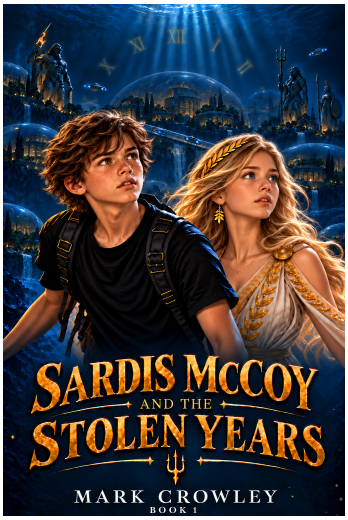
Sardis McCoy and the Stolen Years

BOOK 1 | MARK CROWLEY



Free opening sample

Prologue and Chapters One-Three. From the latest illustrated edition. The full book is forthcoming.

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JENNIFER

To almost everyone who knew him, Sardis McCoy was just an ordinary thirteen-year-old boy. Jennifer McCoy had worked very hard to keep it that way.

“Sardis, you’re going to be late for the bus!”

“Almost done!” His voice came from his bedroom, followed by a burst of electronic static and the muffled startup music from an old video game. Jennifer glanced at the kitchen clock. 7:23.

“You said that five minutes ago.”

“This time I actually mean it!”

Jennifer shook her head. He had woken around five a.m., found an updated wiring diagram from Kale, and decided that before school was the perfect time to connect an Xbox controller to his homemade arcade machine. Once Sardis wanted to understand how something worked, convincing him to quit before he solved it was nearly impossible.

“Sardis!”

“Thirty more seconds!”

“You only have about six minutes until the bus leaves.”

“Plenty of time.”

“It is absolutely not plenty of time. And I’m serious this morning—I have to be at work early today. I cannot drive you to school if you miss the bus.”

No answer. Jennifer smiled faintly. He was probably searching for the limited-edition black iShowSpeed T-shirt he treated as his most cherished possession.

At North Star Middle School, Sardis was the smartest kid in his class. He understood advanced lessons and concepts after hearing them only once and came home with perfect test scores that inevitably produced another request for a meeting. The suggestions had started in kindergarten. Gifted placement. Accelerated mathematics. By fourth grade, his teacher had suggested he skip an entire grade.

“He’s mastered most, if not all, of what we’ll be teaching next year,” the teacher had told her. “Ms. McCoy, Sardis shouldn’t have to sit through material he already understands.”

Jennifer had smiled politely. “He has great friends in his grade. I don’t want him being pushed into a social environment he’s not ready for.”

The teacher had looked unconvinced. “He needs to be challenged.”

“He’s only ten.”

“Exactly.”

Other teachers had suggested private schools, magnet programs, summer courses, and science competitions. Jennifer had found a reason to decline all of them. Once, when Sardis wanted to enter a regional competition, she had actually heard herself say, “Are you sure? It sounds awfully competitive.”

He had stared at her like she had lost her mind. She disliked discouraging him. She did it anyway, carefully enough to keep him an exceptionally bright boy among hundreds of children rather than someone people talked about.

What made it harder was that Sardis rarely tried to prove how smart he was. He helped classmates who struggled. At parties, he noticed the kids nobody included and would sit next to them. Jennifer was more proud of that than any of his grades. Kindness was something he chose. She wished she could keep him safe without holding him back.

“YES!” A triumphant shout came from the bedroom. A second later, footsteps pounded down the hallway. Sardis appeared wearing faded jeans, sneakers, and his favorite T-shirt. His backpack hung from one shoulder. In one hand was an Xbox controller. In the other was a strawberry Pop-Tart. “It works.”

Jennifer looked at the controller. “Congratulations, I guess.”

“No, Mom. Seriously. It actually works.”

“I never doubted you. I’m very proud.”

“You absolutely doubted me.”

“I doubted your decision to begin this project before school.”

“That’s a completely different issue.” Sardis took another bite of the Pop-Tart. “I’ve got the Xbox controller mapped through the emulator. Nintendo, Sega, PlayStation, MAME—all of it. One controller.”

Jennifer smiled. “That sounds very impressive.”

“It is impressive.”

“Stop the presses. I’ll alert the media.”

He rolled his eyes. The arcade machine was only the latest project. Sardis had been taking things apart since she first trusted him with a screwdriver. Over time, fewer things in their house stayed broken. He had even replaced the timing belt in her car after spending half an hour studying the repair instructions.

Jennifer tried not to turn him into the household repairman. But when their air conditioner failed during triple-digit Texas heat, nine-year-old Sardis had asked to take a look. An hour of videos, online diagrams, and one reluctant trip to buy a replacement capacitor and motor later, it worked better than ever.

The parts had cost less than forty dollars. The repairman wanted two hundred just to show up and couldn’t come for another two days. Jennifer had been relieved. And disturbed. Mostly relieved.

Jennifer looked toward the clock. 7:28. Her expression changed. “Sardis.”

He followed her eyes. “Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.”

He shoved the remaining half of the Pop-Tart into his mouth.

“Phone?” Jennifer pointed toward the charger near the front door.

He grabbed it.

“Homework?”

“In my backpack.”

“You’re sure?”

“I remember putting it in there.”

“That is not the same thing as checking.”

“I’m good, Mom.”

Jennifer glanced at the clock. There wasn’t time to argue. He pulled his backpack onto both shoulders.

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too.”

He reached for the door.

“Sardis.”

He looked back.

“You’ll be late for the bus.”

“Quit distracting me.”

“And remember, I cannot drive you today. I have to open the office.”

“I know. I know.”

“I’m serious.”

“No, you’re Jennifer.”

“You have less than two minutes.”

His eyes widened. “Okay. Now I’m serious.”

The door slammed. Jennifer smiled and walked toward the front window. Outside, Sardis was jogging down the driveway, still chewing the last bite of his Pop-Tart. Then she heard the diesel engine. The yellow school bus passed the end of the street. Sardis stopped. Jennifer folded her arms. She had experienced this before.

He would stare after it for a moment and consider his options. Then he would turn around, walk back to the front door, and reluctantly admit that his mother had been right. Jennifer waited. Sardis didn’t

move. Then he looked toward the neighboring houses. The Knaus property. The street beyond it. The place where the school bus route eventually doubled back. Jennifer's expression changed.

No.

Sardis tightened the straps on his backpack. Jennifer opened the door. "Sardis…"

He was already running across the street toward the Knauses' property. Their property with the eight-foot stone wall. Jennifer went back to the window. "You have got to be kidding me."

Sardis disappeared from view. Jennifer continued standing at the window. Any second now. He'd realize this was ridiculous. He'd come back. Thirty seconds passed. Nothing.

Jennifer waited a little longer. Still nothing. She sighed. Apparently surrender wasn't part of his plan. That was another trait she recognized. She returned to the kitchen.

The house always became strangely quiet without him. Jennifer looked down the hallway toward Sardis's bedroom. The monitor still glowed. On the screen sat the emulator interface he'd spent the morning building from electronics that had never been intended to work together. Another seemingly impossible little problem he'd decided simply wasn't impossible. Her eyes lingered on it, then drifted toward the shelves above the pantry.

There were days when this life felt normal enough that Jennifer could almost forget it was not the one she had expected. A small house. An aging car. A job as a secretary for a nonprofit helping homeless families. A thirteen-year-old who could not get out the door on time.

At work she was simply Jennifer from the front office: reliable, quiet, a single mother who needed steady employment. Nobody knew about the doctorates or the master's degrees packed away where Sardis had never seen them. Once there had been laboratories, publications, and people who recognized her name. She had left all of that behind thirteen years ago. Leave. Become forgettable. Don't give anyone a reason to find you or Sardis.

She still found joy in her work. The nonprofit mattered, especially to the homeless families it helped in Austin. It also kept her name out of journals and conferences where former colleagues might look for her. She needed both things to remain true.

She smiled faintly. "Such a stubborn kid." She pulled a kitchen chair toward the pantry cabinets and climbed onto it. Her fingers passed several cookbooks she actually used. Thirty-Minute Family Meals. The Texas Barbecue Bible. Southern Desserts. Then stopped. The Practical Encyclopedia of Root Cellaring, Canning, Pickling & Long-Term Vegetable Preservation.

It was thick. Ugly. And spectacularly boring. Jennifer had chosen it for exactly that reason.

Sardis had voluntarily read electronics manuals, computer documentation, even the owner's manual for Jennifer's car. He had once read the instructions for their dishwasher because he'd discovered it had a hidden diagnostic mode. But even Sardis had limits. Apparently several hundred pages devoted to pickling vegetables were one of them.

Jennifer carried the book to the table. For a moment, she just stared at it. Then she opened it. Page 316. A photograph rested between the pages.

Jennifer removed the photograph carefully. She was twenty-three, perhaps twenty-four, her longer blond hair loose over a white lab coat. Safety glasses rested on her head. The university building behind her was familiar. The woman who still believed she knew where her life was going felt a lifetime away.

Beside her stood a man. Tall. Dark-haired. His arm wrapped comfortably around Jennifer's waist. Her hand rested against his chest. They were both smiling.

Jennifer remembered the exact moment. The weather. What she'd worn. What they'd eaten afterward. What he'd whispered to her before the photograph was taken. There were some memories time seemed incapable of dulling.

She traced the man's image with her thumb. Sardis knew almost nothing about his father. Jennifer had cut the people who might have remembered him out of their lives. There were no photographs on the walls, no birthday calls, no visits. Nobody had even told Sardis his name.

When he was younger, the questions had come constantly. Did his father know he existed? Was he dead? Had he wanted them?

I'll tell you when you're older. It's complicated. We'll talk another time. Eventually Sardis had stopped asking so often. Jennifer knew that did not mean he had stopped wondering.

Other people supplied ordinary explanations. An old boyfriend. A failed relationship. A man who had left. She let them. Ordinary explanations were useful.

She held the photograph carefully by its edges and remained still for a long time. Thirteen years. He had promised to return. During the first few months, Jennifer had expected him almost every day. A knock at the door. A phone call. A message. Anything.

The months became a year. Then two. Eventually she stopped counting. What frightened Jennifer most wasn't the possibility that he had lied. Somewhere deep inside, she couldn't believe that. Whatever else had happened, his promise to return had been real. She was sure of it.

Which left a much worse possibility. Something—or, more likely, someone—had prevented him from coming back.

She glanced toward the glowing arcade emulator. Electronics that had never been designed to communicate were now working together because Sardis had decided they should. Maramis approached problems that way too. The resemblance could still catch her unprepared. Missing the bus would not have looked like a final answer to either of them.

"Where are you?" she whispered.

The empty kitchen offered no answer. It never did.

For thirteen years, Jennifer had called this protection. School. Friends. Games. A mother who loved him. Surely he could have an ordinary childhood until Maramis returned. But Sardis was thirteen now. I'll tell you when you're older was wearing thin.

She had imagined the three of them sitting down together someday. Maramis would explain why he had left. She would explain why she had hidden her career and discouraged opportunities her son deserved. There were answers she owed him, even if Maramis never came back to provide his own.

She returned the photograph to page 316, closed the cookbook, and put it on the highest shelf. At the front window, the street was empty. Sardis really was trying to catch that bus. Of course he was. She rested a hand against the glass. “Be careful.”

Somewhere beyond the neighboring houses, her son was racing toward a school bus, completely unaware that the day ahead would put him on a path toward answers Jennifer had spent thirteen years trying to find on her own. Within days, Sardis McCoy would finally learn who his father was.

Chapter One

Missed The Bus

SARDIS

There are moments in life when you realize you've made a mistake. Watching my school bus disappear around the corner was one of the smaller ones.

I stood at the end of our driveway, backpack hanging from both shoulders, and watched the yellow bus accelerate away.

"No." Its brake lights vanished.

"No, no, no." I ran into the street.

"WAIT!"

The bus did not wait. Apparently yelling at the back of a moving vehicle from seventy yards away is not an effective transportation strategy. I stopped. My lungs filled with the warm spring air. Behind me was home. Inside was Mom. Mom, who had told me at least four times that she could not drive me to school.

Returning home would require admitting that she had been right. There had to be another option. I looked toward the corner. Then something clicked. The route. Our bus didn't go directly to school. It made a giant looping pattern through the neighborhood.

From our street, it turned right on Deer Canyon, stopped twice, looped around Cedar Bend, and then came back along Ridgeview. The next stop was only two blocks away. By road? Probably three-quarters of a mile. In a straight line? Maybe a quarter mile. I pictured the neighborhood from above. Roads. Fences. Backyards. The drainage creek. If I went straight… I might beat it.

I checked my phone. 7:31. That was insane. I looked toward home. Then toward the route. My Ninja Warrior coach's voice popped into my head. Think about what you want to do. Then do it. No hesitation. No fear.

I tightened the straps on my backpack.

"Okay."

The bus was somewhere behind the houses now. I could still hear it. I started running.

OBSTACLE ONE

The Knaus house. Mr. and Mrs. Knaus lived directly across the street from us. They were retired, extremely nice, and apparently terrified that someone might attempt a medieval invasion of their backyard. Their stone fence was at least eight feet tall. Normally I used the gate. The gate was twenty yards in the wrong direction. Not happening.

I sprinted across their front lawn. The stone wall rose ahead of me. Higher than I remembered. This suddenly seemed like a terrible idea. I ran faster. Too late to reconsider now. Ten feet. Six. Three.

I planted my right foot. Jumped. My left shoe hit the rough stone. For half a second I was running vertically. Then gravity remembered me. My body started falling backward.

“Nope.”

I threw both hands upward. My fingertips caught the top edge. Barely. For one ridiculous second, the wall felt like a real-life warped wall. My backpack yanked against my shoulders.

For one terrifying second, I hung there with my shoes scraping uselessly against the wall. The bus engine growled somewhere beyond the houses. Move. I jammed the toe of my sneaker into a gap between two stones and pushed. My right elbow cleared the top. Then my chest. I twisted sideways and rolled across the wall. Success. For approximately half a second.

Then I remembered what was on the other side. The air-conditioning unit. I dropped. My shoe slammed onto the metal housing. BANG. The entire unit shuddered. A fan somewhere inside made a noise like an angry lawn mower.

I jumped onto the grass.

“Sorry!” I had no idea whether anyone could hear me.

Then the back door opened.

Mrs. Knaus stepped onto the patio holding a coffee mug.

“Sardis?”

“Morning!”

She blinked. I was already running.

“Everything all right?”

“Perfect!”

“Why did you come over the—”

“Have a great day!”

I crossed the yard. Behind me, I heard her say something I couldn’t make out. Probably better that way. Their rear fence separated them from the Merchant family. Five feet. Wood. Easy. A compost container stood three feet from it. Perfect launching platform.

I adjusted my angle. Then smelled it.

“Oh, that’s disgusting.”

The compost bin was open. Banana peels. Coffee grounds. Something green that might once have been lettuce. I could go around. No time. I put one foot on the edge. The plastic lid flexed. My other foot hit the fence.

I vaulted. For one glorious instant, everything worked exactly as planned. Then the sole of my sneaker slid across something wet. My body rotated sideways. I hit the top of the fence with my thigh. Pain shot up my leg.

“Ah!”

But momentum carried me over. I landed badly in the Merchants’ backyard, stumbled twice, windmilled my arms— —and stayed upright. Still moving. Good. I could deal with the bruise later. I took three more steps. Then stopped.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

OBSTACLE TWO

The pool. Normally, the Merchant family’s backyard was one of my favorite places in the neighborhood. Large swimming pool. Diving board. Old blue slide. Grass everywhere. Today it looked like a construction site. The grass around the pool had been ripped apart. Dark Texas mud covered nearly everything.

Plastic sheeting lay across parts of the empty pool. Several piles of dirt blocked the route around it. Apparently Mr. Merchant had chosen this exact week to install new sprinklers and resurface the pool. Going around would take too long. Going through… I looked at the empty pool.

Nine feet deep at my end. Two or three feet at the shallow end. The bottom was mostly dry except for a brown puddle collected in the deep end. A diving board extended over the hole. Across from it, the old blue pool slide stood near the center.

Beyond that were steps leading out of the shallow end. My brain built the route before common sense could object. Diving board. Slide. Shallow end. Stairs.

I stared.

“No.”

The bus engine rumbled nearby. I looked toward the street. Through a gap between houses, a flash of yellow appeared.

“No!”

It was already making the first stop. I had maybe forty-five seconds. My body started moving before I completely agreed with the decision. Three stone pavers crossed the mud. I hit the first. Second. The third shifted beneath me. My shoe slipped.

I threw my weight forward and regained my balance. The diving board was ten feet away. This is stupid. Eight. Really stupid. Five. I remembered my Ninja Warrior coach again. Hesitation gets you hurt. The diving board filled my vision.

I accelerated. One foot hit the back. Then another. The board barely moved. Of course. The pool was empty. They had tightened it down. No spring. That was information I would’ve preferred to have before jumping on it.

I reached the end. Bent my knees. And launched. The world dropped away. For a moment I was suspended over nine feet of empty concrete. The blue slide looked much farther away from up here. I immediately reconsidered every decision I'd made that morning.

My right foot reached toward it. Too short. My stomach dropped. Then— THUMP. The heel of my sneaker caught the lower edge of the slide. My body slammed forward. I grabbed both rails. Momentum ripped my hands loose. Suddenly I was sliding. Backward.

"No, no—"

I twisted. My backpack smashed against the fiberglass. The slide dumped me into open air. I fell toward the shallow end. Three feet. Maybe four. I bent my knees. My shoes hit concrete. Pain fired through both ankles.

I let myself collapse sideways instead of fighting it. Shoulder. Hip. Roll. My backpack smacked the pool floor. I came back onto my feet. Ninja Warrior training. For once, all those obstacle-course drills had actually paid off.

I ran. The shallow-end stairs were covered with plastic. I jumped the final two steps and grabbed the edge of the pool. Pulled. My arms screamed. Then I was out. I looked down at myself. T-shirt intact. Jeans dusty.

One smear of something questionable across my knee. Good enough. The bus engine grew louder. Wrong direction. It was moving again.

"Come on!"

I ran.

OBSTACLE THREE

The rear fence. Three and a half feet tall. Wooden pickets. On a normal day I wouldn't even have counted it as an obstacle. Today there were two enormous trash cans on the other side. I could see their black lids through the gaps. I didn't slow down.

Left foot against the fence brace. Right hand on top. Vault. My legs cleared. Almost. My right shoe clipped a picket. I pitched forward. The trash can rushed toward my face.

I shoved against the lid. It rolled. The can tipped. I jumped sideways. CRASH. The trash can hit the driveway. The lid spun in a circle.

I landed against the second can. Somewhere inside the house, a dog began barking like I'd started a war.

"Sorry!"

Again. I apparently owed a lot of apologies this morning. I sprinted across the Merchants' front yard. The street was directly ahead. So was the bus. Yellow flashed between houses to my left. Closer now. Too close. It would reach the next stop before me. Unless— I was about to run into the road when a horn BLASTED.

I jumped backward. A pickup truck shot past. Look both ways. Excellent time to remember that. The driver threw both hands into the air.

“Sorry!”

That one he definitely heard. I crossed behind him. Only one thing remained. The creek.

OBSTACLE FOUR

Calling it a creek was generous. Most of the year it was a shallow drainage ditch. Three feet across. Dry dirt. A few rocks. Sometimes trash. I’d jumped it dozens of times. I reached the top of the hill. And froze. Yesterday’s storm.

I’d forgotten about yesterday’s storm. Brown water rushed through the creek. What was normally three feet wide was now closer to six. Maybe seven. The banks were muddy. Water churned around branches and rocks.

“Seriously?”

Behind me— SQUEEEAK. Bus brakes. It had reached the stop. I could hear kids talking on the other side of the hill. The bus was there. Maybe thirty yards away. One creek between us. I backed up. Could I jump it? Maybe. If the ground were dry.

It wasn’t. Best-case scenario: soaked shoes. Worst-case scenario: face-first into brown storm water before school. Neither seemed ideal. The bus doors hissed open. Think. Think. Think. My eyes searched upstream. Rocks. Too far apart. Downstream. Nothing.

Then I saw the oak branch. A thick limb extended from our side, reaching almost halfway across the creek. Not all the way. But maybe enough. The bus engine idled. Kids climbed aboard. I ran toward the tree. Mud grabbed at my shoes. My left foot slipped.

I caught myself with one hand. Wet clay coated my palm. Didn’t matter. The branch was eight feet ahead. I ran. Jumped. Both hands caught the bark. My full weight hit. The limb bent.

“Whoa!”

My feet swung over the water. For one horrible moment the branch made a cracking sound. Not a huge crack. More of a you should probably reconsider what you’re doing crack. Too late. I kicked my legs forward. Back. Forward. Like a pendulum. The opposite bank moved closer. The bus doors closed.

“No!”

I swung harder. The branch dipped. At the highest point of the swing, I let go. Immediately, I knew I’d released too early. My feet hit the mud inches from the opposite bank. The ground collapsed. My right leg slid toward the water.

I threw myself forward. My chest hit grass. One sneaker disappeared ankle-deep into the creek. Cold water filled my shoe. I clawed at the dirt. Pulled. My knee cleared the bank. Then my other leg. I rolled onto my back.

For half a second I stared at the sky. Blue. Perfect. Quiet. My heart hammered against my ribs. I wanted to stay there. Then I heard the diesel engine rev. The bus.

I jumped up. My right shoe made a horrible squishing noise. Didn't care. I sprinted over the hill. The bus started moving.

"No!"

The driver couldn't see me. I was behind it. I ran harder. My lungs burned. The backpack bounced against my spine. Twenty yards. The bus accelerated. I wasn't going to make it. Fifteen yards.

"WAIT!"

Ten. Then a kid sitting in the back turned around. He saw me. His eyes widened. He pointed. Another kid turned. Then another. Suddenly half the back row was looking through the window. Someone must have yelled. The brake lights came on. Beautiful red brake lights. The bus stopped.

I nearly ran into the back bumper. I stumbled along the side until I reached the folding doors. They opened. The driver stared at me. Mr. Ezra. Not smiling. Not even slightly. He looked at my mud-covered hand. My wet shoe. My dusty jeans. The streak across my T-shirt.

Then he looked back toward the neighborhood.

"Sardis."

I tried to breathe.

"Morning."

"Did I just see you come out of that creek?"

I bent over with my hands on my knees.

"No."

He stared.

I looked at my dripping shoe.

"Technically… I came over it."

Silence. A kid behind him laughed. Mr. Ezra closed his eyes for a moment.

"Get on the bus."

"Yes, sir."

I climbed the steps. Every head turned. Kale was three rows back. He looked at me. Then at my clothes. Then at the mud.

"What happened to you?"

I collapsed into the seat beside him.

"My mom told me not to miss the bus."

Kale stared.

“So you fought the neighborhood?”

“Neighborhood started it.”

He looked down at my soaked shoe.

“Did you finish the controller?”

I couldn’t help smiling.

“Yep.”

His face lit up.

“No way.”

“Xbox controller works with everything.”

“Nintendo?”

“Yep.”

“PlayStation?”

“Yep.”

“MAME?”

“Yep.”

Kale held out his fist. I bumped it.

“Spring Break,” he said.

“Spring Break.”

I leaned back against the seat while my breathing finally slowed. Outside the window, our neighborhood disappeared behind us. I’d made it. Barely. My biggest problem that morning had been catching a school bus. At the time, I had no reason to believe that would change.

I had no idea that before the day was over, I would meet a girl who already knew my name. I had no idea she had crossed half the world looking for me. And I definitely had no idea that everything my mother had spent thirteen years keeping from me was about to come crashing into my life. If I had known any of that… I probably would’ve stayed home. Probably.

Chapter Two

Last Day Before Freedom

SARDIS

By the time the bus pulled into North Star Middle School, my right shoe had stopped making the squishing noise. Mostly. I considered that progress. The rest of me looked considerably better than I felt. My jeans had survived the empty swimming pool with only a dusty streak across one knee. My T-shirt had somehow escaped without a tear, which was honestly more important than the jeans. My right palm was still dirty from the creek bank, and the bruise forming on my thigh had begun announcing itself every time I moved. But I'd made the bus. That was what mattered.

I stepped onto the sidewalk. Squish. Okay. Maybe the shoe wasn't finished. Kale looked down. He stared at my shoe for several seconds. Then looked at me.

"Your foot just farted."

I closed my eyes.

"Good morning, Kale."

He smiled.

"Morning, bro." Kale had been one of my best friends for so long that I couldn't remember actually becoming friends with him.

Isaiah—Zay to us—was the other. The three of us had been together since elementary school, enough that teachers, parents, coaches, and just about everybody else started calling us the Three Amigos. We accepted it. Mostly because Kale's first suggestion had been The Three Magi. He'd heard magi meant wise men and thought the name would make us sound smarter. Isaiah and I rejected it immediately.

Individually, we were not much alike. Kale could make me laugh without either of us understanding what he had meant.

He wore thick black-framed glasses and had curly brown hair that had become considerably curlier after Isaiah and I convinced him to get a perm the month before. At the time, we'd assured him girls would love it. They apparently did not. On a good day his hair looked like a collection of loose curls. On a bad day it looked like somebody had frightened a poodle.

Kale didn't seem particularly bothered by either possibility. This morning, he'd completed the look with green flannel pajama pants. In March. In Texas. On a day expected to hit somewhere near ninety degrees.

I looked down at them.

"Are those pajamas?"

Kale followed my eyes.

“Technically.”

“What does technically mean?”

“It means yes.”

“Why are you wearing them?”

He shrugged.

“I was tired.”

“That doesn’t explain anything.”

“It explained it to me.”

Conversations with Kale sometimes ended because there was nowhere left for them to go. He was bright when something interested him. Schoolwork usually did not.

But give him a piece of lumber, a controller, or a mission involving the arcade cabinet and he could suddenly focus for hours. His dad had a workshop in their garage, and Kale had been using power tools since before any responsible adult probably should have allowed it. The arcade machine we’d been building was mostly his design. Kale had drawn out the cabinet himself. Monitor placement. Speakers. Storage. Control panel. Ventilation.

He’d even insisted on cup holders. His contribution was building the entire thing. Mine was figuring out how to make all the electronics work together. Kale had also suggested adding a microwave. Inside the arcade cabinet.

“For pizza rolls,” he’d explained, as if that settled every safety concern.

We hadn’t added the microwave. Yet.

Isaiah came up behind us while Kale was still examining my shoe. Tall, lean, and blond, he had the kind of easy smile that made adults trust him. He could walk into a room of strangers and look personally invited within five minutes. Girls especially liked him. It was extremely annoying.

He remembered names and things people told him. He could also talk his way back into everyone’s good graces after getting into more trouble than Kale and me combined.

Usually. There had been the toilet-paper incidents. Several teachers had woken one Monday to find their yards covered.

Isaiah might have gotten away with it. Except he’d taken pictures. A lot of pictures. And then posted them online. Including one where he was holding twelve rolls of toilet paper and giving the camera a thumbs-up. When I asked him why, he’d shrugged.

“I looked good in that picture.”

Teachers knew he was trouble. Everybody liked him anyway. I generally watched how things worked. Isaiah watched people, which made him a good friend and occasionally an extremely irritating one.

He stopped beside us and looked me up and down.

“What happened to you?”

Kale pointed at me.

“Water got him.”

“I was not attacked by water.”

Kale looked at my wet shoe as if it proved his entire case.

“Your shoe is leaking.”

Isaiah smiled.

“You missed the bus?”

“Almost.”

“And then?”

Kale jumped in.

“He went over some houses.”

“I did not jump over two houses.”

“One house?”

“No houses.”

Kale frowned.

“Then how’d you get here?”

I looked at Isaiah.

“You see what I deal with?”

“Every day.”

Kale pointed at himself.

“You’re welcome.”

The three of us started toward the school. The Three Amigos. We argued constantly. Insulted each other recreationally. Competed over things nobody should have cared about. But we’d also been through enough together that none of us questioned the important part. If one of us needed something, the other two showed up.

That was just how it worked. North Star Middle School looked exactly the way it did every other Friday morning—too much beige brick, too many windows, and several hundred students moving toward the entrances with all the enthusiasm of people reporting for mandatory labor. A giant banner hung across the front entrance.

GO TROJANS!

Underneath it, another banner advertised the night's big event:

NORTH STAR TROJANS PRESENT: THE TROJAN GREEK TOGA PARTY — SPRING DANCE — TONIGHT!

Someone from student council had drawn a muscular Trojan warrior wearing a helmet, cape, sandals, and what looked suspiciously like a bedsheet.

Kale stopped beneath the banner.

"Are Trojans Greek?"

"Not exactly," Isaiah said.

"And togas are more Roman," I added.

Kale pointed at the bedsheet warrior.

"So we're dressing like the people who fought our mascot, but in somebody else's clothes?"

Isaiah studied it.

"Huh."

"Don't mention that to student council," I said.

"I'm mentioning it to everybody."

By lunchtime, the hallways would probably contain cardboard columns, fake ivy, plastic shields, and enough gold spray paint to permanently alter the atmosphere. Tonight, the gym would be transformed into what the school flyers called:

THE ANCIENT WORLD OF NORTH STAR

Which sounded considerably more impressive than: our gymnasium with sheets hanging from the basketball hoops. Still, everybody was going. The dance wasn't formal. It was mostly an excuse to celebrate the beginning of Spring Break, play loud music, eat bad food, and watch several hundred middle-school students pretend they weren't nervous about dancing with each other. I followed Kale and Isaiah toward our usual bench near the main doors. It had become unofficially ours sometime during sixth grade. Nobody had assigned it.

We simply kept sitting there until everyone else apparently accepted the situation. Isaiah didn't make it ten feet without someone calling his name.

"Yo, Zay!"

A boy from the basketball team slapped his hand. Two girls walking past stopped.

"Zay, are you going tonight?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

"You better actually wear a toga."

Isaiah smiled.

“I’ll be the best-dressed person in a bedsheet.”

One of the girls laughed.

“You’re not supposed to be a Trojan. You’re supposed to be Greek.”

Kale immediately pointed at her.

“THANK YOU.”

Everyone looked at him.

Kale pointed toward the banner.

“I’ve been saying that for almost twenty seconds.”

The girls laughed and continued toward school. Isaiah sat down beside me.

Kale remained standing.

“I feel vindicated.”

“You learned what vindicated means?” I asked.

“My dad said it once.”

“Do you know what it means?”

“Not really.”

Isaiah shook his head.

“Never change.”

Kale sat down.

“Wasn’t planning to.”

Tonight was supposed to be the perfect start to Spring Break. The Trojan Greek Toga Party tonight. Then an entire week without school. No homework. No alarms. No teachers. And, assuming Kale actually finished the cabinet, seven days to finish the arcade machine. That was the plan. Simple. Predictable.

I should have appreciated that more.

“Sardis.”

Kale elbowed me.

“What?”

He wasn’t looking at me. Neither was Isaiah. Both were staring toward the parking lot. I followed their gaze. And saw her. A girl was walking toward the school. I’d never seen her before. That by itself was unusual.

North Star wasn't huge. By the second semester, you might not know everybody's name, but you generally recognized everybody's face. I definitely would have remembered hers. She had long strawberry-blond hair that caught the morning sunlight whenever the wind moved it. She wore khaki shorts, clean white sneakers, and a light-blue blouse that made her look slightly overdressed compared with everyone else around her. Not formal. Just… put together.

Most of us looked like we'd gotten dressed in the dark. Kale actually had. Isaiah watched her approach. Then nodded once.

"New girl."

The way he said it was different from Kale. Kale was staring. Isaiah was evaluating.

"Definitely," I said.

Kale leaned toward us.

"How do you know she's new?"

"Have you seen her before?" Isaiah asked.

"No."

"That's how."

I laughed. The girl crossed the parking lot. There was something different about the way she moved. Confidence, maybe. Most middle-school students spent half their lives trying to look like they didn't care what everybody else thought. This girl actually seemed not to care.

She wasn't staring at the ground. Wasn't hiding behind her phone. Wasn't searching for somebody to walk beside. She simply moved through the crowd. Except— She wasn't completely confident. I noticed it when she reached the sidewalk. Her pace slowed. Barely.

Her eyes moved across the entrances. Then across the students. She was looking for something. Or someone.

Kale leaned closer.

"Maybe she's lost."

"Probably," I said.

"We should help her."

Isaiah glanced at Kale.

"You want to help her?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Kale shrugged.

“Community service.”

I stared at him.

“You’ve never volunteered for community service in your life.”

“She looks more lost than normal people.”

“Smooth, Kale.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“Oh.”

Isaiah looked at me.

“You should talk to her.”

“Why me?”

“Because she keeps looking at you.”

I stopped smiling.

“What?”

Isaiah nodded slightly toward the parking lot.

“Don’t turn around like an idiot.”

I immediately turned around like an idiot. Isaiah sighed. The girl’s eyes moved toward our bench. Toward us. No. Toward me. For one second, everything else seemed to disappear.

It couldn’t have lasted more than a moment. But I was certain. She was looking directly at me. Not Kale. Not Isaiah. Me. Her expression changed. Barely. Almost like recognition. Our eyes met. My stomach did something weird. Then she looked away.

The girl reached the main entrance and put a hand on the door. Then she looked back. Our eyes met again. This time I was positive she had been looking for me. She disappeared inside.

For several seconds, none of us said anything.

Kale finally broke the silence.

“I think she wants her money back.”

I shoved him. He laughed.

Isaiah stood and grabbed his backpack.

“Relax.”

“I’m relaxed. I’m always relaxed.”

“You’re staring at the door.”

“I was thinking.”

“Sure.”

The warning bell rang. Students started moving toward the entrances. We picked up our backpacks.

Isaiah slapped me on the shoulder.

“Come on. History.”

I stood. My shoe squished. Kale heard it. He smiled.

I pointed at him.

“Don’t.”

He raised both hands.

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Good.”

“I was just wondering if you can dance in a wet shoe.”

Isaiah grinned.

“Guess we’ll find out tonight.”

I looked at both of them.

“There is absolutely nothing happening between me and a girl whose name we don’t even know.”

Kale nodded seriously.

“That’s going to make the wedding invitations harder.”

I shoved him toward the entrance.

Kale suddenly remembered his schedule.

“I’ve got teacher’s aide first period. Who knows? Maybe I’ll meet her first after all.”

We headed inside. The Three Amigos. Isaiah said hello to approximately twelve people between the front door and the office. Kale somehow managed to walk into a trash can while looking at the Trojan dance decorations. I laughed hard enough that my thigh hurt. Normal. Everything still felt completely normal.

* * *

ATHENA

There he was.

For months, Sardis McCoy had existed as photographs, school records, and fragments of information people placed online. None had prepared me for seeing him in person.

Three boys stood near the entrance. The Three Amigos. Isaiah greeted nearly everyone who passed. He was watching his friends more carefully than he seemed to be. Kale wore reindeer pajama pants in March. That had not been in my research.

Between them stood Sardis. His brown hair was longer than in the most recent photograph. He was taller too. I forced myself to keep walking.

I knew his grades, his inventions, the Ninja Warrior course he had climbed. I knew how often those other two boys appeared beside him. What I did not know was how to walk up and say hello.

My heart was beating far too quickly. Every warning returned at once: do not attract attention, do not make contact until you are certain, do not fail. I had risked too much to get here. I could not waste the opportunity by staring.

A large banner hung above the entrance.

GO TROJANS!

Another announced:

THE TROJAN GREEK TOGA PARTY — TONIGHT

I slowed. Trojan. Greek. Toga. I understood all three words individually. Combined, they created historical problems. I decided not to think about it. Middle-school traditions were frequently strange.

My eyes moved back to Sardis. He was looking at me. I froze. Just for a fraction of a second. He looked different in person. Not dramatically. The photographs simply hadn't captured his eyes. There was something alert about them. Observant. Evaluating. Maramis had looked at people that way. The thought struck harder than I expected. I looked away. Not yet.

I needed the enrollment completed first. Access to the building. A class schedule. A believable reason to remain near Sardis. And I needed all of it without giving anyone a reason to inspect my paperwork too carefully.

Easy. I almost laughed. Nothing about this was easy. I reached the front door. My hand closed around the metal bar. One more look. I shouldn't. I did anyway.

Sardis was still watching me. Kale appeared to be talking to him. Sardis shoved him. Kale laughed. Isaiah watched both of them with the patient expression of someone accustomed to their behavior. Those boys were going to complicate everything. Or perhaps help. I didn't yet know which.

Our eyes met again. Something tightened inside my chest. Sardis had no idea who I was. More importantly, from everything I could tell, he had no idea who he really was. I opened the door. The air-conditioning hit me immediately.

Far colder than necessary. I wasn't accustomed to air-conditioning this aggressive. I stepped inside. The school smelled like cleaning solution, paper, cafeteria food, and something artificial I couldn't identify. Students flowed past me. Nobody seemed particularly interested in the fact that I was a stranger who had no idea where she was going. Good.

I followed the OFFICE sign. The reception area contained several chairs, a counter, stacks of forms, and a woman seated behind a computer that looked old enough to qualify as an archaeological artifact. Her nameplate read:

Mrs. Bennet

She looked up.

“Good morning.”

Here we go.

I smiled.

“Good morning.”

“Can I help you?”

“My name is Athena Jones. Today’s supposed to be my first day.”

Mrs. Bennet immediately brightened.

“Oh! Yes. The transfer student.”

I nodded.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She began searching through a stack of folders. I tried not to watch too closely. The documents were there. They should be. Everything had been prepared. Transcripts. Vaccination records. Residence information. Emergency contacts. Signatures.

All fabricated carefully enough to withstand an ordinary review. The word ordinary mattered. If anyone investigated further, the entire plan could collapse.

Mrs. Bennet found the folder.

“Athena Jones.” She opened it.

My pulse accelerated.

“Moving here from…”

Her finger followed a line. I knew exactly what it said. I’d helped create it and memorized every line. Still, hearing her read it made the lie feel considerably more dangerous.

She looked up, then glanced around the room.

“And where is your mother or father this morning?”

There it was. The question I’d expected. The answer I’d rehearsed.

“My father was supposed to come in with me.”

I allowed some embarrassment into my voice.

“But we’re still moving into our new house. The movers damaged one of our televisions, and he had to stay there to deal with them. He almost made me stay home, but I really wanted one day here before Spring Break.”

Mrs. Bennet glanced toward the clock.

“You wanted to start school the day before Spring Break?”

A reasonable person would question that.

I smiled awkwardly.

“Our house is full of boxes.”

That sounded believable.

“And I don’t know anyone here yet. I thought maybe I could meet some people before everyone disappears for a week.”

Mrs. Bennet softened.

“Well, that’s understandable.”

I exhaled silently.

“He said you can call him if there’s any problem. My mom is finishing things at our old house and won’t be here until next week. She knows I’m starting school today.”

Another lie. If my mom knew where I was, being grounded would be the least of my problems. I disliked how easily the lies came now, but they were necessary. Mrs. Bennet examined the forms again. One line. Then another. Keep going. Nothing unusual. Nothing interesting. Just another student. Finally, she closed the folder.

“Well, everything appears to be in order.”

Relief almost made my knees weak.

“Wonderful.”

“We just need to get you a class schedule.”

She turned toward her computer. The monitor glowed green. I stared. I had seen photographs of machines this old. I hadn’t expected one to remain operational. That probably explained why getting into the school’s online system had been easier than expected. Mrs. Bennet typed. Slowly.

The machine responded with mechanical clicks. Then the printer beside it suddenly came alive. RRRRRRR-CHK-CHK-CHK-CHK. I flinched.

Mrs. Bennet looked at me.

“Dot matrix. Older than you.”

If she only knew.

She tore away the paper.

“Let’s see what we’ve got.” She handed it to me.

I read the schedule. English. Physical Education. Mathematics. Lunch. Natural Science. Elective. My stomach tightened. No. I mentally compared the periods against everything I’d collected on Sardis. Mathematics gave me a possibility. Natural Science was uncertain.

World History. Sardis had it first period. My schedule didn’t. This wouldn’t work. I needed direct access. Not a hallway sighting. Not hoping we happened to meet at lunch.

I needed enough time to convince Sardis to listen to me. Today. I had less than eighteen hours. Think. I looked at the schedule again. Physical Education. There.

“Excuse me?”

Mrs. Bennet turned.

“Yes, dear?”

“I think there’s a mistake.”

Her eyebrows rose.

“What kind?”

“My athletics placement.”

“Athletics?”

I pointed toward Physical Education.

“I was supposed to be in girls’ athletics. Basketball.”

Basketball. Why had I selected basketball? Because I’d found an opening in the schedule. That was why.

Mrs. Bennet looked through my folder.

“Hm. Nothing here about athletics.”

“My previous school must not have included it.”

Please accept that.

“You play basketball?”

“Yes.”

Another lie. I had never actually played basketball. I’d watched enough clips online to recognize the basic idea, which was not the same thing as knowing the rules.

“Well, we can certainly look.”

She returned to the computer. More typing. More green text. More waiting. The first-period bell had already rung. Mrs. Bennet clicked something. The printer screamed again. She handed me another

schedule. I read it. World History. English. Mathematics. Lunch. Natural Science. Girls' Athletics. My eyes stopped.

World History. First period. Sardis. Relief surged through me so quickly I had to stop myself from smiling.

"Better?" Mrs. Bennet asked.

"Yes."

Far better.

"Your first class has already started, so I'll have someone take you down there."

She looked toward a chair in the corner. Kale had just slipped into the office and dropped into it, apparently reporting for teacher's aide duty. I followed her gaze. A boy was sitting there. Thick glasses. Curly hair. Green plaid pajama pants decorated with reindeer. Kale. Of course.

Mrs. Bennet called his name.

"Kale?"

He was already looking at me. When she called his name, he snapped his attention away. His posture changed instantly. He stood too quickly and nearly kicked the small table beside him. He caught it with both hands. The magazines on top slid sideways. He stared at the table. Then at Mrs. Bennet.

"Saved it."

Mrs. Bennet sighed.

"Kale, this is Athena. She's new. Would you please take her to Mrs. Weber's class?"

"Absolutely."

He walked toward me. Then stopped.

"Hi. I'm Kale."

"I know."

Silence. My heart stopped. Kale blinked. Idiot.

I recovered.

"Mrs. Bennet just said your name."

"Oh."

He nodded.

"Right."

Another pause.

"For a second I thought I was famous."

I couldn't help smiling.

He held the door open.

"After you, my lady."

"Thank you."

We stepped into the hallway. We walked perhaps ten feet.

Kale looked over.

"So…"

"Yes?"

He seemed to think. Then apparently abandoned the process.

"Why'd you come today?"

"Today?"

"Last day before Spring Break."

"We just moved."

"Right."

He nodded. Three more steps.

"But you could've stayed home."

"I suppose."

"That's what I would've done."

"I wanted to meet some people."

Kale considered this.

"Oh."

Then:

"That's probably healthier."

I laughed.

He smiled, apparently unsure why.

"I mean, I like people."

"Good."

"Most of them, anyway."

"Also good."

“Some people are terrible.”

I laughed again. Kale nodded, satisfied. This conversation appeared to be going exactly as he’d intended.

“I was going to skip today, but then they wouldn’t let me come to the dance.”

“I saw the sign.”

“The Trojan Greek Toga Party.”

“Yes.”

Kale lowered his voice.

“I think there’s a problem.”

“With the dance?”

“Trojans fought Greeks.”

I looked at him.

“Yes. I’m aware. It’s a little historically confused.”

His eyes widened.

“Contradicting?”

“Close enough.”

“I completely agree,” he said, looking pleased with himself.

“By the way, are you going?”

“I just found out about it, but it sounds better than opening boxes all night.”

“That’s great. It’s going to be epic.”

He immediately seemed startled by his own response.

“I mean—good. Because you said you wanted to meet people.”

“Right.”

“And almost everyone will be there.”

“I assumed.”

“The entire school.”

“I understand.”

“Okay.”

We walked another few feet.

“I’m not always this good at conversation.”

I looked at him.

“I would never have guessed.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled. I wasn’t certain he understood the joke. We headed toward Mrs. Weber’s classroom. My pulse began increasing. Sardis was at the end of this hallway. Everything I’d spent months planning had led here. Finding Jennifer. Finding Sardis.

Creating an opportunity to get away. Creating the identity. Faking school credentials. Studying his schedule. Getting into this school. Now only a classroom door separated us.

Kale looked at me.

“Are you nervous?”

“Yes.”

The word escaped before I could replace it.

He nodded.

“Don’t worry. Mrs. Weber’s nice.”

The teacher wasn’t why I was nervous. We reached the classroom. Through the narrow glass window I could see students seated at desks. Mrs. Weber, I assumed—the only adult in the room—stood at the front. Ancient Greece was displayed behind her. Then I saw Sardis.

He sat near Isaiah. Sardis was listening to something Isaiah was saying. Isaiah spoke easily, leaning back in his chair like the classroom belonged partly to him. Sardis smiled.

Kale looked through the window too.

“Oh, yeah. You’ve got first period with my best friends.”

“The Three Amigos?”

He looked surprised. I immediately regretted it.

“How’d you know that?”

My brain moved quickly.

“I heard some kids outside call you that.”

Kale accepted this instantly.

“Oh.” Then he smiled.

“Yeah. We’re famous.”

Kale opened the classroom door.

Every student turned. Sardis looked straight at me, and this time I could not pretend I was searching for someone else.

Finding him had brought me this far. Now I had to convince him to trust me—and tell him why.

Chapter Three

A Very Real Myth

SARDIS

By the time Isaiah and I reached World History, Mrs. Weber had already covered most of the whiteboard. Across the top she had written:

ANCIENT GREECE — PLATO — ATLANTIS

Off to one side, beneath a badly drawn Trojan helmet, she'd added:

TROJAN GREEK TOGA PARTY — TONIGHT

Mrs. Weber stood near the board with a marker in one hand and the projector remote in the other.

"Settle down, everyone. I know Spring Break starts in a few hours, but technically you're still students until the final bell."

A few people groaned.

"I'm devastated too."

That got a laugh. Mrs. Weber was one of my favorite teachers because she never taught history like it was one giant list of names and dates. She taught stories. Why civilizations rose. Why they fell. Why people made terrible decisions. Why anybody should still care thousands of years later. Her classroom looked like a small museum had exploded inside it. Maps covered one wall. A replica Spartan helmet sat beside a miniature Parthenon. Photographs of archaeological sites filled the bulletin boards, and a long timeline stretched across the back of the room.

She pointed toward the dance reminder.

"Since tonight's dance is loosely—very loosely—connected to Ancient Greece, we're going to use that as an excuse to talk about one of my favorite historical mysteries." She tapped the first word on the board.

"Greece."

Then the second.

"Plato."

Isaiah raised his hand. Mrs. Weber saw him. I could tell from her expression she already regretted it.

"Yes, Isaiah?"

"Plato."

"Yes."

"Like Play-Doh? The molding clay I make monsters out of?"

The class laughed.

Mrs. Weber stared at him.

“Plato. P-L-A-T-O. Ancient Greek philosopher. Not Play-Doh, the children’s modeling compound.”

“I knew that.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“I was just checking.”

“Thank you for your service.”

Even I laughed.

Mrs. Weber turned back toward the projector.

“Plato—the philosopher,” she said, making a point of looking directly at Isaiah, “was one of the most influential thinkers of the ancient Greek world. Student of Socrates. Teacher of Aristotle. He wrote about politics, government, ethics, philosophy and human nature.” She clicked the remote.

The image changed. A massive circular city appeared on the screen, surrounded by rings of land and water. Ships crowded broad canals. Temples rose from the center. One word appeared beneath it.

ATLANTIS

That got everyone’s attention.

Mrs. Weber smiled.

“And he also gave us this.” She turned toward the class.

“Who here has heard of Atlantis?”

Almost every hand went up.

“Excellent. What do you actually know about it?”

Most of the hands went down.

Mrs. Weber nodded.

“That’s usually what happens.” She looked toward Isaiah.

His hand was no longer raised.

“Isaiah.”

He looked behind himself.

“Me?”

“You seem to have thoughts about everything else.”

“Fair.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“Well… Atlantis was a city from a long, long time ago, in a land far, far away.”

A few people laughed.

Mrs. Weber narrowed her eyes.

“Are you answering my question or introducing Star Wars?”

“A little of both.”

More laughter.

“And,” Isaiah continued, “it was really advanced. Then something happened and the whole thing sank into the ocean.”

“Better.”

He smiled.

“And I watched the movie.”

Mrs. Weber closed her eyes.

“There it is.”

“It was a cartoon, but it was actually pretty good.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“They found Atlantis under the ocean, and there were all these huge machines the Atlanteans could control with crystals—or maybe the crystals powered them. I don’t totally remember.”

“Isaiah—”

“And there were sea monsters.”

“Of course there were.”

“Really big ones. And this giant submarine thing, and the people had their own language, and—”

“Isaiah.”

He stopped.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Thank you for your contribution to historical scholarship.”

“You’re welcome.”

She looked toward me.

“Sardis. Help him.”

Isaiah leaned toward me.

“No pressure.”

I ignored him.

“Most of what we know comes from Plato,” I said.

“He wrote about Atlantis in Timaeus and Critias. He described it as a powerful island civilization beyond the Pillars of Hercules.”

Mrs. Weber nodded.

“And what happened to it?”

“According to Plato, it was destroyed in some kind of catastrophe.”

“Exactly.”

She clicked again. A map of the Strait of Gibraltar appeared.

“Plato’s written description is actually fairly limited compared with everything people now associate with Atlantis.”

Another slide. Santorini. Crete. Spain. The Azores. The Atlantic.

“Since then, people have spent centuries trying to figure out whether Atlantis was a real civilization, a distorted memory of another place, or simply a story Plato created to make a philosophical point.”

She turned back toward us.

“That’s where we have to separate what Plato actually wrote from everything people have added afterward.” She wrote three words on the board:

FACT EVIDENCE THEORY

“It is a fact that Plato wrote about Atlantis.”

She tapped the second word.

“His writings are evidence of what he claimed.”

Then the third.

“The location of Atlantis, whether it existed, what civilization might have inspired it, and what exactly happened to it are theories.”

Isaiah leaned closer.

“Except the sea monsters.”

I tried not to laugh.

Mrs. Weber looked directly at him.

“I heard that.”

Before Isaiah could respond, the classroom door opened. Everyone turned. Kale stood in the doorway. Beside him was Athena. For the second time that morning, I forgot what Mrs. Weber had been talking about. Kale stepped into the room with the expression of someone who believed he had accomplished something important.

Mrs. Weber looked at him.

“Kale. Who are you bringing to my class?”

Kale smiled.

“A new student.”

Mrs. Weber waited. Kale waited too.

Finally she asked, “Does this new student have a name?”

He glanced toward Athena.

“Oh. Right.”

A few students laughed.

Kale straightened his shoulders and swept one arm toward Athena like an announcer introducing the starting lineup before an NBA game.

“It is my pleasure to introduce the newest student at North Star Middle School… Athena Jones.”

Athena tried not to smile.

Mrs. Weber shook her head.

“Thank you, Kale.”

“You are very welcome.”

“Back to the office.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Kale gave Athena a little wave and disappeared into the hallway.

Mrs. Weber looked down at the enrollment slip.

“Athena Jones?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Welcome to North Star.”

“Thank you.”

“You’ve caught us in the middle of our last lesson before Spring Break. We’re talking about Plato and Atlantis.”

Something changed in Athena’s expression. Very slightly.

“Atlantis?”

Mrs. Weber smiled.

“Yes. Have you studied it before?”

Athena hesitated.

“A little.”

“Perfect. Let’s put the new student on the spot immediately.”

A few students laughed.

Mrs. Weber gestured toward the image on the screen.

“Tell us what you know about Atlantis.”

Athena looked at the image. Then at the class. Then briefly at me.

“Atlantis was founded in 9514 B.C.”

The room got quieter. Mrs. Weber’s eyebrows rose.

Athena continued.

“It eventually became the capital of a major maritime empire controlling trade across much of the Atlantic and into portions of the Mediterranean.”

I sat up a little straighter.

“The capital was arranged in concentric rings around a central island. Three major channels separated the inner districts, and bridges and waterways connected the different sections of the city.”

Mrs. Weber glanced toward the screen.

“The commercial harbor was outside the main defensive ring. Military vessels primarily used the western harbor because it gave them faster access to open water.”

Now Mrs. Weber was really listening. So was everybody else.

Athena kept going.

“The central district contained the administrative complex and the Temple of Poseidon. Gold and silver were used extensively, along with orichalcum.”

Mrs. Weber interrupted.

“Orichalcum?”

“A copper-based alloy.”

Instant answer.

Mrs. Weber tilted her head.

“That’s one possible theory.”

Athena paused.

“Yes.”

Another pause.

“Um… right. A theory.”

That was the first moment something felt strange. Not because Athena knew the word. Because she had said it like it wasn’t a theory at all.

Mrs. Weber folded her arms.

“You also gave us a very specific founding date.”

Athena nodded.

“9514 B.C.”

“Where did you learn that?”

“My previous school.”

Mrs. Weber smiled.

“You must have had a very thorough teacher.”

“Yes. Very.”

“What else did they teach you?”

Athena looked toward the map.

“That Atlantis was located in the central Atlantic.”

Again. Not possibly located. Not believed to be. Located.

Mrs. Weber smiled.

“That’s a little more certainty than most historians would be comfortable with.”

Athena seemed to realize it.

“I mean—that was the theory we studied about the origin of Atlantis.”

“Very good.”

Mrs. Weber nodded.

“What about Santorini?”

Athena answered immediately.

“That wasn’t Atlantis.”

Silence.

Athena’s eyes widened just slightly.

“I mean… it doesn’t fit Plato’s geography very well.”

Mrs. Weber smiled.

“Fair argument.”

Then:

“Have you ever heard of the theory connecting Atlantis with Tarshish?”

“Yes.”

“And what do you think?”

“Tarshish wasn’t Atlantis.”

Again, no hesitation. Mrs. Weber waited.

Athena realized everyone was looking at her.

“It was a trading port.”

I looked at Isaiah. He looked back at me.

Mrs. Weber raised her eyebrows.

“A trading port associated with Atlantis?”

Athena hesitated.

“Associated with Atlantis.”

Another beat.

“According to one interpretation.”

There it was again. The correction after the fact. The theory added only after she’d already spoken like she was stating something obvious. Mrs. Weber stared at Athena for another second. Then smiled.

“Very, very impressive. A much more detailed explanation than my own. I think you may have taken a little liberty with some of the facts, but you have quite a bit of insight on this matter.”

Athena smiled, although she looked more relieved than proud.

Mrs. Weber glanced over at me.

“We might have some new competition for smartest in the class.”

Several students turned toward me. Athena did too. I smiled. I’d always received the highest grades in Mrs. Weber’s class. But at that particular moment, academics weren’t exactly what I was thinking about. Wow. She was cute. And evidently very intelligent. Not a bad combination.

Mrs. Weber clapped her hands once.

“With that, everyone please pull out your textbook and turn to page 120. Let’s begin reading about Ancient Greek society. Athena, you can pick up a book from the back wall.”

Athena nodded.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The rest of class went surprisingly fast. Mrs. Weber knew perfectly well that the day before Spring Break wasn’t the ideal time to introduce anything students desperately needed to remember, so she kept things relaxed. We read sections of the chapter on Ancient Greece and answered questions. At one point we argued over whether we’d rather live in Athens or Sparta, and somehow Isaiah worked the Atlantis movie into the discussion one more time before Mrs. Weber threatened to assign him an essay about it. By the time the bell rang, almost everybody was already halfway out of their seats.

North Star gave us ten minutes between classes—just enough time to fight through hallway traffic, stop at a locker, switch books, maybe grab a drink of water, and make it across the building before the next bell. Normally Isaiah and I would’ve joined the stampede. This time neither of us moved very quickly. We let most of the class disappear into the hallway. Athena was gathering her things near the back.

Isaiah looked at me. I looked at him. Neither of us had to say anything. We walked over to Athena’s desk. Isaiah got there first. Of course he did.

He gave Athena the easy smile that worked on practically everyone.

“So, Athena, allow me to formally introduce myself as president of the North Star Welcoming Committee. We are honored to welcome you to our fine institution.”

Athena looked amused.

“President?”

“Unanimously elected.”

“By whom?”

“Me.”

She laughed.

I liked her laugh. I stepped beside him.

“Nice first impression. Do you always show up at a new school and immediately steal the teacher’s thunder?”

Athena smiled.

“Yeah, I was worried I might have shared too much. My last school was very thorough.” She slipped her notebook into her backpack.

“We studied Ancient Greece recently, so Atlantis was still pretty fresh in my head. It made me sound a lot smarter than I actually am. Lucky for me, I guess.”

Isaiah glanced at me.

“We should all be so lucky.”

The three of us headed into the hallway. Students moved in every direction around us.

“So where are you headed next?” I asked.

Athena pulled out her schedule.

“English first. Then Mathematics, Lunch B, Natural Science, and Girls’ Athletics.”

Isaiah glanced at it.

“I don’t have any of those with you, but I think you’ve got Math with our friend Kale.”

“The one wearing the Christmas pajamas?”

“That would be him.”

Athena smiled.

“He was very helpful. He was my official tour guide.”

Isaiah and I looked at each other.

“Really?” I said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard Kale described as helpful.”

Isaiah nodded solemnly.

“I guess, as president of the Welcoming Committee, I can allow him to keep his job.”

“He successfully got me here,” Athena said.

“That’s a fair definition of helpful.”

Isaiah added, “Kale complains about school constantly, so try not to let his enthusiasm intimidate you.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The hallway split ahead of us.

I realized we were about to head in different directions.

“Hey,” I said.

“Are you going to the Greek Toga Dance tonight?”

Athena glanced toward one of the Trojan-themed posters taped to the wall.

“I just heard about it this morning. Kale actually invited me.”

I pictured Kale’s hallway conversation with her and almost laughed.

“You should come,” Isaiah said.

“Pretty much everyone will be there.”

I nodded.

“It’s going to be epic.”

Athena smiled.

“Well, sitting at home unpacking boxes doesn’t sound nearly as exciting.”

“So that’s a yes?” Isaiah asked.

“Sounds like something I wouldn’t want to miss.”

The warning bell rang.

Isaiah pointed down one hallway.

“We’d better move.”

Athena headed the opposite direction.

“I guess I’ll see you tonight.”

“Definitely,” I said.

She smiled once more. Then disappeared into the crowd. Isaiah waited until she was out of sight. Then turned toward me.

“You’re in trouble.”

“What?”

He smiled.

“You know exactly what.”

I shoved him toward class. The rest of the school day passed mostly the way the last day before Spring Break was supposed to. Slowly. Then quickly. Then incredibly slowly again. By the time the final bell rang, nobody needed to be told twice. Spring Break had officially begun.

* * *

I stopped at home before going to Kale’s. Mom had just come in from work. I put a folded application beside her keys.

“Mrs. Weber said there’s still a place in the science program.”

Mom looked at the paper, then opened the refrigerator.

“We said we’d talk about it.”

“That’s what I’m doing.”

She set the milk down. I unfolded the application. I had circled three projects and drawn a circuit in the margin of the one I wanted most.

“It’s after school. I wouldn’t skip a grade. I wouldn’t leave Isaiah and Kale.”

“There’s more to it.”

“What?”

She read the page. Her thumb stopped beside the student showcase. Public presentations. Competitions.

“You don’t have to prove anything to those people.”

“I’m not trying to. I want to build something I don’t already know how to build.”

Her phone rang. She glanced at it.

“Can you not do that yet?”

She silenced it and pulled out a chair. That should have felt like progress. Then she looked toward the pantry instead of at me.

“I want you to have time to be thirteen.”

“This is what I want to do while I’m thirteen.”

For a moment, I thought she might pick up a pen.

“Not this program,” she said. “Not yet.”

I folded the paper along its old crease.

“How much older do I have to be?”

“Sardis—”

“Same answer about Dad. Later. When I’m older. What changes then?”

Her hand moved toward mine. I kept both hands on the application.

“There are things I haven’t worked out how to explain.”

“You could start with his name.”

Mom looked as though I had asked for something much harder.

“I know you want answers.”

“You know them. That’s different.”

Neither of us said anything for a while. Then she asked whether Kale’s mom was still driving us to the dance. I said yes. She told me to call afterward, and to tell her before I went anywhere else.

“I am proud of you,” she said as I reached the hallway. “The controller. I know how hard you worked.”

“I know.”

I put the application on my desk, beside the controller. For once, fixing the electronics looked easier.