

**WILDCLOWN  
HIJACKED**

**G. Wells Taylor**

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**For Larry and Peggy Chapin**

*My other parents.*

*Good friends and great examples.*

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# Chapter 1

I finished my coffee and contemplated replacing the cigarette I had just put out. Its last puff of smoke was floating across the Formica countertop like a homeless cloud of ectoplasm. I was thinking about having another because I was way ahead of schedule and had time to burn, and because I was intrigued by a woman who sat on the far side of the oval sandwich counter. The green Formica wrapped around an open space where a balding man of pre-Change fifty was frying up two-dozen mock sausages on an oversized grill. A pair of young-looking soldier types had ordered four of the breakfast specials to sit on their hangovers.

A loudspeaker reported the approach of the airship. A group of heads in the station looked up from their magazines and knuckle-biting to distinguish themselves as passengers from the human flotsam that swirled around the central ticket booths at Greasetown Aerodrome. The brilliant panels of lights overhead flickered, turned the air green, and then burst into blinding white. I could have used a pair of sunglasses if the Change hadn't almost made them extinct.

The extremes in lighting seemed to bother the woman across from me—the one that intrigued me—because she turned her head from her pile of papers and glared upward. She was wearing a dark blue business suit—white collar and jacket trim—an expensive looking cut. I caught the hem of her skirt hugging the soft shape of her thighs when she first came in. *Lucky skirt*. A delicious sneer crossed her features as she watched the lights flicker—something frustrated and ironic brought

bright white teeth from behind her full pink lips. I could see that even angry she was beautiful. A silver bang cut a line across her eyebrows, and her hair cascaded down the back and sides like a shower of platinum pausing to splash outwards over her shoulders. I had already noticed that her features were sharp and angular, and that she moved her lips as she wrote in any one of her three notebooks. She did a similar thing with her fingers and hands. Tapping, twisting and bending them as her mind worked. Her eyes scanned her surroundings quickly, had seen me a couple of times, but never did the double take over my makeup. Her attention returned to the file folders and the notebooks in front of her. She ate a muffin and drank a coffee. Something about the way she did it washed away the clouds of Greasetown momentarily—made me remember growing things, and fresh air, and healthy appetites.

I was pretty sure that she was ahead of schedule too. Whether she was meeting someone, or was going somewhere herself. The loudspeakers went off every ten minutes, and none of the messages had brought her out of her fugue. Her nimble hands worked the pen feverishly, tapped her inner rhythm on the Formica. The lips kept moving.

“Don’t worry,” I said, lighting a cigarette. “You’ll get it finished on time.”

Her body went rigid. Then I saw her eyes flash at me through a curtain of silver. The eyes that regarded me were blue—then they did an amazing chromatic shift to yellow-green a moment before darkening to a deeper shade of blue. Must have been the weird lighting—must have been the metallic hair. She turned back to the paper. Her eyes skipped up to mine, held them through the curtain of silver. Then her lips moved and formed the shadows of what she was about to say. She pushed the papers into an untidy pile before she said, “You’re aware that a full grown man wearing clown makeup at a sandwich counter could be considered abnormal.”

I took a deep drag of my cigarette. “More than you know.”

Her eyes watched me, her lips moved, and a subtle muscular twitch slipped behind her fine features. She shook her head.

“Just looks like you’re in a hurry,” I said. “For someone who isn’t in a hurry.”

“Look,” she sighed, shoulders drooping, “I’m not used to being hit on by ‘real’ clowns, so forgive me for not getting into the witty back and forth.” I watched her, and was appalled by the beautiful strength that suddenly filled her eyes. She sighed. “Okay. You’re a mystery—a paradox—whatever... Feel better?” She shook her head. “I have a pile of case notes to prepare.”

“Case notes?” I said, billowing smoke. “You a lawyer?”

“Social worker,” she said, the hint of a defensive tone entering her voice.

“Social worker?” I flicked ash on the floor, waved the cook toward my empty coffee cup. “I thought *I* was an optimist.”

She glared at me and immediately started shoving her notebooks and papers into file folders. Then she reached down and pulled a briefcase into view. She stuffed her files into it and rose from her stool. “Nobody cares.” Her face filled with tragic power as she walked around the lunch counter toward me, struggling into her raincoat. She was close enough now that I could taste the smoothness of her skin. Her perfume descended on me like a conquering army. The eyes burned at me from beneath platinum. “So they cut the number of workers. Those of us left struggle under a crippling workload, with only the uncertainty of contract positions to hang our lives on. Barely any more hope than the people we help.”

Both of us regarded each other; the only movement was the smoke curling from my cigarette. Then she whipped up her free hand and pointed a clean white finger at me.

“But I will not take shit from any fucking clowns.” A look crossed her features that spoke of a spirit overwhelmed by Greasetown, by the Change, twisted humanity, and now by me. Then something softer, wiser entered her expression and she hissed. “Get some professional help!” A look in her eyes told me it had hurt her to say that. She was getting tired of being helpful. Snarling silently, she turned on her heel and threw her smoldering intensity toward the outside platform and the group of people gathered there to watch the approaching airship. She hit the crowd and the bodies rippled outward, like water does when you drop a stone in it.

Poor paradoxical mystery that I am was focused on her lithe and powerful dancer’s body—dark blue stockings hugged perfect calves, disappeared into busy white pumps—her feet barely touched the ground. She moved well, sort of the way I wished all women would move—just grace and power.

I glanced up and into the cook’s face. I tried to look as sad as possible in the clown makeup.

“Now, there’s a woman a smart guy’s going to settle down with,” I said attempting nonchalance and failing. “Anybody with any brains would stop what he’s doing and...”

The cook looked at me with flat brown eyes as he carelessly wrangled the soldiers’ sausages onto thick plates. Truth was: I saw more tragic

hope in that woman's eyes than I'd seen in all the crowds of Greasetown. Truth was: I saw a spark there that kindled something deep inside me, made me think there might be an answer, that there might be a way. Truth was: I was glad she was willing to pay the price to be out there. I didn't know anybody else who would.

But the truth was: I was stuck at the Greasetown Aerodrome ahead of schedule waiting for the two-fifteen from the City of Light. I was on a case. Truth was.

## Chapter 2

I sauntered around the edge of the crowd that huddled out of the rain on the covered platform, pushing through a tangle of body odors. Wet wool, expensive perfume and cheap, alcohol, aftershave and cigars. Those were the ones that stood out and really slapped me in the face as I made my way past. There were others, but I tried to put them out of my mind before they became part of my permanent memory. The departure area spread out across the front of the aerodrome terminal supported some fifty or sixty feet from the ground on a forest of rusted iron girders. From this, a series of six wide ramps fanned outward at angles to meet the platforms where the big ships moored. A half-mile to the north, a group of massive hangars looked ancient and decrepit in the gray light of midday. I knew that was where the lighter-than-air ships called home when it was time for maintenance, and in extremely foul weather.

In the first days following the Change, people found out that there was more to the phenomenon than just constant rain, the end of aging, and the rising of the dead. It became apparent after the twentieth plane crash in a month that the Change was also affecting computers and electrical systems. As the planes kept falling, and the body count skyrocketed, a powerful fear of flying was burned deep into the human psyche. The sane traveling public abandoned airplanes en masse. They were so terrified they embraced a form of air travel that had been abandoned for similar reasons long ago. But it was starting to be a long time ago—like in another life, for everybody.

Devolution had occurred in which we saw the adoption of outmoded forms of air travel. Old propeller-driven workhorses were dragged out of mothballs and given a once over in design. The memories of all those burned out and mangled airplanes just after the Change was impossible to forget. Then one day a group of rocket scientists took out the old lighter-than-air ship designs and marketed the hell out of them. Filled with helium, the new zeppelins were safe from the destruction the *Hindenburg* and others of her kind were prey to. Those used explosive hydrogen for buoyancy. It was easy to sell the public on the new airships. It was a safer form of air travel that could give you a rough landing at worse.

Travel was slower, but more luxurious. Very few complained. Everything had slowed down after the Change—and with living death for the dead, what's the hurry? Speed kills, right? Authority still toyed with technology. They were still blood and guts; hell bent on their way somewhere as fast as possible. But the public seemed to gravitate to old-fashioned and more predictable machinery.

I watched the two-fifteen approach. They had christened her *The Boris Yeltsin*. She was almost invisible against the gray cloud cover, and would have been if not for the flicker of running lights and the various advertisements painted across the underside of the hull. The dull throbbing roar of the engines preceded her. A hundred feet below the airship, the landscape was its usual gray and muddy. Blackened trees grew in low, heavy copses, their naked branches woven together like spider webs.

A nearly inaudible voice spoke from the many speakers bolted at intervals overhead. It snorted and yawned—barked electronically, before blaring a warning to the crowd to wait for the ship to moor and for its passengers to disembark. A barrier kept the travelers from moving out onto any of the ramps until the ship was moored.

I hung back in the crowd because that was what I'd been paid to do. I was waiting for someone. The day before I had been hired to chaperone Daniel Rutherford the Second—that's what his father insisted on calling him. *The second*. I wasn't going to say it too many more times. His father had worn all the fun off of it. But I was to bring Daniel from the Greasetown Aerodrome to the family home in New Garden. He had been sent to the Gorshin Institute. That was a world-class detox-center that nestled in the forested Blue Ridge Mountains west of the City of Light's landward walls. I had read that it looked like a castle, and could only be reached by airship or by following a winding road through the countryside. The literature said that the Gorshin Treatment was so

successful because it depended on strictly controlled environmental factors and social isolation. That was why the institute's clients could experience a more rapid recovery than traditional therapies offered. Having a working knowledge of substance abuse myself, I knew that the technique might also considerably speed up the relapse upon release. But I wasn't a doctor.

Daniel Rutherford the First, the father, was given my name by an acquaintance of his. He did not feel compelled to divulge any more information than that. Some quick research informed me that the Rutherford's made their fortune by handling other people's money. Daniel Rutherford the First was good at it, like his father was before him. It had become a feeling among his offspring that the acquisition of all that wealth surpassed mere skill and talent, and fell somewhere in the confines of a god given right.

I had the feeling that his son grew up like the offspring of many fabulously wealthy families. Feeling on one hand that he deserved the excess he hadn't earned, but struggling with the accompanying guilt that went with it. You couldn't blame him; he was brought up in an 'anything money can buy' household. To feel better about his lot in life, Daniel had chosen to drink all he could buy.