CRUNCHERS, INC. by KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

This past spring was a fruitful time for Kristine Kathryn Rusch. In addition to seeing her well-received fantasy novelette, "Except the Music," in our April/May issue, she had the lead story in the March/April *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and the cover story in the April *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. In her latest tale, she returns to science fiction to investigate life's balance sheets.

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The scream from the middle office was loud and long.

"Damn," said Edith. "We've just lost another one."

Sure enough, Reginald Waterston burst out of the office, slamming the door against the wall—the windowed one, with the expensive glass that formed its own shutters.

He stopped at Edith's desk—they all stopped at her desk, for reasons she never quite fathomed—and said, "My grandfather gave me a horse!"

Edith resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She folded her hands on top of the file that she hadn't been studying, and leaned forward. The computer built into her desktop beeped, letting her know that, on its screen, it already had Reginald's personnel file, his suggested severance pay, and his recommendation letter.

"A real horse?" she said, pretending interest in Reginald Waterson's revelation.

"A plastic horse. From 1942. It had no chips in the paint at all." Reginald Waterston was forty-two himself, balding, with a tummy that needed a bit of tuck. His suit fit loosely—something Edith would have told him to change if she had been his company advisor—and he needed to trim his fingernails.

Employees five cubicles over slid their chairs toward the aisle. People were leaning around the ancient gray formations, so that all she could see were eyes.

Rows and rows of eyes.

It was different every time, with every single Actuarial Engineer. And everyone except Edith thought these outbursts were interesting.

Edith resisted the urge to sigh. She needed Reginald to get the point, and if she followed his inane line of reasoning, she would be listening to the poor man all day.

“This horse is important because—?”

“It’s the only thing I ever got from him.” Reginald had to mean the grandfather, not the horse.

Edith nodded.

“I was five, maybe littler. He told me to take care of it.”

“Which I’m sure you did.” The computer beeped again. Edith wished she could take that insistent tone with people. Maybe that was why they all came to her in the end. Because she was unfailingly polite.

“I did!” Reginald said with something like surprise. “And because of that horse, I went to a Wild West vacation in Arizona when I was twenty-five. I met my wife, we had my daughter, and I wouldn’t be standing here.”

“Resigning,” Edith said.

That stopped him. “Quitting,” he said after a moment. As if he were actually reflecting.

None of them had ever reflected before.

“How will you pay for your home? Your wife’s—” she paused, looked down, saw nothing on the wife except that she had some outstanding student loans, and took a wild stab at it. “—continuing education? Your daughter’s first four-year college? Hmmm?”

“We have savings,” he said, sounding less and less certain of himself.

“And what happens when those savings run out?” she asked.

He stared at her for a long moment. Then those blood-shot eyes of his went slightly wild and he yelled, “I can’t stay here! My grandfather gave me a horse!”

“I know,” Edith said, hitting the image of the check on her desk-screen, then hitting print so that Reginald could have a hardcopy recommendation letter in addition to the e-mail version. “Believe me, I know.”

* * * *

Reginald left fifteen minutes later, stopping to tell anyone who made eye contact with him about his grandfather, the plastic horse, and the small gestures that could turn into major events.

Damn EISH, anyway. They'd found a way to get to him.

They always found a way in.

Edith summoned Conrad Meisner, telling him to meet her in five minutes in what had been Reginald's office. She felt unfairly burdened.

Any senior management official who got confronted with a terminating employee had to handle all problems caused by that employee.

Which meant that Edith had more than her share of terminal offenses. She'd actually dug through the hiring records to see if anyone had instructed quitters to come to Edith, but so far she had found nothing.

She would have to look again.

Then she heaved a sigh and got up, heading toward Reginald's office. She had put on weight again, so moving wasn't as easy as it had been. She had eight months before she was eligible for her third reduction surgery, so she'd either have to lay off the Cheetos before bed or take a six-week cure.

The last time she took the six-week cure, she went down to her official, government-recommended weight for two extra months, then gained every pound back plus the friend that pound had probably been shacking up with. She could do the old-fashioned starvation/exercise thing, but she wasn't an exercise kinda girl even though she knew in fifteen years, she'd have to be at regulation weight or it would count against her. She already had two black marks—mid-level management position and no children—and she really couldn't afford another.

She pressed her palm against the doorknob to get in. The office had reset itself when Reginald took his walking papers. The door unlocked, then eased open, as if it were afraid to reveal the office's interior.

The interior window had stayed shuttered, and so had the exterior window. The office itself was dark. As she crossed the threshold, light rose slowly—*designed to replicate the moment of sunrise!* the brochures had said, but mostly it replicated the moment of irritation when she learned that she couldn't make the lights come up any faster.

She had no idea how many times she had walked into this room, felt that same irritation, wished she could alter the moment when she ordered the lights. Originally, this had been her office. She hadn't been demoted, just moved, because the Brass thought that perhaps a private office (with tons of extra security) would help Actuarial Engineers stay at the job longer.

So far, it hadn't worked. Reginald had been the fifth AE to leave in the past

sixteen months.

She stood with her hands on her too-ample hips. He hadn't even personalized the space. The wall across from him had two dozen screens, all of them scrolling information in real time. His work desk had five more, slowed down to show the problem accounts, and the vid unit—digitized at optimal level for Reginald's personal myopia—wasn't even turned on.

The chair remained at the height the last AE had left it at, the spaces on the desk for photographs had dust, and the air-perfume was still set on Chanel, which was the preference of at least two AEs ago. Reginald didn't strike her as a Chanel-type guy. Maybe, with all this talk of horses, he'd been a Bud and illegal smokes sort, but he hadn't even set the air to imitate that.

Almost as if he'd known he wouldn't last.

She shook off the paranoia and looked at the accounts while she waited for Conrad. Conrad always ran ten minutes late, except when he was fifteen minutes early. It was almost as if he couldn't decide who he was.

She knew who he was. He was a relatively young man with too much responsibility. Conrad was in charge of all of the security on the seventeenth floor—a daunting task, considering the amount of information that flowed through this place.

Public records, bank records, arrest records, personal complaints, grades, salaries, family size, and any other information that someone—anyone, not just the subject—chose to share. People could (and often did) send false information on someone they hated; if the sender got caught, the information went into the sender's file—one of those horrible black marks that Edith feared.

She constantly checked her records and saw only the two legitimate marks—the middle-management position (and no sign of ambition for a higher place in society) and the childlessness, which could be a plus if her ambition grew. Only she didn't know how to grow ambition. She'd already come a long way. Her mother had been a homemaker in the days when homemakers were shunned as retro-women, and her father, an Iraqi war veteran, never really got over his period of service—moving from job to job to job, each with less pay and less responsibility.

That she managed to rise this high—and stay here—was a bloody miracle if she said so herself, and she did, although not as often as she could have (fearing that someone would report her for repetitious behavior or vainglory or some other minor sin that could besmirch her record if too many people reported disliking her).

"Edie?"

She jumped, even though she recognized the voice as belonging to Conrad. He was one of the few people in the world who called her Edie.

She turned, hand against her beating heart, glad for the cover of her fear. He always made her heart beat faster. He was six feet tall, broadshouldered, and strong featured. He had a classic twentieth century handsomeness—the kind you saw on war recruitment posters during World War II (her area of expertise in college, all those years ago)—and his voice, a rumbling baritone, seemed to match it.

A few of the women said he was too perfect, suspecting him of abusing enhancements to improve his physical appearance (even in this day and age, women were supposed to do anything they could to improve their physical appearance, but men should abstain for fear of focusing too much on good looks over character). Edith believed he was one of the few humans on the planet born with his incredible good looks. No matter how much she stared at him (and she stared at him too much), she couldn't see evidence of any surgical procedure, nano or otherwise.

"You seem jumpy." He came all the way into the office, and closed the door. Something in his movement jarred the wall system and both glass-shutters opened, as if preventing some kind of physical (albeit unplanned) rendezvous.

"I hate this," she said. "EISH got to him."

EISH was short for the Everyone Is Someone's Hero Society, with the last "s" dropped because EISHS was too hard to say. If Edith had been running the Society, she would have given it another acronym altogether because EISH sounded too much like "ish" for her tastes.

"I don't know how EISH got in," Conrad said. "I've added more secure equipment to this room than any other place in the building. We even have guards posted outside—real, living, breathing guards—just so that no strangers get inside the elevators coming up to the seventeenth floor."

Edith shrugged. "He screamed, then came out at top speed to tell me about his grandfather and a plastic pony, and how that made him the man he is today."

Conrad sighed. "Sounds like EISH."

He leaned against the desk and crossed his arms. He stared at the information still scrolling on the wall across from him, but he clearly wasn't seeing it.

Edith sank into the chair. It felt comfortable, familiar, as if she had come home. Here she didn't feel quite as heavy; here she didn't feel quite as useless or out of date.

She sprang up.

“Check the chair,” she said.

“They did chairs two years ago. They’re not going to—”

“Check the chair.”

He sighed a second time—what other response could they all have to EISH but sigh?—and crouched. While he worked, Edith paced.

Technically, EISH wasn’t her responsibility. The Brass was supposed to monitor EISH and all other like-minded groups. There were divisions that handled anti-EISH spin; divisions that persecuted EISH members to the full extent of the law; and, it was rumored, divisions that sent EISH members into the database earlier than they deserved to go.

But technically, Actuarial Engineers were supposed to prevent database tampering. Even though it was against the company’s best interest, Actuarial Engineers were supposed to double-check suspicious information—especially information provided about a hated person or a person who belonged to a hated organization (like EISH). This protected the corporation from class action lawsuits, too much government oversight, and the occasional overzealous politician/prosecutor/investigative reporter.

After all, EISH had a point that most people sympathized with: Every life had value. Sometimes the value was as small as giving a plastic horse to a child you’d never see again. Sometimes the value was being the person everyone ran to in a crisis (Edith would have to see if that somehow made it into her file—a white mark to counteract the black). Sometimes the value was in living the perfect American life—2.5 children, a dog, a house, too much credit, and perfect attendance at the marginally useful job.

This sentimental view, which even she had some sympathy with, appealed to everyone whose life hadn’t exactly gone the way he’d planned. The person who woke up at forty, realizing that he wasn’t going to get the chance to buy enhancements that would make him a star quarterback (those were age-limited to the under-thirty crowd, no matter what your innate talent level) or that he wasn’t going to be a wunderkind in any subject because wunderkinds all died before they turned forty, usually of some self-inflicted something or other.

EISHies, as she called them, gave succor to the hopeless, hope to the fearful, and pap to everyone else. They simply didn’t understand the way the world had to work.

“Yup,” Conrad said. “They got the chair. I’m going to have to boost the scans again. They put a low energy chip into this thing. It must’ve been working on

him for weeks before he finally blew."

Blew. That was a term. Actuarial Engineers went through a battery of personal tests, showing that they lacked the kind of sentimental bent that made EISH appeal to most people. AEs were as close as people got to being robots themselves, or so personnel had told Edith after the fifth AE blew his cool and left.

People who got hired by Crunchers, Inc., which was a branch of Number Crunchers, Inc., a branch of Statistical and Numerical Services, Inc., a branch of—well, she couldn't remember, not that she had to. She'd only gone to the third level when she'd been applying here.

Suffice to say that the job of Crunchers, Inc., and companies like this, was to assist decision-makers in those hardest of hard decisions.

The ones that involved life and death.

Rather than applying a standard of morality that varied from person to person or township to township, Crunchers, and companies like it, made certain that decisions occurred on a level playing field.

Each American life (someday, the bigwigs hoped, each life) would be reduced to a series of positives and negatives. The intrinsic value of the human being—not just his political clout and financial worth (although those factored in; no one could ignore the way that money talked, even now), but his value to society, how much has he contributed in a variety of measures—as a teacher, as a valued member of his own community, as a giver of advice. Is he a good parent? Have his children grown to become equally valued members of the society or are they in prison/unemployed/living on some sort of benefits? Has he had a positive influence on the people around him?

Each action could cause a reaction—good and bad. The programs worked out a level of disgruntledness proportionate to fame or good fortune or (in cases like Conrad's) simple good looks (figuring that jealousy created bad human behavior). There were also the health factors—was this person keeping good enough care of himself so that he wouldn't become a burden on society—too much alcohol, too much food, too little exercise (unless these things were matched by weight loss surgeries and overnight nano-exercises, things that only a fortunate few [like Edith] could afford).

In other words, the programs kept a functional and relatively simple database—most people fell into easily predictable categories.

It was the folks who led non-traditional lives who were the problems, and they fell under the auspices of the relatively robotic AE, who gave the information a somewhat human glance and decided what category the person belonged in.

Somehow, organizations like EISH had discovered the AEs and even worse, found their names. Now AEs were targets, and all of them seemed to be breaking under the pressure.

“Got it.” Conrad held up a chip the size of a fruit fly. “I’ll analyze it, but I’m sure it’s an EISH component.”

“Scan the room for more of them. And find out how it got on the chair.”

He gave her a lazy grin that warmed her more than it should have. “Yes, ma’am. And what’ll you do?”

“Besides fill out report after report on poor, broken Reginald?” She sighed, making this one gusty and long, so that Conrad knew he wasn’t alone in his disgust. “Find a replacement, of course.

* * * *

The replacement, Edith decided, had to be someone with no trace of sentimentality. No hidden plastic horses, no loving spouse, nothing that could pry through the shield of that person’s loyalty to numbers, statistics, and the purity of formula.

She no longer allowed personnel to make the final decision. She added a few interviews of her own.

It took a week before the seventeenth floor got its new AE. That put seventeen behind all the other floors in the building, a serious problem. Life and death decisions were being made all over the country, and the files that had been routed to seventeen couldn’t be accessed.

That meant doctors who needed to know which patients deserved life-saving treatments couldn’t find out; insurance companies couldn’t figure out who deserved the high-end coverage; extended-living facilities and comfortable retirement centers couldn’t evaluate applications—at least, not for the thirty thousand or so files normally processed each week on floor seventeen.

If this went on too long, seventeen would get docked (and black-marked). More than a month, and everyone on seventeen would be fired for lack of productivity—and would then try to find a new job.

Edith shuddered. Job loss wasn’t a black mark on the permanent files, but job loss resulting in demotion was, and if she got fired along with everyone else on seventeen because they couldn’t find an AE, then she would never find a mid-level management position again. She’d be an “average” worker, and more than black

marks, one thing you didn't want in your permanent record was the word "average."

So she went above and beyond. She stayed late, reviewing applicants' life histories, breaking an unwritten rule and investigating their permanent files in search of sentimentality. (Technically personnel was supposed to look through permanent files for mundane things, like genetic predisposition to various diseases, criminal records, criminal charges, and personal complaints. To look for something more specific, like family history or a tendency toward weeping at sad movies, was against some Federal law that personnel could cite chapter and verse [and did whenever Edith asked them to do it], but Edith didn't care. She wanted the best AE possible, and that meant taking extraordinary measures.)

She also had Conrad beef up security to the room—again. She looked in the budget to see if there was money to secure the AE's place of residence as well. EISH had become quite sophisticated; its anti-formula programs slowly bombarded the AE's subconscious with sentimental stories of the ways that the smallest of encounters could trigger life-changing events.

Even EISH didn't argue that everyone should be saved. The serial killer, the repeat child molester—their bad deeds outweighed any potential for good. Despite the word "everyone" in EISH's title, they were really arguing for the ordinary person, the average person, the person who, when they died, wouldn't have enough accompaniments to fill a fifteen-second obituary spot on the Mourning Network.

Edith always thought (privately) that the founders of EISH were trying to protect themselves and their families. She always argued (publicly) that if EISH wanted to help the entire well-behaved world get extended-life treatments or the best medical care, then EISH shouldn't concentrate on changing the formulas that companies like Crunchers used.

EISH should get more and more people to live on the high end of the Crunchers' scale. EISH should encourage them to give more to charity or donate genetic material or house foster children. If more people wanted the benefits of an exemplary life, they should live one.

Even though it was hard. Edith was falling short, but at least she tried. She didn't go through day-to-day sleepwalking. She actually thought about each action, and its equal or opposite reaction.

She knew she was taking risks interviewing the AE candidates herself, but she figured the benefits outweighed any chance she took.

And finally, within seven days, she found the perfect candidate.

* * * *

He was tall and thin and homely. He wore black wool suits, white shirts, and work boots, all of which looked like they'd come from a second-hand store. He lived alone. His parents had died when he was young, and he'd been shuttled from foster home to foster home, never staying long enough to make attachments. He had been an excellent student who graduated with degrees in economics, applied mathematics, and computer analysis, but he didn't read for pleasure nor did he see movies, play games, or socialize.

He'd never had a pet. He'd never, so far as Edith could tell, had a friend. He'd never supported a cause or taken a stand. He ate every meal placed in front of him without complaint. He wasn't even a vegetarian, as so many of these systems guys were.

Edith could find nothing—in his resume, in his history with the company (in a lesser department; straight accounting), in his own personal life files—that showed a trace of sentimentality. There wasn't even a place where sentimentality could breed—nothing, so far as she could see, that would give those relentless little chips that EISH was so fond of placing (somehow!) in this company a way to make him see the facts and figures he was crunching as human beings.

His name was Bartleby Plante, and he could start immediately. In fact, accounting was happy to transfer him to the seventeenth floor.

Edith ran through the training and Plante had no questions at all, rare for someone in this job, most of whom would ask for certain kinds of clarification, like "What does living alone really mean? Is she alone if she has a dog?" or "Does it matter how long ago his last act of kindness really was?"

Plante simply nodded, took notes, and then set to work.

By the end of the business day, he'd gone through five hundred files, more than any other AE had done on a single day. Edith had to stay late to check his work, and she found no fault with it.

If anything, he was a bit too strict—if someone huddled on the cusp of "deserves Excellent Treatment" and "has earned Good Treatment," Plante always gave them the Good Treatment recommendation.

Of course, Edith recommended that to new AEs, with the caveat that good treatment costs all businesses who contract with Crunchers, Inc. less than excellent treatment, and one should save money where one could.

Still, all other AEs, faced with a subject one-quarter of a percentage away from Excellent Treatment, upgraded that subject. It seemed like the most humane thing to do.

But, she reminded herself that first night, she hadn't hired Plante to be humane. She'd hired him to make judgments that fell outside the normal parameters, and if he was slightly harsher than most, it simply meant she wouldn't lose him to EISH infiltration quite as quickly as some.

After a few days of checking, she felt satisfied that Plante could do the job. Sure, she had to tweak his process a little. If a subject was one-sixteenth of a percentage into Excellent Treatment country, Plante would downgrade them, and Edith had to remind him that once they earned Excellent Treatment, no matter how narrowly, they deserved to stay there.

Until, of course, their behavior moved them down a category—but she didn't say that to Plante. He would not get a chance to review a file twice. Reviews moved up the floors—next year, new information would move everyone processed on seventeen to eighteen, and so on, as a sort of double-check. Of course, once a file had an eyeball review which was, at heart, Plante's job, then the file tended to remain in whatever category it had been assigned—usually all the way to the bitter end.

Edith liked the system. She believed in the system. It was so much better than having individual doctors, for example, deciding which patients got the most expensive treatments based on personal likes and dislikes or on the desire to perform that particular new experimental procedure or on ability to pay.

Edith believed in all that, she truly did. She felt sorry for the people who didn't qualify for everything they wanted—few did!—but in the end, it was their own damn fault.

She found comfort in that.

She was certain she did.

* * * *

Plante irritated her.

She couldn't confess that to anyone. She had stressed that she needed the perfect EISH-proof employee, and she had found that in Plante.

But...

He ate tunafish sandwiches for lunch, and the smell stayed in the office until closing. He picked his teeth while he waited for the on-floor barista to make his coffee. He didn't seem to dry clean his suits regularly, and his boots had a faint barnyard odor.

Finally, Edith had to go to his office after he left and set the air-perfume on

Scrub followed by Lilac, not caring that it was a gender-associated scent. She needed the strongest smell she could find to cover his odors, not to mention the strongest smell she could stand.

She sent a memo to personnel so that someone would discuss his hygiene with him, and hoped it would do some good. She didn't want to disturb him more than she already did.

He scuttled away from her when he saw her, wouldn't make eye contact, and spilled his mocha-cream double-tall the first time she said hello to him during the mid-afternoon mandatory coffee break.

She tried to shrug it off—after all, a lot of people had trouble with her: she was the highest-ranking manager on seventeen—but she couldn't entirely shake the feeling she'd made a mistake.

So she watched him. Watched him interact with the other employees (he didn't); watched him arrive first thing in the morning (his breakfast came with him: McDonald's biscuit with cheese); watched him lock up at night (always the same movement—a press of the palm to the doorknob, then a double-check with the other hand, just to make sure the door was locked).

He said hello to no one—not even the barista on the two mandatory coffeebreaks—acknowledged no one, and shied away from any personal contact at all. If someone brushed against him in the elevator, he moved as if he'd been hit. If someone grinned at him, he ducked his head and looked away.

None of this was in his file, of course. He wasn't listed as anti-social, just shy. So nothing pathological had come from this—and, she supposed, it was all expected, given his upbringing. He'd never learned any of the major social skills.

But he should know them, shouldn't he? So that he could make evaluations? So that he could decide that a woman who smiled at babies sometimes saved them in a crisis—but said crisis hadn't happened yet, so it couldn't be counted on her record. But the smiling should be.

Or a man who gave money to the legion of homeless (those who hadn't behaved well enough to let the system help them or who opted out of the system entirely) wasn't that bad after all. He was just trying to provide what he could for people who couldn't help themselves. There was no guarantee that those deadbeats would use the money to buy alcohol or drugs—and wasn't it on the plus side for the man that he didn't quiz the recipients on how they'd use the money he'd given them? He trusted them to make the best decision for themselves.

Edith's head was swirling with this and all the other factors that Plante had to consider for his job. She wanted to ask him if he realized he initially got a high rating

because of his difficult childhood. For the first ten years of an adult's life, a difficult childhood gave him a pass—an excuse to miss on certain things like marriage in your twenties or learning personal hygiene.

After ten years, though—and Plante was right on that cusp—difficult childhoods faded in importance. The cultural assumption (again a correct one as far as Edith was concerned) was that adults should learn and grow, and yes, a difficult childhood handicapped people but they should learn the things they missed in childhood in their twenties, making them much better citizens in their thirties.

She found herself idly searching his file, looking for his exact birth date, the day he would turn thirty and become, in society's eyes, accountable for his own weirdness.

And that was when she realized she was stepping over a line. She wasn't quite sure what the line was, except that she knew it had to do with obsession, and, eventually, she would get caught.

Another black mark on a file that couldn't afford any more.

So, she contacted Conrad, met him in a coffee bar off-premises after hours, and waited the requisite ten minutes because he was, as usual, late.

He arrived, wearing the same twill pants he'd worn that day in the office with a different shirt (a brown that accented his coloring) and his hair slicked back.

He looked nice.

She wondered if that was for her, then decided it wasn't. Men like Conrad were never interested in women like Edith. They had nothing in common except their jobs, and she wasn't pretty enough, smart enough, or interesting enough to keep him satisfied for very long.

The other women in the bar watched him walk across the room. The bar was small, with ferns against dark wood paneling—some kind of faux twentieth century look—and the entire place smelled of coffee mixed with vanilla, a smell that always made Edith hungry.

"Out of the office," he said as he sat down. He was smiling, which he didn't do at work either. "Clandestine meetings, secret talks. Are we suddenly spies?"

She smiled, but waited to answer him until the waitress took his order—a plain black go-for-the-throat charger with extra caffeine, a man's drink. A macho man's drink.

"I may have made a mistake with Plante," she said.

Conrad looked sympathetic.

“May I tell you my worries?” she asked.

“Is this on- or off-the-record?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Which is safer?” she asked, knowing that either could backfire.

“Just tell me,” he said, and he, the head of the seventeenth floor’s security, would make the decision for her.

Somehow she found that comforting. She found him comforting.

So she told him her observations and her fears about Plante. Conrad listened (they ended up having dinner), and then asked, “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

She blinked at him, not quite sure what he meant.

“A person who couldn’t be persuaded by anything EISH threw at him, a person without sentiment, a person who saw the world in numbers and codes and absolutes. Isn’t that why you got involved, so that you’d get the exact right man?” Conrad pushed his plate aside—he’d had a sandwich made from some kind of thinly sliced beef so rare it didn’t look like it’d been cooked—and folded his hands on the table.

“I didn’t expect him to be so cold,” she said, and realized how lame that sounded. She had picked at her salad, which she had ordered to impress Conrad with her restraint, not because she really wanted it.

“How could he be anything but?” Conrad asked. “You wanted no sentiment.”

“Sentiment’s a bad thing in this job,” she said.

“Is it?” his voice was soft. “Maybe compassion’s a better word then.”

She frowned.

“I mean, there’s compassion built into the system, right? Isn’t that why people with difficult childhoods get a pass early on?”

“The pass doesn’t cost much,” she said. “Younger people don’t have as many illnesses. They often don’t have insurance, and they’re not usually involved in life-and-death decisions. If they’re in an emergency room, it’s usually because of their own stupidity, which by every form, counts against them.”

Conrad's lips turned up, but he wasn't smiling. "So there's compassion when it doesn't cost anything."

She nodded.

"And isn't that what you're complaining about?"

She frowned again.

"The eighteenths of a percentage point—he's waiting for a perfect score to move people up and down the scale, but really, how much difference is there for people who are on the cusp, people who deserve more privileges in this society or nearly do?"

She shrugged. "Some."

"Then I don't see what the problem is," Conrad said.

The smell of vinegar was beginning to turn her stomach. She pushed her salad away. She was beginning to regret this. She had thought Conrad was sympathetic, but he was like all the others.

He didn't understand the fineness of her position, the way it sometimes became personal. If Plante were reviewing her file, he wouldn't look at her previous weight losses. He wouldn't look at the fact she was the first manager in her entire family, the first non-blue-collar worker, the first person to make something of herself by her familial standards.

She was too old for him to look at familial standards. Her previous weight losses were too far in the past. She'd relied on surgery and tricks recently, and that wouldn't wash.

She hadn't had children, didn't give enough money to charities, worked in the Crunching industry which—because crunchers didn't want to be accused of bias—actually counted against her (but because crunchers did the work, was often bypassed as a "non-consideration"). Plante wouldn't make that a non-consideration. He'd examine each of the past five years for black marks and recommendations, for her good work and her bad. He'd see that no one would really miss her if she disappeared, and he'd mark that into her file, and no one would review it, not for quite a while, and if she suddenly found herself with some kind of strange cancer or something, she wouldn't get the preferential treatment she would have received in her thirties, when she was still up and coming, when she was a potential wife, a potential parent, a potential CEO, someone who would eventually become a major contributing member of society, who, even if she didn't have family, would sit on boards of various charities, and give a healthy percentage of her eight-figure income

to various needy folk, and would serve as a role model to children of blue-collar workers everywhere.

She'd stalled, grown content, felt no urge to move on, and her files would reflect that. The statistics said she wasn't going to improve any longer, and Plante would know that, instead of looking at her and realizeing that just by getting involved in his hiring, she was showing ambition again.

She was striving. She just wasn't doing a very good job at it.

"Edie?" Conrad asked. "You okay?"

She made herself take a deep breath. She nodded, regretting this conversation, regretting speaking to anyone on or off the record.

"I'm fine," she said. "Thanks for coming, Conrad. I appreciate your time."

Then she patted him on the hand, grabbed the bill, and swiped it through the pay register on the side of the table, then pressed her right index finger on the marker, so that she paid out of the correct account.

He was trying to say something as she walked away, but she didn't stop. She couldn't stop.

She felt like a fool—and she wasn't exactly sure why.

* * * *

She became sure when she arrived at work two days later to find her boss, Conrad, and three members of upper management huddled around her desk.

Conrad looked at her guiltily, but the others had a coldness in their eyes. She recognized that coldness; she'd felt it too whenever she'd had to confront a misbehaving employee.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Conrad held up a chip. It was barely the size of a grain of sand. She had to squint to see it.

"EISH," he said. "They couldn't reach Plante—in any way—so they got you."

She felt a flare of anger that she immediately suppressed. Anger would guarantee that she would lose this fight—and fight it was, sudden and terrifying.

“I told you I wasn’t being sentimental,” she said, sounding a bit clipped. She made herself breathe.

The others looked at her as if she were a subspecies of bug. Conrad bit his lower lip, an attractive look for him.

“I’ll walk you through the termination procedure,” he said gently. “It’s the least I can do, since I had to report that conversation.”

She had known he would. No matter what she’d said, on the record or off, she had known he would report her. She would have reported anyone who said those things—if she didn’t believe in the person. If she hadn’t trusted them.

Apparently, Conrad hadn’t trusted her.

“You had to know I’d do that,” he said into her silence. “You gave me the choice.”

She glared at the other three, who looked away from her, as if she were tainted somehow, as if, even by being close to her, they would ruin their own careers.

They had decided. Anything she did now would simply make matters worse. A black mark—being fired!—would become a stain if she fought too hard. She might never find another job if she protested. Someone would write her up as “irrational,” “emotional,” or “uncooperative.”

“All right,” she said to Conrad. “Walk me through.”

* * * *

She knew the procedure better than he did. She had to help him when he got stuck, remind him that she needed her final check and the contents of her personal drawer.

He didn’t say much as he did the work, although he did have trouble meeting her gaze.

Finally, it was done. She grabbed her pitiful box of personal belongings and headed for the door—away from the prying eyes, the people who peered from the sides of their cubicles, the private glee that some of them would feel at losing a manager no matter what the cause.

Plante didn’t even look to see what the disturbance was. He didn’t seem to care—and why would he? That was the problem, after all.

Conrad caught up to her, took the box from her, and pushed the door open

with his foot.

"You don't have to do that," she said.

"Yes, I do," he said.

According to company regulations, he had to make sure she left, had to certify that she had walked out the front door, taking nothing from the company except her check and doing no vandalism as she went.

She resented that. She rarely accompanied any employee out—only the ones who were certifiable or who seemed unduly angry. The rest, she monitored through the company's surveillance system, letting it verify when they had left.

Conrad stood silently beside her as the elevator took them down all seventeen floors—a trip that seemed to take most of her life. Then he followed her as she marched to the front door, feeling the gaze of two dozen people in reception following her as she left for the very last time.

Outside, it was sunny and warm, the air smelling faintly of hamburgers being grilled at the diner next door, the diner she had never gone into for fear it (and the preferences it implied) would show up on her record.

Maybe she'd go in there. Maybe she'd eat every greasy salty sugary thing on the menu. Then she'd go home and lay on her couch and order the worst movies ever made, play the most violent interactive internet games she could find, and maybe even indulge in some illegal porn downloads.

Who cared, after all? She had more black marks than she could fight. Her record had gone from not-bad to worrisome in the space of an afternoon.

"I'm sorry," Conrad started.

"Save it," she said, reaching for her box.

"I mean it," he said. "I had to keep my job. You know that, right?"

And he said it with some kind of weird emphasis, as if she should have an in-depth understanding of what he was talking about.

"Yeah," she said. "We all feel that way in the real world."

He winced. He moved the box away from her, and stepped toward the curb.

"They're going to fire Plante," he said.

She hadn’t known that. She wasn’t sure she cared.

“He’s compromised. You hired him by going outside procedure.”

She blinked. “He’s the perfect man for the job.”

“Yes,” Conrad said. “But this way...”

His voice trailed off. He leaned toward her, giving her the box, but as she slid her fingers through the cardboard handholds, he clung.

“EISH couldn’t get to him,” Conrad was whispering now. “We knew this was the only way.”

“We?” Edith asked.

He nodded. “I had to stay. Do you know how hard it is to keep a guy like me on the seventeenth floor?”

He let go of the box. Her head was spinning. What was he saying?

“Conrad, are you—?”

He put a finger on her lips. “You’ll be all right,” he said. “I’ll make sure of it.”

And then he walked away from her, disappearing back into the Crunchers’ building, the place she had spent most of her adult life. A place she had believed in.

Or maybe it had just been a place she’d feared. And maybe, by working there, she had tried to control those fears.

She had taken it to an extreme with Plante. Whom Conrad had gotten fired. The only man doing a superb job, and Conrad had found a way to get rid of him.

By getting rid of Edith too.

She hefted the box, glanced at the diner, and thought about it. Eating her way through her problems wasn’t the answer. She’d have to do what she recommended to so many others—career counseling, a personal reassessment, a quiet contemplation of what she really wanted from life.

Maybe she hadn’t contributed much because she’d been stuck in her fear instead of living her life.

Maybe.

Or maybe she had just been going through the motions, like everybody else. Marking time until someone made a decision for her.

Like EISH had.

Like Conrad had.

At her request. She had been trapped with Plante, a creature of her own making; Conrad had freed her.

If she understood him right, he was getting rid of all the Plantes, making sure that certain things didn't go any farther.

She stared at that diner door, silver on the outside and spotless because of city regulations, but a faint greaseline coated the interior. The man at the counter was as round as she was. The woman behind it had gray hair and wrinkles all over her face.

Imagine living a life like that—without worrying about each movement, each decision. Without thinking about black marks and ratings. Taking the consequences when the time came—but not before.

Just going through life, the way people did before computers and information-gathering and streamlined decision-making regulations.

Imagine having a piece of pie because she wanted a piece of pie—not because she was allowed one on her current program or because she could afford one given the amount of exercise she'd done.

She glanced at the Crunchers' building, and then at the diner. She'd never before seen the irony in them being side by side. She studied them, thought about them, shifted her box from one hip to the other.

And then she walked away, heading—

She didn't know where. She didn't care. Somewhere new.

Somewhere undefined.

Somewhere very different from here.