

THE 13TH KEY

Sarah Fisher

Book One in the Dragonscale series

First published in Australia in 2019 by Sarah Fisher

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ISBN: 9780648182443 (paperback)



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, incidents and events, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

*To my mother, Judith and my dearest friend, Maree, who read every
word of every draft*

Acknowledgements

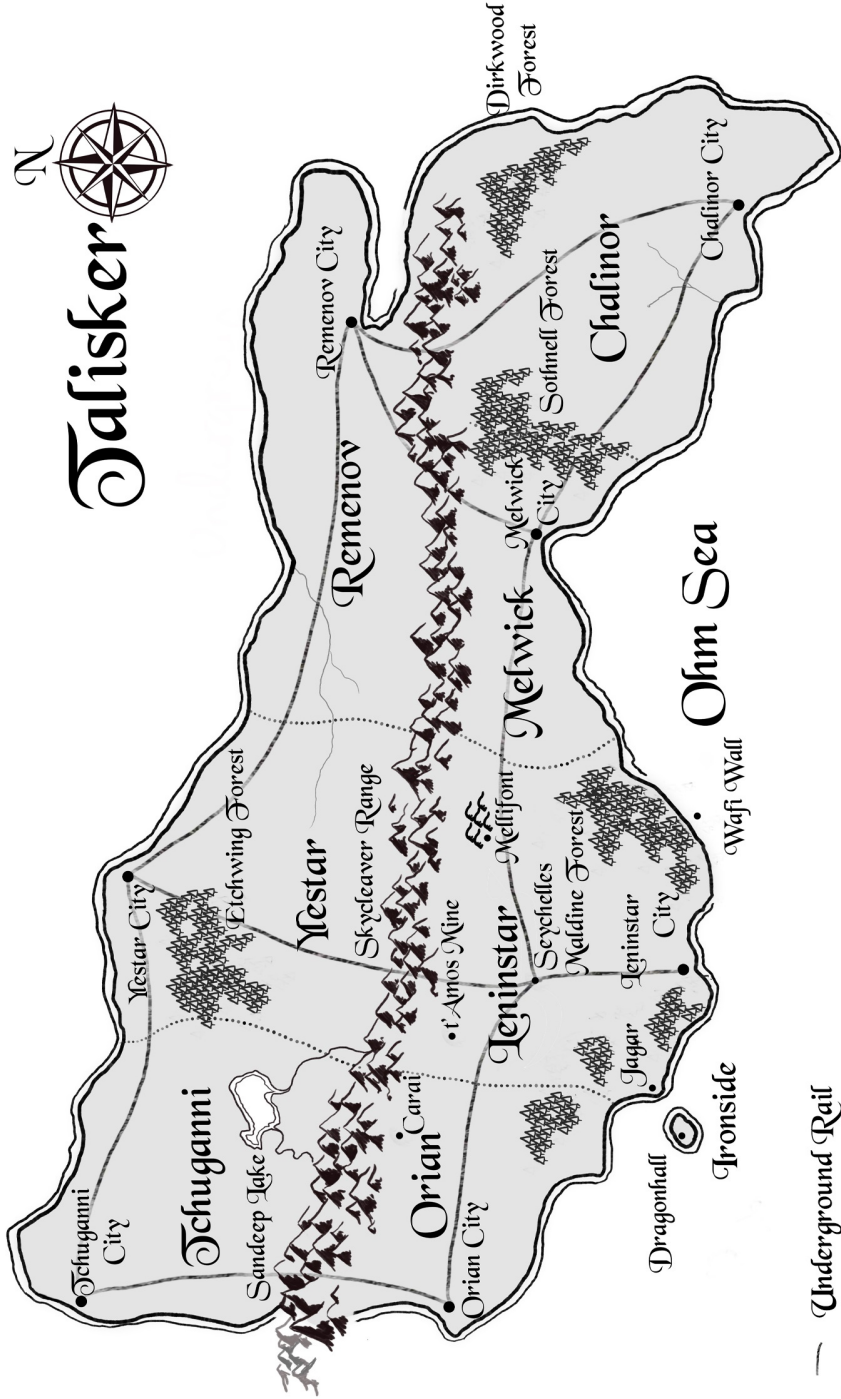
I am eternally grateful to my parents, Ray and Judith; and my brothers, Cameron and Daniel for their support and encouragement.

I am indebted to spirit-sister, Maree for her love and guidance, and to Angus for believing in me.

Thanks also go to Patrice and Kirsty for their editorial and design expertise, and to Lucy for amazing artwork.



Talisker



— Underground Rail

Chapter 1

Noah could feel her teacher's disapproving gaze boring into her. Nothing new. She refocused her eyes, if not her attention, on the summaries scrawled across the whiteboard. *Romeo and Juliet*. Aside from the costumes, the film didn't interest her. She'd faithfully copied all the costuming notes into her book, supplementing them with full colour sketches, but had disregarded everything else.

As Noah set about putting the finishing touches on her artwork, she prayed for the promised storm. All the windows of the ground floor classroom had been pushed out to their limits – Regi Alston had almost fallen out the one nearest to him in his quest to snare some fresh air – but the breeze never came. The fans twirled uselessly on the ceiling, barely stirring the cloud of perfume and body odour that dogged the English class.

Noah looked up when Mr Brennan arrived at her desk. Experience had taught her that ignoring him would not make him go away. He raised his hands to speak.

'If this were an art and design course you would be achieving fantastic grades, Noah,' he signed, 'but this is *not* art and design. It is English. You are going to fail if you don't broaden your knowledge of the genre.'

Noah's face burned. While few of her fellow students understood sign language, they all knew when she was being told off.

‘Pass or fail, I’m out of here at the end of the year,’ Noah signed back.

‘You think failing senior is going to get you a good job?’

When Noah didn’t answer, Mr Brennan pointed to her drawings.

‘Do you really think you’re just going to walk out of here and become a world-famous fashion designer?’

Noah nodded.

The teacher’s eyes narrowed. ‘I suggest you talk to your maths tutor about the likelihood of *that* happening. You’re destined for the streets if you don’t pick up your act, young lady. Quite frankly I’m surprised at you. I’d have thought you’d want to make something of yourself – become someone your parents would’ve been proud of.’

Noah held his gaze, inhaled slowly and pressed her palms onto the desk. She would not be baited. Not this time. Long moments passed before Mr Brennan broke the impasse.

‘I’ll call your aunt this afternoon to discuss your lack of effort in this subject,’ he signed before turning his back on her.

You do that, she thought as a hand closed over hers. Noah looked at the girl beside her.

‘Ignore him,’ Libby signed, rolling her eyes. ‘He’s a jerk.’

‘Oh, I know it,’ Noah replied.

‘Just don’t let him get to you. He’s wrong.’

‘About?’

‘You. Your parents would already be proud of who you are.’

Noah felt her angst melt away. ‘Thanks.’

She took the girl’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. Libby was one of the few students at Sayle South High who knew how to sign, and the gregarious drama student enjoyed signing with someone other than her annoying little brother. Noah was just thankful for someone friendly and bubbly to talk to.

‘You can have my notes to copy if you need them,’ Libby offered.

‘Thanks,’ Noah signed. ‘I might just take you up on that.’

Noah looped her dark ponytail into a knot to keep it out of her way and went back to her artwork. The notes would wait a bit longer. As she added more detail to the bodice of Juliet’s dress, a tingling sensation in

THE 13TH KEY

her ears distracted her. It wasn't painful but it was ... gone now. She took a deep breath then exhaled but the feeling returned, stronger this time. Noah sat up straight in her chair. Mr Brennan, who was sitting at his desk writing a note in his diary, was distracted by her sudden movement. He looked up and glared at her – as did the cat that was perched next to him.

Where did that come from? Noah wondered. As she studied the feline she was increasingly worried that the answer to her question might be “not from Earth”. The cat was about the size of a domestic pet but it had the distinctive markings of a tiger. Perhaps the science department had been miniaturising African cats in the lab and one had escaped. Noah shook her head. Though Sayle South boasted the best technology the twenty-first century had to offer, high school science students were more likely to blow things up than create things.

Noah looked around the room. The other students were dutifully writing in their English books – some were probably even writing the notes from the board – while Mr Brennan continued glaring at her. No one else appeared to notice the cat. Noah closed her eyes and counted to five before opening them again. The cat was still on the desk but it wasn't sitting now. It sauntered across the desk in front of Mr Brennan, its tail trailing across the teacher's top lip, giving him a stripy moustache. Reflexively, Noah rubbed her nose.

Mr Brennan went back to writing in his diary while the feline stopped to sniff the whiteboard markers on his desk. It recoiled violently and swatted at one of the pens with a testing paw. Noah had long believed that teachers' pens were implements of torture and if this animal could sense their inherent evil, she might have to reassess her dislike of cats. After a few more swipes, it lost interest in the pens and jumped onto Mr Brennan's head. He didn't react. Noah gaped as the cat balanced easily on the greasy dome. She watched its mouth move and she noticed that as it did, the strange sensation in her ears started again.

Weird.

The cat closed its mouth and the sensation stopped.

Very weird.

Noah shivered. Imaginary cats should not make her feel this way. *Must be the perfumes in here, she thought. I'm hallucinating.*

When Mr Brennan stood up, the cat jumped lightly onto the desk again. Noah continued to stare at the feline as her classmates packed up their belongings.

Libby tapped her on the shoulder and signed, 'Bell's gone.'

Noah looked up. 'Yeah thanks. I'm almost done. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Okay,' Libby signed. 'Don't stay too long. Storm's coming.'

As the classroom emptied, the creature leapt from the teacher's table onto one of the student desks in the front row. Like a frog negotiating lily pads on a pond, it jumped from desk to desk until it got to Noah's. Leaning as far back in her chair as she could, Noah studied the apparition. It clearly wasn't a miniaturised tiger. The proportions were all wrong. Tigers – even the cubs – were powerfully built with large heads and paws but this specimen was delicate. The striking markings lent its lean frame undeserved credibility while its mesmerising orange eyes blazed beneath its pointed ears. A slender tail waved cobra-like behind it.

The cat studied her too when, without warning, its hackles went up and its tail exploded into something that would have been perfect to dust her dressing table. It bared its teeth at her and Noah clamped her hands over her ears.

From deep in her brain a word floated to the surface.

Hearing.

What?

You can hear the cat, her brain said.

Hear the cat? That's ridiculous, she thought. *I'm deaf. I can't hear.*

You can hear, her brain insisted.

Not keen on arguing with her own brain, Noah acted quickly to set things straight. *Okay Brain, there are only two problems with your theory. If we ignore the first one for a moment – the rather obvious one about me being deaf – we get to the second problem, which relates to the cat not being real. Surely a person can't hear something that doesn't exist.*

Her brain was not dissuaded.

Why not? You're seeing something that doesn't exist, apparently.

THE 13TH KEY

Noah had to admit that her brain had a point. She stared at the cat that didn't exist and frowned. Again, the feline bared its teeth and Noah clutched at her head.

Her brain was back.

If you can't hear, then why have you got your hands over your ears?

It was a good question but one that she set aside as she fumbled to get her pencils packed away. Hugging her satchel to her chest, Noah threaded her way between the desks, picking up speed at the doorway. She ignored Mr Brennan's scowl as he locked the classroom, and she scooted down the hallway and out the front door of the English block.

Noah looked to the sky. Dark clouds were building but the storm was still a little way off. With luck, she'd make it to the city before the downpour. When she was clear of the school gate, she pulled her mother's ring from the fob pocket of her school shorts and slipped it on her middle finger. A glance at the silver dragon coiled protectively around the large oval sapphire brought her parents' faces to mind. *I'll make something of myself*, she promised. *I may not become an English professor but I'll be something.*

The train station was swarming with storm-shy commuters when she arrived. People crammed under the awnings in anticipation of the impending deluge. Noah checked the board. Three minutes until the next city-bound service. She took a spot in the open, confident the rain would hold off. When the train arrived, Noah waited until the initial surge of passengers subsided before she boarded. The carriage air-conditioning was performing admirably despite the crowding and was a welcome reprieve from the day's oppressive humidity. She stood by the door and passed the fifteen-minute ride by watching the lightning show over the mountains to the west of Sayle.

Instead of changing trains at Grand Central and going home to the inevitable argument with Aunt Polly about her English assignment, Noah headed for her favourite fabric boutique. Bibs & Bobs was only four blocks away but the heavy foot traffic at this time of day made the journey slow going.

Holding her satchel in front of her to manoeuvre through the throng more easily, she angled to the left of the footpath, aiming for

the newsstand up ahead. The latest edition of *Sayle Chic* was out today with the full list of upcoming fashion shows. She took a copy of the free weekly without breaking stride. Later she'd pour through the magazine to choose which shows to attend. Every night in Sayle scores of events took place in ballrooms and basements across the city. Established designers competed with up-and-coming artists while die-hard wannabes clamoured for recognition as well. Noah's stomach tightened in anticipation. She needed to choose the best events to show her designs and assess the quality of her competition.

By the time she reached Bibs & Bobs, her cotton blouse was plastered to her skin. She looked up and caught a large raindrop in the eye for her trouble. Noah wiped her face, thankful that the rain had held off as long as it had, and pushed open the door. Once inside, she tucked her copy of *Sayle Chic* inside her satchel and slung her bag over her shoulder.

The site which housed Bibs & Bobs was once an Olympic swimming facility. Whoever thought that a swimming pool in a prime, inner-city position was a good idea had been mistaken. It was a spectacular flop but it did make for a unique shop layout. The water was gone and the pool was now filled with rolls of fabric, cards of lace, spools of ribbon, tubes of buttons, reels of thread and drawers stuffed with pattern templates. Where the stadium seating had been, elevated walkways allowed customers access to rooms containing a plethora of other sewing paraphernalia – mannequins, sewing machines, overlockers, cutting machines – as well as studios for hire.

Noah headed for one of the service rooms on the Level 2 walkway. In fancy script on the glass door was one word – Alterations.

The petite young woman behind the counter looked up and smiled when Noah entered.

'Raining yet?' Jemima Chase signed as she made her way around the counter towards Noah.

Noah nodded and signed back, 'Just started.'

'How was school?'

Noah rolled her eyes. 'The same. Can we talk about something else?'

'Of course,' Chase signed. 'Have you finalised your collection yet?'

'Almost.'

THE 13TH KEY

‘You’re a terrible liar,’ Chase signed. ‘Noah Chord, I swear to God, I’m going to strangle you with this’—she whipped her tape measure from its customary place around her neck and dangled it in front of Noah’s face—‘if you don’t get organised.’

Though small, Chase was not to be messed with. Her diminutive stature and plain looks were in sharp contrast to the personality that lurked within. Jemima Chase was imaginative, intelligent and headstrong. This young woman didn’t wait for life to come to her. She went out and hunted it down.

Noah wrung her hands before signing, ‘I can’t decide.’

Chase frowned and hung the tape measure back around her neck to free her hands. ‘Save the woe-is-me artistic crap for someone else,’ she signed. ‘The show is only two months away. You have to decide.’

‘It’s such a big decision.’

‘Duh! That’s why you’ve got to make it,’ Chase signed. ‘This is the Junior Design State Titles, Noah. You need this one if you want to get to the Nationals.’

‘I know.’

‘So decide. You can kiss the Nationals goodbye if you can’t even pull a collection together for the State Titles.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

Chase’s eyes narrowed. ‘I’ll get my mother down here.’

Noah shook her head. ‘I’ll decide. I promise. Can you help me?’

‘As luck would have it, I can. Let’s go out the back.’ Chase gestured for Noah to follow.

Inside the utility room Noah noted the full rack of “finished” alterations on one side of the doorway and then the empty rack of “to do” alterations on the other side. Chase’s workspace was neat and functional, being organised was in her nature. It meant she had no trouble meeting her mother’s high standards of efficiency at Bibs & Bobs. Though some people quailed at the thought of working for one of Sayle’s most successful CEOs – Noah counted herself amongst them – Chase loved it. To her there was nothing better than having her mother as her boss.

Noah glanced at the compendium on the small table in the corner – Chase’s other job. The leather case was her mobile office. On top of

her sewing work, Chase had probably added a few chapters to her novel today too. Noah wished she could be as productive as her friend.

Chase pointed to the empty workbench. ‘Spread them out. I’ll choose,’ she signed.

Taking her much-loved folio from her bag, Noah laid it on the bench. After cleaning her hands with a wet-wipe, she pulled out a wad of papers and spread them out. Chase walked around the bench, studying each drawing in turn.

‘They are all fabulous,’ she signed at last. ‘I can see why you’re having trouble deciding.’

Noah tried to smother a triumphant smile but failed.

‘Lose the cat-who-got-the-cream look, Noah. Smug doesn’t suit you,’ Chase signed.

‘I’ve got a story about a cat that you might enjoy,’ Noah signed.

‘Yep, in a minute ...’

Chase selected seven sketches and slid them into a plastic sleeve. She put them on top of her compendium and turned back to Noah. ‘Teen Street collection,’ she signed. ‘I’ll draw up the patterns for you tomorrow.’

With an equal mix of envy and relief, Noah signed, ‘Thanks. I owe you.’

‘Yes, you do. How about that cat story and we’ll call it quits?’

‘Deal,’ Noah signed.

Chase helped her re-pack the remaining sketches. Just because the drawings hadn’t made the cut today didn’t mean they wouldn’t be useful someday.

Noah started to explain about the miniature tiger but hadn’t got far when Chase stopped her.

‘I need my tablet.’

Out of necessity, the story was on hold until Chase retrieved her device from her compendium. When she was ready to watch again, she nodded. By the end of the tale, Chase had interrupted four times to make notes.

‘Weird, huh?’ Noah signed when she was finished.

‘For you, yes,’ Chase replied. ‘For me ...’ she shrugged.

THE 13TH KEY

Noah smiled. Chase had told her many times that weirdness was relative. For someone like Jemima Chase, whose life revolved around fantasy fiction, a deaf girl hallucinating about hearing an imaginary cat was something to be celebrated.

Noah checked her watch. The later she was home, the worse the argument with Aunt Polly would be.

'Better go,' she signed.

'Do let me know if the cat comes back,' Chase replied with a wink.

'Yeah, right.'