

Frog Head Key

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By Eric Douglas



Chapter 2

“Jackson, man, this is a really nice boat,” Jake said from the dock, looking out across the water. He was the other boat captain at the dive shop. Jake was good with the tourists and always brought in big tips, but he was a little too cocky for Jackson’s taste.

“My houseboat?” Jackson asked. “Thanks man, but it hasn’t even been out of the dock in years. It isn’t all that much of a boat.”

“What? That heap? No. I mean this one,” Jake said, pointing at Jackson’s pride and joy. *Daydreamer*; a 28-foot Boston Whaler Outrage with twin 250 horsepower Yamaha four-stroke engines. “This thing is sharp.”

“Thanks,” Jackson replied with a shake of his head. He knew what Jake had been talking about, but his reaction just reinforced to Jackson that the kid had a lot to learn. He hoped to promote him and give him more responsibility, but he knew the younger man needed to learn to filter his thoughts and control his impulses before that would happen. “Where’s Bo? We need to go.”

Jackson kept his *Daydreamer* fueled up and ready to run. He always kept a couple full scuba tanks on board as well—he never knew when he might get a chance to get in the water. Jackson had invited the two captains and another promising diver from the shop to take a look at Bo’s algae bloom at Frog Head Key.

“No clue,” Jake replied. “You’re right, though, we need to go. Let’s get out of here.”

“You’re not going anywhere with out me, are you?” Bo said as he walked down the ramp to the dock, his long blond hair stuffed up underneath the Marshall University ball cap he never took off. “Sorry, I’m late boys. Just had to let my dog out.”

Where Jake was competitive, Bo was laid back and rarely got upset about anything. To think his casual attitude made him any less intelligent would be a bad guess.

“Are you guys going to get it in gear,” came a new voice—a female. Kia Swanson was the newest divemaster at the shop, but Jackson saw in her a balance between the two men in front of him. She had been below deck in the cutty cabin when the men arrived, stowing gear.

Jackson asked her to come along because the way she handled the tourists, he knew she was a leader. Most of the visiting divers were men so it didn’t hurt that she looked great in a

bikini, either. But even the ones who started out looking at her body quickly realized she knew what she was talking about. At 5' 10" with long brown hair, she was striking. She was deeply tanned, but never wore any makeup that Jackson could see and spent very little time worrying about her hair, simply making sure it was out of the way when she went in the water.

"The lady's right guys," Jackson said, grinning, as the two younger men stood open-mouthed. "Get on board and let's get out of here. Kia and I've been waiting on you."

Without another word, the two boat captains jumped on board. They had both expected to be in charge, but had been upstaged by Kia. Neither wanted that to happen again. Jackson quickly got *Daydreamer* moving out of the marina and got the boat on plane.

"Hey Jackson," Jake shouted over the noise of the outboard motors. "You're a little off course. Look at your GPS, man. Frog Head Key is over there."

"I can read, Jake. I want to see how far out Bo's algae bloom goes. The current is moving to the east so I want to circle around and track it in from the end. We need to see how big of a problem we're dealing with," Jackson replied, never taking his hand off the wheel or his eyes off the water in front of him.

Nearly 40, Jackson had worked as a firefighter in New York City up until September 11. Afterward, he decided to take a pension from the department and get away. He found the most remote island he could, without leaving the continental US, and bought a house boat. He settled in and hoped to work occasionally for a dive shop. His plans didn't end up going exactly as he had scripted them in his mind as he drove south for that last time. His experience and authority quickly earned him the respect of the other divers and the owner of the shop. Before long, he was in charge and not diving nearly as much as he would've liked. On the other hand, he was having fun and he knew he would be bored by now if it weren't for this opportunity. He was often asked

why he didn't own the shop, or open one of his own. He always answered that he would have to be crazy to own a dive shop.

"All right, boss. Time to back off a bit. We aren't too far from where I saw the water starting to cloud up this morning," Bo said, raising his hand to signal Jackson to slow down. Jake, Bo and Kia all moved to the sides to look into the water.

"There it is," Kia called out, pointing at the water. "It goes on past us, though. This is really spreading out from what you said you saw."

"Yeah, it is. It's a lot further out than I expected it. But it seems to be thinning out, too. It seems to be riding the current. How far are we from Frog Head Key?" Bo asked.

"About a mile," Jackson said. He was skirting the edge of the bloom. To him it appeared to be more like a muddy stream mixing into clear water than an algae bloom. "I'm going to stay clear of this stuff, but let's try to follow it backward. I've got a bad feeling about this."

Jackson guided *Daydreamer* slowly against the current. He wanted to stay clear of the turbid water, but didn't want to get too far away. He quickly realized that, instead of coming around the small island, the bloom seemed to be coming right from it. About 100 yards from the rocky shore, the bloom stopped and the water turned clear.

"Ok, now I'm really confused," Kia said first. "What's going on here?"

"I can see it coming up from the bottom. It is rising straight up," Jake said, pointing down.

"I want to get underwater and see if I can figure this out," Jackson said looking at the three divers. Bo, you and Jake stay here. Take care of my boat. Kia, come with me. Get into your gear and let's get underwater," Jackson said.

"Why does she get to go with you?" Jake protested immediately.

“Yeah, why are you taking Kia. I discovered this mess. I should be the one who figures it out,” Bo agreed.

“Simple. She was on time and ready to go. She brought her gear and helped out,” Jackson said. “And even simpler. I said so and it’s my boat. Now you too can either watch my boat while we make this dive, or you can swim back. Your choice.”

Without another word, Jackson walked toward the stern where Kia was making a last check of her gear. The water was warm and clear so neither diver bothered with a wetsuit. They pulled on their fins and masks, strapped their BCs in place and prepared to back roll into the water.

“I don’t plan on messing around too long down there. Let’s just drop down and see what we can see. I have a jar with me so we can take a water sample if we see something,” Jackson said to Kia. “It’s about 60 feet to the bottom so we can just drop straight down and look around.”

Then he turned to the two boat captains. “Guys, don’t bother dropping anchor. Just keep it in place around here. We won’t be long. Keep an eye out for our bubbles and when we start to ascend, come back and get us, OK?”

“You ready?” Jackson said, turning back to Kia. She simply smiled, put her regulator into her mouth and fell backward into the water.

