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Secrets in Sleaufort

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# **SECRETS IN SLEAUFORT**

**by ethel kouba**

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## TWENTY-ONE

Now, as I sat in the courtroom, I knew that the person in front of us was Sally. She might have lost forty pounds, blonded her hair, and improved her complexion—but she still had those shifty, sneaky little eyes peering underneath her false eyelashes and ghostly white teeth displayed with her prominent overbite.

In addition, she had not rid herself of the two habits she had been known for in Rustin—her hand-rubbing (I called it her self-congratulatory expression of glee knowing that she had tricked someone.) and her smirk when she thought she had said something clever.

I sat through her forty-five minute talk of deprivation, degradation, and overcoming all odds. She wiped the fake tears from her eyes as she told us of her mother's cruelty. Then she rubbed her hands together and gave a tiny smile—a smirk.

She mourned the loss of her innocence and her newborn baby, snatched from her arms. There was the hand-rubbing and smirk again.

Finally, a century later, she stopped her fake pity party, dried her eyes with a tissue, and asked if there were questions.

One of the temps asked who did her hair. A paralegal asked how much advance payment had she

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received for the memoir. Millie asked how a person went about getting published.

Mr. Gorham stood up and he was seething. He said, "This young lady has shown you all a picture of her soul. Please ask serious questions. She can be a beacon of light for those who are lost...Blither! Blither."

I stood up and the news cameras turned my way. I said, "I knew you in Rustin; you were called Sally then, and I loaned you fifty dollars to help pay for your poor old mother's trip to Charleston, SC to visit her mother's grave. If you have made all this money, when can I expect payment?"

There were mumblings—what did she say?—her name is Sally? She's from Rustin?

These pieces of information did not jive with the bio sketch May Bea Long had provided. I could see people tapping into their laptops to extract information.

When Mr. Gorham dismissed us from the auditorium, Sally remained behind, surrounded by news people. She looked very uncomfortable as she tried to answer their questions. There were no smirks. My guess was that once the research into her past was concluded that there will be no forth-coming multimillion dollar book deal and she could say "adios" to the prospects of making a movie.

The rest of the courthouse folk were all happy, because we were finished for the day—early, I might add. Following the talk, informal groups had been scheduled to

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chit-chat about the formal talk and how it could help us everyday people out. Mr. Gorham decided not to even try.

I drove home. I was too tired to stop for takeout. It had been an awful first week back at work. With the farmhouse cleaning thrown into the mix, I couldn't even follow the day to day news at the courthouse. Was Bubba still trying to date on the Internet? Was Junior still betting on the ponies or whatever? What was going on with Dick Dave and Dolly? Who was the stranger that Dolly was dating? And what about Dick Dave's lovely mother Violet? Had her venture of blind-dates-for-oldsters caught on?

I needed to get a gossip group together (obviously), but first I needed to find out why Jade had cut her cruise short.

That little piece of business would be forthcoming on Sunday. But between today and Sunday was a horrible thing to get through—lunch at George's.

When I got home and check my messages, I was chanting a mantra—let George cancel the lunch; let George cancel the lunch...and to my surprise, once I had listened to and deleted all the messages for extended car warranty, for the heart fund, the druggies' addiction fund, the blind light bulb fund, there remained a message from George and drum roll, please, there was no good news, for it was not a cancellation message. Charlaine had decided a cook-out would be so special. Everything

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would be provided, of course, except the stuff to be grilled. I was supposed to bring meat.

I thought to myself—"Sure I will whip out and buy something really expensive—steaks or ribs. I don't think so." I looked in my freezer unit I found some soy frankfurters—perfect!

There was some more good news for the evening. I found a carton of Ben and Jerry—Double Death by Chocolate.

I polished off the ice cream, followed by three pieces of celery and vegged out (get it?) in front of the TV. I caught up with all the celebrity gossip (Thank you, TMZ.com.) and then watched a show featuring a make over session for a drab bland woman.

First, they did surgery—new nose, cheek implants, lips' inflation, hair plugs, jaw realignment, teeth straightened and whitened. After the face redo, the body was next—breast and butt implementation, and finally an all-purpose liposuction and cellulite removal.

When the surgical recovery phase was over, the project switched to a more serious mode—a rigorous exercise program was begun: to tone and define arm and leg muscles, and to create a firm back. Next her hair was lengthened with extensions, and dyed a multi-toned red.

Her eyebrows and eyelashes were shaped and colored.

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Pedicures and manicures and eye makeup and cheek and lip makeup were selected—there was blending and shading, so everything would appear natural.

I could see that this woman was well on her way to total beauty. Her family and fiancé would be so happy. They were interviewed and expressed their joy and desire to see what she looked like.

The fiancé, a middle-aged balding short obese man, rubbed his hands together and then stroked the few hairs on his head, as he said, “I am sure this will rekindle the romance we once had. You know, we have been engaged for six years, and to tell the truth, I was beginning to find her sexually unattractive. She had let herself go.”

He was in for a surprise.

I was getting sleepy—too much chocolate, no doubt. I really wanted to see the outcome. That was my last thought until morning.



## TWENTY-TWO

The knock on the door at 6 AM was my wakeup call. Stumbling to my feet, I staggered to the door. There stood Grunt. “Miss Bixie,” he said, “I wanted to tell you that your car door is wide open—that can’t be good for the battery.” He nodded his head and left.

I went out to the Falcon. Yep, the door was wide open. The inside light wasn’t on—not a good sign. I climbed in and tried to start the car—the battery was dead—dead as my hopes and dreams, dead as my chance of getting a better job, and wonderful man....

I mentally slapped myself. “Wait, wait,” I thought. “There is definitely a bright spot here—if my car doesn’t start, I can’t go to George’s for lunch. I’ll just call him—with the news, and then, later on, I get my car’s battery jumped.”

I went back in the house, all happy, and ate some healthy cereal while I read a chapter in the new book by Kouba. I was spacing my reading time out, because I had heard that she might not be doing another book.

At 8 AM, I called George, hoping to reach his answering machine—no such luck. One of the daughters picked up the phone. When she realized it was me, she dropped the phone in a bucket or something and screamed, “Daddy, it’s Aunt Bixie on the phone.”

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George came on the line. I explained the situation and expressed my regrets at not making lunch. “We can always reschedule another time—maybe next month or in the spring, when it warms up.”

“Nonsense,” was his answer. “I am sure that Bo will be glad to pick you up and bring you over. It will give the two of you more one-on-one time. How special! Don’t forget. Bo is a professional—you’ll like him and he really is a catch.”

I interrupted George. “Who is Bo? I thought the man’s name was Maurice Cheever.”

George responded, “Now don’t get yourself all upset, Bixie. Dr. Cheever had to deal with an emergency podiatry call that took him out of town. So when I realized he would not be available, I went to plan B. It’s all good. Bo is a really unique person. I am sure that the two of you will get along famously.” After all this blithering, George hung up.

“Uh, oh!” I had better do something quick or I would be stuck at George’s all day—I could just see it now—waiting, waiting for a ride back home. I might even be forced into a marathon of baby sitting.

I went next door and tapped on Jewel’s door. “Help!” I said. “I desperately need a ride.” After going through all the details, she said she would make sure that Grunt recharged my car battery, and that someone at Jewel’s house would pick me up at George’s.

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“Thank you! Thank you!” I gasped.

I spent the morning, paying bills and washing clothes, and muttering to myself. George was a great brother, to be sure, but he so needed to stop his match-making.

Finally, I dressed for my date. I wiggled into a pair of black jeans. They used to fit, but the Sleaufort humidity had struck again, and the jeans were just too blasted tight. I put on a bright green turtleneck and a gold chain, and brushed my hair vigorously—A dab of lipstick, rouge, green eye shadow and I was so ready. Where was the guy—the so-called good catch?

A beat-up truck was circling the block again. The sign on the truck read, “Bo’s taxidermy—you catch’em; we stuff’em.” On the third turn around the block, the truck stopped in front on my house.

A short balding man, wearing a pair of way too young jeans and a pair of high-heeled boots, waddled up to my front porch.

“Howdy,” the man said, “You must be Bixie Lee. I am your brother’s friend, Bo Tucker. I’m going to be your wheels. Gather up that Porterhouse steak you’re bringing and we’ll get on our way to the grilling.”

I thought to myself—“Hope you like soy franks, Porterhouse steak, indeed.”

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He reached out; perhaps he meant to guide me down the sidewalk, with a courteous hand on my back, but his reach was a little off, as he patted my butt.

“So that's how it going to be,” I thought, and I stumbled, accidentally, of course, and grazed his leg with the point of my high-heeled boots. He gave me a little more personal space after that.

He so ungentlemanly did not help me up in his truck. I had to heave myself up, risking a rip in my already-challenged jeans. I threw the crap that was on the seat to the floor, and before Mr. Bo could say boo, I plopped my boots on the pile.

He grumbled a little, but then gritted his teeth. After all, he was getting a free Porterhouse steak, and who knew, maybe a beer (or ten) would loosen me up a little. Obviously he had not been a guest at George's before—No alcohol allowed.

I tried to be nice, and I asked what he did. That was all the invitation that Bo needed. He told me everything about being a taxidermist—which he was. I learned all the steps involved in the training; I was instructed on how to stuff a fish, a deer, a bear. I heard the benefits of such a career, and how he aspired to open up his own taxidermy school.

Talk, talk, like raindrops in a monsoon, drip, drip, drip. George only lived fifteen minutes from my house but our drive surely must have lasted hours. All I had contributed to

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the conversation was, “Really,” “sure,” “how interesting,” “okay.” I was atrophying, even as I sat in this truck.

The car in front of us, put on its brakes, but it was too late for the rabbit crossing the road. Bo came to a stop, so sudden, that I almost hit the windshield and all the papers between us fell to the floor.

He opened the truck door, and jumped to the ground. He raced over to the rabbit.

I thought, “I have judged Bo too harshly; he’s trying to save the rabbit.” I was wrong—he scooped the rabbit up and put him in the back of the truck.

He smiled when he got back in. He didn’t say diddle-squat about where the rabbit was going, and I didn’t ask.

When we got to George’s—he got a bag from behind the seat, and started walking toward the house. I slid off my seat; I heard a rip—great! I followed along behind him with my bag of franks.

The five children answered the door. Of course they love me to death—Not! Once they realized that I didn’t have a present for them, they went back inside, letting the screen door slam in my face. My gallant date had slipped in, so I opened the door for myself.

Bo had handed his package to Charlaine for grilling. When the meat was unwrapped, I gave it a real good

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glance—it sure did not look like chops or steaks, or even burgers—it seemed to be some kind of skinned varmint.

My soy franks were looking better and better.

Of course, before we could eat lunch, the meat needed to be grilled, and the delay gave the children just the amount of time, they needed for their little show. It celebrated Thanksgiving—but it had been changed to be politically correct. In this version, the noble Native Americans try to instruct the rough savages that have come from England in survival techniques. All their kindnesses are met with ridicule, until the youngest member of the group, Emily teaches everyone a valuable lesson of sacrifice (She dies.) and everyone comes together for a dinner, celebrating her life—oh bother, I couldn't follow the plot.

With one hand, I was trying to keep Bo's hands from creeping up my leg, and with the other hand, I was trying to cover the rip in my jeans and with the other hand, I was dumping the pureed carrot appetizer Charlaine had forced on me—well, that was how it went. An eternity later, the show was over, and the children passed a hat for payment. I gave them two Canadian pennies; Bo was even more thrifty with his payment of putt-putt tokens.

## TWENTY-THREE

We marched out to the picnic table in the yard for our lunch.

I said “pass” on Bo’s grilled meat, and I recognized the patties that George had provided, not a good choice either. They had the M brand 2234 stamped on the package—this was the beef that been recalled the month before. I grabbed a soy frank—so what if it had been frozen for the last year or so.

I smothered the frank in mustard and BBQ sauce. I knew enough to avoid the offerings of potato salad with the secret ingredient and the baked beans floating in pork grease. I took a muffin, but when I dropped it on my foot, I lost all feeling in two toes for several minutes.

My meal finally consisted of a soy frank and a crisp, but bruised green apple.

Bo was a pig; he had seconds of the potato salad and the baked beans. He would soon regret his gluttony, probably as he drove home.

George stepped up to his match-making role. “Well,” he asked Bo, “what do you think of my sister? Isn’t she special?”

Bo tried to pat my thigh, and my fork slipped and I pronged him. He yelped. George had missed the little fork interlude and he thought Bo was yelping approval.

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George continued, "I'm just hoping that Bixie can find the happiness that Charlaine and I enjoy!"

I felt the soy frank trying to come back up. Surely, George was being facetious. I had seen some of the happiness between the two of them—the week George lived in the YMCA; the week that Charlaine went to stay with her mother and George changed the locks to their house and Charlaine bulldozed in the door when she returned.

"Please, someone help me," I muttered quietly. The doorbell rang. There was Grunt, "Howdy, you all. I promised Miss Bixie a ride. She's going with Miss Jewel to help pick out curtains."

Everyone was so sorry to see me go. Bo promised to call me real soon, and I said I would be waiting. I thanked the whole little group for their hospitality.

As we drove away, Grunt said, "I've got your car all charged up. Do you want to make a stop on the way home?" I answered, "Please, stop at Bonangles—I really, really need a grease fix." I tried not to think about what was going to happen to the road-kill rabbit and what the animal was that Bo had brought to lunch. Some things are better forgotten, hopefully never to be retrieved at some quiet midnight hour.

We stopped at Bonangles and I picked up the "greasy don't spare the calories special." I held the bag on my lap, and the warm smells of French fries, biscuits,



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fried bacon, and the rest drew me to a peaceful place, and my shiverings decreased.

Grunt looked over my way and said, "Coming off a bad trip?"

I answered, "You have no idea."

He dropped me off at home and I thanked him again for the ride and for the all the loans of Spuds.

I went into my house and inhaled the food, and then read awhile. When I had achieved my inner calm, once again, I clicked on the TV and watched the end of the wrestling show. Soon wrestling would return to our area, but for now, I had to be satisfied with the televised pickings. They were so faked—like a wrestler would be able to live after taking a hit from another wrestler who had climbed up on the ropes and then jumped four feet down and landed on his chest. Please! I could do the math,  $\text{Force} = \text{weight} \times \text{height} \times \text{factor (some kind)}$  equals a gazillion units of force.

It was getting late—7 pm, and 7 pm was bedtime for someone somewhere. The phone rang as I was dozing off. It was Jade. She did not sound good. We made plans to meet the next morning for a late breakfast. I started in asking questions: "Why did you cut your cruise short? What's wrong? What presents did you bring me?"

She cut me short, with a little Jade-like comment, that went something like, "@#@%\$###", and then she said, "Just wait until tomorrow."

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I hung up and then took the phone off the hook. I figured it was just about time for George to call and 1) complain about my manners or 2) set up another match-making gig.

I was asleep, before I could even begin to worry about the next fellow on the horizon.

Sunday came. The weather was beautiful—fluffy white clouds in an azure sky. Birds were singing. The air smelled sweet—the wind was blowing the Menhaden fish factory fumes in the opposite direction.

I got dressed leisurely—no time clock to punch.

Even my clothes cooperated. My jeans were not tight. My hair curled just perfectly. My face looked refreshed, no lines—my eyes were clear.

I felt good. I felt less so once I realized that I was wearing the jeans I had worn when I was pregnant. I paused for a moment to ask myself how many pairs of pregnant jeans had I kept. When I put on my glasses, I saw that my face was lined, my eyes were red, and as I looked closer—there was some kind of impression running across both cheeks. Scary!

I postponed breakfast. No sense in eating twice. I read some more in my motivational book—In Vision? Envision! To summarize the 400 pages: if I saw something I wanted, by thinking really really hard, I could get it. I was on page 14.

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I heard a car horn beeping. Yay, it was Jade. I hurried to the car, mostly to stop the blasts of her horn.

I got in, and held out my hand. She popped a package in my hand and said, "Don't you dare open it, until you hear my story!" Then she reconsidered and took the package back. "You will get it if you are good," she said.

"That's fine, but I need food!" We drove to the By-the-Sea Café. We sat down, quickly made our selections, and in a blink of an eye received our meals. My plate had bacon, eggs, pancakes, biscuits, and one piece of orange. Jade's breakfast was a medley of fruits and a bowl of oatmeal. As we ate, I asked Jade about her trip.

Actually, the words I said were, "Okay, what..." and that was all it took. Jade began to talk so fast, that I did the T- timeout signal and begged her to take it easy.

She started again. "Okay, you know I won the cruise trip by being the best salesperson for some of the specialty items I carry in my marital aid shop. The cruise was booked as a single-mingle one, and I thought—well, you know—after the chili cookout episode, I could definitely use some new men in my life.

I cashed in some of my treasury bonds so I could buy some really pretty cruise wear. I was so looking forward to the warm weather (Sleaufort was having highs in the low 60s.) and seeing some tropical islands. The cruise included stops at Bermuda and Puerto Crusa, and several smaller islands.

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I got on the ship, all happy and excited and then I looked around really good to scope out the really hot-looking guys and you know what I saw? There were old, old geezers and geezettes everywhere. I would put the youngest person I saw at 55 or 60. Scary.

I was beginning to get bad vibes, but I rationalized that—I don't know—that the hot, young people were on the other side of the ship, or something. It was too late to do anything—the ship was pulling out. I waved to all the people on shore—there was a crowd of nine or so.

Then I went in search of my cabin. It was extremely tiny. When I stretched my arms out, I hit walls. I could hear coughing and wheezing all around me from the nearby cabins. It was as if the walls didn't exist.

The schedule for the day's activities lay on the bed. There was a welcoming get together scheduled in an hour, up on the main deck. I fluffed my hair, reapplied my lipstick and slipped into a more comfortable top. (By comfortable, Jade meant 'braless.') Then I went for a walk about the ship.

Everywhere I went I saw old, old people. I have nothing against the elderly; you know that—after all, some of my best customers are old. But these people were creepy old—the women were wearing tiny dresses or Daisy Duke shorts and they were braless—just slinging those down-to-the-waist things around. I saw age spots on age spots and mounds of flab and varicosed veins—it was awful. Then there were the surgically improved women—

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with their expressionless faces and orange tans in tiny, tiny clothes.

Have no doubts, though, in comparison to the old geezers, these women were beauties.

The men were in a class by themselves in awfulness.

There were all kinds of eye torture. It was obvious that the overweight men were really proud of their manly shapes, or something, because they all wore unbuttoned shirts with white chest hair poking out, and shorts that displayed their skinny legs and black socks in high-priced running shoes.

All the men were losing their hair, and they have solved this problem in one of two ways—some had gone for the shaved head routine, and these guys had those unappealing fat faces, and the others had gone for hair replacement—either surgical or toupees. The toupees were getting a real workout as the sea breezes tried to free the rugs.

There I was—on this ship with the geriatric singles. Did I mention that there were three women for every man? Of course, I was surrounded in an instant by a group of fellars. The women stood around and glared.

Now, you know, I don't mind an old man once in a while—they have lots of ready cash and they are really grateful for just so little—but these old geezers—their hands were touchy, feely. I was being pinched and grabbed,

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and every time, I slapped away one paw, there were two more in its place."

New troubles pursue Bixie in the beach town of Sleaufort. Can Bixie juggle work, unwanted suitors and her chocolate addiction while the demented Thomas family attempts to prevent the old family secrets from surfacing? Bixie's death would be good.

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