THE TIME TRAVEL DIARIES

ADVENTURE IN ATHENS

CAROLINE LAWRENCE

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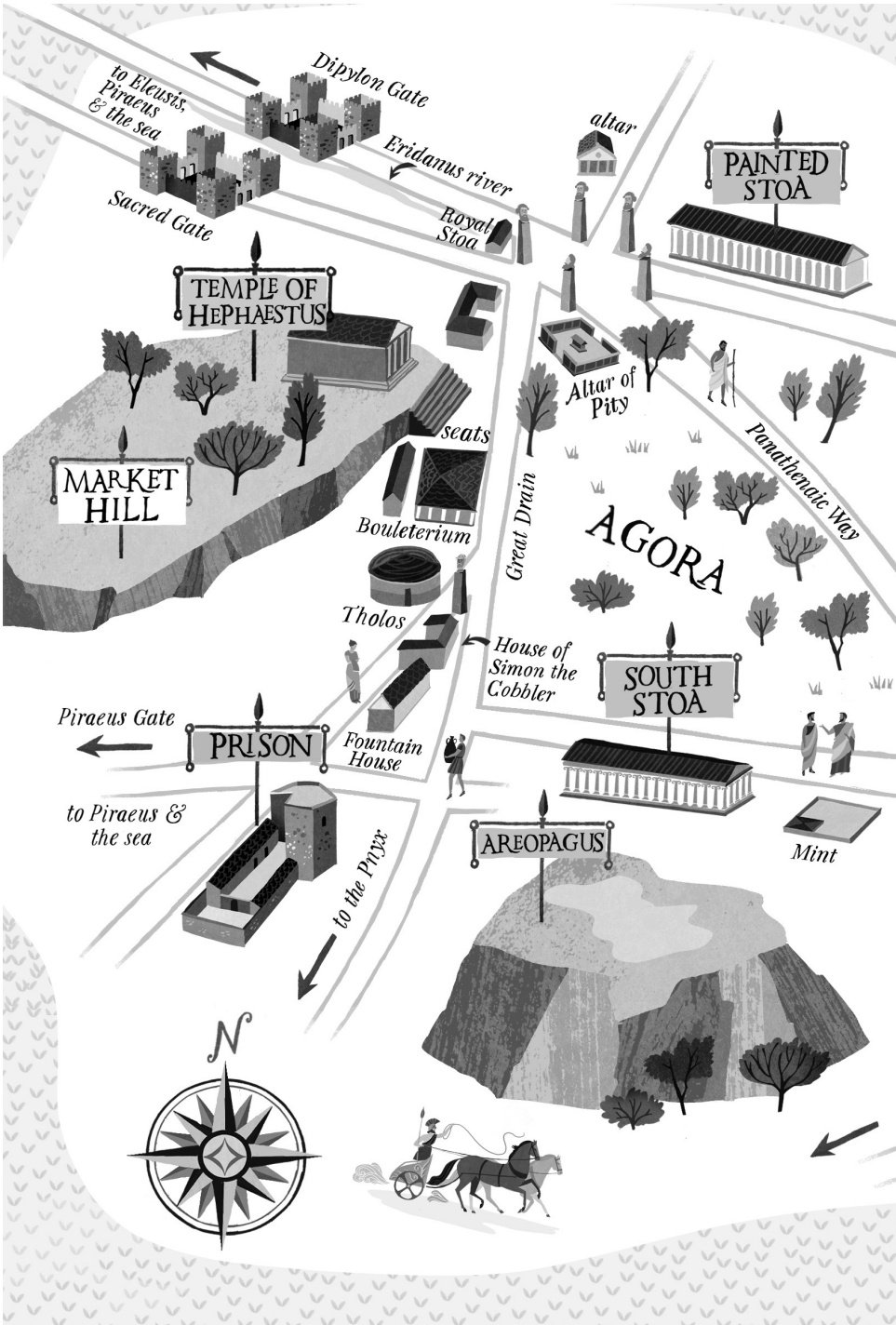
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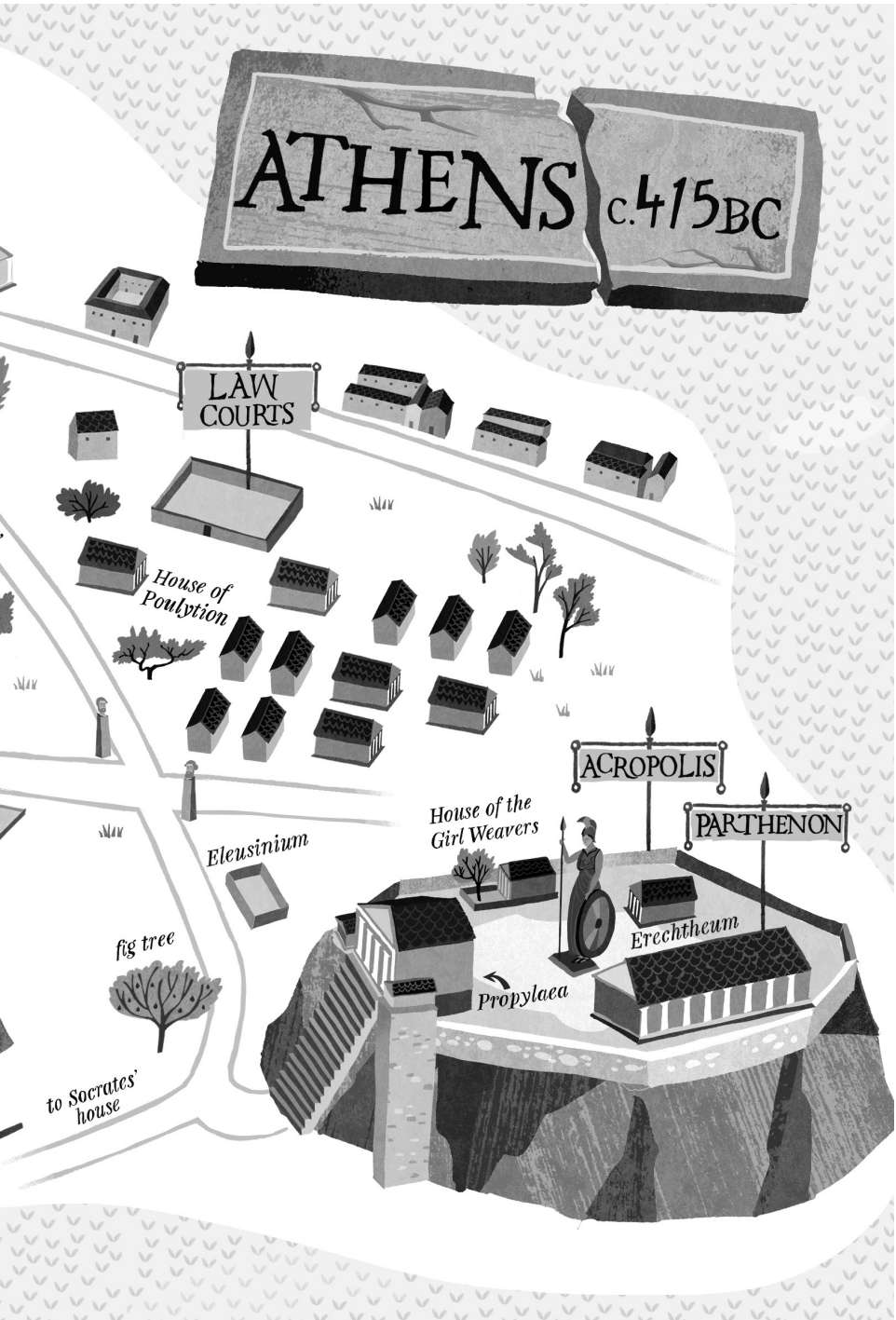
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To Professor Armand D'Angour,
who kindly consulted on this book and
allowed himself to appear as a character in it.


to Eleusis, Piraeus & the sea
Dipylon Gate
Eridanus river
Sacred Gate
altar
PAINTED STOA
Royal Stoa
TEMPLE OF HEPHAESTUS
Altar of Pity
Panathenaic Way
seats
MARKET HILL
Great Drain
AGORA
Bouleterium
Tholos
House of Simon the Cobbler
SOUTH STOA
Piraeus Gate
PRISON
Fountain House
to Piraeus & the sea
to the Pnyx
AREOPAGUS
Mint
N


ATHENS c.415BC
LAW COURTS
House of Poulytion
Eleusinium
fig tree
to Socrates' house
House of the Girl Weavers
ACROPOLIS
PARTHENON
Erechtheum
Propylaea

1
Fame at Last



When my best friend and I went back in time to track down the wisest man who ever lived, we only did it so we could be rich and famous.

It all started when we arrived back at school on the first day after the Easter holiday. We were fresh off the plane from a two-week language school in the Alban hills outside Rome and had taken an Uber straight from the airport.

As we came into the school cafeteria halfway through lunch, everybody fell silent and looked in our direction with admiring whispers and nudges. Having been a nerdy geek all my life, I naturally assumed it was for someone else. I turned around to see if some superstar had come in behind us. But it was just the two of us: me and Dinu.

I raised my eyebrows at Dinu. He's a big Romanian kid who used to be a bit of a bully.

Now he's my best mate.

'What's going on?' he asked me in ancient Greek, the language we had been studying intensively for the past fortnight. 'Is it because we're in ordinary clothes?'

'I don't think so,' I replied. 'Maybe they found out what we did at the beginning of the year?'

'No way,' he said. 'And it wouldn't impress them even if they knew.'

'You're probably right.'

As I helped myself to mac and cheese with green beans I studied Dinu, who was going for a baked potato with all the trimmings.

He looked good. The Italian sun had lightened his hair from butter blond to lemon blond. His white T-shirt showed off a good tan and nice muscle definition.

'Maybe they're staring because we look good?'

Dinu puffed out his chest. '*I* look good, you mean.' He gave me a teasing grin. 'You only look good to people with no dentists or proper doctors.'

I sighed. Dinu was right. Sure, I have good teeth, clear skin and shiny hair but so does practically everybody else in twenty-first-century London. I'm the smallest kid in my year group and have the voice of a choirboy.

Even my Roman suntan couldn't make me cool.

So why the admiring looks?

Dinu and I set off for the table at the far end of the cafeteria, where our friends from Latin club usually sat.

Everyone was beaming at us, from the big Year Twelve football players to the woke kids in Year Ten to the little Year Seven environmentalists. Even the mean girls in Year Eight looked interested.

'Why is everyone smiling at us?' asked Dinu, still speaking in ancient Greek.

'*Oo-den oy-dah*,' I replied. I know nothing.

'Dinu! Alex! Come sit!' called one of the Mean Girls.

Her name was Chastity. Her dad was a pop star who didn't believe in private education and she was the prettiest, meanest girl at Wandsworth Academy. She had blue dip-dyed hair and a butterfly tattoo on her neck.

Yup. A real tattoo.

Even the teachers were afraid of her.

I slowed down. 'Want to sit with them?'

'I guess?' Dinu replied.

I let him sit next to Chastity and I put my tray of food next to Kiana's. Kiana is half Jamaican with tight black curls, tawny skin and golden eyes. She is what my gran would call *petite*, which is French for small but perfectly formed.

'What language were you two guys speaking?' asked Chastity, running her hand through her blue-tipped hair.

'Um, ancient Greek,' I said. 'We've just been on an intensive course in a *palazzo* outside Rome.'

I braced myself for mocking laughter. Instead the third girl, Maude, sighed. 'Ooh, I love the way you say *palazzo*.'

'It's Italian for "palace",' I said. My voice came out squeakier than I would have liked, but none of them seemed to notice. I babbled on: 'It was this mansion with frescoes on the walls and massive formal gardens and a view of Rome.'

Chastity leaned forward. 'Is it true that you were being sponsored by Mannasoft Games?'

'Just for commenting on YouTube?' added Kiana.

'Yes.' Dinu looked pleased. 'We posted a walk-through of their latest platform game and they liked it. So now we're consultants.'

'Mannasoft Games are the coolest,' said Maude. The pink tips on her hair matched the colour of her lips.

'You like computer games set in the ancient world?' I said, frozen with a forkful of pasta halfway to my mouth.

'Duh,' said Chastity, and Maude said, 'Obvs.'

'Then you might like to know,' said Dinu importantly, 'that we are consulting with them on their next game too. It's set in ancient Athens. That's why they sent us to Italy. To learn ancient Greek.'

'I thought they spoke Latin in Italy,' said Maude.

'No, Italian,' said Chastity. 'Latin is a dead language.'

I had to pinch myself. The coolest girls in our year group were discussing ancient Greek and Latin.

In my mind I was screaming: *What on earth happened in the two weeks we were off-grid?*

2
Mean Girls



I stared at Dinu and he stared at me. We couldn't believe the Wandsworth Academy Mean Girls were interested in the ancient-Greek language school we had attended over Easter.

'Um . . . Chastity is right,' I said. 'They do speak Italian in Italy. But this was a special place for learning two dead languages: Latin or ancient Greek.'

'Say something in ancient Greek!' breathed Maude.

Dinu grinned and leaned forward. '*You're so hot you could burn down Troy.*'

'Dinu!' I hissed in Greek. 'Be serious!'

'What did he say?' asked Maude, turning her baby-blue gaze on me.

Thinking quickly I replied, 'He said you are as beautiful as Helen of Troy, whose face launched a thousand ships. You all are!' I added hastily, looking at each of them in turn.

Chastity and Kiana rolled their eyes at each other, but Maude giggled.

I took a big bite of pasta but my throat was dry with panic and I started choking. For a terrible moment I was afraid I might die right in front of them, but their gently patting hands and a big mouthful of water helped get it down.

Dinu rolled his eyes. His meaning was clear: *I can't take you anywhere.*

I dabbed my watering eyes with a paper napkin. Could I *be* any more of a geek?

And yet the Mean Girls were still being nice to me.

'Hey, you guys should come to a party at my house this Saturday,' said Chastity. 'My parents are out for the night and we're going to have a multiplayer session of the best platform game ever.'

Kiana winked. 'I think you know which one.'

I nearly fainted. The most beautiful girls in Year Eight inviting us to play a computer game? Something was definitely wrong in the universe.

Somehow, Dinu and I managed to make it through the rest of lunch. We told them about the trip we'd taken to an Etruscan graveyard and a Greek comedy we'd performed and a thunderstorm over Rome. When the bell rang the girls all stood up and gave us radiant smiles as they took their trays.

They left me and Dinu sitting stunned.

'What just happened?' I asked him.

'No idea.'

'Have we come back to a parallel universe?' I said. 'Shall we call Mr Posh?'

Back in January, when Dinu and I had come back from a top-secret trip, we had been debriefed by a government official we called Mr Posh. He told us to alert him if we noticed anything about our world that was different from when we had left. Over the following days, weeks and months neither of us had seen anything that seemed wrong. But now I was beginning to wonder.

The cafeteria was emptying out and we were just about to take our trays when Dinu's younger sister plonked herself down beside him, opposite me.

'I don't suppose either of you have a clue what's going on, do you?' she said.

Eleven-year-old Crina was going for the eco-radical look with green spectacles and her mouse-brown hair in braids. If Dinu got the looks in his family, she got the brains.

'Nope,' I agreed. 'Not a clue.'

Crina looked over the top of her green-rimmed glasses. 'Have either of you heard of Bluzie Steenberg?'

'That singer you like with the pink hair?' said Dinu.

I said, 'The one who produces music out of her garage in northern California?'

Crina nodded. 'Her hair is purple this week,' she said. 'But yes.'

'So?' I said. 'What does she have to do with us?'

'Apparently Bluzie is a bit of a geek who plays computer games. You know that YouTube commentary you did about the game set in Roman London? She loves it and even mentions the two of you by name in her latest song.'

'You're joking,' I said.

'Nope. The song's called "Take Me Back", and there's a line that goes "Take me back Alex and Dinu; I'll go anywhere with you . . ."'

Dinu was grinning like an idiot but I still couldn't get my head around it. 'We're suddenly cool because a sixteen-year-old girl wrote a song about our YouTube commentary on a computer game?'

Crina rolled her eyes. 'Bluzie has fifty million followers and thousands of people sample her songs on that music app. Everybody loves her, from toddlers to teens to grannies. Can you think of any other reason why everybody in the school would think you're cool?'

Dinu and I looked at each other.

'You don't think it's because you went back in time, do you?' she said.

My jaw dropped and Dinu's blue eyes bugged out.

Somehow his annoying little sister had discovered our closely guarded secret.

But how?