

THE PROOFREADER'S IN THE PUDDING

by

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(The main office of Nitwit House, a small but successful publishing company on the third floor of an elegant old building in central Boston. The walls and filing cabinets have been decorated for the annual New Year's Eve party, and a large, central desk has been cleared of its papers to host a substantial punch bowl. As the lights come up, Cookie Booker is putting the finishing touches on the party preparations. Douglas Double-Troubleday enters.)

DOUGLAS

Ah, Cookie. I'm glad to see I'm not too late to help you set up. What shall I do?

COOKIE

Now? After I've done all the work? Hmm . . . I'd say your best bet is just to stand there looking like a well-preserved, seventy-five-year-old statue. Maybe put a drink in your hand.

(She hands him one.)

There. Now, if your classic publishing genius had led you to show up about *two hours ago*, then you might have been able to actually *help*. But, not to worry. You are so absolutely fabulous at just looking distinguished, and useless, Douglas. It's one of your best things.

DOUGLAS

(Charmingly, oblivious to her irony)

Flattery will get you nowhere, my dear.

(He looks around, with pleasure.)

You know, a publisher's life may not be what it was in the golden age . . . but I do so love our annual New Year's Eve party. Especially these past few years. I say, what do you think has made the last two or three parties so especially wonderful?

COOKIE

(Ceasing her activity to stand in a pose of mock contemplation. She is completely sarcastic, and mimics Douglas' crisp English accent.)

Hmm . . . I say, let me see, now. Could it perhaps be because we hired that jolly lovely young book designer about two or three years ago?

DOUGLAS

(Suddenly showing great interest in some decorative snowflakes)

Did we? Honestly, I hadn't noticed. It's so hard to keep track of the comings and goings of a large staff -- what is it, five of us now?

COOKIE

(Speaking in her normal accent again)

So you haven't noticed Slikk Galleigh, eh? Interesting. You sign her paychecks every week. Though I'm surprised she doesn't make you revise the checks in three

different graphics layout programs before she'll accept them. I mean, "complete artistic control" of the graphics department is one thing, but that chick really pushes the limit sometimes.

(Slikk Galleigh enters.)

COOKIE

Hi there, Ms. Galleigh. I was terribly afraid that you might not be able to join us.

SLIKK

What made you think that?

COOKIE

Oh, I don't know. I just figured there must be hundreds of louder, more *excessive* places for your type of personality to go on New Year's Eve.

SLIKK

Well, you're right, of course. But I didn't want to miss Mr. Double-Troubleday's special vintage scotch.

(She gives Douglas a playful pat on the cheek. It barely passes for "daughterly".)

(Scarlett enters, humming "Copacabana". She seems nervous and preoccupied.)

SCARLETT

Hi.

(She looks around frantically.)

Where are the Cheese Doodles? Don't we have Cheese Doodles?

SLIKK

Hey, Scarlett, what's up. Where'd you get those funky leggings?

SCARLETT

What? Why are they funky? You have leggings like this. I saw you wear them last week. Tuesday. What's so funky about these leggings?

COOKIE

Help yourself to the brie platter, Scarlett honey. The bread's fresh from the Italian bakery.

SLIKK

Get with it -- "funky" is a complimentary word again this year.

SCARLETT

But this year is ending. In a few hours it will be *next* year, and then maybe you'll be *dissing* my leggings. You wore yours while it was still the old year. You always know what to do. Maybe I should go home and change. Is that what the sticky note

you left on my desk meant? It wasn't funny, you know. Don't we have any Cheese Doodles?

COOKIE

There may be some in the kitchen.

(Scarlett exits toward the kitchen.)

DOUGLAS

What a funny young lady. And always humming that interesting tune.

SLIKK

Yeah. "Interesting", that's one word for it. It's "Copacabana", by Barry Manilow.

COOKIE

"Copacabana"? You mean like the name of that nightclub across the street?

SLIKK

Coincidentally, precisely, and *unfortunately* . . . the same. The awning on that nightclub is the last thing Scarlett sees every day before she enters our building, and this unconsciously prompts her to begin humming that tune around the time she greets us. Nothing hypnosis couldn't cure, I'm sure. Or murder -- if we can't afford a hypnotist.

COOKIE

What's that note she's talking about? You haven't been writing unkind things to her, I hope.

SLIKK

Of course not! I like Scarlett, despite "Copacabana".

(She walks to Scarlett's desk and removes a sticky note from the tape dispenser to which it is affixed. She brings it to Cookie.)

Here. Do you call this unkind?

COOKIE

(After glancing at the note)

Seems innocent enough to me. But what's that strange symbol at the end?

SLIKK

Oh, for pete's sake! It's a winking smiley. Do I have to explain *everything* around here?

(She walks toward the brie platter.)

Oh -- no knife.

COOKIE

(Defensively)

I'm *sorry*. I'm only one bookkeeper. I can't do everything, you know.

SLIKK

Hey -- chill. I'll get the knife, okay?
(She exits toward the kitchen.)

DOUGLAS

Strange -- I could have sworn there was a brie knife there a moment ago. Reminds me of a story. I was dining with George Bernard Shaw -- I was a young man then, of course -- and when the cheese was served, he --

COOKIE

Oh, shut up.

(Before Douglas can reply, they are joined by Studs Verbiage and Jess Curran-O'Fares.)

JESS

Happy New Year! I was just saying to Studs here on the way up: Do you realize this is the first time in eight years that New Year's Eve has fallen on a Thursday?

STUDS

I *knew* there was something special about tonight.

COOKIE

Jess, how *do* you manage to come up with so much -- uh -- fascinating information?

JESS

It's part of the research I'm doing for my chapter about calendar biorhythms. Hey, where is everyone else?

DOUGLAS

Well, the proofreader went off to satisfy a peculiar craving for Cheese Dodos.

COOKIE

Doodles.

DOUGLAS

Just as you say.

(Apologetically)

I have such a poor command of gourmet food terminology.

COOKIE

And Bette's not here yet -- she had a late meeting with a prospective author. And the more prospective, the better, is all I can say, since we've got our hands full right now with the likes of you. Not that I'm complaining about all the blockbusters she keeps putting out for us, mind you. Hiring her 10 years ago was the smartest thing Douglas ever did -- and not just because she does most of what used to be his work, either.

DOUGLAS

Really, Cookie --

COOKIE

Listen, Bette Sellers became our Editor at a time when we had fallen completely off the map, commercially. I know you care more about prestige than money, Douglas --

(Addressing Jess and Studs)

that's why he never lets the biggies buy him out, though they keep offering. But even *he* can't object to Bette putting us on the best seller list every ten minutes. Still, I wish she wouldn't be so extravagant with her expense account. I mean, look at this.

(She retrieves a restaurant tab from her desk. She addresses Douglas now)

Wednesday. Bette takes these two clowns here to lunch at the Marinara Menage. They order a portabella mushroom pizza. I've seen those pizzas -- feed at least 4 people, even writers. But someone orders a soup and sandwich, too. *And* they have Tuscan lemonade -- whatever that is -- at \$3.50 a glass.

STUDS

I'm sorry, Cookie. I ordered the sandwich.

COOKIE

Soup and sandwich. Whatsamatter, you don't like pizza or something?

STUDS

(Nervously)

Don't be silly -- who doesn't like pizza? Of course I like pizza. I just . . . didn't really feel like pizza, that's all.

JESS

You know, Studs, I don't believe I've *ever* seen you eat pizza.

STUDS

Nonsense. You're just not remembering.

DOUGLAS

Unlikely, my dear boy. We all know that Jess has a memory like a card catalog.

STUDS

(Getting a little excited)

Well, then she just hasn't been paying attention. I mean, it's *obvious* that a guy like me would like pizza, right? How could I not like pizza? Why it's -- it's -- preposterous, that's what it is. When I was in high school, they called me "Eight-Slice" Verbiage. Where do you think that nickname came from, huh? *Huh?*

(He is now shouting)

I'll tell you where it came from -- it came from the fact that when I was good and hungry, I could polish off an entire pizza pie in one sitting, and love every minute of it. So just get off my case, all right!!

DOUGLAS

Er . . . of course.

(Attempting to change the subject)

Nicknames are a curious thing, what? Back in England, I knew a chap they called "Squishysquash", because --

STUDS

(Now calmer, but still upset)

I'm sorry, Douglas. I'm sorry, Jess, Cookie. Please don't tell anyone I don't like pizza. I hate pizza. I've always hated pizza. Blech! They never called me "Eight-Slice", either. *Please* don't tell Slikk. She's the super-coolest person I've ever met. These past eight months with her have been the best time of my life. I love her, and I want her to think *I'm* cool, too. But it's not cool to hate pizza. You won't tell her, will you? I -- I -- I'd do almost anything to keep someone from telling Slikk that I hate pizza. Up till now, the only one I've ever told was Scarlett. I don't know why I told her. It was last winter . . . I was about to break up with her. It had only taken a few days for me to see that she was really still just an insecure teenager dressed up as a grown-up professional. I guess I felt sorry for her. But she could tell Slikk. She would do that kind of thing, just to feel important -- she's so juvenile. If I'd known then how irresponsible and obnoxious she can get with a "secret", I never would have told her. But hindsight is 20/20. I don't know how to shut her up.

(Regaining his usual composure now)

Hey, where is Slikk, anyway?

SLIKK

(Re-entering with a cheese knife)

Right here! Say, who invited *authors* to this party? I thought this was for the real workers -- and Douglas.

(She laughs at her own witticism, and kisses Studs heavily on the lips.)

JESS

Whoo!

STUDS

(After they finally break the clinch.)

Hold the champagne, Douglas. My lips are too numb to taste anything now.

DOUGLAS

I'm confused, young man. Weren't you with the other young lady this time last year?

(Slikk laughs good-naturedly at this faux pas.)

JESS

Douglas Double-Troubleday. Publisher . . . diplomat . . . man of impeccable taste, judgment and discretion.

COOKIE

You forgot "horse's behind".

JESS

It was implied. Douglas, weren't you paying *any* attention to Studs' little narrative just now? I thought it was rather gripping, myself.

(Studs shushes her, cocking his head in the direction of Slikk.)

SLIKK

Oh, Douglas, you are so amusing. But speaking of the late Scarlett Marx . . . she wouldn't talk to me just now in the kitchen. I don't know why she hasn't come back in here. She found the Cheese Doodles. I think she's upset about something. Her over-reaction to my comment about her leggings, her antisocial obsession with cheese-flavored snacks, the slightly-melancholy overtone to her normally-cheerful rendition of "Copacabana" . . . it all adds up.

JESS

Well, I'll go see if I can coax her back. I'm headed for the kitchen, anyway.

COOKIE

(Defensively)

What's in the kitchen? Did I forget something else?

JESS

In the kitchen is a sink, for washing my hands. There's much more room there than at the bathroom sink. In the bathroom, my elbows always knock the soap dispenser onto the floor.

COOKIE

You're supposed to knock that over with your purse, not your elbow.

JESS

Yes, but I don't carry a purse.

(She exits toward the kitchen.)

SLIKK

So now Jess is going to "coax" her out here, huh? That I'd like to see. It would be like watching a roll of microfilm sing and dance for the kiddies. Now if she'd said she was going to *bore* her back out here, that would have made more sense.

STUDS

(Who has been silently reflective)

Why did you call her the "late" Scarlett Marx?

SLIKK

What are you talking about?

STUDS

You described Scarlett as the "late Scarlett Marx".

SLIKK

Don't be silly, lover man. Why would I say such a thing?

COOKIE

I was wondering that myself. But you said it, all right.

SLIKK

Hmm How eccentric of me. I must have just been thinking about Scarlett being late in returning from her search for Cheese Doodles. What an unfortunate way of putting it, though -- I mean, she's not dead or anything, right? Though I have to say her hair looks a little limp tonight, poor child.

(Bette Sellers enters.)

STUDS

Hello, our Illustrious Editor. You owe me a nickel.

BETTE

I owe you no such thing. I don't even think there is such a thing. A "nickel", you say? Absurd. Rhymes with "pickle". Maybe I owe you a pickle. That I could believe.

STUDS

You owe me a nickel because I got here before you.

BETTE

No fair -- when we made that wager, I didn't know I'd have a meeting tonight.

STUDS

Doesn't matter. A bet's a bet, Bette.

BETTE

All right, all right. I'll add it to your next royalty check.

DOUGLAS

May I pour you a drink, Bette?

BETTE

I'd love one, in a moment. But business before pleasure -- I need to use the ladies' room.

(She exits.)

SLIKK

(Mischievously playful)

She considers a dreary office party like this a "pleasure"?

COOKIE

I think she was referring to the proffered drink, not the company.

(Jess returns from the kitchen, holding an ink cartridge.)

JESS

Was that Bette's voice I heard?

COOKIE

Probably. It was coming out of Bette's mouth. So unless one of you other characters has taken up ventriloquism

JESS

Do you think she's going to ask me how my book's coming along?

STUDS

I don't know. Why?

JESS

Well, she asks me that every time I see her.

STUDS

Editors can be so annoying that way.

SLIKK

Among many others.

JESS

But not as annoying as proofreaders. Especially eager-beaver proofreaders who don't know when to mind their own business.

STUDS

Hmm . . . Do you have anyone in particular in mind when you say that?

JESS

Of course not -- it was just an abstract generalization.

DOUGLAS

Ah -- that's my very favorite kind of generalization.

JESS

I did not intend the remark to refer to any specific proofreader that we might all know. Where *is* she, anyway?

SLIKK

I thought you were coaxing her out of the kitchen.

JESS

Indeed, this was my intention. However, the plan was undermined by the appearance of one unanticipated factor -- namely, that Scarlett wasn't *in* the kitchen.

Nobody in there but an open ink cartridge, dripping into the sink. Blue. Cut open with a knife, it looks like. Expensive hobby for whoever did it.

(She places the ink cartridge on a desk.)

BETTE

(Re-entering)

Hi, Jess. Happy New Year. How's the book coming along?

JESS

(Evasively)

Oh . . . it's coming.

BETTE

I wasn't kidding about that January 20th deadline, you know.

JESS

Look, I may not know much . . . but I know enough to realize that an editor *never* kids about a deadline.

STUDS

So what's the problem, Jess? If you've got writer's block, just go copy it out of the encyclopedia.

(All but Jess laugh at this.)

JESS

Very amusing.

(She stomps across the room, away from the group.)

STUDS

Hey, take it easy. It was just a little writer-to-writer joke!

JESS

I'm sorry, Studs. I'm just upset because of that irksome little Scarlett Marx. She said something the other day that rattled me. An entirely unfounded and unsupportable remark. It wasn't true, either. She said one of my new chapters reminded her a lot of an article she'd read on some pop culture website. She practically accused me of being a plagiarist, the snotty punk. I was afraid she was . . . spreading rumors.

STUDS

And *you* were going to go "coax her out of the kitchen"? One look from you, the way you're feeling, and she might never have come out again.

JESS

Yes, well . . . I was trying to forget about that incident.

DOUGLAS

With, I will venture, not much success.

BETTE

Hmm . . . Scarlett told me today she wanted to show me something important on the Web. I was too busy to look at it, though. She kept acting like it was some kind of "top secret" revelation, of great concern to the firm. Is there something I should know, Jess?

JESS

(Visibly upset)

Look -- there's nothing in that online article that's not public domain, really. Okay? It's just quicker than going to the library sometimes. I changed it enough. No one will ever recognize where it came from.

BETTE

Scarlett evidently recognized where it came from.

JESS

Scarlett was . . . Scarlett is . . . a meddling troublemaker that someone around here ought to do something about. What's the big deal? You think other writers don't borrow a little, here and there, when they're in a pinch? I'll take it out, all right? Will that make you happy? I'll take it out in time for your freakin' *deadline*, okay?? I'm sorry I'm not a hot-shot *fiction* writer, like Studs. I tried . . . believe me, I tried. That creative writing program -- fifteen years ago -- was the hardest thing I ever undertook. And I couldn't do it. I was never cut out to write fiction.

(She breaks off into sobs.)

STUDS

Take it easy, Jess.

JESS

(Still crying)

Nonfiction was fun, at first. And easy. I churned out articles for newspapers, then magazines . . . before I knew it, I was spending weeks in the library researching full-length books, with a publisher advance to keep me going. I didn't care how small it was. I just wanted to write. But after a while . . . it got boring. Worse than that . . . I -- I couldn't always deliver. I . . . started cheating once in a while.

BETTE

We'll talk about this on Monday, Jess.

JESS

If Scarlett could only keep her mouth shut

COOKIE

Scarlett's a sweet kid, really, but she does tend to compensate for her petite physique by sporting a plus-size mouth.

SLIKK

Oh, Scarlett's all right. She just needs to grow out of her "kid sister" persona -- you know, always underfoot, making trouble, prying into your affairs, trying to get a reaction. Now, I'm lucky. I was an only child.

COOKIE

(With mock astonishment)

Really! You don't say.

SLIKK

Hey, I wonder where Scarlett *is*.

COOKIE

Who knows. It's a big building, and half the offices never lock their doors. And that gal loves to snoop around.

BETTE

(Slightly alarmed)

She does?

DOUGLAS

What a question! Even I've noticed Ms. Marx's propensity for snoopiness -- and I never notice anything. I've been meaning to speak to her about it for some time.

SLIKK

(Flirtatiously)

Aw, you always notice *me*, Dougycakes.

COOKIE

(To Studs, indicating Slikk)

Did she get a head start on the scotch?

STUDS

Slikk doesn't *need* a head start on the scotch. She's like this right out of the bed. Er -- *box* . Right out of the *box* .

SLIKK

Gee, I know Scarlett likes to wander around -- humming "Copacabana" --

BETTE

Please. Don't even mention the song.

SLIKK

. . . but it isn't like her to miss a party. Even a dull one like this. No offense, Dougycakes. I hope I didn't really hurt her feelings on the leggings matter.

STUDS

Who says that leggings matter?

SLIKK

Scarlett. Or she thinks I think they matter. Or something.

(She flips her arm up to consult her wristwatch.)

Okay! Enough time talking about Scarlett. I love her dearly. Well, okay -- *I like* her dearly . . . even though she had a fling with Studs--

STUDS

Slikk! Shh.

SLIKK

. . . but she is a major drag sometimes, and I've had enough of her for the moment, even in absentia.

STUDS

Check. As of this moment, we will write Ms. Scarlett Marx out of the plot.

SLIKK

Well, don't put it *that* way.

STUDS

What way?

SLIKK

"Write her out of the plot." It sounds so . . . creepy.

STUDS

Sorry. Next time I'll say it without the Peter Lorre accent.

(He pours himself a drink.)

BETTE

If Ms. Marx would just do her job, I'd have no complaints.

JESS

(Still sniffing)

I thought we weren't going to talk about her anymore.

BETTE

I never said that. Anyway, like I was telling you -- if Scarlett would just proofread, which happens to be what she's getting paid to do, and not try to be my Junior Assistant Deputy Editor-in-Chief, then I wouldn't complain. I mean, sure -- even Studs writes some awful sentences now and then that somebody's got to fix --

STUDS

Hey!

BETTE

. . . but that's my job, not hers. Just like it's my job to delete entire chapters from Jess's manuscripts when they turn especially tedious. Jess, sometimes I think you

are copying out of the encyclopedia -- it's hard to imagine that even you could be so dreadfully dull entirely on your own.

DOUGLAS

Er, Bette -- *my dear* -- remember, writers are sensitive animals. They could take offense at your remarks, though I know you mean them only in jest.

SLIKK

Yeah, Jess had murder in her eyes there for a moment.

JESS

I did not! It wasn't murder. It was just . . . just a look of aloof disdain. As befits the occasion.

STUDS

Well, you know what they say -- if the occasion befits, wear it.

COOKIE

Oh, good grief. Would somebody please change the subject, before Studs makes another pun?

JESS

All right, I'll change the subject. I've been meaning to ask you, Cookie . . . I know I'm just a writer -- a nonfiction writer at that -- and it's none of my business . . . but why all that red ink on the Annual Report you circulated yesterday? I know the company's not losing money.

COOKIE

There was no red ink on the report until Scarlett got her hands on it. She was having one of her bouts of insatiable proofreading lust.

SLIKK

Well, better proofreading lust than handsome novelist lust, that's all I can say.

(She moves to Studs, possessively.)

Proofreading keeps her out of trouble.

COOKIE

Not when she decides to "proofread" our private accounts, it doesn't.

DOUGLAS

Good heavens! Has she done this?

COOKIE

Look, buster. I warned you about Scarlett a long time ago. So don't act like a big, surprised, overstuffed sofa now, just because we're in front of the children. If you're too silly to get rid of her like I keep telling you to, don't blame me for the consequences. And I don't want her snooping around this building. As long as we have the misfortune -- and poor judgment -- to be employing her, we're responsible for her presence here. Like I said, she's a sweet kid, but she's trouble -- even though

she doesn't mean any harm. I feel sorry for her. And I keep hoping that maybe she'll outgrow her juvenile behavior -- though she certainly hasn't in the eighteen months she's been with us. Anyway, I'm going to go make sure she's not somewhere she shouldn't be.

(She exits.)

SLIKK

Studs, darling . . . you know I'm not threatened by Scarlett, right? I mean . . . she could hardly be considered a threat. I don't want you to think I feel threatened or anything.

STUDS

Don't worry, baby. You're the only one I want. You have no need to feel threatened at all.

SLIKK

I *don't* feel threatened!

STUDDS

Well . . . good. That's great.

(Turning to Douglas)

I can't believe you didn't realize Scarlett had been through the books, Douglas! *I* knew that.

JESS

Me, too. I thought she'd paraded around in front of all of us, telling us she'd seen the private accounts.

SLIKK

Well, you know what they say . . . the boss is always the last to know. Even if he is distinguished and handsome.

(She winks at Douglas)

Scarlett even showed me a page in one of the ledgers one time.

DOUGLAS

But *nobody* looks at those books but Cookie. What on earth was Scarlett doing with one of the ledgers?

SLIKK

I haven't the faintest idea. But then she's always got her hands on things she shouldn't, so I don't even pay much attention anymore. But I paid a little more attention to this, because she made a point of showing me some -- what did she call them? -- "unusual entries". I'm no bookkeeper, so it was all gibberish to me. My professional opinion, as a designer, extends only as far as observing that Cookie has very elegant handwriting and uses a high-quality pen. So anyway, Scarlett showed me all these accounting entries that I couldn't make heads or tails of, and then she closed the ledger with a smug little smile, and said, "You know that Cookie lost a job because of embezzlement once, don't you?" Mentioned a position Cookie supposedly held, back in prehistoric times, with an accounting practice called

Francis & Toast. Like I could care -- even if it's true. As long as I get *my* paycheck all right, the bookkeeper's habit of embezzlement is really not my problem -- or my business, is it? Especially when I'm up to my earrings in work. Hmm . . . maybe we need to give ol' *Scarlett* more work, to keep her out of our hair. Have her proofread the phonebook or something. If she finishes that, there's always the encyclopedia -- if Jess isn't using it.

DOUGLAS

But this is ridiculous! Cookie's been with the firm for nearly forty years -- since I first came over from England and no one in the States had even heard of me. I'm certain she would never --

(He stops. Something has caught his eye.)

Oh -- *there's* the missing brie knife.

(He stoops to pick it up from under a chair.)

How curious -- the blade is covered with bright blue ink. Still wet.

SLIKK

The word is "cyan", Douglas.

DOUGLAS

Eh?

SLIKK

Cyan. The bright blue ink used in printing. Like in that murdered cartridge Jess found C-y-a-n: cyan. As in cyan, magenta, yellow and black.

DOUGLAS

Now, yellow and black, I've heard of.

BETTE

Well, unless you want a "cyan" carpet, we'd better wipe that knife off. Here.

(She grabs a crumpled piece of paper out of a nearby wastebasket, and motions for Douglas to pass her the knife.)

SLIKK

It's the same root as the word "cyanide", by the way. So I wouldn't try injecting any of that ink into your bloodstream.

DOUGLAS

I am pleased to report that such an activity did not form a part of my plans for this evening.

BETTE

(Un-crumpling the piece of paper she has wiped the knife on)

This is interesting. It's in Scarlett's handwriting. Oh, well, I really shouldn't read someone else's aborted correspondence. Even if I *am* the editor.

(She puts the page down on her desk -- not back in the wastebasket. She then crosses to a chair, and sits.)

DOUGLAS

"Cyan", eh? I'll have to remember that.

(Pleased with himself)

Why, that makes two new technical terms I've learned this week. The other one was "disk cache" -- courtesy of Studs.

BETTE

Oh -- Studs, I didn't know you knew computers.

STUDS

Well . . . only socially.

BETTE

Seriously -- I have a question. If someone were using someone else's computer, could she get into that person's email account?

STUDS

Probably not, without a lot of hacker expertise. Unless the owner of the computer were too stupid to have the email access password-protected.

BETTE

(Laughing nervously)

I guess that would be pretty stupid, wouldn't it? *Password-protected*, you said?

(She takes a memo pad out of her purse, and writes something down.)

STUDS

Don't tell me you don't have password protection on your email!

BETTE

Well, I -- I've been really busy these past five years.

STUDS

Here -- let me show you what can happen. Pretend I'm an unprincipled snooper, with access to your computer.

(Before Bette can stop him, he walks to her computer.)

I turn it on, like this. I open your email program, like that. I scan your inbox for an interesting-looking message. Like this one -- subject line "Do We Have a Deal?" from someone in Malaysia, it looks like.

BETTE

(Rushing over to computer)

That's okay, Studs. I get the idea. You can show me how to password-protect next week, all right?

(She quickly closes her email files.)

Now, if you'll excuse me . . . I've had wine on top of hot tea, so I'm off to the ladies' room again.

(She exits.)

JESS

(Calling after her)

Don't forget to knock the soap dispenser over!

COOKIE

(Re-entering)

Well, a lot of those offices *were* unlocked. But Scarlett didn't seem to be in any of them. Unless she was hiding under a couch with the lights off. Not that I'd be so surprised by that, since she really is like a child. In any case, she didn't answer when I called her name up and down the halls.

DOUGLAS

(Thoughtfully)

I say, Cookie -- I didn't know we had anything going in the Southeast Asian market.

COOKIE

Huh? What are you talking about. We *don't*.

DOUGLAS

Studs just opened up a most intriguing email on Bette's computer. Sounded like a licensing arrangement with a party in Malaysia.

COOKIE

(To Studs)

Do it again.

STUDS

What?

COOKIE

Quickly. Before she gets back. I want to see what that says.

(Studs, under protest, walks back to Bette's computer, and repeats the steps he went through earlier. Cookie hovers at his elbow, and reads the message silently when it appears. When she has finished, she carefully closes the email files.)

Well, well. *Very* interesting. I wouldn't call it "licensing", exactly . . . more like "illegal reselling of our production parts for unauthorized overseas markets". With the payments going directly into a Swiss bank account that seems to be affiliated with our worthy editor, Bette Sellers.

(Bette re-enters the room before anyone can respond.)

STUDS

(Awkwardly)

Hey, boss. How about a quick game of billiards before we get too sloshed?

DOUGLAS

(With good humor, glad of this chance to remove himself from the tense situation that the email has created)

Excellent suggestion. We shall return very soon, ladies -- as soon as I remind this young American chap how the game is played.

STUDS

Very funny. Just remember -- you lose, you buy me lunch in the North End.

DOUGLAS

(Teasing him)

A little respect, please, m'boy. Remember, I discovered you and offered you a book contract when you were just 26 years old.

STUDS

(Laughing)

Yeah, and Random House and Simon & Schuster were in line right behind you.

(They exit.)

BETTE

I think I need some Cheese Doodles.

(She exits toward the kitchen.)

COOKIE

You know, I've never understood why there is a billiards room in this office building.

SLIKK

Yeah. What we really need is an aerobics gym.

COOKIE

(With a shrug)

Suit yourself. I was thinking more along the lines of a cocktail lounge. As for the billiards . . . the gentlemen will be back sooner than they realize -- once they find out that the billiards room has been closed for renovations for the past four months.

JESS

You really know this building like the back of your proverbial hand, don't you?

COOKIE

What's that supposed to mean? My hands are no more proverbial than yours are. Even *if* you washed them in the kitchen.

SLIKK

Well, this has been a very revealing evening, hasn't it? I've learned one thing -- if anyone ever tells me I have to share *my* computer with Scarlett, I'll be out of here in a well-designed, color-coordinated flash. It's bad enough that she knows secrets

about Studs, without also having her wreck my artistically-exquisite desktop settings.

(Bette returns, with the bag of Cheese Doodles.)

JESS

What secrets does Scarlett know about Studs?

SLIKK

That's what *I* want to know. I think -- during their brief and totally insignificant time together -- she found something out about him that he's kept even from me. She's hinted around, you know, like a brat looking for attention. Which I refuse to gratify. As for Studs -- he never wants to talk about it. And he'll talk about almost anything.

BETTE

(Quickly changing the subject, as she is aware that they all know the "secret" about Studs and pizza)

People are funny like that. Take Douglas. Affable, open, always pleasant And yet I couldn't believe the shade of purple he turned when I mentioned -- just to make conversation one day -- that I'd heard about his comic book collection.

COOKIE

Who told you Douglas had a comic book collection?

BETTE

Huh? Oh, let's see I think it was Scarlett, as a matter of fact. Something about a rare stash of vintage British comics in a drawer somewhere. Why, is this some kind of taboo subject?

COOKIE

Taboo? Don't be silly. I just wouldn't mention it ever again, if you like your job.

SLIKK

Nonsense! Douglas has a really *cool* comic book collection. Scarlett was showing me one earlier today. It's still right here on my desk, actually.

(She picks it up.)

"Thrilling Space Stories in Space". Can you believe that title? And the inside is even worse. It's from, like 1950, and they actually thought kids would go for this crap. The artwork looks like it was done in 10 minutes. No wonder they only charged 3 pence for it. This is one of those classic retro things that is so terrible it's wonderful. High kitsch, you know. Douglas should be proud to own something like this. It's just the coolest.

COOKIE

To you, maybe. But in the literary circles in which Douglas travels, I hardly think "Thrilling Space Stories in Space" would be considered an asset. The prestige he's spent a lifetime building could be gone in one long literary laugh. You mark my words, Douglas would do almost anything to protect his reputation. Scarlett should

never have taken that comic book out of Douglas' desk, and she *certainly* shouldn't have brought it out here.

SLIKK

(Still looking at the comic book)

"Edited by Douglas Dover". What a piece of work that guy must have been. "Douglas Dover" -- probably a pseudonym for someone who didn't want to be associated with anything as cheesy as -- *Hey! Douglas Dover*. England, 1950. You don't think that

COOKIE

(Approaching Slikk with deadly seriousness)

Give me that comic book, young lady. *Now*.

(Slikk gives her the comic, which Cookie then locks in a desk drawer.)

(Studs re-enters.)

SLIKK

That was quick, lover. Did you lose already?

STUDS

No, I won -- on a technicality. It seems the billiards facilities in the building in which Douglas rents space are closed down, so I figure that's his default. Hey -- where *is* Douglas?

SLIKK

Uh -- Earth to Studs. He was with *you*, remember?

STUDS

Yes, I actually do remember that. But I also remember that, when we found that the billiards room was closed, he walked back down here ahead of me, while I scribbled some notes in my notebook.

SLIKK

Notes?

STUDS

Uh -- yeah. The billiards room gave me a literary idea.

COOKIE

From billiards rooms that are *closed*, you get "literary ideas"?

BETTE

Don't knock it. His ideas are money in our bank account.

DOUGLAS

(Re-entering)

Hello again. Terribly sorry to keep you all waiting. I stepped outside for some fresh air. Then I popped over to the storage room to put the whipped cream on the pudding.

SLIKK

Oh! The pudding. I almost forgot!

JESS

It wouldn't be a Nitwit Publishing New Year's party without the famous Double-Troubleday pudding.

DOUGLAS

(Who clearly has something on his mind)

Quite. Yes.

(He hesitates, awkwardly)

I say -- there's -- uh -- something I must tell you all about the pudding.

BETTE

Yeah, yeah. We know . . . a Nitwit House tradition, your own special recipe . . . tapioca pudding with nutmeg, rum, yada yada. Honestly, Douglas, we can all recite it by heart.

DOUGLAS

Of course. Rather so. Only . . . I've just discovered that there's -- er -- something else in it as well, this year.

COOKIE

And what, pray tell, is that?

DOUGLAS

Our proofreader, Scarlett Marx. Face down. Funky leggings sticking out. A giant sticky-note affixed to her left shoe.

(He holds up the note.)

And a syringe of *cyan* ink stuck in her thigh.

(Blackout.)