

## **The Monopoly Man**

by Barry B. Longyear

Strange but true, this story marks Barry Longyear's first appearance in *F&SF*. For the three of you who don't recognize his name, Mr. Longyear was a mainstay of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* during its early years and won great acclaim and many awards for his 1979 novella, "Enemy Mine." Since then, he has published about a dozen novels, four or five collections of short fiction, and a few books of nonfiction, including an invaluable workshop for writers and *Yesterday's Tomorrow: Recovery Meditations For Hard Cases*. You can find all this information online at [www.barrylongyear.net](http://www.barrylongyear.net) but the only place you'll find his tale about the Monopoly man is right here.

The end. This was it: Cheri Trace was in it thick. She'd been close before. That time with the bangers on Broadway. The other time with that ... time she didn't like to think about. But this was the real end. Panic was in her face, an arm down her throat and a ragged claw hooked into every nerve.

She was out.

*Out.*

That trumped it all: The punch in the face, the money gone, the purse gone, the blood on her tube top, the pain in her face and ribs, the indifferent smear of faces rushing past in the night fusing into the jumble of lights on West Forty-second. Next to being in pain, sick, and out, nothing's important. Death a distant second. Getting close to ultimate options.

She leaned back against a wall trying not to look up at the passing faces, the theatergoers, touristas, and street sludge who had yet to be sucked all the way down. On the marquee across the street, Kimberli Fallon in *Party Girl*.

She laughed bitterly. "The suck's coming for you, too," she whispered at the marquee.

Cheri jumped at an imagined movement within a shadow, made a grab at the air, another, then covered her eyes with one hand and sighed. "Bastard. Even took my cigarettes."

Never even got a look at him. Muggers. Think you're immune. Look tough, street cred, like you belong here, man, one of the *people*, not prey

but fellow predator. Code. Honor among bastards. Only protection is to have eyes all around your head and guns pointed in all directions, a sign that says “AIDS, fool! TB! Leprosy! Dynamite in every pocket!”

Beware, man, I’m made of cyanide— *Yeah. Like they could even read....*

She slowly turned her face against the wall, rested her bruised cheek against cold glass, forced herself not to cry. Red puffy eyes not attractive. Besides, girl crying on the street and next thing Crusader Rabbit shows on a salvation mission.

*...Humpty Dumpty had a great fall—*

*Don’t cry. There, there, honey, it’ll be all right.*

*All right? That word “all” covers a lot of ground, dude. Don’t make promises you can’t keep.*

*So, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men—*

Aw hell.

Cheri didn’t want to meet Jesus or Dudley Do-Right unless he was holding. She held her aching left cheek against the cold glass as universal truth ground at the back of her head: If she didn’t score something soon, the universe would end. Worse than that, it might not end.

*Get something.*

—Focus, direction. First money. Before money, market the goods. Before marketing, inventory. She stood back from the wall, looked down at the blood drying on the front of her white tube top. She wondered what her face looked like. Hamburger probably.

Rest room. McDonald’s back on the Square. She could slip into the rest room there, wash her face, rinse her top, use the blow dryer, maybe borrow someone’s makeup and stay out of the strong lights—

She caught a glimpse of her right shoulder reflected in the glass protecting a poster advertising the motion picture *Brooks*, Kevin Costner as serial killer. The poster was very dark. Poster and glass made a great black mirror. Where her face had rested against the glass was a smear of blood.

She moved to her right until she could see her entire face. It wasn't just a bloody nose. Cheri's upper lip looked like a wiener, her left eye was bruised almost black and partially closed. "Who would want that?" she cried.

Her cute little white beret was gone, too. She looked so good in it. Her hair ... *god, what a mess.*

She closed her eyes, her head shaking.

*Is this the night*, she thought. *Is this the night it all catches up with me?*

You're in a foot race with a monster who is meaner, faster, stronger, tougher, and more patient than you. And you get surprised when it catches up?

*Fool. Fool.*

Shadows. She needed deep shadows. Safety was no longer an option. Those who look for love in shadows don't expect much. Of course, acknowledged Cheri, they don't expect to pay much. Enough, though.

"Enough to score—enough to get home."

Cheri had some stuff hidden back in the room she shared with Trina, if Trina hadn't found it and shot it all. That was why Cheri had taken to carrying most of her help with her in her purse. If she could just make it back to the room. Before that, money. Before that, business. Before that, shadows.

Bryant Park, thickly bordered with trees, nothing going on at this time of year. Too cold for concerts and summer fashion shows, sipping spritzers on the grass. Not cold enough yet for ice skating or winter fashions. Lots of shadows, bushes. Once you're noticed, plenty of places to go not to be noticed again. The negotiation of virtue for medicine—a little something to keep off the crawlies.

She turned from the poster and, keeping her face down, walked east toward the park, the crowds thinning rapidly once she reached the corner of Sixth. A chilling breeze whipped up the wide avenue and she glanced down at her legs barely covered by the miniskirt. She nodded to herself as her gaze elevated to rest upon the trees of the park. The legs were still good. Cold, but commercial.

Crossing Sixth when the light changed, she could see figures moving among the trees. Joggers, a couple or two bundled up against the chill, walking, some older kids shuffling along, profiling for each other, a few looking to score. Working girls. They'd have pimps nearby who'd add some to Cheri's looks if they caught her.

She got on the paved path flanked on her left by the ranks of trees. One of her johns once told her they were sycamores. He could've been wrong. He was sure wrong about some other things, like that piece of tin in his pocket.

Automatically she looked for both cops and distribution outlets. Two guys holding; recognized them both. The one across the street was Cuff. Cuff wouldn't extend credit to his own mother to keep her from starving to death. He wasn't violent. Just had the heart of a crocodile. His favorite saying: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." The other one, farther up on her side of the street beneath his favorite tree, was Rackshack. Cheri had ripped off Rackshack. Shortest love affair in history. She moved in, found his bags in the wall, she moved out—with her purse packed with Rackshack's merchandise. Terrific three weeks and until she ran out she'd been everybody's best friend. Everybody's but Rackshack's. He'd kill her if he ever saw her.

*That ultimate option again: Quit the race. Lay down—put down, throw down—that burden. Shoot it, crush it, choke it, kill it, let it and everything else in the universe die.*

Tired.

Suddenly Cheri felt very cold, very old, and very tired—the flint-hard kind of bone weariness that didn't care where it slept, whether in a bed, a gutter, or a grave. The cold. If she could just stop shaking, get the cold out of her bones, the ants out of her skin. She turned and glanced again at Rackshack. He usually packed. Had him a S&W nine he was proud of. Maybe he could do her this one last favor.

*"What's it cost, Rack?"*

*"Huh?"* Rackshack was always quick with that witty comeback.

*"A cap outta that nasty old nine you got tucked in your shorts under that bad old Rangers jersey, Rack. Let me have the first one for free?"*

*Right here in my head?"*

She hovered in a limbo of indecision. Rackshack just stood there: tall, dark, a perpetual smirk on his face, an oversized Mets cap on sideways, dealing his death. The Rack don't do no drugs. He net himself four-five large a day and it go in the bank right there in the corner and make it self four-and-a-half to five percent, and all is right with Rack's world.

No loser he.

While Cheri stood in the shadows, shook, stared at Rackshack, and hovered between suicide and homicide, she heard something to her left. Sounded like a flutter of wings.

Angels of death?

Pigeons.

She glanced quickly and saw the rows of trees edging the walkway. There was a man sitting on one of the folding chairs that littered the path. There was a row of such chairs beneath the trees facing away from the street, a body here, a body there sitting in them. Partygoers getting a splash of cold air before navigating home, lovers meeting on the sly, bums, homeless. This man was different. His was a double chair. Loveseat. The view from that vantage point was of another row of chairs with their backs against a concrete balustrade, the dark empty center of the park, and above it the buildings along West Fortieth, the top of the Bryant Park Hotel all lit up like an aging Christmas tree. But the man was looking at Cheri.

He had shiny shoes: black, glossy, expensive-looking. The cuffs coming down to them were dark blue with a thin pinstripe. Cheri walked over to him. Only two kinds of men wore pinstripes in Bryant Park after eleven: big shots looking to buy and stoned Yankee fans. This guy didn't look like baseball. He wore a dark overcoat and a pearl-gray homburg, the hair beneath it white. She stopped in front of him, her arms folded across her chest, her hands in her armpits for warmth. He had a big white mustache with pointy ends like the man in the Monopoly game. "Mister," she said quietly.

"Yes?" he answered. His eyes were sharp blue. "Something I can do for you, my child?"

"You got ten dollars I could borrow—I mean, I could, you know, whatever you want. I really—"

"I'm sorry, my dear." He turned his head to the right and nodded in that direction. "Are you familiar with that building?"

She looked to her left, her heart sinking. "Yeah. The Bank of America building." She looked back at him. "What about it?"

"All my money is in there."

"All of it?"

"With the exception of some funds my daughter spent, lost, and gave away, and other funds she now has for traveling, it's all right there."

Another chilly breeze stirred the leaves on the walk, and Cheri shook the man's answer out of her head and sat next to him. "Look at me, man. Look at my face. I been beat up, robbed, I got no way home, I'm freezing, and I need something so bad right now I'd do anything. I feel so awful."

He took his hand, touched her chin, and studied her face. Pulling back, she covered her face with her hands. "Don't look at me, man. God, I look terrible."

He laughed, and it was a pleasant laugh. "Well, I have neither money nor credit cards, but I can help you a little." He stood, removed his overcoat revealing an expensive dark blue double-breasted suit, a blue silk hanky in the breast pocket that matched his necktie. He bent over her and wrapped the overcoat around Cheri's shoulders. "Here, stand up so you can get it under you."

Cheri stood, and the coat's hem touched the ground it was so large. She felt lost in it, but it was so very warm, so clean, and smelled faintly of some kind of cologne. "Thanks, mister. Thanks, but—"

He motioned for her to sit down, she did so, and he sat on the seat next to her. "You were saying."

"This is warm. So warm. Thanks. I was going to say I need something—you know, some stuff." Cheri thought very hard about what she needed. "I don't know. The crawlies went away." Her confusion transformed into weariness. "Tired," she said. "Need some rest. That's what I need. I need a new life, but first some rest. Man, am I tired."

"Pull your legs up so the coat covers your feet."

“You sure?”

“Of course. Get your feet warm and if you feel like taking a little nap, I’ll stand guard.”

Cheri looked long and hard into the man’s face. “I’m not a fool, mister. If you want me to do something for you, just ask.”

“I want you to take care of yourself. That’s all I ever want.”

Her eyes welled with tears at his answer because, although it had to be crap, it sounded genuine. She bent over, removed her heels, held them tightly in her hand, and pulled her aching cold feet up on the seat next to her beneath the coat. She realized she was leaning against his left arm. He lifted it and put it around her shoulders. “Mister, really, I mean if you want to reach in and cop a feel or something that’s okay—” she yawned. “Really that’s okay.”

“Thank you, Cheri.” He patted her arm with his left hand. “I’ll be too busy watching over my fortune.”

She felt herself falling asleep, wondering how much money the old guy thought he had and how this man knew her name.

There was a moment during the night when voices half-awakened her. Cop voice.

“Good evening, sir.” Cops say that to people who look like they got money. The rest they tell, “Move along, dirtbag. This ain’t no hotel.”

*“Good evening, sir.”*

“Good evening, officer,” replied the man in a quiet voice.

“Is everything all right?”

“My daughter has had a remarkably tiring day. She thought she’d rest for a moment. I don’t have the heart to wake her.”

“You from out of town?” asked the cop.

“Mamaroneck now, but I grew up right on Central Park West.”

"Then you know late at night in a New York City park is not the safest place to be."

"We're safe enough. You seem to have things well in hand, officer."

The cop chuckled. "Good night, sir. Have a pleasant stay in the city."

"Thank you, officer. Good night."

Cheri opened her eyes and saw that she had the man's overcoat pulled up around her ears. The man had called her his daughter. It was a scam to get rid of the cop, but it felt good. For a little mini-fantasy, it felt good. Cheri snuggled in and fell asleep.

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When Cheri awakened daylight was coming through a window to her left, she was sitting in a chair before a desk, and there was a young woman on the other side of the desk. The desk accessory on the edge of her desk identified her as Kelly Brandt. She looked like a Kelly Brandt: blonde and blue, slim and perky. Kelly smiled brightly at her, pushed a stack of books and bound report forms at her, and said, "Good luck, Cheri."

Kelly smiled at the next person sitting in a chair against a wall to Cheri's right and motioned for the woman to take Cheri's place. The newbie was wearing blue pajamas. Cheri saw that she was wearing blue pajamas as well. Kelly, on the other hand, was wearing a red turtleneck over gray slacks. Besides Kelly's name, her nametag said that this was a place called New Beginnings, which sounded suspiciously like a drug rehab.

That edge of panic rose. "Doesn't this cost money?" Cheri asked.

Kelly's eyebrows went up. "You bet it does. You're paid in full, though, provided you complete treatment."

"Who?"

"I'm sorry. The donor is anonymous."

"What? How does that work?"

"It's been going on ever since I've been here. A graduate from New Beginnings takes on the payment of two uninsured patients, provided they successfully complete treatment. Usually the new patients go on to fund



two more and so on.”

“And you never find out who paid?”

“No.”

“And if I don’t finish treatment?”

Kelly smiled. “The next piece of mail you get will be a bill for the time you spent here.”

“What if I walk out right now?” asked Cheri.

“We’ll refund your misery with interest, no charge.”

Cheri’s head was numb. That bone weariness was still with her, although the crawlies seemed to have gone. What had happened to the Monopoly Man, though? Where was the man in the expensive suit who had wrapped her in his wonderful overcoat and called her his daughter?

“Where am I?”

“This is New Beginnings Rehabilitation Center. We’re in Brooklyn.”

“How’d I get here?”

Kelly held her hands up and out to her sides. “Sorry. I just don’t know. Your form lists you as self-admitted. Are you going to give it a try?”

Cheri looked around the office, sighed, and shook her head. “Can you tell me where I’m supposed to go now?”

Kelly told her. Fourth floor for final room assignment, then screening, orientation, physicals, lectures, group therapy, and always the promise of a new life if she could risk letting go of the old one. AA meetings, NA meetings, talks in the lounge with other patients, one-on-ones with counselors, physicians, and psychiatrists. Writing, reading, more writing and more reading.

Nearing the end of her stay three weeks later, Cheri had an interview at a halfway house where, after rehab, she’d live, look for a job, go to meetings, attend aftercare sessions, and become whatever it was she had the desire, the talent, and the determination to become.

What to become? So many possible beginnings. There were some paths that were closed because of her record. Tough to get bonded as an au pair when you've done time for possession and solicitation. Many were open, though. She saw the men and women around her working at the rehabilitation center, throwing out those slender lifelines, on a good month pulling thirty percent out of the nightmare. She didn't know if she could develop the strength for that kind of work. So easy to hitch your wagon to a falling star.

On her last night in New Beginnings, after packing, she was with a few other patients watching the news on the television in her wing's lounge when she saw a couple of familiar faces. One face was so familiar that everyone on Earth who had ever come within fifty feet of a television set or newspaper knew it: Kimberli Fallon, beautiful bad girl heiress to her father's shipping fortune, pop star, actress, divorcée, and in trouble once again. Another drunk driving bust, but this time she'd been holding flake and had beamed a New Jersey State Trooper with her cell phone. Unless her attorney could pull yet another legal rabbit out of his pricey fedora, Kimberli would be spending at least part of the near future behind bars.

A tiny bit of Cheri delighted in this spoiled rich kid finally getting some reality dirt under her well-manicured fingernails. Then Betty, one of Cheri's groupmates, said, "Maybe this time she'll get some help."

"Help?" said Bob scornfully. "She can afford to buy her own chain of drug rehabs."

Betty nodded. "Which means she can also afford to keep help so far away it can never get to her."

Cheri felt guilty about her tiny moment of glee at Kimberli Fallon's predicament. If the beautiful heiress was an addict and had the money to keep help away long enough, she was in bigger trouble than almost anyone in New Beginnings. She might have been spoiled, but that wasn't what was going to kill her. Kimberli was taxi dancing with addiction and could afford to buy up all the tickets.

And how the news pundits seemed to delight in the rich girl maybe having to be locked up and do without makeup for a couple of weeks. The jokes: drunk Kimberli, fried Kimberli, party-'til-you-drop Kimberli. What fun. They didn't realize what they were laughing about, though: the victim of a fatal disease, unless she could get the help she could pay to avoid.

Cheri got up to get a cup of tea in the floor kitchen when she heard

the voice-over mention Kimberli's father, Jack Fallon. Cheri paused and glanced back at the screen. Jack Fallon's father had lost everything in twenty-nine and never got ahead another cent. Then his son Jack was born in nineteen-thirty. Twenty years later he signed on as a merchant seaman and half a century later he was a billionaire. Jack Fallon had died of a stroke two years earlier, leaving his fortune to his only child, Kimberli. His picture came up and Cheri grabbed the back of a chair as she felt her knees sag.

Big white mustache, pinstripes, that smile, those fierce blue eyes—in her mind's eye she could still see him sitting on that loveseat in Bryant Park in October. Jack Fallon: He was the Monopoly Man. He had wrapped her in his overcoat two years after he had died.

She slowly shook her head at her own thoughts. "I got to talk with someone."

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There was a floor counselor, a young woman named Shana, and they talked in Cheri's room. Cheri told Shana about that night, the beating she took, the crawlies, the Monopoly Man, her waking up in rehab with no knowledge of how she had gotten there, and that the Monopoly Man was a dead ringer for Jack Fallon, except that it couldn't be because Jack Fallon had been dead for two years.

Explanations explain everything. Jack Fallon and his daughter Kimberli had been in the news for the past ten years, ever since the girl had turned fifteen and had been first taken into custody for vandalizing the yacht club to which her father belonged. No charges, of course, but plenty of copy and airplay. In her confused drugged state and in her desperate reach for help, Cheri simply became confused by a little salvation fantasy. She had met an imaginary Crusader Rabbit on her way to get help.

It was all in Cheri's head.

*Maybe*, thought Cheri as Shana left her room. *Maybe*.

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After Cheri graduated from the halfway house and was beginning her college education in preparation to become a treatment counselor, on a return visit to New Beginnings she met someone. She was passing through the main patient lounge on the fourth floor on her way to meet with her old group counselor when she heard a familiar voice call out, "Yo, Cheri? Is that

you?"

She turned and saw Rackshack getting up from a couch where he'd been talking to half a dozen very clean looking persons. He was still tall, dark, and wearing a Mets cap. She nodded dumbly, not knowing for certain if she should shake hands, embrace him, or run like hell. He walked over to her and stopped, his mouth wide with smiles, and looked down at her. "Girl, you clean. How long?"

"Eight—" Her throat was very dry. "Eighteen months. How are you doing, Rack?"

"Good," he said as he nodded. "Real good. You doin' all those meetings, workin' those steps?"

"That's my medicine. Are you visiting someone here?"

He laughed. "No, girl. I earn my way into this hotel."

She raised an eyebrow. "I thought Rackshack never did drugs. Drugging was for losers."

"Got that right." He smiled sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his neck. "Fooled you as well as me. Got a minute?"

"Sure." She nodded and they sat in a couch away from the other patients. They made a special kind of small talk: she apologized for stealing all that cocaine and running out on him. He expressed relief at the information because he didn't remember Cheri ever moving in with him, stealing the drugs, or moving out. All this time he thought he had used it all himself and had become immune to overdoses, a theory that had blown up in his face about three weeks ago.

"I was dead. Out in Bryant Park under my old tree. I saw angels, swear to God, and they was laughing at me. So sick I wished I'd never been born. Then this old dude he picks me up off the ground like I was a little child. He sits me down in this seat. I don't know what I said, what he said, or anything, unnerstand?"

Cheri nodded.

"I remember the rattles so bad I thought my eyeballs were poppin' out my head. This old dude, real expensive threads, he puts his overcoat on me." Rack snapped his fingers. "Just like that I stop shakin'. Never been so

warm or at peace in my whole life. Got to be at least a foot taller than that old dude, but I near got lost in his overcoat. Can't figure that. Anyway, sat me down, covered up my feet. I think I fell asleep." He looked around and held out his hands. "Woke up in this place. You ever see a picture—"

"The Monopoly Man," said Cheri.

Rackshack nodded vigorously and pointed at her. "From the game. Got handlebars on his lip just like the dude in the Monopoly game." He glanced around to make certain no one would overhear what he planned to say next. "Maybe I'm crazy, but I thought I saw him on the TV."

"Jack Fallon," said Cheri.

He stared at her. "Yeah." He glanced down at the floor and back up at Cheri's face. "That old dude's been dead more'n three years." He held up a hand, palm faced toward the ceiling. "So?"

"I don't know what to tell you." She placed her hand on his shoulder. "Rack—What's your real name?"

"Luther."

"Luther, I'm going to tell you how I wound up here. A lot of people look like a lot of people, and talking about ghosts might not be the swiftest way to get through your psych evaluation, but here it is." And Cheri told Rackshack about her night in the park wrapped in the Monopoly Man's overcoat and how she woke up in rehab.

When she finished, Rackshack rubbed the back of his neck, then let his hand fall to his lap. "What if it was Kimberli Fallon's old man? What if it was a ghost?"

"Whoever it was, whatever it was, he saved my life. Yours, too, Luther, if you do the work here."

He held up his hands, palms facing her. "You preachin' to the choir, girl. I am a believer." He lowered his hands. "I heard a kid named Ted talkin' in the lounge about how he got here: Overcoat Park Express. We all crazy?"

She looked down at her hands. "I don't know. I hope the Monopoly Man is real, though."

Rackshack leaned back in his chair. "Monopoly Man, he say to me he watchin' over his fortune. Later on, Cheri, he talkin' to someone who woke me up. It was a woman. Anyways, he tell her I been through a tough day and I'm all wore out." A pause. "He tell her I his son. His *son*." A tear streaked down the left side of the man's face. Embarrassed, he laughed at the tear and wiped it off his face with the heel of his hand. "He call me his son," he whispered. "What's it all mean?"

Cheri took the man's left hand in both of hers. "I don't know, Luther. I'm guessing if you need to know, it'll come to you." She leaned over, kissed his cheek, and said, "Good luck. Do what they tell you and keep off the grass."

They both laughed and Cheri left for her appointment. When she was done she went down to Admissions to talk about arranging anonymous payment for her two patients. She thought about going to Bryant Park that night. Part of her wanted to believe Jack Fallon was there. If he was, though, she didn't know what she could make of the information. She didn't want him not to be there, though. She decided against pinching herself awake from this dream: she owed it too much.

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After her graduation from college and internship Cheri applied for a counseling position at New Beginnings. She was accepted and was an assistant there for a year when her lead counselor retired and recommended her to fill the opening. Cheri Trace had been a full group counselor at New Beginnings for almost two years when Kimberli Fallon's name found itself once again upon a police blotter. This time the actress's antics affected a great many drug rehabilitation facilities. While high she had driven her BMW into the rear of a police car, narrowly missing a young woman and her three-year-old son. Her mug shot was the takeoff point for a thousand talk show jokes. The party girl was getting decidedly worn around the edges. Where the rehabs came in was because this time her latest high-priced attorney thought that voluntary rehab might look better in front of the court than more pictures of her bare butt on YouTube or evening news footage of her showboating at parties.

Feelers were sent out to a number of rehabs. Big staff meetings at all of them and just about every rehab administrator and group counselor in the business had thrown Kimberli out of rehab before she even made it through the door.

Too disruptive.

Media circus.

Couldn't possibly take her recovery seriously.

How would the other patients be able to concentrate on their recoveries?

At New Beginnings it was about decided by the director, staff, and counselors to tell Kimberli's attorney that she would have to go someplace else to find recovery when Cheri said, "I'll take her."

After a stunned silence, then much ado about Cheri's relative lack of experience, aspersions regarding her possible motives, and the possible damage to her other patients, not to mention damage to the institution—

"And," Cheri interrupted, "there are a few conditions that must be met and a few procedural changes to make." And she told them her plan.

There was considerable debate. Cheri's plan was fraught with possible liabilities, licensing issues, zoning violations—or as Dr. Manter, director of New Beginnings, put it, "For all we know, you'll run afoul of Homeland Security."

Still, the issue was what it always was: Getting the addict through the doors and clean long enough to be able to make that terrible choice. In addition, Kimberli Fallon had as much right to recovery as any pimp, crack whore, doctor, or football player. Cheri looked around the table at the faces of her fellow counselors, the staff and director of New Beginnings, recovering alcoholics and addicts every one. "After all," she said, "none of us got to this table because of a perfect history of wise choices and good manners."

The staff voted Cheri's plan in unanimously. Dr. Manter later asked Cheri why she had been willing to take on such a risk as treating Kimberli Fallon when the safe course would have been to steer clear of America's party girl.

Cheri would have liked to tell the director that she owed Kimberli's father a big favor. Instead, she simply smiled.

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When Kimberli Fallon showed at New Beginnings, it was the media

circus everyone had feared. Cameras, vans, uplink dishes crowded the streets on two sides of the complex, and Kimberli, of course, arrived in a limo escorted by her attorney, Michael Braden, and her current rent-a-phallus, Manager Richard Evan Garvey. Kimberli was all blond, spectacular makeup, sheared beaver coat over hip-huggers, spiked gold sparkle heels, and maximum wiggle. The mouthpiece and the manager were turned away at the main entrance, as expected. Both then proceeded to deliver prepared statements to the media after a small spat over who would get to deliver his statement first.

As the different media blow-dries were sending their pieces off to satellites and around the globe, Kimberli was taken to a room in which she was unceremoniously shucked of everything but her underwear and issued New Beginnings blue pajamas and slippers. Her bags were searched and all cell phones, electronic devices, money, jewelry, over-the-counter drugs, herbal remedies, prescription drugs, and an ounce and a half of crystal meth were removed. The legal items were placed in a bin to be returned to her upon release. The illegal items were confiscated.

She was given a physical by a female physician and her screening was done by a female psychiatrist. Once all the testing was done, it was early afternoon. She was hustled down to the ambulance loading bay by three males who looked like street thugs, save for the New Beginnings nametags on their upper wear. She was loaded into the ambulance along with her bags and her three companions. The doors closed and the ambulance left the bay, no sirens, no Christmas lights. The slender blond guy with the sad blue eyes and nervous smile sitting next to her handed her a small package of cheese and crackers along with a Diet Coke. His nametag said his name was Ted Franks. "What's this?" she demanded, holding out the fare.

"That's lunch. It'll be a while before we get to the unit." Ted opened his own pack of cheese and crackers, placed two complete cracker sandwiches together into his mouth and bit down. After a couple of chews, he opened his own Diet Coke and took a slurp.

She looked across at the two men sitting on the bench seat facing the one upon which she and Ted sat. "Where are you taking me?"

"Old Overcoat Unit," said the tall dark one. He was rugged looking with an easy smile and wearing black denims, white Air Jordans, and a Mets cap. His name tag identified him as Luther James.

"I didn't know anything about any move. No one told me. My attorney



didn't say anything about moving me elsewhere."

"Nobody knew, 'cept the unit," answered Luther. "In a few minutes somebody from the rehab will announce your treatment won't be taking place at New Beginnings."

"Where?" she demanded.

"At an undisclosed location," said Ted. "No media, no visitors, no interviews, no calls, no complications."

"You get to concentrate on your recovery," added Luther.

"I have to be able to talk with my attorney," said Kimberli. "There are legal matters, court, business—"

"Frito?" said Luther to the fellow sitting next to him.

Dark brown complexioned, black hair, dead black eyes, the man called Frito had a thick ropy scar on his left cheek that went from his eye almost to his chin. He wore a black knit cap down to his eyebrows that covered his ears and he had a simple gold ring dangling from the left corner of his mouth. His nametag said his name was Alfred Tomas.

Slowly Frito reached to his side and picked up a red backpack. Taking a manila folder from the bag, he held it up and wiggled it. "You signed the papers, Kimberli. We got you for three weeks—"

"I'm paying for this," she snapped. "I can leave—"

"No, you're not paying for this," Ted interrupted quietly. He held up another pack of crackers. "Want some more?"

"What do you mean I'm not paying for this?"

"We are." Ted nodded toward Luther and Frito. "All of us. The members of the Old Overcoat Unit. We're paying for your treatment. You only have to pay if you don't complete treatment."

"In any case," said Frito leaning forward, his elbows resting on his thighs, "We got you for three weeks. You going to detox and maybe get a new start."

"This is not what I agreed to," she protested angrily.

Frito grinned widely and tapped the file folder. "Want to read your copy?"

Luther leaned forward and handed Kimberli a couple pieces of facial tissue. After a chilly stare, she took them. The muscles in her cheeks flexed. "I'm a prisoner?" she said at last. "Is that it?" She looked at Luther. He stuck his hands in the pockets of his denims and slouched back against the wall of the ambulance.

"You are definitely a prisoner, Kimberli. And the first step in escaping from a prison is—" He arched his brows and looked at his two companions.

"—To accept that one is in a prison," they replied in unison.

"Why ... that's just stupid," said Kimberli. "That doesn't make any sense at all."

"Give it time," said Frito. "It's going to sound real smart in a few days."

\* \* \* \*

An icy night wind came up Sixth Avenue driving tiny sharp particles of snow before it. Cheri Trace waited for the light to change, one hand making certain the wind left her cute white beret on her head. She was wearing a white coat over a wine-colored top and dark slacks as she stood looking across the street at the naked trees in Bryant Park. Once the light changed she crossed almost at a run, her cheeks burning from the cold. Hardly anyone in the park. Cuff was doing business beneath Luther's old tree and not looking well. Very thin. Two diehard joggers in sweats with towels over their heads rounded the corner from Sixth and continued down West Forty-second. Cheri got on the path that put the trees between the street and her, the rows of chairs getting just a dusting of white.

A fellow collecting newspapers to pack in his clothes for insulation, the sharp laugh of a working girl as she pulled at her john's arm. There was a well-dressed man in a blue pin-striped suit sitting in a loveseat, his overcoat wrapped around what looked to be a child of about seven or eight. Cheri tried to feel fear or wonder at the man's manifestation. It was, without a doubt, Jack Fallon. She looked at the child wrapped in the Monopoly Man's overcoat. A girl. Cheri smiled, thinking of what Luther must have looked like at seven, lost in that overcoat.

"How are you doing, Jack?" Cheri asked.

"Hello, Cheri," he said without looking up from the girl's dark innocent face. "You're looking well."

"I am well." Cheri sat in the chair to the man's right. "We've got her in treatment, Jack. Kimberli's in the middle of detox. The media thinks it's a big laugh and the paparazzi are going crazy trying to find out where she is."

His eyes closed for a moment, then they opened. "How is she doing?"

"She's having a rough time. She's out of stuff, thinks she has all the answers, wants her own way, and right now that means getting some heavy medication and getting the hell out of treatment." Cheri smiled sadly. "She's refused medication for withdrawal because, in her opinion, she doesn't have a drug problem."

"Is she in a lot of pain?"

"Yes and getting worse by the minute. You got a tough girl there, Jack. It's going to take her a while to realize her pain is self-inflicted. We have her at least for two and a half more weeks."

"Cheri, is that going to be long enough?"

"Maybe. Pain is the teacher we listen to. Maybe not." Cheri smiled and bundled herself more deeply into her coat. "Kim's in a good group, Jack. Luther's assistant counselor, Ted and Frito are interns, and the rest of the group are made out of return visitors and new patients you know." She looked down at the sleeping girl. "Everyone in the group slept where she's sleeping."

"And you're the group counselor."

Cheri nodded. "Jack, I came here to tell you something. You've done all you can do for Kimberli. It's up to her now. Even if she completes treatment and makes a good try at staying clean, it won't be easy. The media will never leave her alone, they'll never regard anything she says or does to aid her sobriety as sincere, and any Twelve Step meetings that she attends are going to have anonymity tested like nobody's business. If she wants it, though, she can have it."

"And?" he prompted.

She glanced at him. "Jack, if you want, you can rest now."

The apparition stared into the distance for a moment, then smiled at Cheri. "I don't need rest. Besides, I've got to watch over my fortune." He nodded toward the girl wrapped in his overcoat. "My daughter's name is Sabrina. She's had a remarkably tiring day and she wanted to rest for a bit. I don't have the heart to wake her."

Cheri stared at Jack Fallon and the charge he had taken on. Everyone knows you get to pick your own Hell. What only a few lucky ones get to find out is that you get to pick your own Heaven, too. "Then you have a good visit in the city, sir," said Cheri.

"Thank you officer," answered Jack with a grin.

They sat that way on the chairs in the falling snow for several moments when a sleepy voice asked quietly from the depths of the overcoat, "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine," answered Jack.

"Is your fortune safe?"

"For now." He patted the girl's shoulder. "For now."

Cheri placed her hand on the ghost's arm and was not surprised to find it warm.