

REDEMPTION

Sarah Fisher

Book Three in the Dragonscale series

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To Angus, for walking beside me

Acknowledgements

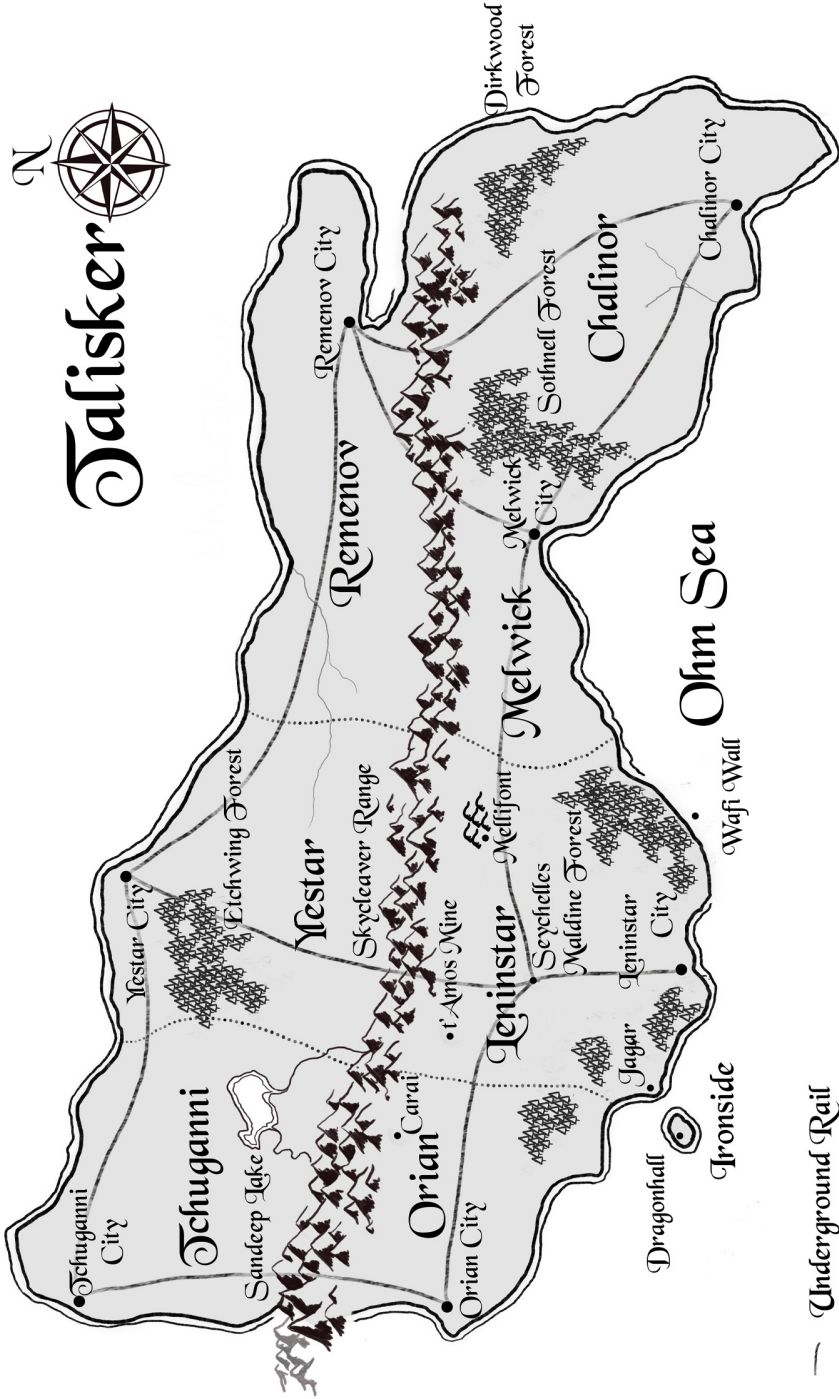
This book would not have made it into the world without the support and encouragement of my wonderful family. And I don't just mean those I am related to. You know who you are.

Thank you, Lucy for bringing my vision for this cover to life.

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Talisker



— Underground Rail

Characters

Academy adepts

Major Noah Chord, viola
Chief Examiner Sachin, flute
Major Jacin, flute
Major Alan, recorder
Major Anok, lyre

Noah's crew

Raven Chord, Leninstar's Army
Commander
Emir Delorian, Noah's adviser
Jemima Chase, Noah's best friend
Jaxon, Emir's brother
Gillette, Emir's nephew
Montana, High Priestess of Talisker
Ardis, Elani warrior
Dr Grainger, Dragonsbane
Brinn, cat
Xan, ancient dragon

Elves

Councillor Taly, sein-Jong
Theo, woodland elder
Seamus, Theo's grandson

Royals

King Catriona, Leninstar
King Henrik, Orian
King Mallory, Melwick
King Tara, Chalinor
King Severine, Carai

Dragons

Horatio, dragon elder
Fontina, dragon elder
Piper, Noah's dragon
Chain, Emir's dragon
Vespa, Raven's dragon

Gods

Elani, creator
Jong, destructor
Temperance, mediator

Other

Avril Jane, historian
Sorcerer-master Percival, Somyni's
ruler
Sorcerer Sagan, Percival's acolyte

Prologue

Temperance sipped her tea while Elani massaged his temples. She hadn't seen him troubled like this in aeons.

'What troubles you, Brother dear?' Temperance asked.

Elani sighed. 'The vortex is growing much faster than I'd anticipated.'

'Yes,' Temperance said. 'Comets and asteroids won't appease it for much longer. It's going to have an appetite for bigger things.'

'Talisker,' Elani said. 'It's going to swallow Talisker.'

Temperance placed her teacup on the saucer. 'Yes.'

'I don't want to sacrifice Talisker, Temp,' Elani said, 'but it's the only way.'

Temperance shook her head, setting her brown ringlets jiggling. 'No it isn't.'

Elani drummed his fingers on the table but said nothing.

'The Pyranhi foresaw this,' Temperance said. '*The thirteenth key the world shall need, for evil to be brought to heel – One of two, the Dragon's bane must rise; and the music wield.* The 13th key has been made.'

'The human?'

'Her name is Noah.'

'She's not ready.'

Temperance sniffed. 'Of course she's not ... but she will be.'

'Temp, you can't help her. *We* can't intervene.'

Eyes smouldering with ageless wisdom, Temperance smiled. ‘Not *directly*.’

Elani stood up and strode to the archway. Temperance took a deep breath before joining him. Beyond their celestial palace, the galaxies sprawled gloriously across the universe. All Elani’s wonderful creations. But the shimmering tapestry of star-studded gas clouds and swirling planetary clusters brought Temperance no joy today. In a distant galaxy, Talisker – her favourite of all Elani’s worlds – sailed through the heavens on a collision course with a rapidly expanding vortex.

Talisker was a paradox. Both a shrine and a prison. The mighty dragon, Xan had been mortally wounded when she’d battled the destructive god, Jong – and then devoured him – to end his campaign to destroy all Elani’s creations. Elani had built a world around her, a protective cocoon in which the injured dragon could continue to contain the vanquished god. It was a precarious situation though. Jong still lived, waiting for his chance to break free.

Talisker must be saved, Temperance thought, *and we’re desperately short of time.*

‘What if Noah were to find the illestial?’ she said.

Elani spun round. ‘No! That’d be playing into Jong’s hands. That’s exactly what our brother wants.’

‘But with the illestial, Noah could extract Jong from Talisker and re-home him in the vortex. That’s what we need, isn’t it? We’ve got a voracious vortex and a delinquent god – a perfect match.’

Elani frowned. ‘I agree it’s a perfect match, Temp. Xan cannot contain Jong much longer. The vortex is definitely the solution. Jong wouldn’t be strong enough to break free of the vortex, but he’d suck enough energy from it to stop it growing.’ He sighed. ‘It weighs heavily on me that the vortex will consume Talisker, but it’s the safest way to get Jong in there.’

Temperance glared at her brother. ‘How can you talk like that? Noah could do this. Talisker could be saved.’

‘The human is brave and well-meaning,’ Elani said, ‘but no match for Jong.’

‘Noah is part dragon. Xan’s power is in her veins.’

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‘She is mortal.’

‘So because her life – *human* life – is fleeting, it is meaningless?’
Temperance said. ‘We should just let them all die?’

Elani faced her. ‘Don’t do that.’ He put his hands on her shoulders.
‘You know that’s not what I meant.’

Temperance waited.

‘Temp, Xan was a mighty dragon,’ Elani said. ‘The mightiest. She fought Jong and ...’

‘Contained him,’ Temperance said. ‘With the illestial, Noah could do the same. She wouldn’t have to do it for long – just long enough to get Jong into the vortex.’

Elani returned his gaze to the cosmic landscape. ‘The illestial was designed to *free* Jong. We can’t risk that. If Jong is free – he will destroy everything. Not just Talisker ... *everything*.’

Chapter 1

Noah glanced at her watch as she and her companions strode along the footpath.

‘How late are we?’ Chase asked.

‘Half an hour,’ Noah said.

Chase shook her head. ‘I can’t believe there was so much traffic.’

Raven adjusted his cap as they approached the museum forecourt. ‘Is it even possible for VIPs to be late?’ he said. ‘I thought they could arrive whenever they liked.’

‘I told Avril we’d be here at opening time,’ Chase said, fanning herself with a vintage lace fan. ‘I don’t like being late.’

Sayle Museum loomed over them; its sandstone façade taking the brunt of the morning sun’s baking heat. The four long queues snaking out from the main archways wrapped and curled through a maze of temporary rope barriers. Progress was slow. Though the massive shade sails over the forecourt protected the waiting visitors from direct sunlight, it was still oppressively hot in the marshalling area.

‘I’m so glad we don’t have to queue,’ Noah said as they bypassed the shuffling horde on their way to the museum’s rear entrance.

‘Agreed,’ Raven said. ‘Bring on the air-con.’

Chase huffed. ‘You think you’re hot? Try being five months pregnant.’

‘No chance,’ Noah said.

Raven shrugged. ‘Yeah, think I’ll pass on that too.’

Chase sighed. 'I should've known better than to expect any sympathy from you two.'

The lone guard in the security booth was dozing in her chair when they reached the window. *She looks old enough to be one of the exhibits*, Noah thought. It appeared that someone had papier-mâché'd over a skeleton then topped it with a dusty old brown wig from the props box. The guard's faded uniform was crumpled and bore several coffee stains.

'Do you think she's alive?' Chase whispered.

Raven raised his fist. 'Let's see.'

He knocked on the window. The guard jerked in her seat but was slow to look up. When she did, she stared at them with eyes so devoid of expression they might have been made of glass.

'Help you?' she drawled.

'I'm Jemima Chase,' Chase said. 'Avril Jane is expecting me and my two guests.'

The guard turned her attention to the monitor on the desk. 'Yes,' she said. 'You're on the list. I'll page her ... once you sign for your passes.'

While Chase attended to the paperwork, Raven sidled closer to Noah. 'So, Sis, what are you going to do if you happen to run into one of your old school friends today?'

'I'll hide behind one of the exhibits,' Noah said.

'Seriously?'

'Seriously.'

'You wouldn't want to talk to them? Find out what they've been doing?'

Noah considered it for a moment. 'I'd be interested to find out what they've been doing, but the conversation might get a bit awkward if they ask me what I've been up to.'

Raven grinned. 'Really?'

'Don't be a jerk,' she said.

'I'd love to hear *that* conversation,' he said. Doing his worst to imitate his sister's voice, Raven continued, 'Well, I've travelled to another world where I had my hearing restored and I learned to speak. To repay the favour, I saved the world from destruction by becoming a living weapon. I attained the position of King's Tailor and from there I went on to be

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a king myself – King of the Goblins actually. I have also achieved the highest raiki honour in the land – that of Major – by curing the effects of a toxic parasitic worm. I am dating the king’s adviser, my brother is the king’s army commander, and I am about to be godmother to the child of one of Earth’s most successful authors.’

Noah stomped on his foot. ‘Knock it off, Commander,’ she said. ‘Geez, I’m glad you’re my brother and not my biographer. That was worse than awful.’

‘But all true.’

‘And what about you?’ Noah said. ‘Though born human, I was secretly turned into a dog when I was a baby by a seer on another planet. I lived on Earth for sixteen years as an Alsatian before returning to my homeland to have my true form reinstated. I helped my sister become the 13th key. I am the army’s chief commander and the king’s consort. I—’

‘Okay, okay,’ Raven interrupted, raising his hands in surrender. ‘I get it. Maybe we should leave the biographical details to Chase.’

‘Forget it,’ Chase said, handing each of them a VIP pass. ‘I’m a fictioneer, not a journalist.’

The steel door behind them squeaked open.

‘Jemima!’ a smartly-dressed young woman said. ‘I’m so pleased you could come.’

‘Pleased to be here,’ Chase said, shaking the hand that was offered to her. ‘Avril, this is my dearest friend, Noah Chord and her brother, Raven.’

‘Avril Jane,’ the woman said, extending her hand to Raven. ‘Archaeologist, historian and curator of my grandfather’s collection which is currently on display here at the museum ... *and* I’m Jemima’s biggest fan!’

‘Nice to meet you,’ Raven said. ‘So, you’ve read all her books?’

‘Read them and brought them in today for Jemima to sign.’ Avril turned to Noah. ‘Noah? That’s an unusual name for a girl.’

With a practised smile, Noah said, ‘So I’m told.’

Noah guessed Avril was in her early twenties. Subtle makeup accentuated her doll-like features while loose blonde curls cascaded from a high pony tail. But what impressed Noah most was her outfit. Her halter-neck

chiffon swing top was emblazoned with an elaborately sequined and beaded daffodil – the bright flower radiating a dazzling blend of colour and energy. She'd teamed her top with faded designer jeans and yellow stilettos, giving the ensemble a casual sophistication.

Noah's designer's instincts took over. 'Where did you get your top?'

The young woman beamed. 'Elzaba. You like it?'

'Yes,' Noah said. 'I do like it.'

'Well, come in, come in,' Avril said, ushering them towards the door. 'It's lovely and cool inside and there is much to see.'

Inside, a floor-to-ceiling poster advertising the current exhibition dominated the small foyer.

'Wow!' Raven said. 'If that's the poster you've got at the back door, I'd like to see the one at the front.'

'There are actually four designs,' Avril said. 'You'll see a full set in the main foyer.'

'Impressive,' Chase said.

'Thanks,' Avril said. She pointed to the dates on the poster. 'As you can see, the exhibition has only a week left to run. I'm so glad you're in town to see it. Your VIP passes are valid for the rest of the week. Feel free to come as often as you like.'

'Thank you,' Chase said, looping her lanyard over her head. 'That's very kind of you.'

'Absolutely my pleasure,' Avril said. 'Shall we get started?'

'Yes indeed,' Chase replied.

Avril smiled. 'Excellent, follow me.'

Noah walked beside Chase as they followed their guide through corridors that were strictly off-limits to *unofficial* museum patrons. When they reached the main hall, Noah shook her head in wonder. Though she'd visited the museum several times as a youngster, the intricately carved sandstone columns supporting the vaulted ceiling enchanted her all over again.

As they crossed the geometric mosaics on the tiled floor, Noah wondered how long the magnificent old building would survive in the face of Sayle's unrelenting scramble for modernity. Noah enjoyed Earth's state-of-the-art technology but preferred the simple life on Talisker. Electricity

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was still in its infancy there and she hoped it would take a long time for them to catch up.

‘This is the *Warriors of the World* exhibit,’ Avril said as they entered the first auditorium. ‘A good portion of what’s on display throughout the museum is from my grandfather’s private collection and since I’ve helped him collect some of the pieces, I can give you extra information that you won’t get from the other guides.’

When she winked at them, Noah cringed.

‘I hope you’ll find this interesting, Jemima,’ Avril said. ‘I know you do lots of research for your books and I thought all this history and these relics might inspire you.’

‘That’s very thoughtful,’ Chase said. ‘I’m sure it will be wonderful.’

‘Please,’ the young historian said, taking Chase’s elbow, ‘this way.’

A few steps behind Chase and Avril, Raven walked with Noah. ‘And it certainly doesn’t hurt to have a famous author at your exhibition,’ he said so only his sister could hear. ‘A great way to drum up business for the last week of the show.’

‘So cynical, Brother,’ Noah said.

‘You disagree?’

‘No.’

Raven grimaced. ‘Maybe Avril wants to be a character in Chase’s next book?’

‘She seems to be sucking up for something,’ Noah said, ‘and maybe something more than just getting her book collection signed.’

‘There are two more displays after *Warriors of the World*,’ Avril said. ‘In the next hall, you’ll find ancient burial practices of different societies and then, after that, there are rare and intriguing relics from around the globe.’

Raven clapped his hand on Noah’s shoulder. ‘I think I can pretty much keep myself entertained in this hall right here.’

‘I’m sure you can, Army Commander,’ Noah said. ‘Hoping for some tips from these ancient warriors, are you?’

‘Very funny,’ Raven said. ‘Just pick me up from here when you’re done,’ he added, before wandering off to look at a life-size wax model of a Viking warrior.

Noah tagged along with Chase and Avril, doing her best to ignore the conversation. Chase didn't need any help dealing with crazy fans. She'd had lots of practice.

Though military history wasn't of interest to Noah, she examined all the weaponry and read the plaques. At least the models of the different fighters and soldiers gave her the chance to indulge in a critique of their uniforms.

When they entered the *Death and Beyond* exhibit, a feeling of foreboding crept over Noah. Instantly wary, she scanned the hall but saw nothing to explain her apprehension. She thought about getting Raven but dismissed the idea. He'd only give her a hard time about being scared of mummies and dead bodies. *Don't be silly*, she thought. *It's only the living that are dangerous.*

'Avril, where are the toilets?' Noah asked.

Avril smiled. 'The toilets are in the next hall, Noah,' she said. 'Are you maybe trying to sneak ahead to see the rare artefacts?'

'You got me,' Noah said.

Chase patted Noah's shoulder. 'It's okay. We'll catch up with you next door.'

Noah threaded her way through the crowd towards the next hall, scrutinising the exhibits she passed for anything unusual. She paused at a scale model of a cliff-face, joining a tour group and standing beside an elderly lady with a young boy in tow.

'The great mystery of this ancient culture is how they got their dead into the niches,' the young female guide said. 'The niches are high in the cliffs. They certainly couldn't have climbed up from the bottom and it is difficult to imagine how they might have scaled down from the top – especially with a mummified body to carry.'

'As you can see' – she pointed to one of the mummified bundles – 'the corpses were not laid out flat. They were arranged in the foetal position before binding. These people believed that since they were curled up this way in their mother's womb before being born into this world, they should take the same position before being born into the next world.'

'Neat,' the young boy said, clapping his hands enthusiastically.

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Noah smiled as the elderly woman accompanying him flinched.

‘Toby, remember what we talked about?’ the old lady said. ‘You can be interested without being creepy.’

Creepy, Noah thought, rubbing her hand absently over the goosebumps on her arm. *There is definitely something creepy here.*

‘Noah.’

At the sound of Raven’s voice, Noah turned. ‘Bored with the warriors already?’ she said.

He didn’t answer her question but looked her up and down. ‘Are you alright?’

Her unease rising as he studied her, she said, ‘I think so. Why?’

Raven frowned. ‘I dunno. I just had a feeling ...’

‘Yeah, I know what you mean,’ Noah said. ‘There’s something not quite right here but I can’t put my finger on it. Come next door with me.’

‘Yep.’

Raven strode towards the final exhibition hall, leaving Noah scrambling to catch up. They walked through the short tunnel side by side, but Noah stopped as soon as she set foot inside the next hall. Raven pulled her out of the entranceway.

‘You want to get trampled?’ he said.

Noah put her right hand over her chest and pinched her locket between her fingers. ‘My slider,’ she said. ‘It’s warm.’

‘That sounds bad.’

Noah nodded. ‘It is. Firestone is attuned to Talisker, not to here.’

‘But something is setting it off?’

‘Yes.’

Raven looked over his shoulder towards the entranceway. ‘Where should I be?’ he asked. ‘Should I check on Chase or am I more useful here?’

‘Stay with me,’ Noah said.

Raven folded his arms across his chest. ‘Then there’s something in here – a relic – from Talisker?’

‘That’s what I’m thinking,’ Noah said.

‘Then we need to find it.’

‘You got that right.’

They jostled their way through the sea of people and at the far end of the hall, Noah stopped in front of a glass case. ‘This is it.’

A solid metal triangle about the size of Noah’s open hand lay on a black velvet cushion. Its centre had been drilled out to the size of a half-dollar coin, and then filled with a piece of firestone. The shiny metal around the multicoloured gem was smooth but for three identical carvings. Running parallel with the triangle’s edges, three straight lines had been etched in black into the metal. *Almost a triangle within the triangle*, Noah thought, *but the lines don’t quite join up*. On the ends of each line was a circle – an unfilled circle at one end and a black circle at the other. Noah read the plaque on the case.

Iron and copper triangle with opal inset – origin unknown.

‘Not a very helpful description, is it,’ Raven said.

Noah gaped at the artefact, his words barely registering with her.

‘It can’t be,’ she whispered.

Noah’s heart beat painfully in her chest as an image of Gillette flashed in her mind. She had saved Emir’s nephew from King Franco but she’d had no chance against Jong. The God of Destruction had abducted ten-year-old Gillette and given Noah a mission. In exchange for Gillette, she was to free Jong. Set him loose in the universe. And with the relic before her, she could do it!

Raven nudged her with his elbow. ‘Noah?’

‘It can’t be,’ she said again.

‘It can’t be what?’

Noah decided against mentioning Jong in a public place. Instead, she reread the inscription.

Iron and copper triangle with opal inset – origin unknown.

‘Origin unknown, my arse,’ she muttered under her breath.

‘Beg your pardon?’ Raven said.

Noah turned to him. ‘Where’s Avril? I need to know who donated this piece.’

A voice behind her interrupted whatever response Raven might have made. ‘Excuse me, Miss?’

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Noah spun round. A freckle-faced young man in a museum uniform waved a booklet. 'Would you like a program?' he asked. 'It's full of information on all the exhibits, including the contributors.'

'How much?' Noah asked.

'For you, Miss, a tenner,' he said, smiling.

Noah fished her wallet out of her handbag and found a ten-dollar note. 'Here you go,' she said, 'a crisp, new tenner.'

He took the note and slipped it in the money pouch around his waist. 'Pleasure, Miss,' he said, handing her a program. 'Enjoy the rest of your visit today.'

'Thanks,' Noah said, opening the glossy booklet. 'Let's see who owns ...'

She stared at the inside cover for several moments.

'Noah?' Raven said. 'What is it?'

'Guess whose exhibition this is,' Noah said as she leafed through the program in search of information about the artefact.

'Whose?' Raven said.

'Bernard Kurz.'

Raven's eyes widened. '*Kurz?* Really?'

'Really.'

'Do you think he's related to ... you-know-who?'

'Yep,' Noah said. 'I'm pretty sure "Bernard" was Orville's grandfather's name.'

'Crap!'

'And, according to the program,' Noah said, glancing at the photo of the iron triangle, 'that artefact belongs to him.'

Raven frowned. 'Avril Jane said that she had curated this exhibition of her grandfather's work, didn't she?'

'Yep.'

'So Avril is Bernard Kurz's granddaughter?'

'It looks that way.'

Raven exhaled slowly. 'So what do we do now?'

The question hung in the air for long moments while Noah marshalled her thoughts.

'We tread very carefully,' she said at last.

‘A trap?’

Noah nodded as she clutched her locket. ‘It’s gotta be.’

‘Do you think Chase is in danger?’ he asked.

‘Not at the moment,’ Noah said, ‘but I’ll go and hurry her along. You wait here.’

‘Yep.’

Noah’s stomach churned as she retraced her steps across the hall. As if dealing with Jong wasn’t bad enough, Bernard Kurz promised to further complicate things. His grandson, Orville Kurz had almost obliterated Talisker three years ago and his face still lurked in Noah’s nightmares. And Orville hadn’t had the artefact that Bernard possessed.

When Noah found Chase, her friend was so engrossed in the mummified cat display that she didn’t notice Noah’s arrival. Not wanting to startle her, Noah hung behind her.

‘Ah, Noah,’ Avril said, ‘back already?’

‘Checking on progress,’ Noah said. ‘There are certain places writers should not be left unchecked. Museums, libraries and second-hand shops top the list.’

Far from being offended, Chase smiled.

‘I see you got yourself a program,’ Avril said.

‘Yes,’ Noah said. ‘It’s for Chase actually. She likes to collect this kind of stuff.’

‘She can have as many copies as she likes – on the house,’ Avril said magnanimously.

‘A couple of copies would be great,’ Chase said. ‘I like to cut out the pictures.’

‘You keep your copy as a souvenir, Noah,’ Avril said. ‘It actually makes for very interesting reading.’

‘I’m sure it does,’ Noah said, ‘but, unless there’s *fashion* in there, I’m unlikely to get to it anytime soon.’

Avril tilted her head to one side. ‘So you haven’t had a little peek inside?’

A tingle trickled down Noah’s spine as she studied the young woman. If Avril was Bernard Kurz’s granddaughter then Avril and

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Orville were related. *Siblings or cousins?* Noah wondered. Right now, that didn't matter she decided.

'I've been too engrossed in the exhibits to read the program,' Noah said. 'It's an excellent display.'

'Well thank you, Noah. I'll take that as a compliment.'

Noah nodded but said nothing more. She checked her watch. They'd been at the museum for less than an hour.

The tour ground on, Chase taking photos of almost everything. By the time they reached the firestone relic in the last hall, Noah was desperate to leave.

'This display here,' Avril said, 'contains items of unknown origin. My grandfather has acquired these from collectors over the years but, despite extensive investigation, has found little information on them. As you can probably appreciate, artefacts are much easier to analyse in context when you're on a dig – but when you purchase them from dealers it's much more difficult.'

'I can imagine,' Noah said.

Chase stared at the firestone relic for a long moment before looking at Noah. Noah tapped her watch.

Chase took the hint. 'Well, it's been a wonderful tour, Avril,' she said, 'but I'm afraid we have to run. We have a lunch engagement to attend.'

'I completely understand,' Avril said. 'Being a famous author, I'm sure your diary is always full.'

'It is tricky to juggle all my commitments,' Chase admitted.

Avril clasped her hands over her heart. 'Would you have time to sign my books before you go?'

Chase smiled. 'Of course. It's the least I can do to thank you for your generosity. The passes' – she waved the VIP tag on her lanyard – 'and the guided tour are much appreciated.'

Avril blushed. 'Do you think you might use the passes again?'

'I have a few appointments this week, but I'll see what I can arrange,' Chase said.

Oh, we'll be back, Noah thought. *We'll definitely be back.*