

An SOS from Rustin persuades Bixie to return to the Medical Institution. Funds and employees are missing. Bixie uncovers secrets, but in the town of perpetual ice and snow, no good deed goes unpunished. Will this be Bixie's last adventure?

Sleuth of Sleaufort SOS

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**SLEUTH OF SLEAUFORT
SOS**

By ethel kouba

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THREE

Morning came too soon! I dressed in the many layers that Maxine had suggested and drove over to the starting point. It was still raining and not a warm drizzly kind of rain but a cold heavy rain. The radio weather forecaster was predicting that the rain would change over to snow and there would be accumulations before nighttime.

When I got to the parking area at Widow's Woods, I could see that I was already late. There were groups standing about, identifiable by their shirts—red, blue, green, purple, orange, yellow, and finally a muddy grayish-brown.

I retrieved my ticket. It had a muddy grayish-brown spot on it. I put on my shirt with the same ugly matching colors of mud and walked over to greet the gang, which consisted of Dorothea (a grossly overweight middle-aged woman), Alex (an accountant from the satellite clinic with severe bronchial asthma), Penny (a very thin, almost anorexic clerk who had fibromyalgia), and Dudley (one of the security guards who slept in the upstairs bathroom during his work shift). There were others in my group, but they all looked really sickly.

I could see the other six groups had the young healthy employees. I asked Jenny, prancing about in the red group, who had set up the teams. She pointed to Sarcoidosis.

When the “lady” in question saw me looking at her, she smiled and flashed her grayish greenish brownish pond scum colored eyes at me and mouthed the words, “You are going down, Bixie.”

I didn't like the sounds of that. We received our instructions from the administrative assistant to the CEO, along with our paint guns. We were given thirty minutes to disperse in the woods. The winning team would be the team which at the end of the day had the most players left or had the last player standing.

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The final admonition from the CEO's poppy or puppet or whatever, was a subtle warning. "It has come to our beloved CEO's attention that some of you all think you can take a dive—get hit by a paintball early on and go home.

No, no, no, no. Anyone that is hit in the first hour will face an additional team building exercise and believe me you will not like it."

There went my plan or rather Maxine's plan. I looked about, but I did not see Maxine or any of the lab people. I was kind of friendless.

The timer went off and all the participants scattered. Their goal seemed to be—go as far away as possible. It was raining pretty hard. I was cold and wet. My goal was to find a dry spot and wait out the exercise of team building. Of course there was no place to hide, or was there?

If I remembered correctly from years ago, when I had taken my children for hikes in Widow's Woods—this was before they discovered body piercings, mortal combat Internet games and the rest—we had found a cave.

I stumbled through the wetness. Briars caught at my clothes. Fortunately, it was too cold for snakes to be out and about, or was it? I began to doubt that I could locate the cave. Widow's Woods was a great big place.

I tripped on a rotten log and fell on my face. A good thing for me, it turned out, because through the bushes I could see an opening into a cave. If I had not been lying on my face, I would have missed it.

I wiggled through the wet brambles and entered the cave. It was very tiny and it led downward a short distance. There was barely room for me. I wrapped up in my coat to stay warm and hunkered down in the cave for the rest of the morning. The rain picked up in its intensity and the wind whistled about, but I was dry and warm. From time to time, I could hear yells, ranging from cries of victory to screams (faked) when a person was shot with a paintball.

A century later, the signal for the end of the game sounded, as has been agreed upon, with a fire alarm kind of noise. I came out of the cave and walked in a round-about fashion, until I had come to the group. Most people had been colored with spots on their jackets. Several people were missing.

Willis, the organizer of the team building exercise said, “We are short three people—Sheila had to go home because her children became sick (well played, Sheila) and Douglas fell and may have ruptured his Chilean tendon (sure Dougie had; I had watched him practice that move). However we are still missing Sharon. We will give her a few more minutes, before we start looking for her.

Congratulations, muddy brown-gray team! It looks like you have won this year’s exercise—thanks to Bixie.”

We stood around, shivering in the rain, waiting for Sharon. People came up to me and congratulated me for a game well-played. Everyone wanted to know my secret for surviving the onslaught of paintballs.

Willis finally took charge and organized us into several search teams and we began to look for Sharon, calling her name. Within twenty minutes, Chad and Monroe, two housekeepers at the Institution, found Sharon.

She lay face down in a tiny stream. After Willis checked her out, he yelled, “She’s dead. I can’t find a pulse; she must have fallen and hit her head.”

Everyone had advice about what the next step should be. Some advocated bringing her out of the woods and others, more CSI savvy said, “No, no, you can’t move her; the police will want to investigate.”

The debate raged on. It was decided that a vote should be taken. The group began a heated discussion on what kind of method should be used for the voting—raised hands, yay or nay, secret ballot and several other less-used methods. I stepped closer to the Sharon. I could see a hole in her coat and the blood seeping from the hole.

I shouted above the hullabaloo, “I think she was shot!”

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We all became silent and then Willis took out his cell phone and called 911. I moved away from the crowd. Someone had been using a loaded gun, instead of the paintball gun. I did not like the feeling I was getting. Why would someone shoot Sharon? I took a moment to think about things. It was possible that Sharon had been shot totally accidentally by a hunter in the woods. Each fall, there are numerous deaths reported which have been caused by a drunk or myopic hunter who mistakes a 5'10" man for a squirrel or a deer. Perhaps Sharon had been a hunting fatality. Personally, I was glad I had hid out in the cave.

As Sharon lay there dead with her face down in the babbling brook, I noticed an odd kind of thing. She was wearing the same color of coat as mine. Indeed, with her hair all straggling down, instead of her normal tidy bun, she looked like me.

My shivering worsened. Had someone intended the bullet for me? Why would anyone try to kill me, especially in Rustin? I had live here peacefully for many years before I had moved to Sleaufort.

Eventually, the Sheriff and EMTs came and removed Sharon's water-logged body. They questioned everybody—trying to see if anyone knew anything—we didn't. Finally they let us go. We were told to stay available for further questioning.

They continued to search for evidence.

When I got back to Chloe's place, the very first thing I did was ripped off my wet and muddy clothes. A hot shower was next. I fed the cats and then I called Jade.

When she answered I could hear all kinds of music in the background.

"Hi girl, how's Rustin? We're having day two of the beach party."

I asked, "Isn't it raining? We have completed out paintball team exercise. It took all day. It is pouring rain here and cold besides. And someone got shot during the exercise. Her name

was Sharon; she was an administrative kind of person—she was the one told you about that always smiled and nodded her head at the department meetings. She was really irritating. I don't know why she got shot or who shot her, but she was wearing a coat like mine, and with her hair down she kind of looked like me—but fatter... And Maxine, who is my temp boss in the lab, has still not turned up. I was talking to her last night on the phone. She screamed and the call was disconnected, and then I got a heavy-breather call. I am afraid something bad has happened.”

I stopped talking—mostly because I had run out of breath.

Jade said, “Bixie, you know I am very supportive of all your delusions and I hear your pain. I want you to tell me everything, but not now. Zac of the Zombies is here and he's getting ready to sing that song I love so much, so call me back. Kiss, kiss!” Jade was gone.

Maybe I could reach William—he was somewhere in Rustin. He had been a big help for me in Sleaufort, as I tried to fight off the Thomases.

My cell phone rang. It was Phoebe. We had been close friends when I lived in Rustin. She was just mischievous enough that we came close to getting in quite a bit of trouble. Of course we never got in trouble, but we were often two steps ahead of the authorities.

Phoebe had moved to the DC area right before I left Rustin. She had gotten a really good government job; she had said it was hush-hush—some kind of undercover job. I accused her of joining one of the escort services that provided nice young ladies for the legislative people, sort of an “undercover with the man” kind of job. She always got mad and said that I knew very well what “undercover” meant and it certainly wasn't an escort service.

Phoebe said, “I'm going to be in town for a few days and I really want to catch up with what's been happening in your life. But be aware that I don't believe your stories of Sleaufort—that whole Thomas saga—beginning with the blackmailer Miss

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Thomas and then onto her demented half-brother or twin brother or son or whatever he was—the guy dressing as a woman. I know you are fantasizing about the little troupe of Thomases which included a troll and finally, all the drama of finding out Judge Thomas' secrets. You are such a story teller.”

“No, no, Phoebe, I am so telling the truth. I almost died, like ten times.”

“Please, Bixie, save it for the naïve. I am into big criminal investigations. I can't talk about them on the cell phone; I think that I may be monitored. I'll tell you about them tomorrow. Let's do lunch.”

“Wait, Phoebe, I'll be glad to meet you, but let me tell you what's happening here. Maxine, the lab manager has disappeared, plus Sharon, that obnoxious administrative person, you know, the one who always nods her head and smiles during all the department meetings got shot during our paintball team-spirit exercise today and I think that she was mistaken for me and....”

I stopped talking; I could hear noises of a scuffle, then there was silence, followed by the dial tone. I tried to do *69, but I got the recording saying the number was blocked. I gave Phoebe a few minutes to call me again. She did not.

I dialed the phone number, I had for William. Who knew if he still had the same number? The number rang and rang and finally, the answering machine came on, with a voice that sounded like William.

“Speak!” the message said. And so I did. “Hi, William, I'm here in Rustin, and I had hoped I could find some peaceful times here. I was invited to come and run some quality control for some of the lab assays and to develop a few new ones. It sounded pretty straight-forward but strange things are already happening. Maxine, the lab manager has disappeared and Sharon...”

William came on the line.

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I asked, "Have you been there listening all this time; just sitting there and listening to me...?"

William laughed and said, "There you go being all paranoid again. It sounds like you could use a friend to unload with. I will be happy to have breakfast with you in the morning."

I answered, "Oh how great! It will be so good to sit down and catch up on things with you."

"Now, Bixie, don't you be planning a great big long conversational visit. We'll have a quick bagel and then maybe you can go with me to the church, I am currently investigating. I had planned on using another operative, but something bad happened in the last five minutes to her. Phe, I mean, she is not available, anymore."

"William, you are so manipulative. I don't need/want to be dragged into another church thing. I might have known you weren't really going to help me out; you should be ashamed. Bill was right—you are just a user."

I would have said much more but why should I to a dial tone? William was gone.

William had investigated claims of fraud against a church in Sleaufort. Purportedly, they were claiming to heal folks. Who knew what this church was doing—fire bombing abortion clinics, kidnapping girls for white slavery rings?

I was sure that William would be oh so happy to tell me.

I fell asleep to the sound of rain on the roof. I woke up once during the night; I was dreaming a bad dream about Phoebe. I replayed the conversation I had had with William. Had he started to say that Phoebe was no longer available?

EIGHT

I hurried to the second floor pharmacy with my requisition. Yolanda was working in the back.

“Hi, Yolanda! What’s new? I asked the question, before actually seeing her. I was shocked; she looked awful. She had no make-up on; her hair hung to her shoulders in its brown drabness. She seemed to have lost weight; her clothes hung on her skinny frame.

The words flew out of my mouth. “What is wrong with you? You look sick.”

“Oh Bixie, I have made such a mistake. I married Jeffrey a few months ago; I thought he was my Prince Charming. I dated him just a short time, and he was so gallant and polite; he said I was the most perfect woman he had ever seen—he wanted to protect me and guard me and keep me from harm.

Some of my friends warned me—they said he had been charged with several counts of domestic violence and stalking. But did I listen?

I asked him about the stories, and he said two ex-girlfriends had not been happy when he chose to leave them, and so they had gone to the police. The charges had been dismissed for lack of evidence.

I listened to my emotions, not my brain. See where I am now? He watches me all the time; the only place I am safe is here—with all the security restrictions about this place, he can’t come in.

He has no job. He is so vile-tempered that he gets fired from every job. He was a drinker. Now he is into drugs. He thinks I am cheating on him. He punishes me for all kinds of fictional reasons. Look!” She raised her skirt; above her knees were bruises and scratch marks.

“My word,” I said in shock. “Why don’t you leave?”

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“And go where, Miss Bixie Lee? You tell me where I can go and be safe from him?”

“Go to Sleaufort; I will give you my friend, Jade’s phone number. She has connections, mysterious, perhaps illegal connections, but she can free you from Jeffrey.”

Yolanda’s face was wrinkled in disbelief. “How can she keep Jeffrey from finding me in Sleaufort?”

“I don’t know how she does it—only that she will take care of things. I will tell you a quick story and then I better be trotting back to the lab.

Once upon a time in Sleaufort, there lived a pretty young thing named Ashley. Ashley was naïve for her age and headstrong—not a good combination. She fell madly in love with a guy named Patrick. They eloped and from that point on, bad things began happening.

Patrick was lazy; Ashley was beautiful. Patrick was greedy; Ashley was gullible. Patrick was devious; Ashley was a dummy.

Anyway Patrick videoed Ashley in sorts of pornographic set-ups and marketed them on the Internet. When Ashley objected, Patrick broke her finger. The next time Ashley complained, he broke her arm. Things got worse and worse.

Eventually Ashley talked to Jade about her problems; she had become increasingly worried that Patrick was going to kill her and tape her dying in a snuff film. Patrick had always done a little drug use, but by now he smelling all kinds of chemicals and his mind was toast.

Jade told Ashley not to worry. She would “talk” to Patrick. One dark and stormy night, Jade met Patrick in a bikers’ bar. They had a brief conversation. Patrick was never seen again. Ashley lived happily ever after.”

“What are you implying, Bixie? What did Jade do to Patrick to make him disappear? Is he dead?”

“Beats me! Just give Jade a call. See you in Sleaufort.”

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I carried my ethanol back to the lab. Life had continued without me—centrifuges were spinning; mixers were stirring; Rick was snoring.

I compared the label on the bottle of ethanol with the label on the bottle I had been using. There were no differences between the labels; the grade of alcohol used in the assay was not the problem.

I reviewed the results again. No matter what I did, the assay was still not giving numbers anywhere close to the ones Janet had measured. I looked over her notes and on one sheet, I could see there had been several erasures.

A person new to espionage might be interested to learn that the secret to restoring writing that had been erased is to copy the sheet and make the copy very dark.

I learned this lesson the first month I was in Sleaufort. Mr. Gorham had thrown out an interesting piece of paper in his trash. As was my habit, I kept all the interesting things I found in the garbage. I felt this practice helped me in my work at the courthouse.

Anyway, the note had several phone numbers that had been erased. With a little bit of persistence, I was able to restore the numbers, and the knowledge I gained, namely Mr. Gorham was liasoning with Bubbles, a contortionist stripper helped me to get a much needed Friday off from work.

My fingers had been busy working on the note. Now when I held the paper up to the UV light I could read the erased words.

Maxine had written, “???? Something wrong with assay, question Henry; then call the DEA.” Who was Henry and why was the DEA involved? To be sure, the DEA would be one group wanting a good quantitative assay for BO.

I asked Tybo who was busy, busy lining up pipet tips for more information about Henry.

He laughed, “Interesting you should ask. Henry worked on the BO assay for awhile after Janet up and vanished. Then he didn’t show up for work one Monday. He left a note, saying he had a chance to do what he had always wanted to do—be a

clown—so he was giving up lab work and joining the circus. The circus was in town that week.

Serendipity was hot for Henry. She believed that Henry was getting ready to propose; he had been hinting about having a special gift that came in size 6—her ring size. She refused to consider the possibility that Henry would become a clown. She said he was actually clownaphobic because of an unfortunate childhood event where he had been stuffed into a very tiny car (although it was fuel efficient) and had been forced to travel with eight other people to Winnipeg where his grandmother lived.

Serendipity was so vocal, that the administration placed her on compassionate leave (without pay) for several weeks until she regained her equilibrium. By then, she had fallen madly in love with Harry, the barber from Chic Mon Ami and so Henry was forgotten.”

“Please!” I said to Tybo. “What happened to Henry? You act as if there is a little mystery involved.”

“Well,” said Tybo. “I guess you could call it mysterious.”

“Call what mysterious? Come on, cough it up!”

“Several weeks after Henry disappeared, the park rangers at Plunder Mountain found his car. It was hidden in a great big patch of poison ivy and kudzu vine. You know how fast kudzu vine grows. They said it was a miracle that they saw it when they did. They theorized that in another week or so the kudzu would have covered the car completely—and the poison ivy would certainly have kept folks from exploring in that particular patch.

Barry, the older of the park rangers, macheted his way through the foliage and he said the closer he got to the car, the more sure he was that something dead was in the car.

Sure enough, when Henry’s car was reached, there was Henry—quite dead. The conjecture, at first, was that he had had an accident, and then they thought he had committed suicide.

How ludicrous! Like a person would tie a green tie with shamrocks about his neck and pull and pull until he was dead, while sitting on the front seat of a car and a mini-cooper at that.

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Henry's killer has never been found and of course, there are no suspects.

Everyone agreed that he was such a nice guy—he never harmed anyone, bla, bla.”

“Let me ask you a question, Tybo. Don't you find it interesting that there are now two unsolved murders associated with the Institution?”

Tybo looked at me, then up at the ceiling and then back at me and winked. “Bixie, I have found that the best solvent to use when cleaning glassware is potassium dichromate mixed with sulfuric acid. Mind you that you must rinse many times to get the glassware free of the solution, but a wash a day is but a wash away.”

I looked at Toby and thought, “Speaking of solvents, what organic liquid has he been sniffing?”

Tybo winked and glanced up at the ceiling again. Then he mouthed to me, “We're being watched; I'll call you later.”

Tybo then nodded his head and said, “So long, Bixie, it's my day to give blood. We are encouraged at the Institution to be community-minded. See you tomorrow.”

It was time for me to leave also. I swiped out again and retrieved my coat, scarf, hat, gloves and boots from my locker. I thought back to Sleaufort, always warm and sunny, so different from Rustin, with its layers of snow and ice.

I put on all my winter apparel and walked outside. The wind was blowing and the coldness penetrated my layers of clothes. I stuck my hands in the coat pockets—anything to keep them warm—and felt a cylindrical thing. When I pulled it from my pocket, I discovered it was a flash drive, so odd, where had it come from?

I promised myself I would check it out. But first, I was going to get home, warm up some soup and settle in to watching Monday night television.

My cell phone rang; it was, drum roll, please, not Jade, nor Amber, nor the anonymous breather, but William.

“Hi ya, Bixie, How are you doing? I hope your day was great.”

“Okay, what favor do you want? Why are you being so nice?”

“Why, Bixie, how can you be so untrusting? You know that you are special to me, and I truly like hearing your voice.”

“Bull-hockey!” I said. “Just spit out the reason you called.”

“Sure, Bixie, I remember your saying that you find Rustin kind of boring—well, I have something special that we can do tonight.”

I thought to myself, “Am I good at predicting things or not?” The funniest thing about the whole conversation was the fact that once upon a time I had believed that William had romantic feelings for me. Now I knew William for the manipulative jerk he was. But he was determined and single-minded in his pursuit of evil-doers.

William continued his conversation. “Tonight is the night for Bible Studies for couples at the church. I need you to come with me. This is my plan: we’ll settle in for the beginning of the study, and then you’ll ask some stupid question, like you do so well and while the leader is dealing with you, I’ll go out to find a bathroom, because as everyone knows I have a prostate problem. I will do a little exploring and then I will pop back and join the meeting.”

“Wait, William, did you say, that we are going to do Bible Studies. Are you whacko? My plans are warm soup, reality TV—I’m not sure if tonight is the night that Blake, the bachelor, meets all the women he rejected in the show, or if it’s Celebrity Rehab or it may be the show, Animals Do the Dumbest Things—it doesn’t matter.

I have to be at work at 7AM tomorrow to start a ten hour assay. It’s freezing outside. I think I’m getting a cold. Jade’s planning to call and maybe all my little nieces will call me too, because I am their favorite auntie, so you see I can’t go with you.”

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I was talking to a dial tone. I drove home, and there sat William out in front of the condo, waiting. His only comment was, “Bixie, did you wear that to work? For the Bible study you need to look different. Put on that nice long gray skirt and the shapeless tan sweater—and don’t forget to wipe all that paint off your face. Be quick; I’ll wait here in my truck. Don’t worry about supper; there’ll be a snack at the meeting.”

I went upstairs and got dressed. The thought of rebelling went through my mind. But what was the point? William could nag better than any other person I had ever known. And I did owe him a lot for rescuing me from the Sleaufort mess.

Ten minutes later, I joined William in his truck. We drove out to the church.

He put on a talk radio show, which pretty much killed conversation.

To be sure, there wasn’t a better way to spend an evening, after a full day of working in an insanity ward, than sitting on a hard church pew, smelling the mildew nestling in my clothes, on an empty stomach, listening to a guy talking about the imminent destruction of our civilization as we know it.

Soon enough, we were at the church. We joined a group of twenty or so people in a classroom. The Bible study was being taught by one of the church deacons. He was tall and thin except for a bulge at his waist. His looks were unexceptional, except for very red lips that he kept licking.

The rest of the group was a mixed bag of people. There were maybe three or four individuals that looked kind of normal, but the rest of the collection were not people I would want to meet in a dark room. There was an unusual intensity about them. Their eyes glinted and sparkled, as we read from our lesson from the book of Revelations.

At the descriptions of sinners torn from limb to limb and thrown into eternal fire, smiles broke out across their faces. Two or three moved back and forth in their chairs and mumbled nonsense as drool ran down their chins.

I tried to not make eye contact with any of the group. William whispered in my ear. "You need to create a diversion. This isn't going the way, I thought it would. Do something, or we will never get to leave!"

That was all the incentive I needed. There was simply no way, I could stay here much longer—but what to do, what to do? I called upon all the dramatic spirit that resided in my body, and with a jerk, I stood up.

All eyes turned to me. I waved my arms about my body in clock-wise circles. Too bad, for the ugly man on my left that had been staring at my sweater all evening, when I walloped him right in the nose. Then I waved my arms behind my body and then in front. Some would say I deliberately slapped the old weasel nosed woman who sat in front of me. So she reminded me of my nemesis from college.

Everyone's eyes had turned toward me. William touched my shoulder, and I gave him a good wallop with the hymnal.

"There, there," he said. "You are overwrought; I will retrieve your nerve tonic from the truck." He was gone.

I knew order would be restored relatively quickly if I didn't do more histrionics. Bunny-hopping to the front of the room, I began to talk in a monotone, reciting all the steps in mitosis.

To keep interest up, I flapped my skirt up and down. I was sure getting attention. Several men, in security guard uniforms, had come in the classroom. They stood at the back, debating what to do.

I sure hoped William got finished soon because I didn't think the guards had good plans for me. They held tasers, and were beginning to circle-approach me.

Many years ago—well, not so many years ago, I had been in a similar situation. In my freshman year at college, I had attended a fraternity party. To be sure, many fraternities contain a good group of guys, interested in community activities and giving encouragement to their members to become responsible members of society.

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But there is a small number of fraternities that narrowly escape being on the expulsion list for their hijinks and pranks. Such was the fraternity whose party I so blithely attended.

I realized I was in bad bad trouble, when I was surrounded by a group of eight drunken, barely-clothed guys who were talking obscenities as they promised all kinds of “special” activities for me.

During this time period of my life, I had a really nervous stomach, and I had eaten a supper that consisted of quite exotic things that weren’t sitting well anyway, and the stress of the moment was not helping.

Before I knew it, out came all the special things I had consumed—most of which I have never eaten before—the Rocky Mountain oysters, and the curly things that were stewed in tomato sauce, and the tiny crunchy things in a mixture of pineapple and mango chutney and the thick creamy gravy that had the odd after taste.

The circle of guys jumped back and soon left the room. Once I was finished with my purging, I found the back door and retreated. That night marked the end to my tentative steps into socializing with fraternity guys and also into adventuresome eating.

If only I could throw-up now, I might buy myself some time. My stomach growled, reminding me of the supper I had not eaten in my hurry to help William.

The guards crept closer; the situation was definitely going downhill. At that moment, in came William. He walked past the security guards, and put his arm about my shoulder, saying, “I must apologize; I brought my beloved here thinking she was all better from the necrotizing bite of the Uepotimus spider. I was wrong. If any of you feel a fever coming on, please go to a doctor. She may still be contagious but the doctor can give you a great big dose of gamma globulins, and you will be all better.

I got my dose, and truly, there have been no problems. Your injection site may be tender—but in a situation like this, an

ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Impotence is such a difficult thing to explain.

Excuse us, excuse us.”

The last little bit of William’s speech had definitely made the security guards shift back.

We made it back to William’s truck with no further difficulties.

“That was no fun!” I told William. “Things were getting ugly pretty quick. I hope this little excursion proved to be worthwhile.”

William said, “You did an excellent job! Getting the security guards involved was a stroke of genius. I was able to do quite a bit of looking about; I have sent photos to the appropriate authorities.

I found the room where the DVDs of the children are made. I accessed their computer and recovered an recent mailing list of their customers. I stored all these files on a flash drive. Last, but not least, I found where they keep the children!

Moreover, I don’t believe anyone will be able to tell I was there. I hope not, because on the downside, everything I obtained was done illegally—no warrant, no court order.”

“Let me just check out one tiny point with you; are you sure that there were no monitors about recording all your illegal search and recovery activities?”

“Oh no, Bixie, you are so dad-blamed smart; how could I have been so careless? I never thought to ... oh please, give me credit for a teeny tiny bit of smarts. Yes, there was a really neat monitoring set-up. However, a group of crows attack the X3-gadget that was on the telephone pole and the whole system shut down.”

“Crows?”

“Don’t ask. Are you hungry? I did promise you supper.”

“I’ll take a rain check. I want to get home and chill out.”

ELEVEN

The phone rang, interrupting my thoughts. I could swear that I heard breathing, and truly these random hang-ups were irritating me. I yelled into the receiver, “I know who you are, and I know your dirty little secrets and I have written a long list that I will be turning into Sheriff Grumpy, so just...”

I was talking to a dial tone. The phone rang again. That really did it. I growled something obscene into the phone, before I heard Jade’s voice.

“Bixie Lee, you sound way tense. You need to chill out or come back to Sleaufort or something. Anyway, let me tell you about Mr. Gorham and the old pervert, Peckinsniff. You know, or maybe you don’t, they were attending a city managers’ conference in Atlanta—which is kind of surprising in today’s economy. Who knew that Sleaufort could afford the expense? Whatever, that’s neither here nor there.

The explanation offered by the Sleaufort bureaucracy was that the conference would instruct cities on ways to recruit new businesses and tourism. Sleaufort could use an infusion of newness, so the two guys got to attend.

The two were arrested in an undercover prostitution sting. My source, Pete, remember him—I introduced you to him once—he’s a former policeman who worked at the escort service in New Fern. Well, Peter said, apparently the two had not attended any of the conference meetings but had been drinking and carousing all about South-Side. So, it had only been a matter of time, before they ran into deep doo-doo. And on Saturday, they did.

When the police raided the “party”, it was pretty much empty, because all the regulars and staff had been warned, but not the Peckinsniff and the Gorham.

They were found in the kitchen, passed out and lying in a dishelved heap. Mr. Gorham was wearing a crimson thong and

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an UNC muscle shirt and Peckinsniff had on a blond wig, nipple clamps, and a pair of leopard skin bikini bottoms. They spent a night in jail. The next morning they met bail and were sent back to Sleaufort.

They are trying to get people to accept their story of being “set up” by their political opponents, due to their brave outspokenness in dealing with Sleaufort’s corruption.

The jury is out on whether the common folk will accept their story or not, but it is apparent that the two wives are not swallowing the tale. In my opinion...”

Jade’s voice faded into some giggles and then I heard, “Bad boy, bad, bad...” before the phone went dead. Date night in Sleaufort, and the rain continued in Rustin.

I soon went to bed and fell into the innocent sleep that I had earned.

Morning came too quickly. The rain had stopped. I quickly got ready and went outside. After two steps, I realized that the temperature had fallen, and by then so had I—victim to ice on the sidewalk.

Only my pride (and my rear) suffered and I soldiered into work.

Old Mac Thomas was out spreading salt. Once again, I marveled at the number of Thomases out and about. I glared in his eyes and was greeted by red-glazed eyeballs which clashed horribly with his greenish grayish brownish pond scum colored irises.

He gazed back and wished me a “good day” with his sour beer smelling breath.

The work day had officially begun. Everyone in the lab looked stressed. The news about no raises, layoffs, and unpaid furloughs had not improved morale and there was grumbling everywhere.

Tybo told me there was a group meeting at 10:00, and we must all attend.

I thought to myself, "Perfect! The assay will just get to percolating, and then I'll have stop and attend the meeting. The assay will be useless when I return."

I made up my mind then and there to escape the whole she-bang. If I wasn't mistaken, my gums had begun to hurt, and that said, "Dentist appointment." I started rubbing my jaw, moaning softly, and when no one noticed, I increased the volume.

Finally, Morris, the guy who worked nearby, said, "Shut the noise up. I don't care what your problem is—I will bet you do not have a pregnant wife, who is expecting quadruplets and a mother-in-law who has recently moved in your house(with its two bedrooms) to help take care of everything. Did I mention, the mother-in-law is a drunk, a kleptomaniac, and has a 400 pound motorcyclist boyfriend who plans to come with her?"

And even better, I am not yet sure how my wife got pregnant, because my sperm are so gone from my vasectomy four years ago, and did I mention, that we were some of the people who got those really good rates on a mortgage two years ago. Well, I wasn't actually involved. My beloved wife forged my name on an application while I was on my annual deer hunting trip. What a surprise homecoming! We moved from our affordable rental unit into one of those huge houses in Magnolia Estates.

My beloved wife said all this was necessary, because her children from the previous marriage were now uninstitutionalized and could live with us."

Morris took a breath and finished with the words, "So you see I am not listening to you and your problems."

I sniffed and thought, "What a self-centered pig—it's all me, me, me!" But I was nice, and simply answered, "Children are such a blessing."

I went to the acting lab manager and told him of the horrific pain I was experiencing.

"Yeah, yeah, Bixie, whatever! Everyone gets one sick day per month—no doctor's excuse is needed, but if you need more than one day, well, my advice is don't!"

I cleaned glassware until it was time for the lab meeting. I ignored Morris, as best I could, but it was a little disconcerting to watch him. He had lined up several chemicals on the bench—sodium cyanide, minute glass boiling beads, arsenic trioxide, potassium hydroxide, plus an assortment of scalpels, needles and syringes. He was busy reading stuff off his desktop computer, and when I tried to read over his shoulder, he growled.

Finally, 10:00 came and we all tramped into the conference room. Dr. Thomas greeted us. He was wearing a cheerful yellow tie with smiley faces—his was not.

Dr. Thomas looked at each of us and then shook his head in a sad kind of way and said, “The reason for the lab meeting today is to explain the thought processes our beloved leaders of the Institution have been going through during these tough economic times.

As most of you know, our beloved Chairman, Dr. Brine is steering our research ship through the economic storms that have been created by government mismanagement from those formerly in power. Dr. Brine is, as you know, too...”

My thoughts were already wandering; I glanced at my fellow lab techs. A few were listening with great attentiveness, but I saw a number of techs doodling, with the predominate theme of their art being knives, explosions or similar subjects.

I knew Dr. Brine well. He had climbed the corporate ladder within the Institution at an unbelievably fast pace. He was quite young and good-looking; both qualities had served him well—in the servicing he had performed for the Institution—or rather, on the women within the Institution.

Of course, it may have only been a rumor, but I had heard that Dr. Brine made a point of seducing wives of certain higher-ups within the Institution. Once the wife fell asleep, he used the free time to collect information on their husbands. But like I say, it could have been only hearsay.

My attention returned to Dr. Thomas as he concluded his talk with the words, “and so effective next month, there will be one day of furlough each month for every employee in this group.

Don't plan to take a sick day; you will come to work and gladly give the Institution one day's worth of free work."

Interestingly, no one clapped, although Dr. Thomas paused for such a response. Dr. Thomas bared his teeth in a smile and left the room.

I didn't care about the furlough one way or the other, because I would be home in Sleaufort, but all the people around me were hot under the collar.

Morris and his friend Rick were cussing up a storm, and saying horrible things about the beloved leader. Morris asked Rick, "Have you heard that they created another position called 'VP in charge of Interactivity?' What does that mean—what will that person even do?"

Rick answered with a lowered voice, "Obviously, you haven't heard that the position has already been filled with Dorothy Phelan."

Morris whispered back, "You mean Feeling Dot, that blonde, or rather fake blonde, bimbo that used to work in Public Relations?"

"Yep, apparently, Dr. Brine believes he needs her expertise in managing various upcoming projects."

The two men began snickering and making jokes that became more and more graphic at Dr. Brine's expense.

I returned to the lab and with dramatic moans signed out for my dentist appointment. I left the Institution, stopped at a fast food place, and then drove to the boyhood home of Judge Thomas.

The demolishing crew was at the Thomas house. I shook hands with Johnny, the son of Donovan from Crooks' Flea Market. He told me that his crew was getting ready to take a lunch break and then they planned to work in a house down the block. His final comment was, "Enjoy yourself! You have all afternoon to look around, and really, if you find anything lying about, fell free to take it."

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Johnny hesitated and then continued in his talk, “Before we leave, I should warn you that there is something very strange about this house. Several of my workers, me included, have felt what we call vibes in certain parts of the house. Danny is the youngest worker. He was raised by a mother who is a practicing Wiccan. He says the house reeks of evil. He insists he can physically feel the dark side pressing down on him. But maybe he is just trying to get out of work—or maybe he is tripping.

Be careful! I’ll come by at 5PM and lock up. Later!” He was gone.

I went into the foyer. Which way to go first? I decided to take a look-see on the main floor first. There was a lot of trash lying about. The light fixtures had been removed and parts of the flooring were missing. The rooms felt empty and cold but there were no vibes.

I wasn’t sure what I was looking for—but my hope was that I would find something in the Judge’s early history that would clarify why he became a monster. Was there an explanation in his childhood for his many years of children killings? What had caused Judge Thomas to become a sexual deviant and murderer?

Environment or genes?

I walked up the creaky stairs to the second floor. There was a centrally-located hallway with many rooms leading off the corridor. Why were there so many rooms and why were they so small? I thought about this for a moment, and then I knew the reason.

These rooms had served as the living spaces for the girls in the brothel run by Judge Thomas’ mother. There were three very tiny rooms, the size of closets, with bolts on the outside—no doubt, punishment rooms for the girls who had misbehaved.

In the other small bedrooms iron plates were bolted to the floor. Had the girls been chained in their rooms? Were the stains on the floor, blood?

I flashed my light into one of the punishment rooms and I could see scratch marks on the walls and on the door itself,

where a desperate girl, terrified of the dark, had tried to escape. I began to feel like I was drowning in a cold fog.

On the floor of one of the punishment rooms, my light flashed on something white. I bent down to see what it was. I picked it up and suddenly recognized that it was a tooth. It fell from my grasp. I had seen all I could take. I whispered a tiny prayer and hurried down the steps.

I had not yet gone into the basement. I wasn't sure I wanted to. There would be spiders and the enormous roaches that Rustin was famous for. They had even been nicknamed "Rustin Roaches," and little plastic souvenir roaches had been popular once upon a time in Rustin's shops.

I opened the basement door and peered down. It was like looking into a dark tunnel that led to hell. I took the first step and the next one and then the next one, and finally I stood on the concrete basement floor. There were piles of trash here and boxes of stuff.

I went to one box and pulled out some of its contents. I had dragged out a dress, mildewed and falling apart. It was old-fashioned in design. Underneath the first dress was another dress, bigger than the first. The box contained six dresses in all. Mixed in the clothes were a few books and other personal items, falling apart from the dampness.

No doubt, these things had belonged to the girls that had been forced to be in the brothel. Some of the dresses were so small; the wearers must have been tiny women or children.

I walked further into the basement. The cement floor gave way to the original red clay floor. The smell was bad, mildew and rot—a potent combination. Obviously, countless animals had found their way into the basement and died.

Behind the oil furnace was an incredibly tiny room with walls of cement blocks. The room contained an iron bed. A rusting chain was attached to the one of the bed's posts.

Who had been shackled in this dungeon?

I moved closer, very cautiously—I had heard about snakes that lived in basements. I heard scurrying. I moved a little

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closer and dancing about in the flashlight beam was the biggest Rustin Roach I had ever seen.

He waved his little antenna at me, as he left. Truly, if I had not been paralyzed with a combination of fear and disgust, I would have screamed like a girl and fled, but there I stood.

When I became unglued from the floor, I moved forward, and flashed my light about the bed. The light picked up a glint from something under the bed.

I reached down and retrieved a sodden cigar box with a glittering top. Inside was a tiny journal. I stuck it in my bag and moved about the basement toward the corner most distant from the bed. The beam of the flashlight showed what appeared to be piles in the darkness of that corner. They almost looked like burial spots—surely not. I walked over, carefully, now that I knew Rusty (The name I gave the roach.) was nearby.

The piles could have resulted from leakage or flooding into the basement. As I looked more closely, I saw a delicate white bone. I knew there was no innocent explanation for the piles. Next to the first bone was another; I could see many bones. I was standing next to a graveyard.

I rushed back to the part of the basement that had been cemented. I fled up the stairs. I had lost my desire to sort out Judge Thomas' childhood. If my suspicions were correct, the journal would answer some questions. But deep inside I already knew the truth.

The iron bed, with its shackles and the graves had probably been part of the rearing for the young Thomas child. No doubt he had been exposed to the consequences of what happened when girls in the house were disobedient or outstayed their usefulness or became pregnant or did one hundred other things that angered Judge Thomas' mother. Maybe she killed the girls because she enjoyed it. Who could say?

It was almost time for Johnny to come back and lock up the house. In another day or two, it would have been demolished, but not now, not with the bones in the corner. Why hadn't his crew found the graveyard in this charnel house?

ethel kouba

Here was the man, so I asked, “Have you all ever checked out the basement to...”

Johnny interrupted my question. “Now, Miss Bixie, that is not our job. We are supposed to tear the house down and remove all the rubble so the new baseball field can be built.”

“I have bad news for you. Come down into the basement, and I will show you.”

We went down the steps and I led Johnny to the back corner, where we both viewed the bones.

Johnny stopped in his tracks. “My word, what happened here? We’ll need to contact the police and get some experts involved so they can sort this out. It’s awful! How many people are buried here? How long have they been here? Who put them here?”

I had truly had all I could take. I told him I was leaving before the authorities came. It would not do me any good to be found here. After all, I had been excused to go to the dentist.

He said, “Thanks so much for your detective work”—in quite an uncalled for sarcastic voice.

I left with the little journal I had found. I took gasps of fresh air. I could still smell the odor of mildew, corruption and death. I welcomed the wind that was blowing from the north and the freshness that it brought.

FOURTEEN

My phone rang. It was Millie from Sleaufort. “Hi, Bixie, I won’t take but a minute because a group of us are meeting at the newest vegetarian restaurant for a bachelorette party for Cindy, one of the temps.”

I was still trying to compute, “Cindy was getting married?” that I missed the next few words. My attention was grabbed by the words, “America’s Most Wanted.” I asked Millie to say the last sentence again.

She repeated what she had said. “The guy whose picture you emailed me looks remarkably like a killer named Barney Able. Barney was featured on America’s Most Wanted several weeks ago.

He is a suspect in several lonely heart murders. His mode of operation is that he joins some kind of lonely-heart club, woos the women, who all seem to be unattached, middle-aged, wealthy, plain old maids, and when the women are willing to do whatever he suggests, he has them sell all their possessions and bring their cash and themselves to a meeting spot. The woman thinks she will be getting married. Barney has other plans.

He makes sure he has the money and then it is, ‘Adios Senorita.’ The woman disappears and years later, some hiker in the woods finds a bone here and a bone there, and that marks the end of the woman looking for love in all the wrong places.”

“Are you sure that Ginger’s new beau is Barney? The picture was kind of fuzzy.”

“Bixie, you sent two pictures, remember. For sure, the face picture was not clear, but the picture of his willy-wanker could not have any more distinct. Several of the women who disappeared told their friends about their lover’s tattoo. How many men would have such a tattoo in such a place?”

I thanked Millie for her answer and told her I would pass the tale on to Ginger. Before I called Ginger, I looked at the non-

head shot again.. Oh, my word, how could I have missed such a distinctive marking on Byron/Barney? I knew how—I had avoided looking at his... well, where the tattoo was. What a braggart, “A+ primo”, indeed!

I called Ginger and told her Millie’s story. Ginger did not want to believe me. She said that Byron’s most recent email response had been so sweet. She told him she was having doubts about converting her mutual funds to cash, this being the worst economy since the depression. He had been so concerned and understanding. He offered to come to Rustin, if need be, and help her take care of things.

I said, “Ginger, that suggestion might not be a bad idea for two reasons. If he is really sincere you’ll get to see him in person, and if he is really Barney Able, there is reward money being offered.”

Ginger answered, “You know—I don’t really care if Byron is real or not. I wasn’t that excited about moving to Wyoming or wherever, he had his cattle ranch. This afternoon, I visited a new chat room and I think I have met my Mr. McDreamy. He’s a contractor, who does humanitarian work in France and Spain—building bridges and drainage ditches, so everyone can have pure water. He has been hurt badly by love, but he said my messages were so sweet and he could feel his heart mending from being broken. I’ll show you his picture tomorrow, he’s so wow...”

Oops, my cell phone’s battery had gone dead, or maybe my interest in receiving phone calls was dead. Gosh golly! I was getting tired of everyone’s problems. At least in Sleaufort, I had my gang of girls to get me through the hard times—but in Rustin, where was my support group?

This stint I was spending in Rustin was growing old and—I had only spent five days or seven days. Really, how long had I been here.

Saturday was coming. I would visit Crooks’ Flea Market again and... no, wait, I couldn’t go back there for awhile—not

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after being involved in the discovery of the bones in the Old Thomas home place.

The weather man was predicting another snowstorm for the weekend, with possible accumulations of two inches or two feet, and did it really matter?

There were no cute guys, like Bill or William or the tourists that came through Sleaufort. Well, there was William, who almost didn't count anymore. I needed to check on his progress in the church-school investigation.

I turned my cell phone back on. I had four messages—two from Ginger—great surprise, one from Jade and one from a blocked number.

I called Jade back. She wanted to update me on Cindy's prospective husband. "Bixie, it was like fate dropped the guy in Cindy's lap. You know how the three temps have that web site where they show those productions they have written, produced, and starred in— "

"Yeah, I know all about that enterprise—such shows as 'The Three Bares' and 'An XXXtrea Special Loving.'"

"One of the Danes, we met on the beach, has been a customer of the site for the last year. When he realized that Cindy was the 'Cin' part of the trio he loved so much, it was a match made in heaven. He wants to marry her right away and then he can get a green card and stay on in the United States.

The kind of odd thing about him is that he doesn't look Danish—I always thought of Danes as being blonde and tall, and he is short, with dark, dark hair and his name is Andre, but it takes all kinds, I guess.

But the other reason I called was to ask if it will be all right to use your house for the out-of-town wedding attendees to stay at? There will be several families with dogs and small children and you know what sticklers the Sleaufort motel people are..."

Dad-blame, the cell phone had died again.

I put the cell phone on the balcony to cool down and cut the TV on. What was this? Our beloved President was on, with still yet another news conference. He introduced his new dog,

who barked a few pithy remarks on the state of the economy. There was the weekly update on the progress of the White House garden. Cutworms had threatened the Swiss chard, but after appropriate intervention the danger no longer existed.

Rubbing my head, I cut the TV off and picked up the book I was currently reading. It was an autobiography of Elisa Spanard, and her bout with corpulence.

The book was a tear-jerker. Elisa had fought a long hard battle with obesity. From her early years as a teenager, the siren call of fatty food had lured her into a path dogged with jiggly arms and thighs.

She had turned to all sorts of things, looking for an answer to her addiction—the church, popular charismatic speakers, even drugs, but alas, there was no permanent solution. The pounds would disappear and then return.

Who can forget the photograph seen in every weekly magazine, of Elisa with grease all over her face, holding a piece of fried chicken in one hand and BBQ ribs in the other, as she snarled at those tender-hearted people trying to keep her from consuming two thousand more calories.

I put the book down and went food hunting in the kitchen. I dug through the frozen slabs of whatever in the freezing unit, until at last I reached the hidden treasure of Ben and Jerry's Double Chocolate Chunk with nuts.

Twelve hundred calories later, I was so relaxed, that the bed was the only entertainment I wanted...I'm talking "sleep," you pervert! Ten seconds later I was asleep, building up the strength for yet another day at the Institution. It would have been good if I had set the alarm.

The next morning I awoke to the unexpected pleasure of tiny sunbeams dancing across my face. I luxuriated briefly, until shock drove me from the bed.

"Oh my word!" I shrieked. "I forgot to set the alarm." Sure enough, it was already 8:30. It would be nearly impossible to get to the institution by 8:00AM. I quickly dressed and drove 85mph to work. Fortunately, the ice had melted.

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When I walked in the Institution, I was greeted by a trio of Thomases—Sarcoidosis, Mac and the great one himself, Dr. Thomas, CEO of the Institution.

Dr. Thomas was the designated spokesperson. He smiled unpleasantly and said, “Bixie Lee, we have been very disappointed in you. Maxine spoke so highly of you—your work ethic and your persistence and your dedication to finding solutions for lab problems. However, Maxine is dead, probably from suicide, and this fact alone says how bad her judgment was. Sadly, she appears to have been far more emotionally fragile than any of us suspected. Therefore, I am not sure I place validity in any of her decisions, but that being what it is—you keep repeating assays and getting invalid results; you are always late for work or leaving early; you are....”

Dr. Thomas’ face was getting all technicolored. Now, in addition to his grayish, greenish-brownish, pond-scum colored eyes, his cheeks and forehead had become vermilion, and his nose looked like Rudolph’s.

Was he going to have a stroke?

Sarcoidosis stepped in and spoke in a barely audible voice to Dr. Thomas. “There, there baby, you need to calm down. You’re getting too excited by this problem some person. You can see that Bixie is as stupid as she ever was. Remember, if she becomes too much of a problem—well, removing problems is our middle name!”

She looked down at me and smiled. “Bixie, we have contracted to pay a certain amount of money for your work. So this is how it is—you will make up your coming in late, with extra work on Saturday. And please don’t make us think any less of you than we do now, by whining. Be gone!”

I hung my head down and pretended to wipe a tear off my cheek as I passed the trio, muttering, “Work on Saturday, oh, no, how unfair!” Internally I was jumping up and down. If I worked on Saturday, I could so investigate.

I walked to my bench and got busy doing the assay I was now assigned— a check of the minerals present in the lab’s

water supply. It was obvious that my current research problem were far removed from the more controversial problems. Talk about cover-up.

There seemed to be so many issues associated with the Institution. There were financial problems and there were lab mismanagement problems. It seemed that the mismanagement was more than the accidental errors that can always come up, no matter how much care is given to details. I found the mismanagement to be deliberate.

Purchasing badly-made equipment will happen but buying the supplies at one very cheap price and then falsifying records to reflect a higher purchase price, well that was white-collar embezzlement. If the Institution was guilty of reusing syringes or improperly sterilizing equipment, then they were risking patients' health and lives. From the records, I was reviewing the Institution had most definitely be involved in many kinds of fraud.

My hands were busy, pipetting and mixing and diluting and running standard curves. In other words, I was killing time, as I tried to sort out exactly what was going on.

Ginger apparently had been trying to get my attention for several minutes because she finally hit my shoulder with her copy of People magazine. "Didn't you hear me? We have that personnel meeting to go to in five minutes. It's mandatory!" All the meetings were.

I said, "What's the problem this time? Are we flushing the toilet too often, or drinking too much water or...? I know we're consuming too much lab air."

"Oh, you, Bixie, such a kidder, no, it's the sexual harassment talk. You weren't here when the most recent problem occurred, but Jodie reported that she had been harassed by a group of office administrators up on fourth floor.

Apparently, or so the complaint stated, Jodie was just minding her own business sitting on the stairs out in front of the Institution, drinking her green tea, when a spider sat down beside her and startled her so much that she whipped off her top.

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She explain the action by saying that she thought the spider had gone down her top and that she was trying to get rid of it.

The guys watching Jodie began whistling and stomping their feet when they saw her remove her blouse, but once the job was finished, they lost interest and actually turned away in disgust.

Jodie claimed that this harassment has profoundly affected her outlook on life and more importantly her progress in undergoing her sexual transformation.”

“What do you mean—sexual transformation?”

“Oh, that’s right, you didn’t know. Jodie used to be Joe, until he decided that there was a female trapped in his 6’2”, 220 lb body. He had started the hormones and was dressing like a female—but when the spider went down his top, he forgot all the lessons in acting like a lady—such as ‘don’t take your blouse off in public’ And there you have it.”

“What happened to Jodie?”

“Nothing happened to Jodie. He settled for an undisclosed amount of money from the Institution to be paid each quarter. He continued working here for a while. He was promoted to administrative assistant. He got breast implants and hair follicle excision on his face.

Rumor had it that when his procedures were finished they would cost almost one hundred thousand dollars—all to be covered by the Institution’s health plan. But then Jodie went to the Carnival in Buenos Aires last month, met a millionaire, and never returned. “

“How do you know he met a millionaire and the rest of that stuff?”

Ginger grabbed my arm and said, “We’re going to be late; we’ll talk as we walk. Sarcoidosis Thomas was friends with Jodie, and she got a bunch of emails from Jodie for a while, until Jodie stopped writing.”

“Sarcoidosis was friends with one of the common folk?”

“Yes, of course, she is very nice sometimes. She told me that Jodie said to tell me ‘Hello.’”

My thoughts were in another place—the basement storage room. If I had enough time, I just bet I would find a bundle of personal things that had belonged to Jodie—and doubtlessly, there was a drum that contained Jodie’s remains.

We had reached the conference room. Ginger and I were the last ones to come into the room, and for that, I earned a cold hard stare. “Make sure you sign the attendance sheet,” Dr. Thomas said. “Since we are starting late due to someone’s tardiness, we will have to run through your lunch period.”

Everyone glared at me.

Dr. Thomas dimmed the lights and showed the power point presentation on sexual harassment. I had to say I wished Amber had gotten a chance to show her video. Nevertheless, I tried to be a good employee and behave.

The video showed all the many ways of being incorrect. There were many, many things that were wrong: comments on clothes, hair, physical traits. Certain phrases must be avoided. For example, it was wrong to say, “I have an itch.” It was better to say, “I have an epidermal irritation.” It was wrong to say, “She has such good luck.” It was better to say she has such good fortune; after all the “l” word sounded very close to the “f” word. The barnyard bird that crowed was a rooster, not a cock, and the noise he made was definitely not “cock-a-doodle-doo.” The biblical animal was a donkey, not an ass, and so on.

Little scenarios were enacted in the presentation. Barry meets Gloria. Gloria is wearing a low cut blouse. When Gloria bends over to pick up a pencil on the floor, Barry must shut his eyes and place his hands over them (his eyes), as well.

All about me, people were taking notes—not. Tybo was texting his bookie; Ginger was looking at some photographs. I glanced at them. Oh my word, how did such a thing fit in a pair of jeans? Morris was adding up numbers and wiping sweat from his forehead. Several people were asleep; one was even snoring.

The ordeal would have continued for many more minutes, had not there been a power surge. Dr. Thomas fiddled with the machine for a few minutes and then threw his hands up in

disgust. He flicked on the lights and asked if there were questions.

There were none.

He waggled his finger (inadvertently using the middle one) at us and said, "I don't want to learn of any misdeeds involving sexual harassment; we will throw the book at violators of this policy—bla, bla, bla"

I ate my energy bar as I walked back to the lab. The good news was that I only had a few hours left of the work day. Ginger walked with me. She was talking non-stop.

Her new website had so many good-looking guys on it. She showed me some more photos as we returned to the lab. "I think I'm going to set up a real-time meeting. What do you think? It would be so cool."

I kept my thoughts like, "oh my sainted parakeet, you are seriously nuts—planning a meeting with no-telling what—pervert, killer, woman, ex-felon in real time; take your pick" to myself and simply said, "Hmm!"

Ginger returned to her dream world. The dealings with Barney had plopped back in the depths of her mind. I made a note. When I had time, I might set up a meeting with Barney. I could use the reward money. No, I meant to say, a misanthropic murderer must not be allowed to continue his rampage.

We were all happily involved in our lab work, when my cell phone rang. Everyone glared at me. I answered quickly, before one of Thomases popped up. A man's voice growled, "Hey, Bixie, you are so hot! Do you have a moment to 'chat' with me?" Then the voice changed to the more recognizable one of William.

"What are you doing? You know we can't take calls here at the asylum, I mean Institution."

"Bix, we need to meet somewhere tonight. There have been some major developments."

We finally decided on Oleander Bistro, a new upscale restaurant. The name Oleander was odd for an eating place—I mean, after all, oleanders are poisonous. William had sounded very mysterious. What was up with that anyway?

ethel kouba

I returned to humdrum of lab analysis, and when quitting time came, I had proven beyond any shadow of doubt that lab water first contained as its primary component—water with trace amounts of Iron, sodium chloride, calcium, and thirty-seven other components, too boring to list.

I was looking forward to having a nice supper with William. My lunch energy bar was long since gone, and no one seemed interested in sharing their food with me.

An SOS from Rustin persuades Bixie to return to the Medical Institution. Funds and employees are missing. Bixie uncovers secrets, but in the town of perpetual ice and snow, no good deed goes unpunished. Will this be Bixie's last adventure?

Sleuth of Sleaufort SOS

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