

Bixie is finding it difficult to get her holiday groove on. She is overworked and surrounded by the jolly courthouse group, buzzed up from sugar and alcohol. As if attendance at a school play and being Santa at the drunken courthouse party is not enough, Bixie continues to be stalked. There are sinister gifts, threatening phone calls and three people resembling Bixie are dead. Thomases are everywhere. This season, staying alive will be present enough.

### **Silenced in Sleaufort**

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# Silenced in Sleaufort

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# ONE

It was Christmastime, and I was back in Sleaufort – Sleaufort with its warm ocean breezes, surrounded by my friends.

In my dreams, I was feeling the breezes. Unfortunately, Sleaufort was in the midst of a snowstorm – the first in a century. I wasn't actually counting but so far all my lovely friends and coworkers had been really really slow in welcoming me back to Sleaufort.

I had returned from my month's adventures in Rustin – narrowly I might add, barely escaping with my body intact. To be sure, there had been the threatening weather, snow followed by freezing rain which had caused power shortages, but my problems resided in the Institution, my former workplace. I had thought Sleaufort to be the nexus of unexplained deaths, but I was wrong.

Rustin had changed in my year's absence. The Institution was under new leadership, headed up by Thomases – quelle surprise. The bottom line had become the most important indicator. The new way to achieve financial success was by the removal of any employee that posed a threat. Several words needed defining – a “threat” was defined as a person wanting to retire early (taking his funds from the Institution's retirement plan) or one who was sickly (putting demands on the medical plan). And the term “remove” was defined as killing the person, storing the body in the Institution's basement, and creating an explanation for the employee's sudden disappearance.

I had discovered the bodies floating in their barrels and had narrowly escaped being pickled myself. In a

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wonderfully surprising maneuver, all my friends living in Sleauford had traveled to Rustin and rescued me.

I was thrilled to return to Sleaufort. My job at the courthouse had been kept open. Good news, right? It could have been. I learned to my surprise that although temps had done the basics of my tasks (After all, since I was a housekeeper/custodian at the Sleaufort County Courthouse, a modicum amount of cleaning had to be done.) most tasks had been left untouched.

In my janitor's closet, there was barely room to turn around. Cardboard boxes and cans that should have been recycled were piled to the ceiling in one corner and there were piles of debris scattered in the other corner. When I flicked on the light, the bugs (gigantic) scurried for cover. One cleaning bucket had a layer of green mold floating on the top and all the mops were mildewed.

I was so ready to quit – but I do like eating, so I bit my tongue, and went to chit-chat with the courthouse manager – Mr. Gorham. As I reached his door, I met Mrs. Gorham leaving. She looked really mad and she almost ran over me – muttering, “Son of a pickle! He's back at his old tricks! Well, let's see how he performs without his blue pills during the holiday season!”

I retreated from the office door. It was definitely not a good time to register a complaint.

I went to the assistant manager's office, Mr. Peckinsniff. I didn't bother knocking – just opened the door and went inside.

Mr. Peckinsniff's face was very red and he looked startled when he saw me.

“Why hello, Bixie, welcome back, what's new?”

He was fumbling with his computer, using his left hand. His right hand was busy below the desk.

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“What tha...?” I thought.

I stepped to the side of his desk and seeing the fading image on his computer screen, I realized what Mr. Peckinsniff had been busy doing. I gave him a few seconds to adjust his zipper. Then I asked about the likelihood of my having some help with all the unfinished cleaning jobs.

I guess I had him kind of over a barrel, because he gave me the go-ahead speech.

“Now, Miss Bixie, I have always appreciated the really great job that you did, and I must compliment you on the discretion that you have always displayed.” At this point he glared at me and then tried to smile and wink to show that we were sharing in his little indiscretion, before he continued. “So Miss Bixie, we will get you some help, but for now let me give you your bonus/Christmas gift so you can get home before the storm hits.”

He reached into his pocket and handed me ten crisp ten dollar bills.

I thought, “Is this a bribe?” I answered my question, “Who cares – I couldn’t tell anyone anyway, but Jade.”

I thanked him and left his office. Five minutes later I was on my way home. I made a quick stop at the grocery store. Yep, a storm was coming. People were hurrying, picking up bread and milk – the best food to have during a storm.

I threw a flashlight, some batteries, matches, candles, peanut butter and lots of other stuff – just in case I lost the power.

When I got home, I waved hello to Jewel. She beckoned me over and said, “The weatherman is calling for six inches of snow; I’m just so worried. My beloved daughters Tiffany and Crystal are both out and about, in

my car, I might add, and they simply don't know how to travel in snow."

I knew this to be true. Last winter, it had snowed a tiny bit. Miss Tiffany had gone out to drive in the snow. I heard a horrible noise. Tiffany was floor-boarding her mother's car, trying to get out of the itty-bitty snow drift.

A rational human being would have shoveled the snow or waited for it to melt. (A temperature of 55 degrees was forecasted for the afternoon.) But this was not soon enough for Miss Tiffany.

The rubber of the tires was being deposited in the snow; the car engine was smoking. Finally the car broke free – with such momentum that it slammed into the Captain's car where it finally stopped.

I told Jewel that maybe her two girls would stay with friends until the storm was over. Then I hurried inside, unpacked my groceries and listened to my phone messages.

Jade was out of town, again. What was the use of having a best friend, if she was always gadding about? This time she was on another Caribbean tour.

George, my brother, had left several messages. In the last one he said he was concerned about the storm, and he didn't want me to be alone, so he would happily come over and take me back to his house until the storm was over.

"Sure," I thought, "that sounds great – like I don't know that Charlemayne is out of town, supposedly visiting her sick mother – who I happen to know is named "spend-every-penny-I-can" and you are alone with your five daughters. You are looking for a baby sitter, so you can do your deer hunting gig.

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The phone rang, it was George again. I let the answering machine do its thing.

When I looked outside, I saw the dark clouds moving in – shades of Rustin. The snowflakes began falling; I didn't care. I was all snug inside my little house. I had food; I didn't have to be at work. If it snowed really hard; I had books to read and truly, I needed the quietness to forget Rustin.

Not enough time had passed. If I closed my eyes, I could still see the black finger-nailed hand waving to me as it floated in the barrel of preservative.

I was just settling in when the phone rang again. I listened to the recording. In an eerily-familiar voice, the words rang out. "Welcome back, Miss Bixie Lee Muddle – let the games begin. This time you are going down; we are infinitely stronger – enjoy your last Christmas!" The laughter began softly and grew more and more uncontrolled, until finally the answering machine ended the message.

It was a Thomas voice and a Thomas laugh from the one Thomas I thought was dead.

Surely Wilma was dead. She had plagued me during my early months in Sleaufort. She had drowned in an alumni cruise. (Still yet another story; buy the book.) How many times must she die, before she was really dead?

Just then, the phone rang again. I almost let the answering thing do its thing again, but fool that I proved to be, I picked up the phone. It was Jade.

"Why, hello, Bixie Lee. How are things shaking?"

"Jade," I answered, "Aren't you on a Caribbean cruise? Somewhere warm at least?"

"Well, Bixie, this is what happened. The cruise went great from Miami. The captain was a hunk – a dreamy hunk with great big brown eyes – unattached, or so I



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thought. And as you might have guessed – I was the best looking, hottest female on the boat.

I was making plans to getting 'closer' to the man, when everything went south.

First, someone called in a bomb threat. The caller said that a terrorist had slipped aboard the ship at the first island stop, and was carrying all kinds of weapons of mass destruction.

And as if that wasn't enough, the really hulky mechanic that smelled like goat sweat, and always seemed to be around when the Captain was making his moves on me, cornered me one day. It was horrible; he breathed garlic rotten smell all over me and drops of spit spray covered my face as he talked. He had a really heavy wrench in his hand that he kept hitting against the chair beside me.

It turned out that I had been mistaken about the mechanic. He was actually a female, and had been the captain's wife for the last twelve years. Quelle surprise.

With all that was going on, I was happy to accept a return ticket to Miami and then on to Sleaufort.

So, what's new with you?"

I took a breath, and began to tell Jade of my visit to the courthouse and the mysterious phone call.

"Bixie, girl, I would love to listen to you longer, but I have to get ready for my date with Shep. See ya. We are leaving for parts unknown."

She was gone.

I looked out my window. The precipitation had begun. It wasn't rain or snow. Instead, it was the dreaded freezing rain.

Freezing rain is a bad kind of thing. Branches of trees become weighted down with the rain, which freezes.

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Enough weight causes them to snap, and snapped branches take out power lines.

There was still enough daylight for me to see. I located my flashlight and loaded in the new batteries. I put candles and matches within easy reach – along with peanut butter, bread, and chocolate bars.

The good news for whatever was coming tonight was that tomorrow's high was supposed to be in the mid forties followed by a warming trend. But for the present, the wind was howling as the rate of precipitation increased. The bushes and trees were becoming covered in ice.

Suddenly there was a large crash; a big water oak had fallen. There was a second crash. Everything went black. There was no power, no lights, no heat – darkness loomed everywhere.

I flicked on the flashlight and made my way to the bedroom. When I had wrapped up in every piece of cover I possessed, I tried to fall asleep.

I would doze off for an hour or so, but a crash outside would wake me up and then the cycle would repeat – a brief period of sleep, followed by a crash, then back to sleep again.

Finally morning came.

I was greeted by a war zone outside. Branches lay everywhere – one had even hit my Falcon.

I was freezing. I washed my face in the cold water, put on my heaviest jeans and boots that I had bought in Rustin, fixed a sandwich and dressed for outside.

I lived close enough to the courthouse that I could make hoof it, and I did.

Half-frozen, I was one of the first at the courthouse. The building was somewhat warm, thanks to the supplemental generator.

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I checked the messages. The system was nearly overloaded with the greetings from the devoted staff members.

Adverse weather is not considered an acceptable excuse to miss work. With this in mind, the messages had a variety of interesting excuses for not being at work. There were ten people who were sick. Their sicknesses ranged from stomach flu to bronchitis to food poisoning to migraines. There were several folks who had suffered an injury – twisted ankle, sprained back, or a flare up of an old industrial accident injury. A few people gave funeral attendance, working from home, would work on the weekend as their excuses.

I liked the quiet courthouse. With only a few people present, I would be able to do my work without interruption. And before anyone gets the wrong idea – by work, I mean “snooping.” After all, I had been gone for a month.

To be sure I had had second-hand updates – but the real truth was lacking. Was Dolly Thorne still married to Dick Dave? Was she in the “love him, because he’s so manly” or the “hate him, because he’s a cheating pig” phase?

Was Mr. Gorham continuing to be involved in his little companionship societies – i.e. the hookers that he had been enjoying or had Mrs. Gorham’s mandate stifled these pursuits?

I knew that Mr. Peckinsniff was still pursuing his computer interest, since I had caught him at it, but did he persist in using online shopping for the purchase of his leather manacles and nipple rings?

Many times, I had thrown out a box from such online sites as Bondage R Us, and Man’s Manacles.

There were other stories I had been following – the stories about the law students from the university were

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pretty bland for the most part. There was the transsexual, who was part way through his transformation. There was nothing wrong with that part of his story. However, the fact that she/he was embezzling funds intended for legal representation of the underserved socioeconomic groups made his/her practice a little shady. There was the law student, married to two women, but the proud father of three women's children, none of whom knew about the existence of the other women.

One law clerk had discovered a trove of interesting material in the courthouse basement. All kind of salacious information was contained in the boxes. This included those who had been arrested for failure to pay child support, for tax fraud and for robbing the local stores.

I realized the devilry that this particular person was up to when I saw that my order of papers had been messed up. Once I realized who the miscreant was, I had bribed/persuaded Bill to subvert the law clerk's record-taking and now what the law clerk had all safety stored away in his computer was a bunch of crap. I had also gotten the locks changed and the law clerk was days away from being fired.

Violate people's privacy! How rude!

Back to the present day, I learned to my regret that sure, Mr. Gorham was at home but sadly his phone lines still worked.

On his second phone call, he told me to clean all the bathrooms, or in his words, "Bixie, don't think you can get away without working, just because I'm not there watching you. Just remember the snow will be gone by tomorrow, and I will check behind you..."

Whoa, had he said he was going to check my behind; had the man become demented? Sad to say, at that

point, I stopped listening and after a while I hung up on the dial tone.

I would sure enough do all the jobs that the old – hmm, here I ran out of words to describe Mr. Gorham. There were a whole group of b-words that fit, also some hyphenated words, but...

I continued in my work. I cleaned all the bathrooms and dumped the trash. It was quite peaceful in the courthouse. I had seen old Earnest Plover, who had never ever missed a day at the courthouse. I wasn't sure what he did, but I think he was into some kind of legal research.

Lorene made it in, with a great flurry, "Oh, Bixie, it's just so bad out there. Jamie is such an excellent driver, but I was just so scared, with all the crazy drivers. We drove down Oak Street, and you know that great big hill about one-third of the way down – well, there was a great big transport truck in front of us ... bla bla"

I cut my ears/ I mean my hearing off – everything with Lorene was drama. Ok, so she made it to work. She lived three blocks away – big whoop!

She trundled down the hall, shaking the snow off her coat and boots.

So special, now I had puddles to wipe up. A few more brave souls made it in and sloughed off to their offices. Even with these workers scattered about the courthouse was very quiet. Yet there were soft noises as I walked down the empty hallways. When I went down the stairs, I heard muffled footsteps. Empty rooms held an almost non-existent odor, as if someone had just left. A door slammed down the hall; no one was there. Water dripped from a bathroom faucet, but no one was working on this floor.

I did not care for the vibes I was getting. I decided to leave early – with a bad headache or something.

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The phone rang at the information desk. I answered. There was the sound of heavy breathing, followed by laughter. I slammed the phone down.

I sat for a minute and then the realization hit me – the phone call had come from an inside line.

The phone rang again. It was an outside call. I cautiously answered it. How special! It was Mr. Peckinsniff.

He started in on his conversation. There were no “howdy’s” or “good job” or “don’t work too hard.”

Not from him. “Bixie,” he said. “You need to go into the basement storage room and make sure that all the windows are tightly shut – they need to be locked – or else the homeless people open them from outside and sneak in and leave the windows open and then the snow will blow in and damage priceless journals. Do it now! And don’t plan to leave early!” He slammed the phone down.

I didn’t want to go in the basement area. It held some very bad memories for me, plus I believed that some unauthorized person was in the courthouse, up to no good.

I had only been in Sleaufort for a few days. Had the Thomases already resurged? Were they already sneaking around, plotting their revenge? Would they never go away? How many Thomases were there, anyway?

I went down the steps and walked to the storage room. The door was unlocked, not a good sign, and the window was cracked open. There was a pile of snow on the floor under the window. I went closer to shut the window and felt cold chills that had nothing to do with the winter’s wind. In the snow were two clear sets of foot prints. One set face inward and one set faced outward.

My guess was that someone had entered the courthouse through the window and later exited the same way.

I closed the window and locked it, and thought, "Sure. Mr. Peckinsniff, I will work my full eight hours today; it will be fine for me to hang around until it is dark and then walk home. Nothing's going to bother me! Please!"

I called Mr. Plover and told him, that I had understood Mr. Peckinsniff to say that we should not work late today – with the bad weather, and health endangerment, and liability, so we needed to close down at 3:00pm.

I put him in charge of informing the others. I left a message for Mr. Gorham, thinking the two great ones – Mr. Peckinsniff and Mr. Gorham could decide between themselves who bore the responsibility for closing the courthouse early.

I checked my mailbox. There was the green slip of paper which told me my recipient for the ever popular Secret Santa.

Secret Santa is a tradition that has been adopted by an increasingly large number of demented people who think it is just so special to have a certain someone that they must buy presents for. Here is the exciting part of the process. The presents are left all lying about – but this must be done secretly.

The name on my piece of paper was Dolly Thorne! D.T. was the on-again, off-again wife of Dick Dave. During my year that had lasted several eons here at the courthouse, I had been subjected to hearing about the whole gamut of feelings that she had for the little overweight, ego-inflated, lazy, chauvinistic pig of a man she had married. To be sure, she was no prize, either.

Maybe I could trade her name for someone else. I could not face trying to find a gift for her, especially if I had to be secretive.

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For example, if I bought the book, Women Who Love Pigs, she would know I was her Secret Santa; likewise a gift of heavy-duty wrinkle crinkle, or facial shellac would scream out my name.

I packed up my stuff, put on my boots, coat, hat, and scarf and got ready to leave. So what, if my coat, hat and scarf were bright red, the outfit was warm, and someone, I forgot when or where or why, had said I looked hot.

As I closed my closet, Lorene came tearing down the hall. "Bixie," she screeched. "Someone has stolen my coat. I am going to freeze."

"Oh, please, Lorene, you are going to wait on the sidewalk for your husband to pick you up! You'll be outside for what, three minutes? He'll call you on your cell phone as he turns the corner, and out you will go."

"No, that's not true; our cell phone contract just expired. I should have paid it, but with all the work I had to do – there was Dallas' project and Samantha had to do a collage and then my mother..."

In an attempt to shut down the barrage of useless information, I said, "Here, use my coat and wait outside – you might as well take my hat too. I have another coat in my closet. Of course, it's not cheery red and some careless motorist will run over me, but that's okay. God forbid that you should get cold or your beloved husband would have to wait for you. Go, go!"

Lorene thanked me and promised to bring the coat and hat back tomorrow. Sure she would!

I opened my closet, and finally found my old coat tucked under a pile of mildewed rags. It smelled a tad bit off, to put it mildly. Actually it stank. But it was warm.



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I waved goodbye to Mr. Plover and the few other brave souls as they were leaving. "See you tomorrow!"

I cut the lights off and made my way to the door. Mr. Plover came back in and almost ran over me. "Call 911!" he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"There is someone laying face down in the snow at the curb. She's wearing a red coat and hat. It looks like she was hit by a car. There's no car there, though."

Someone had hit Lorene?

I called 911 and gave the operator the details. Then I went outside and joined the crowd.

"What should we do? We shouldn't just let her lie there, should we? She might only be hurt a little?"

Then the police drove up; I was happy to see that Al was on duty – not Junior or Bubba or Sonny. The EMT folks showed up. Last, but not least, a large Dodge Hemi RX truck drove up. It was Jamie, Lorene's husband.

Everyone crowded around the figure in the red coat. Carefully the EMT guys picked her up, turned her over and laid her on the stretcher. They checked for vital signs and tried CPR. After some time, they shook their heads.

Jamie wailed, "Someone hurt my beloved Lorene. Why is she wearing this red coat?"

Questions were everywhere, but the answer was obvious. Someone had hit Lorene by mistake – because she wore my red coat.

I left the crowd; truly I wanted to be away from this group, which now included several people I didn't recognize. Safety waited for me at home.

I walked through the melting snow. It was obvious that the courthouse would be open for business the next day.

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I passed Jewel on her sidewalk. I waved but she was oblivious to everything as she shoveled snow. I could hear the words, "\*\*\*!\* Tiffany, sorry little \*\*!\*"; she promised to help."

Things had not changed during the short time I had been in Rustin. Jewel's two girls were still up to their lazy, non-helpful tricks.

Once I had made it in the house, and got the snow off my feet, I checked my messages. There were no familiar voices. However, there was a message from a growly obviously disguised voice that said, "Bixie, you are secret Santa for....Ms Grimsley."

That was just so perfect. At least I had lost Dolly Thorne as the person I must give gifts to. I guessed it had helped to tear up the little green sheet with her name on it and deposit it in Sheryl's mailbox. Sheryl wasn't the person that assigned the Secret Santas, but Sheryl was the nosiest person at the courthouse. She would know where to send my comment about being Dolly's Santa. On each tiny piece of green paper I had written "Bah, Humbug!" to emphasize my response.

The person in charge must be some kind of psycho. Ms Grimsley was a worse choice than Dolly. She was a grumbler. For example, if there were five chairs available at a table in the break room, Ms Grimsley would complain about whatever choice was left for her. The chair was wobbly; it was too far from the microwave; there was something sticky on the seat, etc. The complaints continued, until everyone stood and left, so that Ms Grimsley could sit in all five chairs.

I was supposed to buy Ms Grimsley gifts. Let's see – a gag or sleeping pills or a one-way bus ticket to Kansas. All were possibilities.

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The phone rang interrupting my thoughts. It was Jade.

"Hi, girlfriend, how are tricks?" she asked.

"Where are you; I thought you were going out of town." I asked.

"I am on my way back now – Let me tell you what happened. You know we were going on another cruise. I should have learned a lesson from the last one I took. Remember?" The words continued to fly from her mouth.

I heard some of what she was saying, but it all sounded so familiar - "not what he pretended to be, married, cheater, trying to steal my money."

Finally there was quiet. I answered, "I am so distressed that things did not turn out well. But I am sure that life will get better."

I paused and then continued my conversation. "Listen. This is important. I need some advice about what to get Ms Grumble as the gift from her secret Santa."

"It is so strange that you would ask that question. I took a side trip on my way back to Sleaufort and visited a little shop that sells some very odd things. I would bet that I have a perfect gift for a grumbler.

I've got to hang up – see you tomorrow."

Jade was gone.

What to do, what to do, with the little bit of day left?

I had several books I could read, and of course there were the many Christmas cards left to send to my friends. But in the end, I had a cup of soup and fell asleep on the sofa.

## TWO

Morning came. I could hear the drops of water from the melting snow. "That's odd," I thought. "Why do I hear water dripping?"

The answer quickly became obvious. The water was dripping on my kitchen table. I had a leaky roof.

I set several pans out to catch the water, threw on some clothes and hurried to the courthouse. I opted out on driving, choosing the brisk walk instead.

Everyone was overjoyed at seeing me. Several coworkers, well, one anyway threw their arms around me. I overheard all kinds of cheery compliments. "Doesn't she look tired....old...fat...wrinkled? I was hopeful she'd stay in Rustin."

Dolly welcomed me back by giving me a list of jobs that needed to be completed and so did Mr. Peckinsniff and Mr. Gorham.

There is nothing that says you are special and necessary better than a directive stating – "And make sure you put two paper rolls in each toilet stall."

I started my drudgery – the thirty-five sinks to scrub, the seventy-nine toilets to disinfect, the one hundred and thirty trash cans to empty, the fifteen unknown messes to clean up.

Everything seemed worthwhile however, when I took my break and everyone cheered – not. Old Mrs. Oates was the only one left in the break room and she cheered because she had a flashback to the 2002 Winter Olympics where a little known athlete from Nova Scotia, a distant cousin on her mother's side, took a bronze medal in the women's ice skating competition.

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It was late in the morning before I caught up with my homies, the three temps, Chloris, Doris, and Florist, or whatever.

They started talking as one, and it was difficult to understand them. Finally, they yielded to Doris and she told me the latest. They were still working as temps but during the holiday season, they had cut their hours back, so they could take care of their Internet business.

Chloris chimed in, saying, "Christmas is proving to be a real money-maker. Lately, what we have been doing – Well, let me explain – you have heard of Glamour shots – what we are doing is we take a head shot of some client – we make it look as good as we can. Then we superimpose their head on a really hot body shot.

We were going to use Jennifer A's body or Jennifer L's body and photoshop the body – but our legal team warned us against this. So now, we use our bodies plus the client's head and make a short video that the client gives to her significant other for his special Christmas gift."

I interrupted. "Won't the guy recognize that the body doesn't belong to his girlfriend?"

All three temps chimed in with "you would think so, but..."

We made plans to go to the new restaurant that had opened near the courthouse and then I pretended to be dusting the walls so Mr. Gorham would quit glaring.

Once he returned to his office to pursue his Internet porn collection, I sifted through the trash. I had been gone for a month and I was sorely behind the gossip curve.

I packed a bag of this and that to check out at home. Then I walked outside to see how much trash had accumulated under the bushes in my absence.

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The answer was “Oh my smitherings.” Jade came by and handed me a small package, wrapped in Christmas paper.

“Here is a gift for Ms Grumbler. Let me know if she likes it – it’s perfume.”

“Okay, I’ll leave it in her office – but you aren’t planning a trick on her, are you?”

“No; why would I? I am simply product testing one of the items I got from the little shop in Smyrna. See ya later.”

Jade was gone. I took the present inside and slipped it into Ms Grimsley’s office. She was taking one of her many non-smoking breaks.

I have no idea what she was really doing. But every two hours she goes to the third floor bathroom and twenty minutes later she comes back to her office smelling all wintergreeny.

After awhile, I saw Ms Grimsley in the hall, and she was talking about her Secret Santa gift. She told old Mrs. Oates that she had gotten perfume and had tried a little dab on her left arm.

Still later, the strangest sight greeted me, when I came back in from the garbage-collecting around the bushes.

Ms Grimsley was surrounded by men. Mr. Peckinsniff was trying to touch her and Mr. Gorham had a handful of roses that he had stolen from the Southern Veterans Memorial, which he was pushing toward Ms Grimsley. Dick Dave had shoved his beloved wife to the floor, in an attempt to reach Ms G’s side.

“What’s going on?” I asked Millie – another friend.

“Beat’s me! It appears that Ms Grimsley has either become irresistible or else she has won the lottery.”

Ding, dong – a bell went off in my head – could the perfume have caused such a response? Not good.

I made my way past the ever-widening circle of men and the two manly women that were attending a trial involving one of their friends.

More noise erupted. The law clerks were racing down the hall toward Ms Grimsley.

I quickly slipped into her office. I grabbed the bottle of perfume and wrapped it in several layers of Kleenex and put it into my pocket. No one noticed me leaving. Everyone was trying to catch a glimpse of Ms Grimsley or touch her or hand her a gift.

I left the courthouse and called Jade. "What was in that bottle that you gave me for Ms Grimsley?" Jade laughed. "I told you it was one of the products I bought in the little shop. The woman who owned the shop said it was filled with pheromones, extracted from cats in heat, and rutting dogs and all those kinds of things. She then had added a little of this and that and said a few magic words and poof there was the perfume."

"Are you telling me that you had no idea of what was in the perfume or what effect it would have on the male population? Ms Grimsley put a dab on, and now every man within a one-mile radius –" I modified what I was saying, when I saw the guys from the mariner running up the courthouse steps. "Make that a five-mile radius, is trying to touch Ms G."

Jade said, "I warned you that there might be possible side effects and you pooh-poohed me, with that supercilious voice that you use."

"Did not."

"Did so."

"Did not!"

Jade finally gave in, and said, "The old witch, I mean, woman told me there was an antidote to the perfume. A

*SILENCED IN SLEAUFORT*

one-percent salt solution will neutralize the perfume. So all you have to do is have Ms Grimsley wash the places on her body where she put the perfume, with a salt solution. What could be easier?"

"Please tell me, Jade, with all that knowledge you have acquired and stored in your humongous brain, how can I tell Ms Grimsley any of this?"

"You'll think of something – gotta-go; later."

I went back into the courthouse. Old Mr. Peglegs, aptly named, because he walked with one peg leg (Legend tells of the brave adventures that he had as a young man in Africa, or Alabama, or Arizona – one of the "A" places until alas, a lion, or an alligator, or a Gila monster, or some kind of animal ate part of his leg. As the story continued, Mr. Peglegs crawled miles through the jungle or desert, or swampland until at last he came to a road, where he was rescued.)

I digress – old Mr. Peglegs almost knocked me down in his rush to reach Ms Grimsley.

Enough was enough.

I dissolved several handfuls of salt in a bucket of warm water. Then I dragged the step ladder over to the circle of people around Ms Grimsley. I climbed to the top of the ladder and threw the salt water on Ms Grimsley.

I had not carefully thought out the problem, or remembered that every action has an opposite reaction.

The men folk moved away from Ms G in all directions, taking out the step ladder and of course there went my balance. The good news was that in the excitement no one had seen me throw the salt water. The bad news was that I suffered mild trampitis from the group's exit.

Ms Grimsley just stood there in bewilderment with water dripping down her body. She shook her head and



returned to her office. I snuck back down the hall and up the stairs, and when Mr. Gorham finally located me I was busily polishing the elevator's walls.

"Bixie," he commanded. "Where have you been hiding? There is a massive cleanup needed on the main floor. Someone, personally, I think it was a terrorist, slipped in and threw some kind of terrorist liquid all over our little gathering.

I have told the town fathers over and over we need better security at the courthouse. Next thing you know, we will have an underwear terrorist coming in and where will we be then?"

I had left Mr. Gorham by now, but his voice continued to follow me as I went down the hall and down the steps. Finally I was free of Gorham's irritating voice.

All of the crowd was gone, except for the small group that watched Ms Grimsley rummage through the stuff on her desk and in her trash can, while she wailed, "Where's my perfume; where's my gift?"

She would never know that the gift came from me or that I ungifted it – but years from now, as she sat in the break room, she would relive the joy she had known when every man in Sleaufort had desired her.

I would have to try the perfume one of these days when I went on a date.

The rest of the day was uneventful until late in the afternoon. When I put on my coat, all happy about going home, I found a small package in the pocket. It was brightly wrapped in sparkly Christmas paper.

The insides were not so nice. There was a headless doll in the box. She was dressed in a uniform very similar to mine, and so there would be no mistake in my conclusions, she had a tiny name tag that said "Bixie."

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Apparently my secret Santa did not get the whole idea of the gifting. The gift was supposed to be a pretty little thoughtful thing – not a Halloween thing.

I knew what tomorrow's gift would be. Without a doubt, I would receive the rest of the doll. I was wrong; inside my hat was a tiny wrapped present. It contained – oh, why not guess – a diamond ring, a Hershey kiss, a lottery ticket? No, it had the doll's head. The painted on glasses on the doll's face was a nice touch.

Perfect, I had been back at work in Sleaufort for two days, and already my psychotic stalker was in place.

I walked home. I was missing my car – my beloved Falcon, which I had received as a result of my Aunt Jasmine's legacy.

While I had been helping out in Rustin, a Thomas truck from some kind of parade had inadvertently run over the Falcon. The tree that had landed on the car in the storm had not helped the health of the Falcon.

There was insurance – not nearly enough, however. Grunt, Tiffany's boyfriend, had offered to get one of his guys to fix the Falcon, but she had been hurt pretty badly.

George had offered to loan me one of his cars, but the price was too high. I knew that February was the month when George and his wife Charlemayne went to Savannah to renew their marriage vows, and they were always on the lookout for a babysitter for their five daughters.

I had done it once and truly never, ever, again. I had flashbacks every time I heard any of Michael Jackson's songs – horrible, horrible flashbacks.

With no car, I would be dependent on my friends – to go to the beach, to pick up fast food, to do any errands.

*ethel kouba*

When I got home, there was a strange truck sitting out front. The driver was no stranger – it was William – the undercover agent who had been investigating the links between churches and child pornography. He had been checking things out most recently in Rustin.

William was the quintessential user. For every favor he did for me, he extracted three in exchange.

For example, in Rustin, he graciously treated me to breakfast (cold bagel, weak coffee) and then expected me to attend church with him, while he tried to wiggle his way into the church's inner circle.

Then he helped me fix my borrowed car and expected me to attend a Bible study class and providing a diversion so he could snoop. I could go on and on with the list of examples, if I wished.

William got out of the truck. I geared myself up for the favor/request that I knew was coming.

Quelle surprise. After we exchanged greetings, William said, "Bixie, I have heard the Falcon's dead. I am going to loan you one of my trucks."

I was overwhelmed. How touching. I was in the middle of mentally beating myself up about having misjudged William when I heard the rest of William's sentence, which went "and it is foolish of me to expect you to remain anonymous when you are following Reverend Farquinkle."

I glared at William. "What are you saying? What are you involving me in now? I helped you some in Rustin – but our relationship ended there. I do not want to investigate anything. I simply want to enjoy a peaceful Christmas season."

"Bixie, no disrespect to your wishes, but as long as evil exists, man cannot wear blinders."

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“Oh, please, William, I am not going to fall for your word-trap again. I have too much catch-up work at the courthouse and I have no help and I think my life is still in danger from someone, more than likely a Thomas. “

Then I told him about the phone calls and the most recent accidents.

“See, Bixie, that’s what I’m saying. Unless you help me, you will never get away from the Thomases

I did not want to sway you in your decision to help me, but the church group I am investigating now, you know. It is the one located on the Noose River. Well, I told you Farquinkle was the new minister, but there are other assistant ministers and one of them is a Thomas.”

“Okay, William, you have piqued my interest a teeny-tiny bit, but you know Thomas is a very, very common name. “

“Sure, but what if I told you that Reverend Thomas is a large, solidly-built woman and her first name is Wanda? Don’t you see the similarity in her name to Wilma and Wilhelmina?”

“I would have to say that you are trying to manipulate me. The Thomas I knew as Wilma is dead.”

“Is she? Think back through the last year – have you seen a dead body that belonged to either W-female? No! You have not!”

I felt cold chills running down my back. William was right. Perhaps Wilma was still alive.

I asked William for an update on Reverend Farquinkle. “Why is Reverend Farquinkle involved? I thought he had been drummed out of the church, because of all the misdeeds associated with his ministry.”

“Bixie, Bixie, naive little Bixie. The church is very forgiving. Remember Jim Cooke, who stole money from his

ministry and was prosecuted and sent to prison. Now he has a new ministry, a new wife, some new children, and he is going gang-busters again! And there are so many more examples. Reverend Farquinkle has begged for forgiveness and now he has a new ministry, and by the way, he has a new wife Wanda."

I answered, "See, that's what doesn't fit. My Wilma was a man, who dressed as a woman."

William answered, "Are you sure? Your Wilma may have been a man, once upon a time, but that fact can easily be changed. Now your Wilma could be anything."

By now, I was getting quite cold and hungry and tired of listening to William's bla, bla, bla. I said, "Fine, I will help you. Give me the truck and tell me what I have to do. I just want to go in now and eat supper and chill."

William answered, "I knew you would come around to my thinking. I need you to drive me to where I left my truck, and I will give you details of how you can help."

I got in the truck. Driving it was quite a change from the Falcon. There was no hesitation, no jerkiness, no smell of gasoline. I accelerated past the slower cars, looking down on the little people below.

"Turn left here and take route 22 up ahead"

I returned to the here and now. "Why are we out here? – We are way outside town. Are you making me drive to the church compound by the Noose River?"

"Maybe."

I had been snookered again.

Soon, we drew near to the gravel road that led to the compound.

William said, "Slow down up ahead and turn into the driveway on the right, and park behind the trees."

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I did what he said. We stopped. William handed me a large overcoat and a baseball cap.

"Put these on, once you get out of the truck."

"Wait a minute! You need to tell me what you plan to do."

"We are going to walk through those woods, and I'm going to snap a few pictures. Then we'll come back to the truck and leave."

"I don't want to do this. What if we get caught...."

"Please, Bixie, it will just take a minute and I need your input."

"Fine!"

We trudged through the wet woods. The good news was that it was cold, so it was unlikely that we would tread on some of the woods' inhabitants – like snakes. We were fortunate also, because the mud was frozen, and the swamp areas did not provide a risk.

When we reached the edge of the woods, we were greeted by the sight of a barbed wire fence.

"Don't touch it! It is electric; you'll get a shock."

At least I knew we wouldn't be climbing over the fence and going any closer.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Shhh, just look through the binoculars."

Whoa. I could see everything as if I were ten feet away.

There were lots of cars parking and people were getting out and standing around chit chatting.

I checked out the faces. William was correct. There stood Rev. Farquinkle in all his glory. It appeared that he had treated himself to hair transplants, a shot or two of botox, and shoes with lifts – but his deviancy still shone

through the scrawny little wretch, as evidenced by his patting a few of the females.

Suddenly, the Reverend put his hands in his coat pockets. The reason for this became obvious. A large female came out of the church, strode over to the Reverend, and placed her large hand on him. The hand squeezed his bony shoulder, and the Reverend flinched.

The woman relaxed her hand and turned in my direction, so I was able to get a clear frontal view. It was Wilma, or someone who looked liked Wilma. I was too far away to be sure, but I bet my next pay check that the woman, or whatever she was, had the grayish, brownish, greenish, pond-scum colored eyes that were possessed by all the Thomases.

I had forgotten that William stood by me. He said, "Oh yeah, she does have those eyes."

I looked at him; he looked at me.

"Seen enough?" He asked.

The crowd began moving to the large tent. Soon everyone was inside.

"Let me guess," I said. "You want to figure out how to sneak around this fence and get closer."

"No, Bixie, I have no desire to do that."

"Why not, oh great agent?"

"That's why." Several large dogs were silently moving our way. They weren't barking but they did look mean.

Once again, William answered my silent question, "They don't bark, because their tongues have been cut out. Their job is to silently keep out intruders, not warn off intruders."

The dogs whined as they drew near the fence.

William tossed over some hamburger balls to the skinny silent dogs.

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"I have been feeding them some snacks, each time I come here. I figure one day, I will be on the other side of the fence, and that practice will come in useful."

"William, you are a great big softy – you have been feeding them, because you see how thin they look."

"Caught!"

We went back to the truck and drove away – back toward town. When we neared the Sak-Sav grocery store, William said, "Pull in here – my car's the black one over there."

He had suckered me again – making me think that his car was out of town, so that I would go along with him and see the church folk.

As I got ready to pull out in my new-for-me truck, I beckoned William over and said, "I don't know how I can help you. I can't go undercover, Wilma will recognize me. I still can't believe that she is alive."

William smiled and answered, "Oh, Bixie you do blather – I've got the problem covered. Enjoy your truck."

Then he walked to his car and left.

I had a lot to think about – not the least of which was my supper. If I planned to follow through on the resolutions I had made recently, I would have gone into the grocery store, pick up a salad mix and some tofu cheese slices and fix a tasty, low-calorie meal.

"Forget that!" I thought. I was remembering all my encounters with Wilma Thomas. She had been the most persistent Thomas. From the time she became my helper at the courthouse, until she had tried to drown me on the alumni boat ride (see [Slitherings in Sleaufort](#)). Then she reinvented herself and came back in the guise of a paralyzed computer person hired to bring Sleaufort County into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by converting all the records to



electronic files. She had also resumed her attempts to remove me (see Stalkers in Sleaufort).

There had been so many near hits on my life; Wilma had certainly tried her best to eliminate me.

I had been driving as I thought about Wilma, and strangely enough, I found myself at the fast food restaurant, Solid Sam.

I pulled up to the window, glanced at the takeout list and ordered a Big Fat Blue Sam, which consisted of a deep fat fried, breaded chicken breast setting on top of a biscuit and smothered in blue cheese dressing. It came with vegetables – a microscopic piece of dried lettuce and catsup. I could have requested the nutritional information, if I had desired – but need I say that no one ever did.

Chicken was good for me and it did have vegetables. The smell was tantalizingly wonderful.

When I reached my house, I proudly parked my new, loaner-truck out front and went inside.

I was on my third bite of supper, when the phone rang. Too perfect. I let the call go to voice mail; no message was left. The phone rang again five minutes later. I ignored it; on the fifth go round, I answered it.

It was a heavy-breather who then switched over from the breathing to insane laughter. I picked up my dandy little whistle and blew it into the receiver. I heard a shriek and a hang-up.

Of course, when I \*69 it, the number was blocked. I cleaned up my crumbs, and settled down to TV watching. There were plenty of choices: Santa Gets a Helper, the Chipmunks' Christmas, holiday season with the Osbornes, the Simpson's Special Season's Show.

I chose none. I had some energy left. I would begin my exercise routine. My goal was a healthy body, holding

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a healthy mind. I had realized in Rustin, how badly I had let myself go. Trudging through the snow had left me exhausted. Truth be known; I needed to do better.

I slapped in the DVD I had purchased. The front of the package showed the instructor, a slim woman in her late thirties, smiling as her group of well-toned, also smiling individuals.

The DVD started with a happy hello from Lana, the instructor. "Okay group, let's get started and remember our mantra 'be happy; be healthy.'"

The exercise routine began with some slow music to accompany the stretching. We reached for the sky; we tried to touch our toes, we swirled at the waist.

I was moving with the groove, obviously in better shape than I had thought.

The tempo increased. The routine switched to a series of jumping jacks. The camera moved about from face to face of folks in the group. Everyone was smiling, with nary a drop of perspiration. I was getting a little winded, but it was all good.

The tempo increased again, and still yet again. I could not begin to keep up with the routine. The camera panned over the group. Everyone was still smiling – no sweat, no panting – even from the really old woman. She showed her enthusiasm by waving her hands at the camera.

Still, it was all good; I had made it through the first exercise class. Next time would be easier. But wait, what was Lana saying; did I hear her correctly? Had she said twenty more minutes to go? O.M.G.

I tried, really tried to do the exercises, but I finally admitted defeat, when I wrapped my left leg above my right knee and swiveled to the left while deep breathing. After falling to the floor, I lay gasping and watching Lana's

*ethel kouba*

merry group of participants, smiling and clapping – and still not sweating.

I rested a while longer before I staggered to my feet. I had realized the problem with the exercise tape. I must have inadvertently picked up an advanced level exercise routine.

Unfortunately, the cover said, "Beginner's Level: Recommended especially for those who may have health problems such as heart disease, arthritis, or are recovering from surgery or childbirth."

I was too tired to even deal with the DVD; I left it in the player. I flopped out on the sofa and before I knew it, morning had come.

I was very stiff. I was sorely tempted to take a sick day. "Nah!" I thought, "no one will believe me." I had done the dramatic sick act so often that everyone would think I was faking.

I threw on some clothes, ate something that was in the refrigerator, in spite of its blueness and drove my truck to work.

My feet were all toasty from the heater, and I had a choice of dozens of radio shows to listen to, and the windows were nice and clear, and people did not try to push me off the road – all things different from the Falcon. The Falcon also had the problems of consuming gas in an unbelievable manner and dripping oil while it sat. It also belched black smoke whenever I was next to a really cute guy at a stoplight.

## THREE

When I walked into the courthouse, I was early, but Mr. Gorham had beaten me there. "Bixie, I have some exciting news for you."

With most people, this might have sounded like good news. But from Mr. Gorham, it sounded like trouble, with a capital T.

He continued with his announcement. "Bixie, I have someone to work with you... (Sounded good, right?) Mr. Klause is an efficiency consultant. At the end of our last fiscal year, we had some extra money left over. We could have given a little Christmas bonus to all the courthouse employees, but this option is better. Mr. Klause will watch what you do and make suggestions of ways to improve your efficiency. Isn't that great?"

I bit back my comments. What was the use of verbalizing them? No doubt, Mr. Klause would follow me around, get in my way, do nothing beneficial, and probably have brownish, grayish, greenish, pond-scum colored eyes. Doubtlessly Klause was just the way Thomas is spelled in some other country.

I had been lost in my thoughts, while Mr. Gorham continued his rambling monologue. "Mr. Klause will work at your side during Christmas until the New Year starts. Then he will move on and check out Mr. Peckinsniff, and Dolly and Ms Grimsley – really everyone, even I, will get a look-see by Mr. Klause."

Once again my thoughts drowned out his blitherings. It would be so great – to have Mr. Klause watch Mr. Peckinsniff – Being observed would put a crimp in his Internet porn addiction. Similarly, a good look-see at the

law clerks' activities would show just how many hours they spent in online gambling and Internet stock-trading.

Ms Grimsley was running a little side business, selling clothes on eBay. Every weekend, she would drive to New Fern and shop in consignment shops for name-brand clothes, which she would then sell during the week on eBay.

One of the administrative associates was busy writing her tell-all book about a former governor. Who knew what the other folks were doing during work hours?

For me, however, it was quite obvious what I did. If I didn't do my job, Miss Dolly Thorne, aka Dick Dave's wife had no trouble at all chewing me out when the bathrooms did not meet her high standard of excellence or her trash was not promptly dumped.

However, she had a hundred excuses when a memo wasn't circulated in an appropriate time frame. She was often quite busy selling Mary Kay cosmetics at work and thus sometimes a slow-drying fingernail polish exhibition kept her from her secretarial duties.

When I rejoined the real world, I saw that Mr. Gorham had left. Good riddance.

I began my routine – the work was really harder, because so much had been left undone while I was on leave.

There was a pile of memos waiting. They listed problems that the courthouse folk had uncovered. Examples included; "Nov 28, dead bird under the basement staircase."

"Nov 30. Hole in men's bathroom trash can. Puddle on floor. "

"Nov 30. Rotten smell coming from corner of basement."

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“Dec 1. Gutters on back of courthouse missing a screw, or two.”

“Dec 3. Someone is leaving their leftovers in the refrigerator way past the expiration date.”

And so the messages continued. The grand total was forty-five.

The question that demanded an answer was: if a problem existed a month ago, how bad would it be today?

I discovered the answer very quickly. The problems had increased in their “ugh” quality exponentially.

For example, take the leftovers in the refrigerator. I put on my hazmat suit, double-gloved and opened the refrigerator.

“Oh my periwinkled parasol!” I said. That was the last deep breath I took for some time. The two bottom shelves were coated with bluish-green mold. Puddles of slime had collected in the vegetable tray – and the smell... had something died in the butter compartment?

I collected almost a full bag of garbage from the refrigerator. Once I had triple-tied the bag, I sprayed disinfectant over the insides and shut the refrigerator’s door. I was posting a caution sign on the door, when Ms Grimsley walked in with her bestest friend for the day, Dolly T.

They both stuck their noses in the air and asked the source of the ungodly stench.

“Dolly,” I said, “spray some of your rose perfume, if you don’t like the smell. Why didn’t one of you all clean out the refrigerator while I was gone?”

Ms Grimsley answered, “Bixie Lee, you are so lazy. Didn’t you know that Dolly is working her fingers to the bone with all her extra duties that have been assigned to her? You should be glad they held your position open.”

*ethel kouba*

She would have said much more, if my hand tremor hadn't knocked the bag onto her feet.

Was it my fault that the pointy decoration on her shoe tore a tiny hole in the bag, releasing stuff onto her shoe? Some spilled on Dolly's feet, as well.

I apologized for my clumsiness and tried to clean the mess with the rag I had. The rag was dirty.

Because of my concern about health risks, I sprayed a tiny bit of disinfectant on both women's feet.

They shrieked and screamed, but the spray was totally safe. After I had re-bagged the compromised bag, I wished both of them a pleasant day and left.

Some of the other messes listed in the notes were even worse to clean up. The dead bird had become a fossilized dried spot and I was forced to scrape the feathers and goop off the cement. The gutters were now hanging off the courthouse roof.

The leaking trashcan had now become a can with no bottom. I discovered this fact when I lifted the can up. Quelle surprise.

It was hours past lunchtime, when I came up for air. I was starving. I was peacefully eating my sandwich when Mr. Gorham walked into the break room with a stranger.

"Hi, Bixie, we have been looking all over for you. I want to introduce you to Kelvin Klause. He will be observing you today and making notes."

If Kelvin K was watching me today, where had he been this morning?

Mr. Gorham answered my silent question with his next words.

"Kelvin Klause is a stranger to our area, so I wanted to familiarize him with Sleaufort by taking him on a brief tour."

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“Ah Ha!” Now I knew where the two “gentlemen” had been. Mr. Gorham was introducing the KK to the various strip clubs, the massage parlor, and the XXXX video shops.

Mr. Gorham left and Klause and I were alone. The first words out of KK’s mouth were “I must make a note that you are taking a lunch break in the middle of the afternoon. This obviously doesn’t seem like a bad thing to you but statistics have shown repeatedly that such a practice leads to a job being done half-way.”

I tried to explain to KK that I had been extremely busy cleaning up the messes that hadn’t been taken care of in my absence.

Once again, KK spoke, “Statistics show that if an employee makes excuses for his or her work behavior, he or she is doubly at fault. First, he or she doesn’t have good work habits and secondly he or she thinks he or she has an adequate excuse to explain his or her behavior.”

My appetite had fled with the verbal onslaught from KK. His breath, smelling of tainted sardines, was not helping.

I stood up and said, “Back to work, Mr. Klause.”

KK followed behind me. I had been planning to dump trash cans and collect all the interesting debris I found, but since I had a companion, I decided to tackle one of the messes on the list – cleaning the toilet in the basement men’s room.

Sadly in today’s economy, many people have lost their job. For some of less fortunate, joblessness has led to an eventual homelessness. At the courthouse we have learned to turn a blind eye when some of the homeless people come in and make use of our facilities.

For the most part, these people do their job and then tidy before they leave. But there are exceptions. In this



case, someone had used the downstairs men's bathroom, and had wedged the door shut when they left.

It had remained this way for several days until finally another homeless person reported it.

Once the door was forced open, a horrible sight greeted Mr. Peckinsniff. He immediately directed a memo my way, informing me that someone had misused the facilities in a very unusual way. There were burned feathers and spots of blood on the wall. The toilet itself was... well, disgusting.

I suggested to KK that he might want to put on a mask and some gloves – but he chose to tough it out.

I opened the bathroom door and gestured for KK to go in. He entered, looked about, put his hand over his mouth and ran for the door.

"Weakling!" I thought. I gathered the debris up and filled another garbage bag. The solvent I had put in the toilet earlier had completed its enzymatic action, and a single flush removed the bowl's contents.

I sprayed a sweet-smelling disinfectant about the room and went to look for KK.

He was nowhere to be found. Finally, I tapped on Mr. Gorham's door.

"Mr. Klause has disappeared." I said.

Mr. Gorham glared at me. "What did you do to him? He called me from his motel room, saying he was sick and that when he returned tomorrow, he, for sure, did not want to observe you any more, that you earned every cent you made."

Mr. Gorham took a breath and continued, "When he said those words, I knew he was at best incompetent, or at worst a blithering fool, so I fired him. Have a good day."

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As I left I thought, "Mr. Gorham is getting more and more obnoxious. I need to get Jade to teach him another lesson."

I climbed into my new truck. What a pleasure! The heat billowed out from the vents, and the conservative talk host bellowed out his depressing news. I clicked the selector dial around until I had located some music – Christmas, of course.

I needed to get another secret Santa gift for Ms Grimsley. The perfume gift had produced interesting results, but a calmer present was needed.

I drove to Miss Donna's Divinities (and damaged goods). The store offered two kinds of products. In the front part of the shop were all kinds of candy, ranging from sea taffy to mouth-watering chocolate-covered nuts. In the back were the damaged goods. Miss Donna had accumulated souvenirs from her many years as a paid escort for the world traveler, Hugo Sheffner.

Jade said that in her day, Miss Donna had been quite a looker. Sadly the years and gravity had been unkind to her. When Hugo was found dead from a massive stroke in his Las Vegas hot tub, Miss Donna had received a sizable inheritance.

There were those that said if Hugo had lived a few more days, he would have signed his new will leaving his entire fortune to his latest love, Phoenix. A few gossipers were quoted in the stories which eventually leaked to the tabloids. The stories suggested the late night visit by Miss Donna was responsible for Hugo's stroke. But people always bad-mouth those who have good fortune.

Miss Donna's back room had a wonderful selection of possible gifts for Ms Grimsley. There were music boxes,

unusual jewelry, bird houses, trinket boxes glittering with Swarovski crystals, Dresden dolls, porcelain animals and old postcards. The difficult part would be picking out just one thing.

Miss Donna came back and stood beside me. "Why, Bixie, how nice to see you. Someone was in the store yesterday and they said you had come back to Sleaufort. They even got a little gift for you."

"Who was here?" I asked.

"Oh, I had better not say; they said they were your Secret Santa." Miss Donna tittered and continued. "Although the gift they selected was an odd one for such a purpose."

"Ah ha!" I thought. "So here's where the headless doll came from."

Try as I would, I could not persuade Miss Donna to spill the beans. Finally, I gave up and put a few things in my basket.

I really loved a Dresden porcelain cat and a crystal paperweight. I was surprised at their cost.

I added up the total in my head and then asked Miss Donna where the deeply-discounted items were.

I planned to buy the cat and the paperweight for me, but now I had very little money left for Ms Grimsley.

Miss Donna said, "This box has all my really inexpensive items. Or you could buy some candy. The money you have left to spend will buy two pieces of my chocolate-covered pecans. I will put them in a really cheery red box and wrap the box in my sparkly foil wrap."

She left me to my cheapness as she attended to the wealthier clientele.

The discard box had interesting things – a music box that played six chords and then quit, an exquisite pin with

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four faux emeralds and sixteen empty places, a tiny tea set broken to smithereens, a silver plated jewelry box with seven brown teeth nestled on the velvet inlay and other quasi-trash.

At the very bottom was a medium size wooden box made from some kind of expensive wood. The latch was broken, and the box was warped tightly shut.

I slipped a nail file between the edges and forced the box open. It was empty. As I looked more closely at the box, I thought, "It appears more shallow than its outside dimensions suggest."

I tapped the side of the interior, trying to find a way to get into the secret compartment of the box. I got nowhere.

In disgust, I slammed the cover shut. I felt the bottom of the box move. I had discovered the hidden compartment. When I slid the false bottom revealing the secret compartment, I saw a stack of letters crammed in the space.

I slipped the letters into my tote bag, closed the compartment and took the wooden box along with the jewelry box containing the teeth to Miss Donna.

She added the total for the two things that were B.L.B bound along with the two additional items. My total was too much again.

Finally, I walked out of the store with four gifts for me and a tiny foil-wrapped present for Ms Grimsley that contained one slightly old and damaged chocolate covered nut.

Knowing there was no food at home, I stopped at the newest drive-through restaurant. There are two interesting facts about Sleaufort's eating establishments. First, per square area, Sleaufort has more new restaurants opening than all the towns nearby and secondly, Sleaufort has more

restaurants closing once the first county health inspection is completed. Go figure.

The restaurant, Pickle Me Pink, offered the usual – deep-fat battered fried vegetables, meat, onions, potatoes, and bread. The restaurant's name came from the pickles that accompanied every order. They were, of course, pink. I ordered the days sampler, which had okra, yellow-squash, sweet potato wedges and chicken-filet – everything battered dipped and then fried. I felt very noble at making my meal so vegetable-friendly and by saying “No!” to the side of flavored grease they offered with the meal.

The Sleaufort humidity had already begun its work on making my clothes tight. In Rustin, where the air was drier, my clothes had stopped their shrinking, but here, the shrinking had started again.

I knew my tight clothes had nothing to do with what I ate, or indeed, with how little I exercised. There were just too many studies out there now that substantiated this belief.

To be sure there were random studies that suggested the complete opposite. Some of the conclusions from these clinical trials, written up in journals like Journal of the American Medical Association suggested that a long, healthy life was associated with a balanced diet and moderate daily exercise. But you and I know that anyone can prove anything with statistics.

As J. Edgar Hoover, or George Bush or Abraham Lincoln, someone like that, said, “You can fool all the people, some of the time, and some of the people, all the time,” or whatever they said.

When I got home, I waved “Hello” to Jewel, who was angrily awaiting someone on her porch.

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Once inside my house, I opened my supper, and wolfed down the food. The key, I have learned to eating lard-fried food is to eat it quickly before the grease solidifies. Science had shown that polyunsaturated fats are generally not solids; ergo, lard is polyunsaturated until it cools down.

I felt so content after supper. Now I could deal with my phone messages and the bills. Then I would read the letters that had “flown” into my tote bag.

My brother had called three times but left no messages. Since I had returned to Sleaufort, he hadn't resumed his match making but I knew it was just a matter of time. So he could be calling about the great date he had lined up for me, but more likely he needed a baby-sitter.

Why do people think that a person who has lived through parenthood would be eager to baby sit their children? George believes this. His children hate me, unfair feelings on their part. So I told them horror stories and insisted on feeding them turnips, so what?

I should call George back, but gosh darn, where had the evening gone? It was already bedtime – the clock said 7pm.

Jade called me just as I began to read my non-fiction political expose. This particular one described the rise to power of a charismatic non-experienced country boy. From a lowly boyhood, to achieving the most powerful position in the country – well, almost-so close-nearly did it – all the details were spelled out.

Jade did her little, “Hello, how are you; how are things going?” before she started on the real purpose for her call.

“Bixie, I am throwing a wrap party tomorrow evening and I want you to help me with it.”

“Jade, I would love to help you; but I am really tired from all the catch-up work, I have been doing at the courthouse – maybe another weekend, and what is a wrap party?”

Jade listened in her usual fashion to my long comment and then answered in her Jade-like fashion. “It is great that you can help. A wrap party is the latest weight-loss method. A person throws a party for people who are a little heavy and the wrap consultant gives demonstrations of the wrap technique.

The steps involved take about thirty minutes. A person is wrapped with a special cloth and deionizing liquids are dabbed onto the cloth.

As the ions move across the skin barrier out into the cloth, water and fat molecules move across as well. Within the body, fat globules are broken down into fat molecules and then these also transfer out.

It is amazing – a great big belly miraculously becomes taut and weight just goes away.”

As I listened to Jade, I found my head shaking back and forth. Unbelievable – one more way to lose inches and pounds with no change in diet or exercise.

“Please, Jade, you know I always want to give you support, but not this time. I have to decorate for Christmas, and there’s work...”

I was competing with Jade’s voice, as she said, “I’m counting on you to come up with a nice buffet for the people coming to the party. At last count, there were forty-five.” Then she hung up, while I continued my monologue to the dial tone.

It was hopeless. Now with everything else I needed to buy party supplies. I picked up my book and began reading the description of the boyhood of the politician.

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He had been the smartest, sweetest and the most polite boy that his third grade school teacher had ever had. It was his sweetness and refusal to see bad in anyone that had led him to befriend the school bad boy, Rocky. However, even this friendship was not enough to keep Rocky from his crimes of cheating and stealing the grade book.

Rocky's fall, culminating in an eventual prison sentence, began with the third grade scandal. The "good boy" had turned him in to his third grade teacher for all his misdeeds and incidentally, had gotten the highest grade ever achieved on the end of the grade exam.

I stopped reading. I felt sick; I must have eaten something that didn't agree with me. I put the book down, cut the TV on and fell asleep as yet another bachelor explained how the non-rose recipient had not opened up and how he feared that he would never truly know her.



Bixie is finding it difficult to get her holiday groove on. She is overworked and surrounded by the jolly courthouse group, buzzed up from sugar and alcohol. As if attendance at a school play and being Santa at the drunken courthouse party is not enough, Bixie continues to be stalked. There are sinister gifts, threatening phone calls and three people resembling Bixie are dead. Thomases are everywhere. This season, staying alive will be present enough.

### **Silenced in Sleaufort**

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