

# SNOOK WALLOW

By Janet Heijens

## Prologue

As the band played a Buffett song under a palm-thatched hut, Logan concentrated on the girl. Thong straps, pale pink against brown skin, arched over broad hips before disappearing under denim shorts leaving little to the imagination. Her halter-top, damp with sweat, clung to her body. When she leaned over and shouted her order to the bartender, Logan noticed the tattoo on her shoulder blade, a pair of folded wings. The girl turned, rested her elbows against the bar, and wiggled her hips to the beat of the music. Logan's gaze lingered on the rise of her breasts before dropping to the silver ring in her navel.

The bartender interrupted Logan's fantasy by slamming two wet bottles of beer on the bar. The girl twisted around, pressed money into the man's palm and waved away the change. Picking up the drinks she mouthed *thanks* with a smile worth ten times the tip.

Logan caught his friend, Boyd Skinner staring as the girl disappeared in the crowd.

"Hands off," Logan said. "She's mine." He glanced back, but she was gone.

"Never gonna happen," Boyd said with a grin. "Take a lesson from Ty here. *He* knows his limits. I'm not saying you should settle for the hookers in the fish camp, but—"

"Speak for yourself." Tyler Fox flipped Boyd the finger. He turned to Logan and slapped his back. "Don't pay no attention to Boyd. I say go get her."

"I just might do that." Logan lifted his empty bottle and peered through the brown glass. Feeling a little dizzy he glanced in the direction where the girl had wandered off.

The sandy clearing serving as Snook Wallow's dance floor was packed with sweaty bodies pressed tight against each other. The dancers joined in the chorus, drowning out the band. Logan figured the girl was down there somewhere.

"Can't believe the boss had us doing roof work in this heat." Boyd continued to scan the crowd.

"You spent the whole day sitting in the shade, guzzling Gatorade." Ty was shouting over the noise.

Logan smiled, a wave of drunken affection for his friends washing over him. He looked across the clearing toward the flat-roofed building that housed the rest rooms and tapped Ty on the shoulder. “Gotta take a leak,” he said.

“Right, a leak.” Ty gave him a knowing nod. “You ready for another round?”

Logan reached into his pocket and pulled out a few crumpled dollar bills. He tried to figure out where all his money went. The first three beers went down cold and fast, his body absorbing the fluid in minutes. Egged on by his friends, he chased the next one—maybe two—with vodka shooters.

“I’m almost tapped out,” Logan said.

“I’ll get this one.” Boyd drained the last few drops from his own bottle and waved the bartender over.

“Get me an order of hot wings while you’re at it.” Logan passed him the six singles. “I’ll be right back. Maybe.”

Logan missed the first step, grabbing the railing just in time to keep from falling off the deck. As he pushed through the crowd he kept his eyes open, looking for the girl. The pressure on his bladder got worse with every step. When he arrived at the bathrooms and saw there was a line, Logan stumbled a few yards down the old mule path that ran along the river. As soon as he stepped beyond the cone of light cast down from the lamppost, the night closed in. He turned off the path using one hand to ward off the low hanging branches. With the other he lowered his zipper. The ground sloped downward and he slipped on the mud, skidding down the bank. Once he found his footing, he did what he had to do and with a sigh of relief, turned to make his way back to his friends. Hit with a wave of dizziness, he reached out to steady himself against a mossy oak. He pressed his face against the cool, damp bark and closed his eyes. The faint strands of “Margaritaville” drifted through the trees.

The smell of rotting leaves filled Logan’s nose as he slowly came to. He remembered leaving the deck, the long line at the toilets, stepping off the path and then . . . nothing. Logan raised his hand to check the illuminated dial of his watch. Rolling onto his back, he looked up to the sky wondering how he lost more than two hours. There was a half-moon up there somewhere but all he could see was the occasional flicker of distant lightning behind dark clouds. With a moan, he closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. The only sound to reach him was the singing of

frogs. By now Ty and Boyd were probably long gone. It was time for him to find his way to the parking lot, mount his Harley and get out of there.

Back on the mule path something caught his eye. He blinked to make sure he did not imagine it. There it was again, a light coming from one of the derelict buildings down the path. The cabins were the oldest structures on the property, built when Snook Wallow was nothing more than a fish camp. The only people to use them now were the prostitutes Boyd was so fond of, or the occasional junkie looking to score from one of the pimps that stayed in the shadows. As Logan watched, the light winked and died, leaving him to wonder who was down there. Knowing only that he wanted to avoid whoever it was, he turned and started back to the main building.

With his first step he tripped and fell, landing in something wet. “What the . . .” He pushed himself to his knees and wiped his hands on his jeans.

The clouds chose that moment to part, the white glow of the moon lighting the ground around him. He looked down and drew in a sharp breath.

“Hey, what are you doing here?”

His eyes fixed on the tattoo. The girl from the bar lay on her stomach, her head turned toward him, her hair a curtain of black silk covering her face. Except for the sandals on her feet she was naked, the sheen of her skin beautiful in the moonlight. Placing a hand over her tattoo, Logan tried to wake her.

“Wake up.” He gave her a gentle shake and glanced around. A minute ago, he hoped to avoid whoever was back there. Now he wished someone would show up and give him a hand. “Come on,” he said, shaking her harder.

Fighting a rising panic, he tried to turn her over. She was heavier than he expected but somehow, he managed to roll her onto her back. Her head lolled to one side, her arm flopped against her limp body. His gaze rested on the ring in her belly. A few inches higher he saw the knife.

Logan knew that she was dead but his instincts told him to get that thing out of her. He gripped the handle and pulled. The knife came free with a slurping noise.

Standing on trembling legs he called out. “Is anybody out there?”

He listened for a reply, the sound of footsteps on the path, anything. The knife fell with a soft thud on the bed of damp leaves. Then the silence was complete. Even the frogs had stopped singing.