

THE ARCHITECT SERIES



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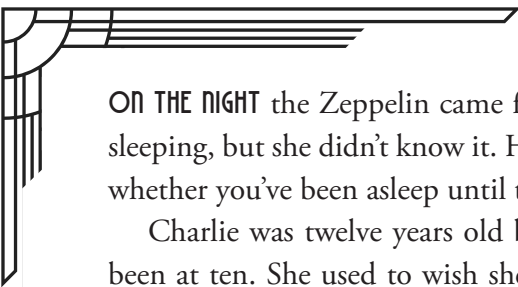
JONATHAN STARRETT



CHAPTER ONE

IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT





ON THE NIGHT the Zeppelin came for Charlie Crane, she was sleeping, but she didn't know it. How can you know for sure whether you've been asleep until the moment you wake up?

Charlie was twelve years old but no taller than she had been at ten. She used to wish she was taller and even tried stuffing newspaper scraps into her shoes to gain an inch or two, but somewhere around age eleven she decided being short was better than pretending to be tall.

There were no scraps in Charlie's shoes the night the Zeppelin came for her. As she bounded along the sidewalk, her curly yellow hair tumbled out of a flat wool cap and down to her chapped hands, one of which held a hot dog with ketchup, while the other played with a penny in her coat pocket.

It was her lucky penny. Her only penny.

And the hot dog? She had found it on the curb a few blocks back.

Charlie didn't consider herself an orphan, though to anyone else that is exactly what she was. She deduced she must have had parents at one time, because everybody does. That they were long gone was no reason to feel sorry for herself. She never considered herself homeless either. Phantom City was her home. It was a big city, with plenty of roofs for when it rained and newspapers for when it was cold. Along with these utilities, from time to time a sandwich, or a hand-me-down coat, or an old pair of shoes would turn up at just the right time. Charlie couldn't have explained why it happened that way. Maybe it was the lucky penny. Either way, she wanted for nothing. On this particular night, not even a balloon.

“Hey, kiddo,” a balloon salesman called to her from across the street. “Might I interest you in a spherical delight?”

“I’ll take the free one,” Charlie joked.

The salesman threw back his head and cackled with laughter. Yanking a marker from his patch-covered jacket, he took the marker’s cap between his teeth. “One free balloon, coming right up.”

He wrote “Happy Birthday” on the balloon, and Charlie’s blue eyes narrowed, bouncing back and forth at the man and the balloon as a strange thought occurred to her. She couldn’t remember if today was her birthday or not. It might have been. She hadn’t had a birthday in a while. Was it normal not to know your own birthday? And if she didn’t know, how did the balloon salesman know?

She was so stumped by his gesture she almost refused the balloon, but then she came to her senses. When somebody offers you a free balloon, you take it. She also thought a “thank you” would have been nice, but she was too flustered to get the words out, so instead she wolfed down her hot dog and set off on the sidewalk with Mr. Squeaks.

That’s what she named the balloon, and she thought it was a good, strong name.

Mr. Squeaks joined Charlie on a cable car to downtown Phantom City. Because she was so short, she could sneak onto the car between two adults and nobody would notice. Not that they would notice anyway. Not even a bright red balloon drew their attention. Their noses were buried in their newspapers.

The only paper printed in Phantom City was the Phantom City Chronicle, and that day the headline was “Beware the

Zeppelin!” According to the Chronicle, the Zeppelin was a doomsday blimp that loomed above the city at midnight, sucking up victims in its tractor beam. The paper detailed the Zeppelin’s attacks—which amounted to hundreds of missing persons every week—and instructed citizens to look away from the airship at all costs, stressing as always the golden rule: “No one about when the Zeppelin is out.”

Charlie wasn’t reading the paper that day, but she knew about the Zeppelin. The papers, radio programs, and movies were always talking about it. She would hear other outlandish tales too, most of them secondhand from conversations on the cable car. Two women ahead of her were discussing the fable of Phantom City’s Architect, whose blueprint, some believed, was the hope of a better tomorrow. This bedtime story about a blueprint of tomorrow had made a few children smile, but in modern times, said the ladies, the thought of a man designing your destiny at a drafting table was old-fashioned. Simple-minded. Even dangerous. What could be more foolish than entrusting your destiny to someone you’d never met?

By the time Charlie and Mr. Squeaks were off the cable car, the downtown shops were closed and the streets were dark and full of dangerous characters. Charlie didn’t mind much. She’d grown up downtown. Crime on the streets was ordinary, like cream cheese on a bagel. In fact, a minute from the cable car, Charlie stumbled onto a knife fight for a stolen purse. The scuffle was fairly standard, and she danced around harm’s way easily enough, but when she rounded the corner, the string was limp in her hand and Mr. Squeaks was gone.

Where could he have floated off to? It had been less than

a block. Charlie's eyes were glassy. She was crying and she wasn't sure why. It was only a stupid balloon, but if by some chance today really was her birthday, she hated the idea of losing her only birthday gift.

She searched the sky and, to her relief, quickly spotted Mr. Squeaks, lodged in a fire escape seven or eight flights up. He was bobbing in place as if to tease her. She could climb the dumpster and shimmy up the ladder in ten minutes. Why shouldn't she get her balloon back? Wouldn't you?

The smell of the dumpster was outrageous. Something big had died in there. Charlie hoped it wasn't a dog but decided she wouldn't mind if it was a cat. Grabbing the bottom rung of the ladder, she hoisted herself up, and as she climbed the fire escape, her eyes swept the streets below and noticed they were empty.

What time was it, anyway?

Charlie felt a soft wind, but couldn't see where it was coming from. She couldn't see anything past her own yellow curls dancing across her face. The wind grew angry and loosened Mr. Squeaks from the iron bars, sailing him out into the starry night. Charlie gasped and cried out, but a sound like cutting blades, rhythmic and relentless, swelled and overtook her voice.

A shadow advanced on the fire escape blotting out the moonlight and turning everything around Charlie deep dark. She snapped her eyes shut as a violent chill seized her back. The whipping wind whirled around her, through her hair and into her eyes, until white light cut the air and the sound became silence. Sharp rays of light embraced her on all sides, streaming past her body like rapids of fire.

Her heart raced as she realized the time.

Midnight.

“No one about when the Zeppelin is out.”

All those stories she'd heard about the Zeppelin, and she never stopped to wonder how big it was. When she opened her eyes again she didn't have to wonder.

She was face to face with the airship. It overwhelmed her senses, but she wasn't afraid.

After all, she was alive.

What's more, in the light she felt awake, as if she'd been roused from a lifelong sleep. As if all the time she'd been sleeping, there had been an adventure waiting.

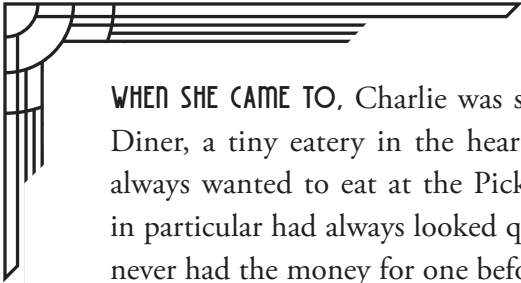
And now that she was awake, there was no room for fear.

But the moment she woke up, she blacked out.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GRAND ILLUSION





WHEN SHE CAME TO, Charlie was sitting in the Pick-Me-Up Diner, a tiny eatery in the heart of Phantom City. She'd always wanted to eat at the Pick-Me-Up. The milkshakes in particular had always looked quite tasty. Of course, she'd never had the money for one before. She'd only ever looked through the windows of the Pick-Me-Up and dreamed of eating there, going to the Phantom Theater and spending an entire evening downtown, rather than on the South Side, where she grew up.

South Side? Thought Charlie as her fingers massaged her eyelids. Did I grow up on the South Side? Charlie was suddenly aware that yes, she had.

Now she could recall old, curling brown wallpaper in a room full of squeaky beds. She could picture a sink that sometimes worked, most of the time didn't. She remembered a needle and a ball of black thread, a red checkered blanket, and the overwhelming smell of fish. Why did she suddenly remember these things? She hadn't the foggiest idea.

As she sat, positively puzzled, she noticed to her delight and surprise a tall, beautiful, ice cold milkshake on the table in front of her. She didn't know why it was there, anymore than she knew where her new, randomized memories had come from. Most importantly, she hadn't a clue where she'd come from, or how she'd escaped the Zeppelin and ended up here.

A man sat down across from her. He was a sweating curly-headed piece of work dressed in all the quintessential trappings of a film director: beret, scarf, brown bomber jacket, riding trousers, and knee-high black boots.

"Swell, you're not dead," he said.

Charlie blinked through her confusion. “What happened? How did I get here? Who are you? Is the milkshake for me?”

“Good grapes, kid, one question at a time. No, the milkshake’s mine.”

JW wrapped his lips around the straw and slurped it heartlessly. Charlie looked away from the man, and right away something else caught her attention. Outside the window the air was green. Had it always been? Maybe it had. Even stranger, it was morning, but still dark. Was it always this dark? She was beginning to think that yes, maybe it was. Was that normal? She wasn’t sure. But for some reason or another it was clear to her now: if there was a sun in the sky, it had gotten lost between there and here.

“Moving on to your other questions,” said the man after another gulp of milkshake, “I was dumpster diving for a reel of film my assistant had accidentally thrown away, when I found you conked out next to a dead cat. The odor was extraordinary. You’re welcome.” He sat back and sunk his leathery hand into his chest. “My name’s Macaw, JW Macaw. I’m a film director, and I don’t mind saying I’m the best in Phantom City. If you’ve heard of the crime fighting hero, The Cardinal— and I know you have— then you’ve seen one of my pictures.”

Of course Charlie had heard of the Cardinal. He was a fiercely popular costumed crime fighter, the sort of real-life hero the ladies on the cable car loved to discuss, the kind the men and boys both envied and aspired to be. Films about the Cardinal were guaranteed successes at the box office, though Charlie was never much interested.

“Say, kid,” whispered the director with a sparkle of

THE TRUTH IS ALWAYS WORTH THE TROUBLE.

There is a golden rule in Phantom City: “No one about when the Zeppelin is out.” Twelve-year-old Charlie Crane has feared the doomsday airship her whole life. But one night, she comes face-to-face with the Zeppelin, and instead of being abducted, she is awakened to the reality that something is very wrong in Phantom City.

Determined to find the truth in a city plagued with lies, Charlie works to free the people of Phantom City from the clutches of a shadowy villain. Helped by a mysterious Architect who only communicates over radio and telephone, Charlie and a quirky band of unlikely heroes must learn to trust a guide they cannot see as they piece together a citywide deception involving superheroes, surveillance, and slaves.

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