

# Frog Head Key

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By Eric Douglas



## Chapter 6

“So what do we do now?” Kia whispered to Jackson as they clung to a dock piling in the shadows.

“Swim over toward the bank there and let’s climb out. Be quiet. It’s time to go look around,” Jackson answered.

“Do you think the people who hurt the guys are here?” Kia asked as they side stroked for the water’s edge.

“I don’t know. Maybe. But I don’t want to take any chances,” Jackson answered. “I just want to see if we can get some idea of what’s going on.”

Kia only nodded in response. They climbed out of the water onto a mangrove tree with its roots hanging down into the water.

“It looks like the only way through these trees is up that path. It’ll lead where we want to go anyway, so we may as well follow it, but stay to the sides of the path and keep low. It won’t help us to get caught strolling down the middle of the path,” Jackson said.

Together they crept down the path, stopping regularly to listen as they moved forward.

“I haven’t seen anything so far,” Kia whispered. “How do we know the guys even made it out here?”

“Maybe they didn’t. That’s the reason we didn’t just report this place to the sheriff immediately. Can’t go sending those guys on a wild goose chase,” Jackson said under his breath. “I wanted to see if we could find something to let us know why the guys got beaten up and Jake got killed.”

“Oh, Jackson, look,” Kia said, pointing at the ground at the foot of a mangrove tree.

“That pretty much clinches it,” Jackson said. “Can’t imagine there are two of those around here.” He bent down and picked up the baseball cap with the big green M on the front. It was Bo’s Marshall University hat. A proud alum, he never took it off. He had to have made it to the island.

“So what do we do now?” Kia asked.

“Let’s go on a bit further and see if we can find out what was worth killing for,” Jackson said and he began moving. As the path wound downward, Jackson and Kia came around a small bend in the trail and Jackson signaled to her to stop and get down.

In front of them was a clearing and the reason for the secrecy. Around the edges of the clearing were tents and tarps covering tables. There were glass jugs of every description on several of the tables. In the middle of the clearing were the metal structures Jake saw the night before. But where Jake didn't have a clue what the men were doing, Jackson recognized them instantly. Fortunately, Jackson realized, he didn't see anyone stirring that morning either.

"These guys are making moonshine," he said under his breath. "That's the last thing I would've guessed."

"What is it? What are those things?" Kia asked. "I've never seen anything like them before."

"Those are stills," Jackson said. "They put the fermented mash in the bottom of the big kettles and boil off the alcohol. It rises up into the tower and then condenses down that coiled tube."

"You're kidding. That's amazing!" Kia, said, almost laughing until she remembered where they were.

"Nope, these guys are making moonshine," Jackson said. "I saw a couple smaller ones back in New York working on the fire department. Usually someone would set it up in an apartment or a basement and would catch themselves on fire."

"So, is that what I think it is over there?" Kia asked. "It looks like a clean room, almost."

Jackson looked at where she was pointing. He saw another set of tables, but these were shrouded in thick plastic. He could just see the stove and other equipment behind the plastic.

"Unfortunately, I used to see that from time to time, too," Jackson said. "It's a meth lab. They're making methamphetamines."

"Damn, I hate that stuff. I saw too many kids messed up on it," Kia said a bit too loudly.

Suddenly, Jackson saw a man come out of one of the tents. The way he was looking around, Jackson knew he heard something.

“We need to get out of here,” Jackson said quietly. “Don’t say anything, just move backward slowly and let’s get back down the trail quietly.”

“Who’s out there?” the man in the clearing shouted. It was Tommy.

“What’re you yelling about?” Billy asked, stumbling out into the clearing as well, rubbing his eyes.

“I thought I heard voices out here,” Tommy explained.

“You’re just dreaming about last night,” Billy said, smacking his friend on the shoulder. “Let it go.”

“No, I don’t think I can ever forget about last night,” Tommy said, “but I heard voices and one of them sounded like a woman.”

“Well, there is only one way on and off this island, so go look around,” Billy said. “Take the short cut down to the boat house and see if there is another boat down there anywhere. If someone is out here, you’ll get there before they do.”

“You’re right. Good idea,” Tommy said as he picked up his baseball bat and took off jogging for the side trail that led straight to the back of the boat house. The men had cut it through the mangroves after getting their operation established. Jackson and Kia hadn’t seen it since they hadn’t gone through the boat house itself.

Jackson and Kia had started out moving away quietly, but as they got farther away from the clearing they began moving faster. By the time they got back to the water’s edge, they were both moving at a dead run. They knew in their minds that the men behind them had killed Jake and nearly killed Bo.

So, it came as a bigger surprise to both of them, and to Tommy, when Jackson and Kia came around the final bend in the trail. They ran headlong into the moonshiner as he stood at the water's edge facing away from the trail, confused that there was no sign of anyone else on the island.

“What the hell?” Tommy yelled as he splashed face-first into the water.

Jackson was able to react faster than Tommy or Kia. He grabbed her by the waist and ran back to the trail, then into the mangrove.

“Who are you? What's going on?” Tommy yelled. He was whirling around, but never saw what, or who, hit him. “Come back here. It's Ok. I won't hurt you. I just want to talk.”

“What do we do now?” Kia whispered to Jackson as they hid in the thick trees, watching Tommy.

“I don't know,” Jackson answered. “Let's just hold on and see what he does.” He knew in the back of his head that they were in trouble. Littlebear wasn't that far away, but his friend didn't know they were in trouble or needed help. They were going to have to face Tommy to get to the water and back to their dive gear. The only other option was climbing across the thick mangroves and making their way to the water directly. If the men had guns, that way out could get deadly fast. They would have to swim across the surface of the open water to get to Littlebear and the boat.

“Let's just sit tight a minute,” Jackson said. “We'll see if something comes up.”

“Something just did,” Billy said from behind Jackson and Kia. “Get your hands up and start moving.”

Jackson and Kia froze, but then realized they were caught. There wasn't going to be any way out of this one.