

The Jake Eliam ChickenBone Mystery Series

CHICKENBONE EXCERPTS

Rabbit Shine

I pulled into the first place I saw that looked like a mechanic. It was a faded blue concrete building, surrounded by stacks of old tires, and a hand-painted sign over the door that said *JUNE BUG'S TIRES*. Maybe they would know a mechanic around here. I pulled to a stop, steam rolled out from under the hood.

My headlights landed on an older black man, wearing smut-covered overalls, sitting on a grease bucket eating fried chicken from a box with his weathered hands. I got out and went over to him.

"You June Bug?" I asked.

"That's what the signs says, don't it?" he said.

"I don't need tires, but I was wondering..."

"Water pump," he cut me off.

"Yeah," I said. "Can you help out?"

"Gotta finish my chicken first," he said and pulled out another drumstick.

June Bug told me that he had closed for the day but would take a look anyhow and see what he could do. I agreed and asked him if there was a place nearby that I could get something to eat while I waited.

"Chicken place done closed," he said. "Next best place is 'bout a mile away, 3 PIGS up that way," he pointed up the street. "Best damn barbecue in ChickenBone."

"ChickenBone?"

"That's where you are, young buck," he said. "Good living, but hard living."

"I'll walk up there while you take a look."

"You toting?"

"Toting?"

"Carrying," he said as he worked on the drumstick.

"Carrying what?"

"What the hell you think, big man? A gun."

"No, I don't have a gun."

"Then, fellow look like you don't wanna be walking up this street in the dark."

I went around to the back of the Jeep, took a 34-inch blonde-and-brown bat out of my equipment bag, gave my keys to June Bug and said I would be back a little later.

"You one crazy-ass white boy," he said as he shook his head and went back to working on his chicken.

Make a note: A man who eats his dinner with his hands while sitting on a grease bucket will always treat you right.

Hoochy Koochy

The door swung open with a bang. We both jumped. Sweet Thang was holding the huge pot in both hands.

“Ain’t gone lie, got no sweet tater pie, all we got is stew, but it gotta do,” he sang out loudly. “Bless this meat, let’s eat.” The screen door slammed behind him.

One hour and two episodes of *Hogan’s Heroes* later, we had nearly finished off the whole pot of Mulligans Stew

“Where did you learn to cook like this?” JD asked Sweet Thang.

“Ain’t no cooking,” he said. “You just kill it, skin it, boil it, and eat it. Take a lot, throw it all in a pot.”

Make a note: When you eat with Sweet Thang, always check the meat for a pulse.

“Since you boys dug such a fine snake pit,” he said, as he popped up out of his chair, “you deserve some homemade dessert.”

He disappeared into the kitchen and came back a minute or so later with three red plastic cups and a jar of clear liquid. He sat them down on one of the little tables.

“Moonshine?” I said, “For dessert?”

“Grade A, certified, bonafide, Georgia corn liquor. Handmade, homemade, and one hundred percent guaranteed to tickle your toenails.”

“You make this?” JD asked.

“Nope, this here batch was made by my cousin Scooter.”

“He in the business?” I asked.

“Was. Run out by the Jehovah Witnesses, biggest moonshiners in the county.”

“Jehovah Witnesses.”

“Nothin’ like door to door to drive up your sales. Now, shut your pie hole and let me watch my shows.”

He hit the button on the remote and the theme music from *Green Acres* blared out of the large screen. He took a big swig of his drink and plopped back into his chair.

“This here is a classic. Arnold Ziffel opens up his own bank account and ends up solving a bank robbery. He’s a legend, shoulda won the Oscar for this one.”

I didn’t make it to the end of the show and all of Arnold’s performance. The corn liquor and ten hours of digging a snake pit knocked me out cold. When I woke up, it was a little after two in the morning. I felt the crinkle of paper in my shirt pocket and reached in to pull it out. It was a folded old worn envelope, torn open. On the back was a note scribbled in blue ink. It was from Sweet Thang.

Hear tell you headed into town. Get my list and do not dilly dally

Beer—Taterchips—Sodicrackers--Bacon pork rinds--White bread—Mustard--TP

And go see if Rusty has my spark plugs

PS I done checked your truck top to bottom Ain’t no snakes nowhere

There are times in your life that you realize that somehow you have taken a turn down some road you can’t find your way back from. I had turned down that road and become

the errand boy for a man who milks snakes for a living. Catfish wasn't going to believe this one, or maybe he would. Hell, far as I knew, Catfish might even know Sweet Thang. If not, I hope he at least knew Rusty.

MudCat Moon

Catfish jumped on the line.

"The last time a dead man called me I hung up on him."

"Last I checked I'm not dead, but the night is young," I said into the crackling phone.

"That's not what's on the TV news," Catfish said.

"The news says I'm dead?"

"Watching it now."

"Any details you care to share?" I asked.

"Yep," he said. "Says you were killed when Billy Ray's security goons rescued Cissy."

"Rescued Cissy from me?"

"You and your associates they say."

"I have associates?"

"Apparently."

"And we're all dead?"

"According to Channel 10."

"Breaking news," I answered.

"Tragic. They still got your name wrong."

"So, I suppose now would be a good time to fill you in on what's really going on up here?"

"I was standing by for your call."

"You were?"

"Billy Ray has been lying out his fat rear end since he was knee high to a billy goat."

"And now he's lying about this. You ready for the real story?"

"Talk fast. You running out of time."

"How can I be running out of time if I'm already dead?"

"Cause Billy Ray has called the GBI and every damn news truck in two states."

"How much time?"

"Hour at the most."

"We need to get a move on, but can I ask you a question, first?"

"Make it quick," Catfish replied.

"Did you just say this wasn't your first call from a dead man?" I asked.

"I was drinking one night and I think I got a call from my dead high school football coach."

"You're not sure?"

"Could've been a dream or it might have been the whiskey."

"Well you did start up with the bourbon two hours before kickoff today. You still drinking?"

"Why stop now," Catfish said. "I'm talking to a dead man."

BirdDog Boogie

"She's dead."

"What?"

"I know dead, and she's dead."

The man who made this pronouncement leaned in for a closer look. Ashes from the cigarette in his lips dropped off. He poked at something. I cringed at the sound.

"Yep, she's dead," he said.

"You sure?"

He looked at me, cocked his head, and pointed at his partner.

"Tell him, Henry."

"He knows dead," Henry said and wiped his face with the sleeve of a dirty white t-shirt.

I stood in the ditch next to the road. The sun had drifted below the pine trees behind me.

Nothing in view, left or right, except a long two-lane tar and gravel road. The man asked me where I was from. I told him.

"What you doing way down here?"

"Was on my way to see a man about a piece of machine gear."

He looked me over and rubbed a hand across the stubble on his face.

"So, what do we do now?" I asked.

"Well, getting dark." He looked up at the sky. "I guess me and Henry can haul it back to my yard and take care of it for you."

"How much is that going to cost me?"

He took a long drag off the cigarette and tossed it in the ditch. "Five hundred dollars."

"Really?"

"Look, son." He turned to face me. "I don't know where you're from, but where I come from, five hundred dollars is a lot of money to give somebody for a 1974 Ford truck with a blown engine and rusty parts and I've still got to haul it back to my junkyard. A tree will be growing through it before I make my money back. Five hundred. Take it or start walking."

"I'll take it."

"Go get the tow truck, Henry." He fired up another cigarette.

An hour later, I was sitting on a stool outside a convenience store in the dark. I had five hundred bucks in my pocket. I was one hundred miles from home. I had a cardboard box with the remains: two screwdrivers, a hammer, a handsaw, three cans of motor oil, four baseballs, two bats, and a soon-to-be-empty bottle of Wild Turkey to mourn the loss of a good truck. May she rest in peace.

SweetTater Tango

I felt a poke in the ribs and turned to see Cool Breeze with his cane. He looked me up and down.

“Baseball is a funny game, ain’t it?”

“That it is. Especially tonight.”

“Ice cream,” he said.

“What?”

“You like a good ice cream cone?”

“Sometimes.”

“I do too. But these days you try and get that ice cream cone and some fool will cover it up with all sorts of things. Little sprinkles, crumbles, runny syrup and even jelly beans.

“How did we get to talking about ice cream?”

“Done mucked up baseball like my ice cream cone,” he said. “Can’t find the game under all them jelly beans.” He poked me in the ribs again with his cane and headed off toward his seat.

“Game is still down there underneath somewhere. Just keep looking.”

I heard a giggle. A familiar one. Alex. She was dressed in khaki pants, white t-shirt, her black carry vest, a hip bag and one camera around her neck.

“I just had a chat with your friend from the Bandit.”

“Sugar?”

“The one and only. Dressed in white pants, red shirt and pink sunglasses.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t ask. Don’t want to know.”

“Did he ask you for a date again?”

“He did indeed.”

“The Bandit doesn’t give up easily.”

“He said I would come around sooner or later because as he put it, ‘he knows things’”

“What kind of things?”

“Didn’t ask. Don’t want to know.”

We were rudely interrupted by a blast of loud music from the ballpark speakers. Sharp horns in a familiar tune. The crowd inside began to cheer and point toward center field. We made our way to the fence next to the dugout. A black van with a red stripe and red wheels turned sideways in the middle of the field. The rear doors flew open and a big man leaped from the van. He wore jeans, no shirt that showed off big muscles, a huge band of gold necklaces ran down his chest. He sported a thick beard and his hair was cut in a tall mohawk. He flexed his large muscles and let out a big scream. Mr. T from the A-Team had arrived at the ballpark. Alex grabbed her camera and pointed it toward centerfield. “Pity the fool that misses this shot.”

“Jelly beans,” I said.

ButterBean ShingALing

With maybe two of hours of light left, it already felt dark on the river. The ChuChuManga River. When Billy Bass rounded me up the first night at the camp, he told me the name of the river meant, *Head of The Snake*. We were riding straight into it. A narrow passage, not more than fifty feet wide, water black, flanked by tall cypress trees, twisted roots, long strings of moss stretched to the riverbank. Daylight struggled to break through the thick moss, like the flicker of a broken flashlight. Take a hundred photographs and *none* of them would capture the way this place made your bones rattle in person.

Bass lifted a paddle, pushed us up next to the other boat. A flatboat, not long as ours, open, powered in the rear by an odd-looking motor and fan. A small version of an airboat. The two guys in the boat were familiar.

“Locked n’ loaded and itching for a butt-kicking.” A loud cackle. CoonDog.

In the rear, Big Rig sat near the fan motor. His overalls open to the waist, bare chested, a long rifle in his left hand. He did not speak or smile. I do not think I had heard him say a single word since we showed up. CoonDog did enough talking for both.

“So, what’s the dilly-bo-billy at the end of Gilly?” He wore jean shorts, a t-shirt with no sleeves, cap turned around backward. A pistol on his right hip, a hunting rifle leaned against his legs.

“Go in slow and low,” Billy Bass told them. “If you find fellas that don’t belong, deal with them. If one of them is this Elvis guy, get his ass back here in one piece. You remember what he looks like?”

Coondog cackled. “Yeah, little fat idiot walking around in his underwear.”

“That would be the idiot we are talking about,” Catfish said with a grin.

“If we find him, we’ll get him.”

“Listen up good now,” Billy Bass said. “*Nobody* ends up dead tonight. We are *not* gonna give that crazy Cooley any reason to haul us in on murder charges. We clear and straight?”

“Aw, hell Billy Boy,” CoonDog grinned. “Now you done gone and took all the fun out.”

Big Rig yanked a cable, the motor and loud fan fired up. He spun the boat in a half circle, gunned it, headed up Gilly Creek.

CoonDog yelled, “Get your heart right, cause your ass is mine!”

They faded away deep into the creek.

“Them two boys could scare butter out of a biscuit.” Catfish said.