

Frog Head Key

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By Eric Douglas



Chapter 9

Jackson walked out of his boat house with a limp, but he was moving as quickly as he could. He wanted to catch the men who had killed a friend, hurt another one and had nearly killed him too. Kia had insisted on finishing up the bandage on his leg before he left.

“Kia, you’re staying here on this one,” Jackson said, taking her by the arm, gently.

“Bullshit, Jackson! I’m going,” she said.

“Listen. You were great out there today, but you’re not a cop any more,” he said. “I’ve been deputized by the sheriff. But I can’t risk you out there, too.”

“Damn. All right, but I don’t like it” Kia said, but she was smiling at him. “You come back, all right?”

“You got it,” Jackson said, relief crossing his face. He leaned forward to give Kia a hug, but she took his face in her hands and kissed him.

“That was for good luck. Now get out of here and get those assholes!” she said as she stepped back.

“Are the sheriff’s boats ready yet?” Jackson said to Littlebear as he climbed into *Daydreamer* and fired up the still warm outboard engines.

“They’ll be here in two minutes,” Littlebear said, while securing his pump shotgun into a fishing rod holder and pulling out his badge.

“Are you officially working on this one?” Jackson asked with surprise.

“Yeah, it turns out these guys have been selling their moonshine onto the reservation some, so I get to play,” Littlebear explained. “You’re not going to believe what else.”

“Are you actually going to make me ask?” Jackson said as he left the marina and brought *Daydreamer* up on plane.

“They’ve been mixing the meth into the moonshine,” Littlebear said. “We’ve been pulling kids down out of the trees, literally a couple times, because of this crap. I’ll be so happy to get these assholes behind bars.”

“You and me both, brother. You and me both,” Jackson agreed. “Hey, there are the sheriff’s boats. Get them on the radio and tell them to follow us. I’m going in as fast as I can.”

“Hey Snake,” Tommy asked as he brought the last of the boxes of moonshine down to what was still standing of the dock to load onto the boat. “Where are Billy and I going to sit? You’ve got the whole thing full of this stuff.”

“Who said you’re going to go with me?” Snake asked, as he pulled a Glock 9 mm from his pocket.

“You can’t leave us here, you son-of-a-bitch,” Billy yelled. He began to charge forward at Snake, but he stopped short when Snake pointed the gun at his midsection. “The cops are going to come and we’ll tell them everything we know about you. You’ll be done for. You’ll never get away!”

“I don’t remember saying I was going to leave you here alive, either,” Snake said quietly.

“Oh, man, Snake. You can’t do that. Come on. Billy was kiddin’ man. We won’t tell anyone where you went,” Tommy said. “This ain’t right, man.”

“Tommy, just shut up. What’s that noise?” Snake said, looking around.

“Sounds like a boat to me,” Billy said. “It’s probably the cops now.”

“He’s runnin’ wide open, too,” Tommy said. “Too fast to be coming in here.”

“All right, boys, time to say goodbye,” Snake said, leveling the gun at Billy.

“Oh shit!” Tommy yelled as he turned and ran, but not from Snake. He was running from what he saw on the water. It was the bow of a 29-foot Boston Whaler entering the small inlet on the island and at better than 30 miles an hour.

At the last second, Jackson jerked *Daydreamer*’s port outboard into reverse, but kept the starboard engine running forward at full speed. He spun the wheel to port as hard as he could.

The direction change and the reversing of the port engine caused the boat to complete a near-perfect J-turn. Jackson was able to stop their forward momentum, mostly, but the boat and the wave the maneuver created crashed into the weakened dock, knocking Jackson and Littlebear down onto the deck. Tommy and Billy were both thrown into the water as the structure collapsed. Snake hung onto a piling and then dived into his boat.

Snake grabbed the boat keys and started his boat, an old Dusky runabout with twin Evinrude engines. Before Jackson and Littlebear could recover from their entrance, Snake shot back out of the inlet and took off across the water, splitting the two patrol boats that were following Jackson in.

“That one’s getting away,” Jackson yelled as he regained control and accelerated back out of the inlet in fast pursuit. “Get on the radio. Tell the sheriff’s boats to come in here and get those two guys in the water. We’ll chase the one in the boat down.”

Daydreamer’s twin outboards roared as Jackson pushed the throttles to their stops and the propellers dug into the water. Snake had only a few seconds’ lead on them, but it was enough for him to open the gap and move out of their sight line, angling his own boat around the smaller island facing Frog Head Key. Jackson couldn’t be sure which way the other man had headed until a couple minutes later when he saw Snake break into the clear. He had misjudged the other man’s intentions. Jackson had the faster boat, but he knew he was going to have to work hard to catch up.

“Littlebear! Can you get that helicopter out here? I don’t want this bastard to get away!” Jackson yelled.

“Already on it,” Littlebear replied, his voice barely reflecting the excitement of the chase. “Do you have any weapons on this boat?”

“Not really, why?” Jackson asked.

“I’ve got this shotgun and my service auto, but nothing else. I was just taking stock of what we had on board, in case something came up,” Littlebear explained while he held on.

“There’s a flare gun and a spear gun, but neither one is going to help you much at this distance,” Jackson answered. “What kind of shot do you have in the shotgun?”

“Not shot, slugs,” Littlebear said. “They’re better for stopping cars.”

“Makes sense. You think you can hit one of the boat engines and slow this guy down a bit? We’re gaining on him, but not fast enough.”

“I can give it a try, but it’s going to be tough,” Littlebear asked as he moved forward to line up for the shot.

“If you don’t think you can, don’t try,” Jackson answered.

“Nah, I’ll give it a shot, but still pretty long odds,” the Seminole said as he moved into firing position.

“I’ll get you as close as I can,” Jackson said, angling to starboard to give his friend a clearer shot from the port side.

Littlebear began to judge the bumps of the water. He supported the rocking of the shotgun’s barrel as they sped along, using his body to isolate the gun from the vibrations and jarring of the boat. Suddenly, the gun recoiled and Jackson felt the blast as Littlebear fired at the speeding boat.

“Did you hit anything?” Jackson asked.

“Looks like I hit one of those boxes in the back, but not one of his engines or anything else important,” Littlebear said.

“Look up ahead,” Jackson said. “He’s probably going to try to angle around this small island coming up and put some more distance between us. Try to stop him before he gets there.”

Littlebear never looked up. He continued following the boat using the shotgun’s sights. When he lined it all back up, the shotgun belched out another shell with a deafening roar. And then another.

“I think you hit an engine that last time,” Jackson said. “His port engine is smoking pretty bad, but he’s gotten around the side of that island. I’ll go in close to the island to see if I can catch up with him.”

Jackson slowed down, trying to see where Snake went after taking the hit. He lost sight of Snake as he moved in close to the island, but that couldn’t be helped. Jackson wanted to be able to react when the man took off in a new direction. If Jackson were too far out when Snake made his break, then he could be completely out of position.

Jackson and Littlebear were both quiet as they scanned the water, looking for signs of the boat.

“Where did he go? Where’s the helicopter?” Jackson asked, finally.

“I don’t see him. The helicopter will be here in a second,” Littlebear said.

“Do you think he managed to find a hiding spot on this little rock of an island?” Jackson asked, pointing back over his shoulder.

“Don’t know. Could’ve, I guess. We lost sight of him for a few minutes. He could’ve slipped into a little break somewhere and be laying low,” Littlebear said. “But he’s got to know he can’t hide there for long.”

“Let’s turn around and check out the island this time. I’ll move in a little closer as well,” Jackson said.

The small spit of land beside them moved by slowly as Jackson had eased the throttles off to barely more than an idle. The two men scanned the mangrove trees and shrub brush on the island, looking for any sign of the missing boat.

“*Daydreamer, Daydreamer*. This is Hawkeye 1,” the helicopter called out over the radio. “We have a visual on the boat. He is off your three o’clock and accelerating.”

Both Jackson and Littlebear turned in time to see Snake gunning his one good engine and ripping out from between mangrove trees on the island. He was heading straight for *Daydreamer*. Thanks to the warning from the helicopter, Jackson was able to accelerate just in time to avoid a direct blow to *Daydreamer*’s side. He wasn’t fast enough to avoid all the damage, though. Snake’s bow ripped into the twin Mercury’s and ripped one out of its mounts before he bounced off to the side himself.

In the collision, Littlebear lost the shotgun and was nearly thrown overboard. He hit his head on the side railing and was knocked unconscious. Jackson was thrown forward then backward. His weak leg wouldn’t hold up under the thrashing and he fell on his back in the stern of the boat.

“I don’t know who you are, but you’re finished now,” Snake yelled out. “I’m going to send you straight to hell!”

Disoriented for a moment, Jackson looked under the seat and saw the flare gun. He heard the unmistakable crack of a gunshot as Snake shot at them. Without thinking, he unsnapped the case and pulled the gun out. He loaded a flare into the tube and sat up.

Hoping to scare Snake long enough for the helicopter to get involved, Jackson fired the flare at the boat before collapsing back to the deck. The incendiary began sparking halfway

there. The gun wasn't designed for aiming or accuracy. So, Jackson wasn't surprised when he heard Snake shout.

“Ha, is that all you got? You missed me!” Snake yelled. “I'm going to kill you! What the? Oh shit...”

The last words from Snake came out as a scream. Jackson rose up to see what was happening and saw flames leap from the deck of the boat and up the stack of boxes. The sparks from the flare had ignited the leaking moonshine from one of Littlebear's slugs. A moment later, the entire boat exploded. The moonshine went up like a brilliant torch, sending a cloud of smoke into the air that caused the helicopter to dodge.

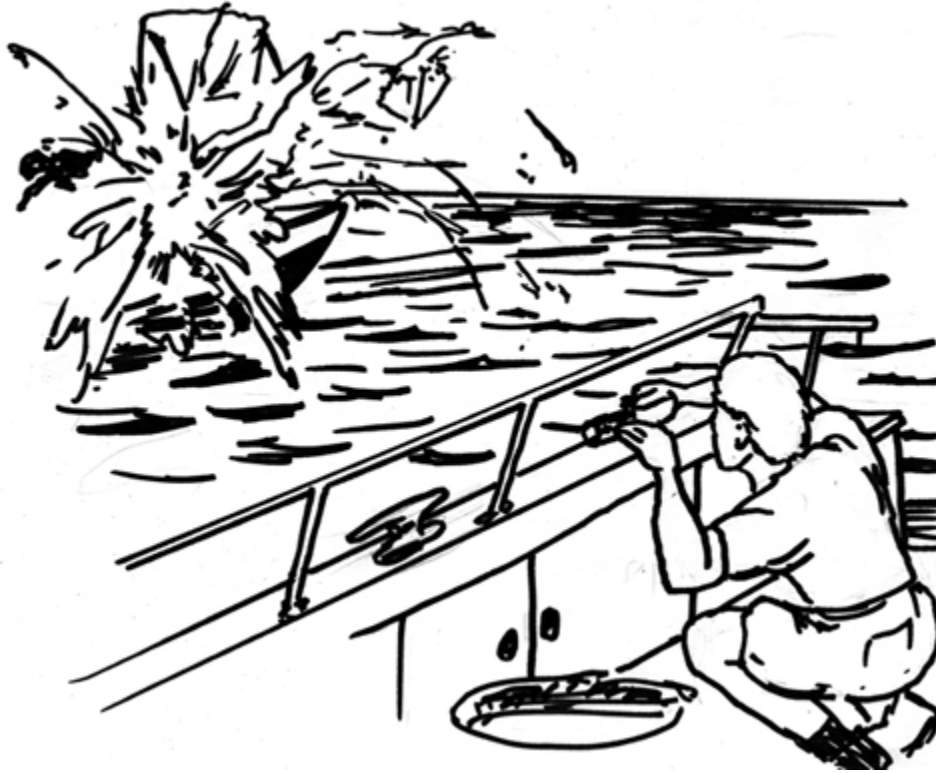
Jackson could feel the heat from the blast, but he crawled forward to check on Littlebear.

“You OK, man?” Jackson asked.

“I guess you sent him to hell, not the other way around,” Littlebear said with a laugh.

“I guess that means you're OK.”

“Yeah...I'm OK,” Littlebear answered.



Epilogue

It only took a few days for everything to shake out with the moonshine/drug ring and for things to settle back down. About a week later, Bo was able to leave the hospital. Jackson and Kia, along with most of the staff had visited him regularly. Still, the first thing he did when he got out of the hospital was go straight to the dive shop. He wanted everyone to know he was all right.

“Well, there he is,” Jackson said, looking up from his desk. He stood to greet his young friend. “Good to see you up and moving around. How you doin?”

“Still got a lot to figure out, and I’ve sure felt better, but I think I’m going to make it,” Bo said.

“You take your time. Your job will be here when you are ready for it,” Jackson said.

“No rush, though.”

Just then, Kia and the rest of the staff came in after a charter. They quickly surrounded Bo and nearly overwhelmed him with handshakes and hugs. It took 10 minutes for things to settle back down.

“Boss, thanks for what you said about my job. I appreciate that. But are you sure? I know the owners get on your case for things like that. If you need to bring in another captain, I understand,” Bo said.

“Don’t worry about the owners,” Jackson said. “A few things have changed around here all the sudden.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it just so happens that the owners were actually tied up in the moonshine ring. They owned a couple bars and that was how they were distributing the moonshine and drugs. Of course the two guys they caught told everything they knew pretty quickly and the owners are headed off to jail,” Jackson explained. “They needed some fast cash so they sold the business to me.”

“You’re kidding! You always said there was no way you would ever own a place like this,” Bo said, laughing.

“You’re right, but I guess a lot has changed since then,” Jackson said with a laugh and a wink.