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Good Catch

AGGIE WENT TO THE LUNCHROOM just to get a cup of coffee and got distracted by Eunice's frown. Eunice didn't frown all that often; she was usually a pretty sunny gal. But when Aggie saw Eunice's scowl aimed at a piece of paper on the table in front of her, she couldn't help asking:

"Bad news, sweetie?"

Eunice shook her head.

"What, then?"

She shoved the paper across the table in Aggie's direction.

"You tell me," Eunice said.

Aggie glanced at the clock. Technically, she had a 15-minute break. Her supervisor at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co. was strict about punctuality. She wasn't sure she wanted to spend her precious minutes looking at something that could make even Eunice frown. But she sat down anyway, and turned the paper around so she could read it.

It didn't look like the type of business letter or report or memorandum she was used to seeing. This was different. It was typed, which didn't surprise her (this was a business office, after all), and her expert eye told her there didn't seem to be any misspellings in it. But the format was all wrong.

It was broken up into little sections, 13 in all, each one numbered with a Roman numeral. Each section had several short lines in it—some only a couple, some as many as six or seven. Lots of words were crossed out, with others written above or in the margins. And even some of those were crossed out and rewritten, with lines and arrows going every which way.

It was a mess.

"This is a mess," Aggie declared.

"I know," said Eunice. "I can't even read his writing, some of it."

"What is it, anyway?"

"I think," said Eunice, "it's a poem."

"A poem?" Aggie looked at it again, from a new perspective. A poem. Something about blackbirds and glass coaches and icicles in long windows. And other stuff. Could be a poem. Maybe. "Where'd you get it?"

"You know Mr. Stevens? The kind of funny

gentleman in the surety department? He gave it to me. Asked if I wouldn't mind typing a clean copy for him when I got a spare minute."

"Why you?"

"I don't know. Said his own secretary was swamped with letters and that it didn't look like I had anything too pressing...."

Aggie snorted. "The nerve."

"You said it."

They both stared at the paper for a moment. As if it might suddenly grow feathers and begin pecking at the crumbs on the table.

Impulsively, Aggie grabbed a pen from her purse and crossed out a word on the paper. Two bold strokes. Eunice was alarmed.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"Shhh." Aggie had crossed out the second "one" in the section numbered IV, and now she wrote in "three." She put away the pen.

"Why did you do that?"

"Because it doesn't add up, obviously. If anybody knows that, it's Mr. Stevens. He's got a reputation for being a stickler for numbers. Believe me, he'll thank you for catching that."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course." Aggie looked at her watch, then the clock on the wall again. She stood up suddenly. "Gotta run," she said. "My boss watches the clock even more closely than I do."

Alone again, Eunice turned the paper back around and looked at it doubtfully. She retrieved the pencil from behind her right ear and wrote "stet" across Aggie's catch, and immediately felt better. She knew her own boss took a dim view of her messing with the text of his letters. She had no idea about poets. But why risk it?