced over its shoulder to where she stood, hose dangling in her fingertips and her toes turning cold from the flow of water.

She reached behind her and turned off the faucet, keeping her eyes on the pelican.

A burst of conversation came from her right. She dragged her gaze away from the bird and took a step back as a family bustled by juggling four folding chairs, two inflatable rafts, a large cooler, and a string bag holding all manner of sandcastle-building gear. Two children, a boy and a girl, trailed the parents, their faces shiny with sunscreen and glee.

When the boisterous parade finally passed, Violet closed her eyes and inhaled the salty air. It invigorated, energized. It whispered and sang. *It's not just the sand that's healing*, she thought. *It's the air too.*

When she opened her eyes, her gaze snagged on something lying on the handrail at the top of the bench, right where the pelican had perched moments before. Fish bones. Though much smaller than those sitting on her top step this morning, the skeleton was unmistakable. Her eyes darted to the water, but the pelican was gone.

When Violet arrived at Two Sisters a couple hours later, her skin and hair fresh from a shower and dressed in her usual draw-string khaki skirt and cool, loose-fitting linen top, Trudy was already hard at work, bent over the long table in the back, her green banker's lamp illuminating her work space. Violet recognized some of the items spread out on the table—the long piece of driftwood from a few days ago, clumps of dried seaweed, and

the ever-present tangle of fishing line—but there were some new additions Trudy must have found on that morning’s scavenge: a bouquet of sea oat pods, a bundle of reedy grass, and a handful of clam shells.

“Starting a new project today?”

Trudy’s answer was a nod, her eyes not lifting from the fishing line she threaded through a string of shells. Sometimes Violet didn’t understand why her sister didn’t just buy a fresh spool of fishing line. It’d be so much easier to attach the shells and baubles together if she didn’t have to untangle the line first, but Trudy was adamant about using cast-off materials—items others had discarded along with left-behind shells and bits of broken wood. Forgotten, abandoned things. Trudy calmed them down and put them together and made them beautiful again.

Violet made her way through the shop, bringing it to life. She powered up the computer, filled the electric teakettle and flipped it on, then set the music to low and twisted the rod to open the window blinds. Mismatched chairs set up at round tables under the large bay window waited for the day’s customers. As the water in the kettle began to bubble, Violet propped open the front door to catch the last of the morning’s breeze before it turned too hot, Ella Fitzgerald crooned “East of the Sun,” and the shop was ready for the day.

Sugar Bend wasn’t exactly a tourist town—there were no outlet malls, high-end boutiques, or five-star restaurants—but it was known for its quaintness, its beauty, its winding roads draped with cool shade and Spanish moss, and its annual art festival held at the end of every summer. Vacationers from

nearby Orange Beach, Gulf Shores, and Pensacola often made their way up the highway—usually well into their weeklong vacations when their skin needed a break from the sun—in search of the hidden turns and overlooked signs that took them to Sugar Bend, population 1,923. It wasn't by accident that the roads were hard to find and the signs occasionally went missing.

Still, some made it in, and when they did, they faced two types of locals. One type bemoaned the out-of-towners who came for a dose of small-town charm to take back to their regular lives. They barked at the cars that went the wrong way down one-way streets, rolled their eyes at college spring breakers who had the nerve to order a half-caff, sugar-free, “could you add a double shot of espresso” mochaccinos at Joe's Coffee on Cedar Street, and pretended to be cash-only when people pulled out their debit cards. Then there were those who welcomed strangers in with open arms, who were willing to share Sugar Bend's beauty and magic with outsiders, who gave directions, and let them pay however they liked.

For the most part Trudy and Violet fell into the second camp—after all, if someone wanted to take a piece of Sugar Bend with them when they left, why shouldn't that be a hand-painted oyster shell with gold-leafed edges or a whimsical sculpture made from driftwood, sea glass, and coquina shells? Violet would wave good-bye as the visitors walked out of Two Sisters, content in the knowledge that while they might be taking home a small piece of Sugar Bend, the true secrets of the town—and of the river that flowed through it—were known only to the real locals. Those, like Trudy and Violet, who'd

loved and lost in this place, who'd wept here, who'd been broken and fastened back together all along these shores and roads and under these shade trees.

By early afternoon Trudy was finished with her work—*My materials are not cooperating*, she'd scrawled on a note—and Violet had sold a dozen of their bestselling pinch pots. The little containers—perfect for holding small odds and ends on a dresser or by the kitchen sink—were made from river clay Trudy had shaped and baked. When they cooled, Violet painted them to resemble birds' eggs: brown-and-cream speckled for nut-hatches, bright blue-green for robins, a mottled gray-brown for sparrows, pale blue with scattered dark spots for house finches.

As Violet wrapped up a sale, Trudy appeared at Violet's elbow holding a note. *I'm heading home. I'll get things ready for dinner.*

Violet nodded at her sister. "I won't be too long. I'll probably close around four." Most shops in town had fluctuating hours, and no one but outsiders minded.

With her messenger bag tight across her chest and her tackle box of supplies in hand, Trudy slipped quietly out the door and headed west on Water Street toward home. Violet took off her glasses and cleaned the lenses with the hem of her shirt. As she put them back on, a young woman paused outside the front window. Long, dark hair fell in waves down her back, one side tucked behind a delicate ear. Proud nose, full lips, and wide, long-lashed eyes scampered this way and that, as if she was searching for someone. She seemed too young for the worried crease between her brows.

After a moment of hesitation, the girl opened the door and walked in. The bell jangled a happy tune.

“Welcome to Two Sisters.” Violet smiled warmly. “Are you shopping for anything particular?” The girl shook her head and ran her fingers across a set of dish towels splashed with bright-yellow flowers on a table by the door. “Well, I’m here if you need me.”

Violet pattered around, dusting shelves and neatening up displays. She kept an eye on the new customer as she moved through the shop, her face still etched with concern. What was roiling inside her, itching to be freed?

The girl lifted the lid of a shell-encrusted box barely larger than a deck of cards. The inside was lined with pale-pink velvet.

“My sister Trudy made that.” Violet’s words startled the girl, who dropped the lid closed. Violet tried to set her at ease. “She collects little things everywhere she goes—shells, pieces of wood, bits of twine and feathers—and she uses it all in her artwork. Many of the sculptures and art pieces here are hers.”

“I like them.” Her voice was deeper than Violet had expected. Mature. Violet had guessed her age to be fifteen or sixteen, but now she wasn’t sure.

“I’ll tell her you said that. Where are you from?” Violet was sure she’d never seen the girl, and at this point in her life, she knew most everyone in Sugar Bend, if not by name, at least by face.

The girl didn’t answer.

“Are you here on vacation?” Violet prodded.

“Not really.” She fingered the lid of the box again.

“Trudy usually sits at that table back there to work. Those are her supplies.” Violet gestured to the shelves that held everything Trudy needed to make her sculptures: clear jars for salvaged sea glass, shells, small pieces of driftwood, and bundles of dried sea grasses; a few rolling pins she wrapped with fishing line once she untangled the snarls; and large plastic bins that held the bigger pieces of driftwood. Next to them were her tools: a spool of wire, scissors, wire cutters, a scattering of beads, and the ever-present knot of fishing line.

“Are you an artist?” The way the girl’s eyes lit up when she saw Trudy’s things made Violet wonder.

But the girl just shook her head and went back to browsing. A few minutes later, the bell at the door jingled. Violet lifted her head from where she was wiping the counter under the teakettle and saw the girl walking out, one hand stuffed in her pocket. Violet called out a good-bye, and the girl glanced back over her shoulder but her feet kept moving purposefully in the other direction.

Later, as Violet did one last walk-through of the shop before she switched off the lights and locked up, she noticed the little shell box was gone.



After dinner Violet organized her backpack while Trudy sat at the dining table, hard at work. Trudy kept the bulk of her materials at the shop, but she used a tackle box to transport home the ones she wanted to continue working on at night. That

night she'd toted home the most uncooperative materials from the morning—the dried seaweed and clunky clam shells—and she'd spread them out on the table, along with part of an old green fishing net and a length of chicken wire she'd pulled from the sand under their dock. It was a strange combination, even for Trudy, but she had a way with raw materials like that. She'd ponder and squint and move pieces around until they spoke to her and told her what they wanted to be.

At least that was how Trudy had explained it when that perky writer from *Bay Magazine* interviewed her last year. The woman acted like there was some kind of magic to it, the taking of random, broken bits and swirling them around until they became something altogether different.

Trudy had scoffed and flipped to a new page in her notepad. *I'm an old woman and I like to make things with my hands. It's a hobby, not magic.*

But it was much more than just a hobby for Trudy. Violet knew that. It was why Violet never complained when she sat in a dining chair and felt the *crunch* of a forgotten seashell underneath her. Or when Trudy lugged home a driftwood log, leaving behind a scrum of fine sand all over the heart-pine floors or the cool tile floors of the shop. Trudy and Violet both navigated life the best way they knew how—for Trudy it was working with her materials and setting the pieces just right, while for Violet it was through the birds, savoring their ease of flight, identifying their needs, helping them on their way.

Violet had just set her binoculars carefully into their protective case when she heard someone coming up the wooden steps

to the front door. A knock sounded, then Emmajeane popped her head through the doorway. “Anyone home? I come bearing champagne. It was left over from a wedding shower at the library today.”

“Someone had a wedding shower at the library?” Violet set her backpack down and met Emmajeane at the door.

“One of our patrons met her fiancé in the fiction section, and they wanted to have the shower where they fell in love. Lucky for us, they overestimated how much champagne to buy.”

Violet led her friend to the kitchen. “Surely your doctor didn’t say anything about champagne being good for the heart. I know mine didn’t.”

Emmajeane made a *psbh* motion with her hand and plunked the bottle down on the table. “A glass of bubbly now and then won’t hurt.” After making quick work of opening the bottle, Emmajeane poured three glasses—Violet placed one next to Trudy’s elbow—and the two friends made their way out to the porch overlooking the river.

Violet relaxed into her rocker, and Emmajeane took a seat at the small wooden table. They raised their glasses—“To the beauty of another day,” Emmajeane said—and sipped. Violet closed her eyes and savored the crisp citrus zing on her tongue. The bubbles made her feel like she was floating, and she suppressed the urge to giggle. She opened her eyes in surprise.

“It makes you feel young again, doesn’t it?”

Violet nodded. “Champagne wasn’t exactly a part of my younger years though. Our upbringing was a bit more humble.”

“I hear you.” Emmajeane leaned back against her seat and

propped her feet up on the chair across from her. Ten years older than Violet, Emmajeane was a beautiful woman. Her hair was a deep, cozy gray and still had the waves from her younger years, though it was much shorter now than when Violet first met her at Sugar Bend Academy nearly fifty years ago. Emmajeane had been the school secretary, Violet the middle school science teacher, and the two women became fast friends in those heady days of music, sun, and water.

Like Violet, Emmajeane had taken an early retirement when the school closed, but unable to relax quietly into her golden years, she grew antsy and took a part-time job at the public library.

“How are things going at work?” Violet asked. “Other than drinking champagne at parties.”

Emmajeane laughed. “Oh yes, it’s very exciting. Books coming and going, kids stopping up the sink in the children’s department, teenagers kissing in the back of the computer lab. Again.”

“What is it about libraries that makes people feel so affectionate?”

“Who knows—the cool air, maybe? The quiet? All I know is they should have made me a security guard instead of assistant, for as often as I have to bust up the lovebirds.”

A pontoon boat idled by on the river, music pumping from an on-board speaker. It was standing room only, with a gaggle of young women dancing to the beat and waving their slim tanned arms up in the air. Violet watched as the boat passed, its wake winking like stars in the moonlight. “Does it mean I’m

getting old if I see those girls and all I can think is how dangerous it is to be dancing on a moving boat like that?”

Emmajean chuckled. “These days every woman is trying to look younger and prettier than the gal next to her. You and I may be getting older, but at least we’re aging with dignity.”

“Is that what this is?” Violet glanced sideways at her friend.

The two women sat in comforting silence. A dove flew to the feeder hanging from the eaves, picked at a seed, then flew off again. Down by the water, the dock lights clicked on in the falling dark, throwing out wavy beams in every direction.

“I bet that river holds a lot of secrets,” Emmajean said.

Violet’s pulse throbbed in her fingertips and inside her elbows. “What makes you say that?”

Emmajean pushed her hair back off her forehead. “When I was growing up, people always talked about how pirates used to roam around here. Out in the Gulf, through the pass, and all up and down this river. Sometimes I think about what all might be at the bottom of that water. Old ships, treasure chests. Maybe jewels.”

While Emmajean stared at the river, envisioning gold coins and rubies, Violet heard the high-pitched whine of a boat motor as if it were happening right now. Saw the boat taking shape through the misty fog. Felt those fingers, rough and hard, against her neck. She absently rubbed her thumb across the scar on her wrist.

“Violet?”

Emmajean’s voice cut through the memories, and Violet fought her way back to the present. “Hmm?”

Emmajean's eyes were soft, concerned. "I asked if you think there's any treasure in the river."

Violet drained the remaining champagne in her glass, her lips puckering at the now-flat effervescence. "I think anything buried in that water deserves to stay right where it is."



That night, Violet had the dream again. She was on the dock, waiting. Anger simmered inside her like a soup pot left on a hot eye. She was no stranger to anger, but this was something altogether different. This sensation had shape, taste, heat. And her guilt was a bitter root through it all.

*At least she's safe.* The bruises might have been shining even in the dim lamplight, the edges already beginning to darken, but inside the house, all was safe. Violet would make sure of that.

With shaking fingers she caressed the simple gold bracelet around her wrist, the delicate lines engraved on it. She lifted her chin to face the dark sky, hidden behind thick fog, and thought of the man who'd given it to her. He was so kind, so good. He had no idea the volume of hatred that lived inside her right this minute.

She ran her fingers around the edge of the bracelet over and over like a prayer, until the tinny drone of an outboard Evinrude made its way up the river toward the dock where she stood. Her heartbeat thudded again in her ears, and she clasped her hands together to stop the nervous tremors.

Then with a *whoosh* of air in her face, like a great flap of

wings, Violet awoke in a tangle of damp bedsheets. She flung them back and nearly gasped with relief when the breeze from the ceiling fan hit her legs. She lay there a moment, then rose and opened the window an inch and returned to bed.

Nighttime noises had always been a comfort to her—light winds rattling the palm fronds, tree frogs serenading each other, the soft pulse of crickets—but tonight the sounds didn't soothe her as they usually did. Something bubbled deep inside her that had nothing to do with the champagne she'd sipped with Emmajean and everything to do with her friend's casual mention of the river's secrets.

With her eyes clamped shut in an attempt to entice slumber to visit, and hopefully more peaceful sleep this time, the whine of the boat motor started up again, the memory as real as life. It was as if he were still there on the river, still making his way toward her. Toward both of them. And she knew then she was still fighting him. Maybe she always would be.

*The Sugar Bend Observer*, Sugar Bend's Community News Source

Letter from the Editor, Liza Bullock

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This week I had the privilege of attending a birthday gathering at the Home under the Oaks for Sugar Bend's oldest resident. Mrs. Myrna Blaylock turned 102 on Monday, though to look at her, you wouldn't think she's a day over 80.

A PLACE TO LAND

With a glow in her cheeks and perfectly coiffed hair (styled at Cuts and Coffee every Wednesday at noon, thank you very much), she was the best-looking gal under the oaks by far.

I wrote this week's neighbor profile on Mrs. Blaylock, and you can find the feature on 2B. Prior to writing the feature, I corresponded with her grandson to get some background information on his grandmother. In an email he wrote that his grandmother has always loved animals and the wild life. Upon first reading it I assumed he meant "wild-life." However, after seeing the way Mrs. Blaylock hopped out of her chair and danced a foxtrot with one of the men at the party, I'm having second thoughts!

Summer is here and the possibilities are endless. Rest assured, if anything "wild" happens in Sugar Bend, we'll make sure to include it here in your monthly *Observer*.

Enjoy the issue!

Liza