

THE ARCHITECT SERIES



THE ARCHITECT

JONATHAN STARRETT



PRAISE FOR *THE ARCHITECT*

In his debut novel, Jonathan Starrett explodes onto the fiction stage bringing together his creative genius and gift for storytelling in a novel sure to thrill and entertain both children and young adults. *The Architect* is a fantasy adventure story that, in the tradition of C. S. Lewis, brings to life a strange world full of surprises, excitement, and suspense that keeps you turning the page, but also teaches the powerful messages of teamwork and fighting for truth. Full of rich and relatable characters, *The Architect* brings a powerful message about our relationship with God and his plans for our lives. One of the best books in its genre we've ever read, *The Architect* will keep kids reading, and we're looking forward to what Starrett has for us next!

ANDREWS AND WILSON, internationally bestselling authors of the Shepherds series

Nothing can awaken our kids' hearts to the truths of God's Word quite like epic stories. I can't wait to read this one with my kids!

JORDAN RAYNOR, bestselling author of *The Creator in You* and *Redeeming Your Time*

As a leader and pastor, Jonathan is helping kids, parents, and families develop a deeper understanding of God through the power of storytelling.

BRAD LOMENICK, author of *H3 Leadership* and *The Catalyst Leader*

Jonathan Starrett uses suspense and humor to create an enjoyable read for the entire family. He understands the intricate craft of storytelling and provokes the reader to keep turning pages through his incredible creativity and imagination.

STEPHEN CHRISTIAN, singer and songwriter, Anberlin

WHAT KIDS ARE SAYING ABOUT *THE ARCHITECT*

The Architect is an amazing and exciting story about finding truth in a confusing world where it seems everyone has their own truth to sell. What kid can't relate to that? While I love all the characters, I really love Charlie, the girl looking to not only find the truth but share it. The entire cast of characters and their relationships are so well written that I feel like I know them and was part of the gang on this great adventure. I hope this book becomes a series because I can't wait to read the next one!

EMMA WILSON, Christian actress and star of *Faith in Reel Life*

We like *The Architect* because it taught us that “the truth is always worth the trouble.” We learned that God is the Architect of our lives!

THOMAS AND LUCAS SMITH

It was funny and suspenseful. I really enjoyed it, and especially liked the mystery parts!

ANGEL CORREA

THE ARCHITECT SERIES

BOOK ONE

THE ARCHITECT

JONATHAN STARRETT



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The Architect

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The Architect is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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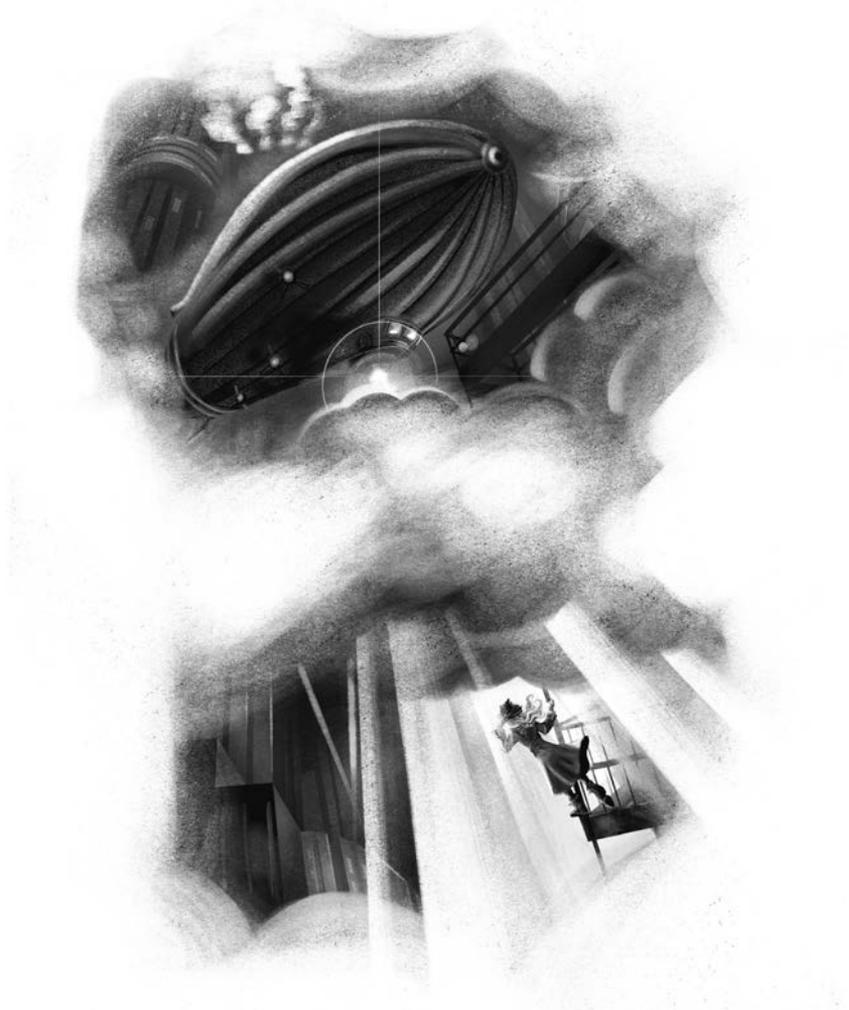
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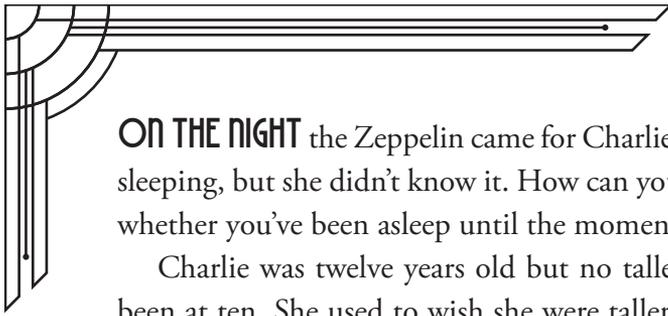
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To Rachael, who convinced me the truth was worth the trouble.

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 were taller and even tried stuffing newspaper scraps into her boots 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 that 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 comforts, 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. He yanked a marker from his patch-covered jacket and 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 between 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 down the sidewalk with Mr. Squeaks.

That’s what she named the balloon. 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 have noticed 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 every evening at midnight, sucking up victims in its tractor beam. The paper, radio programs, and movies regularly detailed the Zeppelin’s attacks—which amounted to hundreds of missing persons every week—and instructed citizens to keep away from the airship at all costs, stressing as always the golden rule: “No one about when the Zeppelin is out.”

Charlie hadn’t read the paper that day, but she knew all about the Zeppelin. She often heard 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 may make a few children smile, said the ladies, but in modern times, the thought of a man designing your destiny at a drafting table was old fashioned. Simpleminded. 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? She’d been walking for less than a block. Charlie’s vision was blurry. She realized

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 gift.

She searched the sky for several long minutes until, to her relief, she 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 go 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. 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. Hot rays of light embraced her on all sides, streaming past her body like cascades of fire. Her eyes couldn't bear it. They squeezed shut again.

Her heart raced as she realized what time it must be.
Midnight.

“No one about when the Zeppelin is out.”

All those stories she'd heard about the Zeppelin, and she'd never stopped to wonder how big it might be. 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, an adventure was waiting.

And now that she was awake, there was no room for fear.
But the moment she woke up, she blacked out.