

*Evil simmers in Sleaufort with the return of summer; dead bodies are surfacing. Split between her drudgery at the courthouse and all the male hunks available, will Bixie find romance, before Evil triumphs with a permanent good-bye, Bixie?*

## **Slitherings in Sleaufort**

By Ethel Kouba

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*Slitherings  
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ETHEL KOUBA

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# ONE

Summer had come to Sleaufort. It was time for cook-outs, for trips to the beach, for casual, light-weight clothes, bright colors, time for my laying in the sun's warmth, while a bronze God slowly rubbed fragrant suntan lotion all over my body, interspersed with gentle kisses and soothing mutterings.

Yeah, in another life, summer for me in Sleaufort was none of the above. Although there is a breeze at the beach, in the town proper there is no air stirring, and the humidity is at least 110%. Oh, let me take it back—the air does stir from the currents set up by the mosquitoes and by the other bugs that come to the South in the summer. My particular favorite ones are the ones known colloquially as the “yuck-bugs”—they are two inches long, kind of hairy looking and they can fly, swim, and are believed to have supernatural powers, according to our local bugologist, Dr. Berry. Dr. Berry taught entomology at the State University in Raleigh until fatigue of dealing with, and here the story differs upon who is telling it, one school says it was the lustful coeds who drove him away, and the other school of thought says his experiments involving genetic engineering with the cockroach caused a mutation that resulted in a very large specimen evolving. At this point, this mutant specimen either played football for one season, before it was discovered that he/she was not a student, or it turned on the department head, causing him to flee and in the hubbub that ensued, the department head (Dr. Wheal) suffered psychosomatic stress resulting in total hair loss. Dr. Wheal had invested a small fortune, as well as many hours of torture, to get a healthy head of hair transplants

and so he was understandably upset—or so the story goes, and Dr. Berry was forced to leave. Dr. Berry moved to Sleaufort for whatever the reason, and has become the consultant for the county in its never ending battle with the bug.

A few months ago I thought I would never have to deal with bugs again. I was a heroine; I had used my powers of detection, my brave heart and had put an end to the string of murders in Sleaufort. A deranged county employee, Miss Thomas, had gone on a silent rampage of killings to cover up her more nefarious activities of blackmail and extortion and when all the smoke cleared and the fur settled and the clouds dispersed, there I stood heroine, Bixie Lee Biddle—Queen for the day. I was given the key to the town and, even better, a four-day weekend.

I knew, oh yes, I was sure that I could quit my job as custodian at the county court house and move on up to better things. Why I had a B.S. degree and had even worked a little on my M.S. degree. I was a qualified lab technician, for Pete's sake. And my dream of wearing that perfect little silk blouse and the power jewelry, of having acrylic nails that I would keep at least two inches long and repolished every Saturday, would come true. I had not given up my promising career back in Rustin to be a custodian forever. Sure, I had been lured to Sleaufort by the promises of a better life, and the inheritance of Aunt Jasmine's house had seemed to be the signal to move, to get with it, before I rotted where I was, but I had believed I had a future in Sleaufort.

And so I applied for Miss Thomas' position. I believed that I was totally qualified to do what she had done. She had done nothing, really, so I was actually more qualified than she had been. She had sat in her office all day long, signing purchase orders, allowing lesser folks to purchase pencils, toilet paper, coffee, and from time to time, had written the all important directions that determine corporate policy such as the paper clip memo. "It has come to my attention that certain individuals within our division are not being as responsible as they should, in this time of economic down spiraling, and for this reason it has become necessary to outline the following steps which will be

implemented immediately concerning the proper use of paper clips, and the most expedient manner in which this implementation can take place...” The memo continued, and was followed by several meetings to discuss the implementation plan. We were all required to attend (attendance was taken)—poor Charlene was at the hospital delivering her baby after seventeen hours of hard labor, but Miss Thomas felt this was no excuse and Charlene’s pay had been docked accordingly.

See, I could do these directives. There was even a form directive on the computer that Miss Thomas had used for other problems like the shortage of toilet paper, of memo pads, of rubber bands. There were no shortages of shortages.

And so, I applied for her empty position. I attached my references, I was hot. I was a heroine; I was good.

Reality came in a form letter explaining the infrastructure of the county government. I could apply for a lateral move like. a dog catcher, only in Sleaufort “dog” was a catch phrase for “dog,” “cat,” “horse,” “mule,” “pig,” and in the case of Gemma, a “turtle.” Gemma was an elderly lady who had been advised by her physician to go for walks to get exercise to keep her osteoarthritis from getting worse. Gemma wanted a pet to take for a walk, so she bought a German shepherd puppy. It went too fast, so she traded it for an older collie dog. It was still too fast for her pace. She tried a cocker spaniel, a dachshund, a poodle, and, finally, a Chihuahua, which she named Duke. All was fine until the Duke saw a bitch in heat (Shitzzy) and dragged Gemma through the parking lots of Bilow, Burning Bunns, and Shimmering Glimmers. Gemma says she would have let the damn duke go, but his leash was tangled in her purse that she always carried and she just couldn’t struggle free. Eventually, folks came to her aid, and the race was over.

But Gemma knew even a little dog was too much for her. When she recovered (you can see where this is going, right?) she purchased a large fresh water turtle named Tony, a perfect companion in her walks. Life was fine, until she went for a walk to the library with Tony. “No animals, inside” was the rule, and so Tony was tied to a bicycle rack. Unfortunately, when Gemma came back out with her book on religious beliefs of the Aztecs, Tony was gone. The dog catcher was notified and

a search ensued. Tony was found, at least his shell was found. Tony had become a dinner special at the Chinese restaurant. I won't eat Chinese, myself.

But back to my job search... I could do a lateral move or a one-move vertical, such as custodian II, but bureaucratic policy prevented my applying for Miss Thomas' position, and so I remained custodian at the courthouse.

And summer slithered in with the slithering in of the tourists, of the humidity, and of the insects.

My life hadn't been too bad—there was still Ms. Thorne -Dolly and Dick Dave for entertainment. They had married and Dolly was still in the throes of the honeymoon period. Dolly was wearing her trademark rose makeup, her bright pink rouge and lipstick and her ever-so-fragrant perfume. (I have had to clean some ungodly messes in my six months at Sleaufort County Courthouse, the most memorable being that of Jed's, Jed is a street person who is a free spirit, living on the epicurean delights obtained from the dumpsters of such fine eating establishments as "Shiny Chitterlings," and "Fannie's Fish House." Jed ate some bad fish, at least that was my hypothesis, and even though his stomach should have been made of iron by now, he nevertheless became ill in the space underneath the bottom stairs of the courthouse. By the time the mess was discovered, the combined breakdown processes of fermentation and putrefaction were taking place. The difference, though, in the smell of Jed's mess and Dolly's perfume is the OSHA mask I can use with the former.

Dick Dave has had some influence on what Dolly wears. Dick Dave believes that the man should dress in an attractive fashion, but the woman should hide her shape, her legs, her attractiveness so it will not look like she is man-hungry. And so gone were the tight short little dresses, the high, high heels, the dangly earrings. She now wore beige pantsuits, above which shines her pink face. If he had his way, she'd be wearing beige makeup or no makeup, but the bruises show too well with beige makeup, which may also explain the pantsuits. A lot of domestic accidents seem to be happening in their household.

It used to be when I sat to drink coffee during my break, I could look forward to entertaining stories about the local swap meetings or pro-wrestling highlights, or even for awhile, there was Dolly talking about Dick Dave. He was so wonderful; he was so virile; and she could not even begin to count how many times they had done “it” in an evening.

She had brought photographs in of her man. The one that struck old Miss Jerome with hysterical blindness had Dick Dave in a thong bikini. Picture, if you will, a thin, scrawny man with no buns, but with a protruding beer belly, and wearing a gimme cap saying, “I BRAKE FOR BABES.” Dolly refrained from bringing more pictures after we presented the petition to her!

Dora had been fun, too; first when she was fat, we had torn down Dolly and then as she had become thinner, we had discussed diet strategies, and exercise types. Dora had continued to lose weight; she said it just seemed to melt off. She was always nibbling, even though it was fat-free, but the fat melted off. The wrinkles began appearing in her face, and her legs got bony-looking. I thought she might be sick with a rare tropical disease, but then I heard her dieting secret one day when I went to clean the second floor bathroom. I quietly closed the door and left. Dora was sick alright, with bulimia. A few weeks later, she took a medical leave.

We hired temps to fill in for all the sick and dead folk missing at the courthouse, but the relationships just never seem the same, as the old ones we had had. And then summer slithered in and with it my life took a turn for the strange.



## THIRTEEN

The pig farm hearing was disbanding for the day. Roland was one of the first ones out. He had his arm around a red-haired woman. I didn't recognize her. Some folks had said there were TV and newspaper personalities from places out of town. Slow news in the big cities, if pig farms were big news. There were a lot of important issues being covered here, though. Does the community's right surpass the individual's rights, does the right of future generations take precedence over the rights of today's generation, etc. Roland saw me and shouted, "See you later!" in my direction. The red-head turned her head. She did look vibrant. Roland wasn't going to have too much energy by the time he saw me, if he dealt with her and then the entertainment of the government people. "Good!" I thought.

I cleaned out a repeat of the earlier trash from the courtroom, only this time, there were newspapers and french fry wrappers in the mess. I saved all the memo sheets and notes I found.

Most of the courthouse workers were leaving or had left. I started dumping their trash cans. Here again, I sifted through the trash.

And let this be a warning: Let's say you are a married man—let's call you Mr. G. (no connection to Mr. Gorham, yeah, right!) and your wife is out of town again on DAR business in Raleigh, because she is the grand behemoth of publicity (in reality, she has a really good friend who lives in Raleigh named Raphael, who is a male exotic dancer). Since Mrs. G is gone, Mr. G feels that he can have an evening out with—say, Gigi, who sells flowers in front of the courthouse, perfectly innocent entertainment of course. So he writes a note to Gigi asking if

she would like to meet him for an evening meal. Since he wants to get the note exactly correct, he drafts several copies that wind up in the trash. The most interesting one is the one with a sketch of two enormous breasts, and the words “I would like to take you out to get some loving (here the word loving was scratched out) food...”

Gigi had sent a note back saying that for fifty dollars, he could have anything he wanted! Now should a note like this be left in the garbage where any snoop could see it?

As I cleaned the trash, I saw that John Esplund had an appointment with Dr. Avery, who treats contagious social diseases. John was one of the young lawyers who had recently returned from a trip to Jamaica with some of his former fraternity brothers. Mrs. Parker was currently treating her problems with her husband and oldest son with Pepcid and Melantin. She is always complaining about her stomach, but I know what she needs and it's not stomach pills. She needs to dump 250 pounds of a beer-bloated, abusive, non-working husband named Parka, along with a eighteen year old son who has already gotten three little mindless teenagers pregnant. The son's name is Ken; the girl friends call him “the King” and he tries to look like Elvis—with long side burns and pouting lips. Mrs. Parker is always being called by one of the girls, looking for the king or by the girls' parents looking for the king. The King needs to be neutered, in my opinion.

Dora's trash can was filled with wrappers of sugar-free, fat-free cookies and sugarless gum. But at the bottom of the can, was a twelve ounce wrapper of Hershey Chocolate Bar and a wad of paper towels, smelling like—well, like Dora was still using her way of losing weight, bulimia. She had looked so pretty when she had returned from the week at the health spa, trimmer, new make-up, new hair style, but now she had become obsessed with her weight and she was growing, or rather shrinking, too thin.

I stopped thinking and quickly dumped the rest of the trash cans in the offices and the garbage in the bathrooms leaving the big cans for the evening pick up. I needed to get home and soon. I could feel the stitches in my biodegradable uniform beginning to pop.

I drove home and fixed a Lean Cuisine for supper. I was still watching my calories. The potatoes were so bland that I added a tiny bit of butter and sour cream to them and since I had eaten such a good low calorie main course, I felt no guilt by having two slices of homemade honey nut bread with a tad of butter.

I took off my uniform, tossed it in the trash and quickly took a shower. I splashed a little Mon Amour cologne on me and slipped into a pretty dress in an attempt to look cool and feminine for my Spanish class. I curled my hair and was especially careful in applying makeup. I wanted to look good, hot for the teacher, Mr. Raoul Tomee. He was new to town and so good-looking, dark, tall, with curly black hair and brown eyes with long lashes, a thick black moustache, white teeth, a sexy smile and a deep-accented voice that made me melt every time he spoke to me.

Maybe it was the weather, the warm days and steamy nights or maybe it was all the tanned glistening male bodies at the beach with their rippling, glistening bodies, but I was regaining my libido that I thought I had left behind when I moved to Sleaufort. I wasn't ready to settle for some of the choices that had been offered like Mr. Married Gorham, who had made this move two weeks ago, or Sonny the Sheriff's deputy who carried his extra 100 pounds with dignity and believed that his body odor was his own business and that personal hygiene was for women folk or those wussy men who wore pastels and were interior decorators. I wasn't interested in overweight rejects, insensitive boors, or married cheaters. If my hormones were going to get in an uproar, it was going to be caused by someone like Raoul. I could see us now, on a starlit evening, dancing very slowly together, our passions rising, the heat, the emotions, stronger, unable to be stopped.

By now, I was at the Community Center; the drive had been a blur. I remembered nothing. There was Raoul, greeting the students at the classroom door. He held my hand for an instant longer than necessary and said in his deep, melodious voice, "Welcome, senorita Bixie." I felt cold shivers going down my spine.

I sat up front so I could "hear" good, and took notes, participated out loud, and dreamed for the two hour class. After class I asked Raoul a

couple of questions. He touched my upper arm and said he would be glad to meet with me outside class to give me extra help. I said I would check my schedule and give him a call.

Raoul said, "Please do; I await your call with the eagerness of a young stallion."

Was I flying or was I flying? He was some really good looking sexy man. He might have mentioned having a "late coffee" with him, but I was late for meeting Roland and I put work first. I needed to learn more about Tom Thomas.

I hurried; I had several miles to drive, and it was already past the time I had planned to meet Roland. He would wait a few moments; I hoped so, at least. I threw my books and notes and burned rubber (figuratively speaking, of course, in the Falcon, burning rubber was not an acceptable car trick) to the Barn Grill.

When I got there, I did not see Roland's distinctively marked Mercedes in the parking lot. I would have gone inside to wait for him, but at this time of night, unless I wanted more excitement than I had planned for, it wasn't such a good idea. The "working girls" would be letting it hang out, before they continue their evening and they didn't like to see unattached, non-professional women on their turf. They were said to be mounting some kind of campaign to keep the amateurs from lowering the standards and work ethics of their profession.

I sat in my car and gave Roland another twenty minutes; the time flew by while I thought of Raoul and my next Spanish class. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to see him outside class or not. My body was sure, but not my mind. Finally, after a particularly satisfying fantasy, I came back to the present with an unpleasant jolt. My Falcon was being rocked back and forth by several "working girls". I guess the parking lot was off limits, too. I waved at them, started my car's engine, and when they freed the car, I left.

I drove home, checked my messages (there were none), and collapsed into bed and dreamless sleep.

## FOURTEEN

Morning came and I dressed in my fresh, new uniform—lavender today. I hurried with my morning preparations. I had decided to go to the Nail Release Ceremony and Crepe Myrtle Park was further away than the courthouse. I felt I owed it to Dolly to be with her in her time of closure, and besides, I would get an hour off work. I was the first to get to the park. It was very quiet and peaceful except for the ducks quacking at Loon Lake. I had brought my camera—I am into nature photography right now. I snapped a few pictures of the flowers and then I decided to take some reflection photographs.

I walked quietly over to Loon Lake. The ducks were all unsettled around the edge of the water—quacking and pecking. I went closer to see what was disturbing them and there in the weeds growing in the water, was Roland's face, minus the tip of his nose.

Roland's face was attached to the rest of his body, but he was dead. I felt a moment of weakness; my head spun. Then I gained enough composure to glance around. Had Roland, perhaps fallen into the lake? His car wasn't in the parking area. It would be unlikely that he walked here, or anywhere—he wasn't into exercising. Of course, he could have met someone here and some kind of accident could have happened and he could have been left here. Another possibility was that he could have been dumped here. The ducks were angry at my interference, they had had their taste of Roland and now they wanted more. They fluttered about quacking and squawking.

I heard a car drive up. It was the three furies, Dolly's friends, who had come together. They were dressed in mourning, black tank tops,

bras, black miniskirts and four inch black heels. One of them, Flopsy, perhaps, had a black veiled hat on. I tried to keep them from coming down to the lake to preserve whatever physical evidence remained of the crime scene. I told them to call the police, that there had been an accident.

Dolly drove up along with Mr. Gorham, and others from the courthouse. Give us an hour off with pay and we'll go to about anything.

Chlorine had a cell phone, and she reported the situation to the police, who said they would be there momentarily. "Momentarily" as we all know means somewhere in the next hour, or two.

Dolly began crying uncontrollably. She had realized that Roland was dead in the lake. She said it was just like that bugger to let himself die and spoil her nail release ceremony, that he was a spoiler from the get-go, and that she wished he were dead.

Mr. Gorham was patting Florine on her back (on her butt, on her breasts) saying, "Now, now, little lady, it will be all right soon."

Florine wasn't even crying, and Mr. Gorham let her go pretty quickly when she accidentally ground her heel into his foot.

The police drove up, and in the excitement that ensued, with Sonny and Junior and the group from the courthouse stomping about, the mud around the lake was covered with layer after layer of footprints. Florine and Chlorine went to the edge of the lake and bent over to see Roland better and, with their miniskirts on, this insured that the group of boy scouts who had joined the hullabaloo was also at the edge of the lake, watching the skirts rise and fall.

Sonny had been interrupted in his morning preparations for work, because there was shaving cream on one side of his face and he had not splashed on the cologne that covers the fact, or tries to cover the fact, that he has foregone a shower for one more day. Excitement was causing him to sweat more than usual, and the ambiance caused by his pheromones, garlic, three day old socks, no deodorant, and just that "Sonny smell" was making my head spin. I moved back from the lake as Sonny and Junior and the scout leader, Mr. Samuels, tried to ease Roland's body out of the lake. I looked for a place to sit and found a bench near the gazebo. The smells, the fact that I had known Roland,

had talked to him less than twenty-four hours before—the thoughts of the impermanence in our lives, the transitory nature of life; everything was making me feel woozy. I lowered my head toward my knees and an unusual thing appeared in my view. Under the bench, covered with leaves, was a pantyhose lump. I pulled it out, and wrapped in the hose, size extra-large for the full-figured woman, was a statue, and an opened package of suppositories!

The statue was a derivative one, using the Thinker as its prototype. Back when the belief existed that Sleaufort was going to become a center of fine arts and literature—sort of a summer waiting place for culture, a Sleaufort man, Jesse Snellings had the brainstorm of an idea. He would make fine ceramic pieces that the artists would want to buy and put up in their houses and yards.

Jesse had a strike against him in furthering his dream, well, there were several strikes, no artists came, he had no talent, he could not center his mind on any project that took more than fifteen minutes, but the major strike was that he could not decide what design to make. At first he tried to make ceramic pigs, but he met major difficulty with these pieces because of the pigs' uncanny resemblance to certain women in the town. If the female has little beady eyes and a pug nose and fat jowls and is hairless without her wig, there isn't too much difference between a pig and women, whose names wouldn't be Mrs. Clarice Evans or Mrs. Barbie Marten. So after Jess was banged up once or twice, he switched from doing pigs to doing other things.

Finally, his daughter, Trina, who had some talent, came up with the idea of doing a statue called the Stinker, as a parody of the Thinker. Instead of his head propped on his hand, the figure has his hand over his nose. Trina had not been trying to do a parody, but was hoping to express the unknown aspect of a person, the mystery of how a person tries to hide part of himself from the people about him, to preserve his oneness. In the first prototype, she made, however, the guy is sitting on a stump, mostly naked (he, not the stump) and he's holding his nose—hence, the name The Stinker.

Even more interesting, however, were the few miscast statues of the Stinker. The right arm of these statues had become misadjusted during

the firing process, and had been fused to the bottom area of the statue. For very obvious reasons, these fellows had been renamed Sphincters. Interesting enough it was one of the Sphincters that had been used to clunk Roland. The true cause of death would remain unknown, until the autopsy was completed.

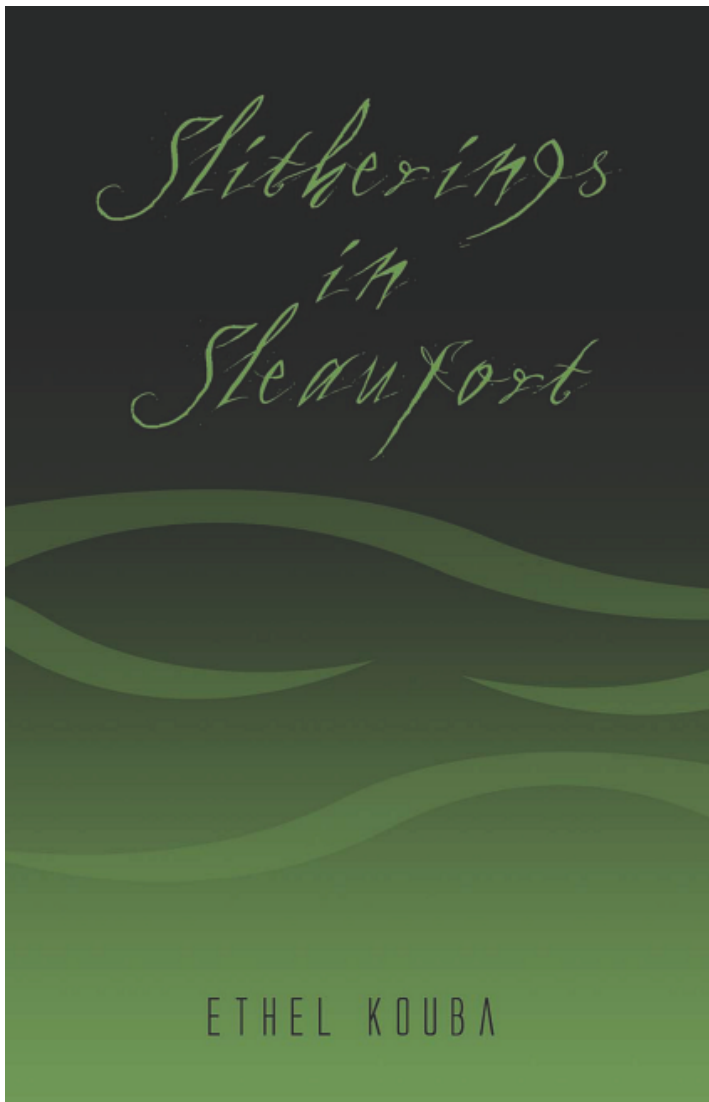
If the Sphincter was responsible for Roland's death, poor Trina might be blamed, since for a while she had been married to Roland. She had been wife number four or five, depending on whether the twins counted as one wife or two. She had had a rough time as his wife, if number of hospital admissions were any indication.

The town coroner, Dr. Vincent, in one of his dry spells, was very good at sorting out the cause of death, even in human beings. Dr. Vincent was a veterinarian and normally worked with animals, but there was not believed to be enough difference in a cow's anatomy and a man's anatomy to warrant hiring a real coroner.

"A whonk is a whonk, whether a cow gets it or whether Marie Long gets it," the town commission, Huey Long, was fond of saying. By now, the body of Roland was lying on a tarp, and the fish and frogs that were in his clothes were jumping and flopping, trying to find their way back to Loon Lake. My quick look at Roland showed that he had a deep cut on his forehead in addition to no nose tip. Perhaps he had been hit by The Sphincter. There was stuff on the statue, which might be blood.

Sonny said he would be transporting the body to Dr. Vincent's as soon as the truck came, and he wrote down our names, in case he needed more information. He took the panty-hose and wrapped The Sphincter and the box of suppositories as evidence.





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