

Section 8: Snook Haven

Soon Lu hears the rumble of traffic on the bridges for Interstate 75. To escape the noise, she swims under the water.

Branches, leaves and other debris pile up against the bridge piers. She twists and turns through the maze. She holds her breath a long time to swim under the bridges. When she rises to the surface, she breathes deeply and paddles to keep herself safe in the current.

Where the river curves, she can see buildings. Under oak trees, two men stand on a deck filled with picnic tables. Mosquitoes and gnats fly in a cloud around their heads. Water covers the feet of their rubber boots as they lean against the railing. Lu hears them talking.

"I don't know how much more the river will rise," the first man says.

"If it's no more than this, you'll be okay," the second man says.

The first man slaps a mosquito on his arm. "It'll be a mess to clean up."

Above Lu, nighthawks dip and soar.

The second man fans the bugs away from his face. "I'll bet it's not the first time Snook Haven has seen a flood."

"You're right about that. It was here for more than half a century before Sarasota County bought it. People came here to fish and stay in the cabins. Others rented canoes or boats or took the boat tour to see the river."

The second man points to the river. "What's that?"

The first man says, "Fire ants! Stay away! When their nests are flooded, they gather into a ball and float on a branch or something. They'll latch onto anything they bump up against — even people."

Lu watches a nighthawk swoop to eat a mosquito.

The second man watches the ants float downstream. "I heard two movies were filmed here."

"That's right. The most famous one was a Tarzan movie that featured killer turtles. Some of the monkeys that escaped still live around here. Most people see them across there."

The first man points across the river.

The second man points at Lu.

"Hey, there's one in the river!"

The first man chuckles. He says, "That's not a monkey. That's a river otter."

Section 9: Jelks Preserve

Downstream in Jelks Preserve, Lu rests on a picnic table near the river. Water flows beneath. In an oak tree above, two squirrels chase along a branch. In another tree, a mockingbird sings. First it trills like a meadowlark. Then it chirps like a wren.

She hears some splashing and footsteps. Then she watches two women wearing raincoats and boots walk along the path, which is as wide as a road. A pileated

woodpecker swoops in front of them as they stop at the water's edge.

"I can't believe how high the river is," the first woman says.

"Remember when we came here a few weeks ago? We saw a gopher tortoise on the trail and a rabbit was eating grass over there." The second woman points to the table where Lu is. The woman doesn't see Lu because the otter's brown fur blends with the wet wood.

"It was a lovely evening, as I recall. The river didn't seem to move. It reflected everything, like a mirror."

"At least until those boats came speeding by," the second woman says.

"That's right! And as the waves washed in, I could see some freshwater mussels. But the clam shells surprised me."

Two doves land on the picnic table. They peck at the leaves, twigs and acorn shells. Lu watches.

The first woman says, "They call this part of the river 'Coastal Lower Myakka' because the harbor's salt water mixes with the river's fresh water."

The second woman says, "But the river flows into the harbor in Charlotte County. It seems a long way from where we are in Sarasota County."

"And lucky for us. This 600-acre preserve is a Sarasota County park, thanks to Dr. Mary Jelks. To buy the land, she gave money and asked others to donate. She even convinced the county to help."

Lu lunges toward the doves. They flutter away with soft noises, and she slides into the river.

