

"Handle With Care"

by

Tim Gage

Scene: The corporate office mailroom of Roberts Office Supplies Inc. A large table, or possibly several small tables, are stacked with mail to be sorted, a thankless task currently being worked on by JENNIFER and EVE. CASANDRA is at a separate table or desk, doing paperwork. The phone near Casandra rings.

CASANDRA: (Picking up the phone.) Roberts Office Supplies mailroom, this is Casandra speaking. (Pause.) I'm sorry to hear you haven't received payment yet, sir, but that isn't our area. I'll need to redirect you to billing. (Pause.) You think it might have been lost in the mail? Sir, I have been working in this mailroom for ten years. I assure you, if a piece of mail comes through here, it arrives at its intended destination. Period. (Pause.) No sir, that's not possible. I'm going to transfer you to--

Casandra stops as the person on the other end hangs up on her. She slams the phone down in anger.

CASANDRA: Can you believe that man? Claiming we lost a piece of mail? LOST! The day a piece of mail comes through here and doesn't get where it's supposed to go, I'll cut my wrists.

Jennifer and Eve shoot each other a glance.

JENNIFER: Casandra, have you thought about taking a vacation? You're sounding a little stressed.

CASANDRA: (Waving her off.) I haven't taken vacation for five years. Don't need it. Getting the AP department their bills for the day...that's my vacation.

JENNIFER: (She resumes sorting.) Yikes.

MATT, a younger man who also works in the mailroom, enters carrying a tote full of mail. On top is a small package labeled HANDLE WITH CARE in bright letters.

MATT: Good news for anyone who was worried we didn't have enough mail to sort: (He sets the tote on a table.) Here's some more mail to sort.

JENNIFER: (With no emotion.) Yay.

EVE: (Simultaneously with Jennifer.) Yay.

MATT: Mondays. What're ya going to do?

As Matt is unloading some of this new mail onto the table, Jennifer spots the package Matt has just brought it in, and picks it up suspiciously.

JENNIFER: What's this?

MATT: Oh! Is this a riddle? Okay, I'm really good at these, let me think. Well, we work in the mailroom. (Gesturing to the tote.) This is the mail. So... (Thinks a moment.) I'm going to say: a riding lawnmower?

JENNIFER: This is a package.

MATT: Ah, hell. That was going to be my second guess. (He goes to work sorting at one of the piles of mail.)

JENNIFER: (Reading off the package.) "Handle With Care" (She shakes it gently) This is a package addressed to Mr. Roberts, the owner.

MATT: Oh my God, you're right. How dare the owner of a business receive packages at the business he owns! You know, I've got half a mind to-- (He suddenly mimics falling asleep, snoring loudly.)

JENNIFER: Mr. Roberts never gets packages here. Everyone who knows Mr. Roberts knows he's hardly ever in the office, and just sends his packages to his home address.

CASANDRA: (Not looking up from her paperwork.) It's none of our business, Jennifer. Just put the package by Mr. Roberts box where he'll see it.

JENNIFER: (Still looking over the package suspiciously.) Look at the return address. I've never seen anything come here from this address before. (She turns to Eve.) Eve, don't you think this is strange?

EVE: Oh, I...I don't know, I guess. Yeah, it's a little weird.

CASANDRA: It's not weird, it's none of our business.

EVE: (Instantly changing her mind.) Yeah, it's really none of our business.

JENNIFER: Look at this... (She points to the bottom of the package.) This thing is damp. It's all wet with something at the bottom.

EVE: What is it?

JENNIFER: (She smells her fingers.) I don't know. It's strange though.

Eve takes the package from Jennifer and looks it over. She smells it.

EVE: It smells weird. Like my boyfriend after he eats eggs. (They all stare at her.) Oh, well, he has this digestive problem, and...

CASANDRA: (Getting up from her work.) That's enough, you two. (She takes the package.) I'll tell you what this package is. It's the property of Mr. Kevin Roberts, owner of Roberts Office Supplies Inc., and it is entirely none of our business what is in this box.

JENNIFER: But what if it's something dangerous? To Mr. Roberts or us? Or... (She thinks a moment) ...or, incriminating! Mr. Roberts could be in trouble with the law or something. (She turns to Matt.) Matt, don't you think this whole thing is a little suspicious?

MATT: Well, it does seem a little-- (He falls asleep, snoring loudly again.)

JENNIFER: (Grabbing the package back from Casandra.) I'm not sending this package until I know for sure it's not dangerous or important. If I just knew what this wet spot was... (She turns to Eve, holding out the package.) Hey Eve, lick it.

EVE: Gross, no!

Jennifer turns to Casandra.

CASANDRA: Oh no. You can lick your own package, if you're so curious.

Jennifer stares at the damp part a moment, considering it, but she can't bring herself to do it. She turns to Matt.

JENNIFER: Hey Matt--

MATT: No way.

JENNIFER: I'll give you a dollar.

Matt freezes. He turns to Jennifer.

MATT: Let me see this dollar.

Jennifer pulls out a dollar bill, holds it out, and sets it on the table. Matt walks over, picks up the dollar, pockets it, and takes the package. He studies it for a moment, then gives it a good long lick. He smacks his lips, his eyes rolled back in thought. The three women stare, waiting for his verdict.

MATT: (Finally.) It's blood.

JENNIFER: I knew it!

MATT: Or...strawberry milk. (He licks his lips a bit more.) Yep, definitely one of those two.

JENNIFER: How the hell can it be either blood or strawberry milk? They don't taste remotely alike!

MATT: Listen, you wanted my opinion, and you got it. You don't like what I have to say, you can lick your own damn mystery package next time!

JENNIFER: I want my dollar back.

MATT: No refunds. (He goes back to work.)

Jennifer grabs the package and crosses to the phone.

CASANDRA: What are you doing?

JENNIFER: (Dialing the phone.) I'm going to call whoever sent this package and get some answers.

CASANDRA: No you are not! The contents of that package are not our concern. Our only concern is getting it where it needs to go.

EVE: She has a point, Jen. We just need to get it to where it's going.

JENNIFER: (To Casandra.) This package is highly suspicious, and I'm not sending it anywhere until I am confident it isn't something dangerous.

EVE: She has a point, Cas. We need to be confident it isn't something dangerous.

CASANDRA: Jennifer, I order you to put down that phone.

EVE: She's orders you, Jennifer.

JENNIFER: You're not the boss, Casandra.

EVE: You're not the boss, Casandra.

CASANDRA: Eve, I'm not a violent person, but I will kill you, I swear to God.

JENNIFER: (Into the phone.) Hi, information? I'm looking for the number of a... (Reading off the package.) Mr. Rick Singer in Winona, Minnesota. Great, can you connect me? Thanks. (A pause as Jennifer waits for someone to pick up. Eve huddles next to her, trying to listen in. Someone picks up.) Hi, is this Mr. Rick Singer? Really?

EVE: Ask him about the package.

JENNIFER: (Into phone.) This is 555-7623, correct?

EVE: Ask him about the package.

JENNIFER: (Into phone.) So Rick Singer is no longer at this residence?

EVE: Did you ask him about the package?

JENNIFER: (Covering the phone receiver.) Eve, will you shut up, already! I'm talking. (Into phone.) So Rick Singer can't be reached here? Can you tell me where I can reach him? (Pause. Alarmed.) No!

EVE: What?

JENNIFER: (Into phone, more alarmed.) No!

EVE: No, what?

JENNIFER: (Into phone, maximum alarm.) NO!

EVE: NO, WHAT?!?

JENNIFER: Eve! (Into phone.) How-- (Pause.) When-- (Pause.) Okay. Well. Thank you. (She hangs up the phone.) Mr. Rick Singer is dead.

All but Matt react with alarm.

EVE: My God! We hardly knew him!

CASANDRA: Well, dead or not, this changes nothing. Packages from deceased senders need to be delivered all the same.

JENNIFER: Are you joking? The CEO gets a damp, funny smelling package from a dead guy, and you want to just send it along like it's just another insurance bill?

CASANDRA: Okay Jen, you tell me. What could this package possibly be that we need to be worried about?

JENNIFER: (Thinking.) Well, maybe...maybe Mr. Roberts was having an affair with Mr. Singer's wife. (She likes this idea.) Yeah, that's it. You see, Mr. Singer was the supplier in charge of providing our company with mail supplies, and on a business meeting one day, Mr. Roberts saw Mr. Singer's wife, they took a fancy to each other, and they begin a secret, passionate love affair, which they conducted in Mr. Singer's own bed while he was away at work. But one day, Mr. Singer forgets an important memo at home, and comes back on his lunch break to get it, catching Mr. Roberts and his wife in the throws of loud, wild, sweaty infidelity. (At some point during the following, Eve picks up the package and is looking it over curiously.) Surprised, Mr. Roberts hits Mr. Singer with the bed lamp, and accidentally kills him! Mr. Roberts and Mrs. Singer know they can't go to jail...their only hope is to dispose of the body, which they do by chopping him up...head, hands, feet, arms, torso, the whole bit...and using Mr. Singer's own mailing supplies to mail the various parts to different locations around the world, including... (She points at the package Eve is now holding.) ...Mr. Singer's left foot!

Eve screams and tosses the package away from her, which Jennifer calmly catches.

EVE: Gross! I was just touching somebody's foot box?

CASANDRA: Ridiculous. You're trying to convince us that he disposed of this man's body by mailing his pieces around the world? Why wouldn't they just throw him in a lake or something?

JENNIFER: Because they didn't have a lake, they had mailing supplies.

MATT: Why would he mail the parts to himself? Why not mail them somewhere they can't trace them back to him, like China or Africa or something?

JENNIFER: So that no one else would find the parts and suspect him.

CASANDRA: How did whoever you talked to on the phone even know Mr. Singer was dead if his parts are globetrotting around the world via the postal system?

JENNIFER: Because...they found the...they talked to the... (Frustrated, she gives up.) Look, just have a little imagination and work with me here, people!

CASANDRA: (Taking the package.) I'll tell you what's in this package. (Thinks.) Mr. Singer was...Kevin Robert's uncle. A very ill uncle, who knew he wasn't long for this world. And knowing this, he wanted to send all his relatives a little reminder, some sort of shared memory that would cause joy in the person, ever after his passing. In the case of Mr. Roberts, Mr. Singer remembered that as a little boy, Mr. Roberts every morning would ask for a glass of strawberry milk, which Mr. Singer would make for him while they watched morning cartoons. So he sent a thermos of strawberry milk to Mr. Roberts, which broke during shipment thanks to someone not heeding the "Handle With Care" sticker, spilling out the contents and causing your mysterious damp spot.

Pause as everyone considers this.

JENNIFER: That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.

CASANDRA: THAT is the dumbest thing you've ever heard? You think the box has a severed foot in it.

JENNIFER: My story just seems way more plausible.

CASANDRA: (Pause.) I repeat, your story has a SEVERED FOOT IN IT!

JENNIFER: Eve, what do you think?

EVE: (Thinks for a moment.) I think the package is full of jelly beans.

JENNIFER: What? Why?

EVE: (Shrugs.) I don't know. I just like jelly beans.

MATT: You know, if you guys really want to know what's in the package, you could just open it, look, then tape it back shut.

CASANDRA: Absolutely not.

JENNIFER: No, Casandra's right. There are certain moral and ethical problems with that course of action. We need to carefully consider all the ramifications of-- (Suddenly, she grabs a box opener and heads for the package.) I'm doing it!

Jennifer sprints towards the box, but Casandra beats her to it.

CASANDRA: (Clutching the package.) No! I won't allow this! Our job is to get the mail where it's supposed to go. We don't question, we don't investigate, we don't judge.

Jennifer approaches in a fighting stance.

JENNIFER: Give it up, Cas. I'm younger, I'm faster, and I'm armed.

CASANDRA: You will open this package over my rotting corpse!

JENNIFER: Have it your way.

Jennifer dives in and manages to grab hold of the package, which Casandra clings to stubbornly. The struggle viciously, knocking piles of mail off the table. Eve shadows them, looking for an opening to break them up. Matt continues working as if nothing is happening. An improvised row ensues, during which the girls struggle back and forth, knocking mail from the tables and screaming at each other, while Matt calmly works away.

Suddenly, Jennifer manages to get a hold of the very top of the package, and Casandra pulls away violently. The very top of the package rips open, leaving the insides exposed. All three women freeze, realizing what they've done. Casandra sets the package on the table quickly and backs away from it. They all stare: suddenly, none of them, not even Jennifer, dare look.

CASANDRA: (To Jennifer.) Well?

JENNIFER: I thought you didn't want me look?

CASANDRA: I didn't want you to open it, but... (Pause.) I mean, it's open now. You might as well look.

JENNIFER: You look.

CASANDRA: I'm not looking.

JENNIFER: Eve, look inside the box.

EVE: I'm not looking in the foot box.

CASANDRA: Why don't you want to look?

JENNIFER: I don't know, it was easy when I couldn't see, but now I can see, and...it's like all this pressure!

Matt stands up in disgust.

MATT: Jesus, women are nuts! (He calmly walks over to the box and looks inside. Pause. He starts chuckling to himself and sits back down.) Oh, man.

The three women look at each other, then sprint simultaneously to the box and look inside.

JENNIFER: (Shocked, but somewhat laughing.) Oh...my God.

CASANDRA: Please tell me that isn't what I think it is.

JENNIFER: I think it's exactly what you think it is.

EVE: What is it?

CASANDRA: Okay. Umm... (She grabs a tape gun.) We are just going to close this up...and...um...

JENNIFER: ...pretend we never saw it.

CASANDRA: (Taping closed the box.) Yes.

JENNIFER: Ever.

CASANDRA: Right.

JENNIFER: We never, ever, ever saw what we just saw.

EVE: We never saw what? What was that?

CASANDRA: Never mind, Eve.

EVE: Yeah, but...what was that?

JENNIFER: I'm not sending that. I mean, I know it isn't dangerous or anything, but still...I don't want to be responsible for that. You can send it, Cas.

CASANDRA: (Freezes.) I can't send this.

JENNIFER: What? What happened to cutting your wrists the day a piece of mail came through here that didn't arrive at its intended destination?

CASANDRA: Oh, it can get to its destination, but I'm not going to be the one to send...that.

JENNIFER: So what are we going to do?

Silence as they think.

EVE: (Tentative.) We could just leave it for second shift.

JENNIFER: Oh my God. That's brilliant, Eve.

CASANDRA: Leave it for second shift. They can decide what to do with it.

JENNIFER: Perfect.

CASANDRA: I love it. Great idea, Eve.

EVE: Um...thank you?

Cassandra puts the box aside, and they all go back to sorting mail, silently. Finally, Eve speaks up.

EVE: But what was that, anyway?

JENNIFER: None of our business, Eve. We don't question, we don't investigate, we don't judge.

EVE: But earlier you said--

JENNIFER: Let it go, Eve.

Pause.

EVE: But what was that, anyway?

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY