

BASED ON THE ORIGINAL TELEVISION SERIES

FRINGE

SINS OF THE FATHER

CHRISTA FAUST

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FRINGE
THE ZODIAC PARADOX
THE BURNING MAN

CHRISTA FAUST

FRINGE

SINS OF THE FATHER

TITAN BOOKS

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PART ONE



PROLOGUE

LONDON 2008

Richard McCoy nursed an overpriced lager in an appropriately generic Red Lion pub in Charing Cross. It had sprung up in the last month to take advantage of increased tourist trade, and had all the trappings one would expect from an “authentic” English pub—wood paneling, darts in the corner, a long bar with row upon row of taps, and a fat, balding barkeep behind it. He’d read somewhere that Red Lion was the most popular pub name in all of England. Something like six hundred of the damn things throughout the country.

In his early fifties, McCoy had thinning salt-and-pepper hair and an aquiline profile that might have once been described as regal, but now just seemed pinched and bitter. His tall frame was slump-shouldered and defeated, with an unfortunate paunchiness around the middle that would probably tighten up if he laid off the lager and put a little more effort into exercise.

But he just couldn’t be bothered.

He had just come off a performance of an atrocious dinner theater production of *HMS Pinafore* at the nearby Charing Cross Hotel, where he’d had the pleasure of entertaining a room full of gluttonous tourists as “the Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Porter, KCB, First Lord of the Admiralty,” who sang such unforgettable songs as “When I Was A Lad,” “For I Hold That On The Sea,” and the ever-popular, “Here, Take Her, Sir.” He’d

never felt more broken in his entire life.

“Pour us another,” he said to the barkeep, banging his empty pint glass on a bar that was disgustingly devoid of water rings. *A pub should be grotty, lived-in*, he thought bitterly, *not like this mass-produced, plastic tourist trap. A pub should be like a woman, experienced, real, slightly used.*

The barkeep placed a fresh glass in front of him, wearing the same sour look he’d worn since McCoy had walked in. McCoy wondered if maybe the man was as plastic as the rest of the place. He couldn’t even remember what his lager was. Some pretentious micro-brew passed through the kidneys of a monkey in the Venezuelan rainforest, no doubt.

He drank it, anyway.

How had it come to this? From a stint with the Globe theater twenty years ago, where his *Romeo and Lear* were raved about internationally, to doing three shows weekly of Gilbert and Sullivan for a room full of fat housewives who wouldn't know talent if it reared up from the depths and bit them on their enormous, pimpled asses.

But he knew the answer to that question. He was drinking it.

"Excuse me," someone said behind him. American accent. Woman. McCoy cocked his head to the side, only just realizing that he'd somehow managed to slump down onto the bar. How many lagers had he had? No more than two, certainly. Maybe three.

"Are you Richard McCoy? The actor?"

Somewhere in the back of his alcohol-shrouded brain something like self-respect asserted itself, and he sat up straighter on the barstool, stifling a burp.

The woman wasn't quite forty, trim and attractive with blond hair, a blue silk scarf around her neck and—he couldn't help but notice—rather ample breasts. She had a quirky, sardonic smile and trouble in her eyes. At least it looked like trouble to him.

His kind of woman. Experienced, real, slightly used.

"I am," he said as clearly and regally as he could, silently tacking on a "Who wants to know?" He owed money to more than a few unsavory types, and just because this American woman didn't look the sort to truck with those types, it didn't mean she wasn't a spotter for some leg-breaker lurking out in the alley.

"I *knew* it," the woman said, so delighted that she bounced in a thoroughly distracting way. "I saw you when you were in San Diego, touring with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Oh, ten, fifteen years ago? You were *wonderful*."

McCoy thought back on that time.

"*Twelfth Night*," he said. "Yes, I remember. And it was a few more years than fifteen."

"You haven't aged a day," she said, and he laughed.

"Kind of you to say so—"

"Miranda," she said. "Miranda Stallings." She put her hand out, and he grasped it in his own meaty paw, bringing it to his lips and giving it the gentlest of kisses.

"Miranda," he said, smiling at her giggle. "A beautiful name. From *The Tempest*. I played Prospero once, you know. Here in London. Oh, so many years ago. I'd say there's a sight more gray in my hair since you saw me on the stage last."

"Oh, I like the gray," she said. "It's very refined."

“Thank you very much, Miranda,” he said. “You take years off just by saying so. Please, allow me to buy you a drink. What would you like?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to trouble you, Mr. McCoy.”

“Please, call me Richard.”

“Okay,” she said after a pause. “Richard. What should I get? I’m not much of a drinker.”

That was the best news McCoy had heard all day.

* * *

A few cosmopolitans later and McCoy had sweet-talked Miranda into allowing him to accompany her to her hotel, the nearby Corinthia on Whitehall. She had been part of a tour group, she said, who had left that morning to head to Bath. She’d fallen in love with London, and wasn’t interested in going to see some stodgy Roman ruins.

“They’re not coming back for another three days,” she said, sliding the key card for her room, getting it into the slot the third time. She leaned into him, unsteady on her feet, eyes bright. “That sounds very lonely,” he said.

“It is,” she said, giggling. “Very.”

McCoy gave a low whistle as they stepped inside. Miranda’s suite was enormous, an expensive room in an already expensive hotel. Well appointed, with soft blue carpet, chrome-and-glass lamps, and modern, sleek furnishings. He made a beeline for the minibar, figuring she could afford a few tiny bottles of expensive vodka on her hotel bill.

He stopped when he saw a device sitting on the table next to the bar. It was a small black box with an odd knob on the top and two ribbon cables, each ending in a flat plate with three small, sharp prongs. McCoy picked up the device, and turned it over in his hands.

“What’s this, some sort of sex toy?” he asked, hoping he didn’t sound *too* hopeful. He touched his finger to one of the prongs. Too sharp for his taste. Americans were all into weird sex stuff—came from all that pent-up repression in the Bible Belt. But even so, this seemed a bit extreme.

Miranda came up behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“It is,” she said in his ear, her voice a husky whisper. “Do you want to try it?”

“Oh, you’re a naughty girl,” he said. “I’m not really into toys, though. Make a man feel inadequate.”

“How about a little bondage instead,” she said, tugging the silk scarf from her neck and wrapping it playfully around his own. “I’ll let you tie me up. Have your way with me.” She slowly pulled the ends of the scarf tighter, tugging playfully at the ends.

“Now that,” he said, turning to face her, “is something I can get into.”

“So glad you approve.”

“I do, though it’s a bit tight there, luv. Loosen up a tad, would you?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” she said, yanking hard on the ends of the scarf, making him gag. The silk bit into his throat, and he pushed at her—tried to knock her away—but she wouldn’t budge. It was as if she was made of stone.

He clawed at the scarf, kicked at her, tried to pull away, but nothing he did helped. She pulled the ends of the cloth tighter and tighter, shrugging off his blows as if they were puffs of air.

He slumped, and she followed him down to the floor as he went to his knees, holding tight onto that damned piece of silk, which was choking the air out of him. His vision fuzzed, going black at the edges until soon there was nothing but her face.

Then even that disappeared. A final thought passed through his mind as the blackness took him.

At least there won't be any more goddamn Gilbert and Sullivan.

FRANKFURT 2008

He’d had many names before today. Miranda Stallings, Evan Beetner, Nathan Wallace, Jaclyn Herera, and on and on. He changed identities the way some people changed their clothes, each new name bringing a new face along with it.

And now he was Richard McCoy, a British citizen in his mid-fifties, late of the London theater scene. A has-been actor, publicly disgraced. Well known in certain circles, but not too well known outside of them. A man with a face and a history and a paper trail.

Just the way he needed to be.

The abandoned factory outside Frankfurt had been used to manufacture dolls, an irony he was never quite able to wrap his mind around. Was it a joke? A metaphor? A flair for the dramatic? He was never sure, and it had always bothered him.

He stepped past broken porcelain limbs and cracked plastic heads left half-painted on rusting machines in the outer rooms. High-vaulted ceilings let in sunlight through shattered skylights, illuminating the drab, gray walls, the piles of concrete dust and rat and bird droppings that littered the floor. He made his way through the bleak corridors and down rusting stairs, flicking on a flashlight as he descended into the basement levels. He’d been in the factory many times before, but never as Richard McCoy.

He stopped at an aging fuse panel next to some unused steam pipes, flipped a convoluted sequence of switches and waited for a long spike to pop out of a recess. He hated this part. But the automated security didn't know him on sight, not in this body, and if he didn't verify his *bona fides* they'd cut him down with machinegun fire.

He put his hand in front of the needle and it shot forward, puncturing the skin and drawing a small amount of what passed for blood in his body. He waited for the process to complete, a green light indicating safe passage, and then used a handkerchief to wipe away the silver liquid from the prick in his hand. He closed the panel and continued on his way.

He followed the steam pipes to a room with a series of large, industrial boilers, rusted hulks that were barely worth the cost of scrapping them. Behind one of these he found a metal trapdoor set into the floor. He wondered—as he always did when he came down here—if the automated systems actually had recognized him.

Moment of truth. He pulled on an iron ring set in the trapdoor. It popped open on oiled hinges. No gunfire. No hail of bullets. He'd passed.

Then he let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Of course he'd passed. He *always* passed. He'd been spending so much time in these skin suits he'd started picking up their damn neuroses. He went down the steps deep beneath the factory, the trapdoor closing behind him as banks of LEDs sprang to life, illuminating his passage into a thoroughly modern laboratory facility.

His mission was going to be active the minute he got through decontamination and changed into his chemsuit. Once the airlock opened, he was confronted with gurneys loaded with body bags, lining the hallway outside the main lab.

Several technicians were pulling a dripping body from one of a dozen clear, horizontal cylinders filled with a cloudy liquid. It was the last one. The rest were all empty. From the state of the body, this experiment had failed, too.

The corpse looked half-formed, sexless. The skin was barely there, a thick slurry that sat on top of the muscles like the jelly in a can of Spam. The veins were visible, but where blood should have pumped through them, they were clear, with no sign of activity.

“Ah, Richard is it?”

“It is, sir,” McCoy said, turning to see the man he took his orders from, David Robert Jones. Even in a chemsuit, the man had presence. “Richard McCoy. As you asked.”

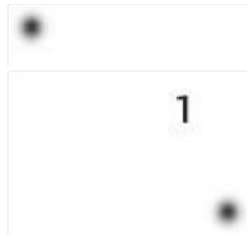
“Excellent,” Jones replied. “I saw him on the stage in Brighton some years ago. He had a modicum of talent. Where did you find him?”

“Doing dinner theater. Gilbert and Sullivan, of all things.” Jones shuddered.

“Poor man. Did him a favor, then. Well, he’s perfect for our uses. A bit of theater is exactly what we’ll need.”

“Are we on to Plan B, then?”

Jones said nothing for a long moment. He watched the technicians hauling the corpse into a body bag, ready to join the others in the hallway. As the techs lifted it out of the cylinder, the right hand separated at the wrist and dropped back into the pool of cloudy slime with a loud plop. “Yes,” Jones said. “We’re on to Plan B.”



BANGKOK, THAILAND 2008

Peter Bishop sat on the edge of the creaky double bed in his cramped box of a room at the Sweet Orchid Hotel. There was a pervasive smell of mold and cigarettes in the claustrophobic space, and every surface was damp and slightly sticky. The cheap mattress felt like a bag of soggy boiled rice beneath him.

The old, asthmatic air conditioner was struggling valiantly, but it was no match for the humid swelter. Tied to the air conditioner's dirty grate were three pink plastic ribbons that fluttered listlessly in the ineffective breeze. When Peter had complained to the apathetic maid that the air conditioner wasn't working, she had pointed to those ribbons as a silent rebuttal before going back to vacuuming the hallway without further comment.

The room itself was barely large enough for the double bed, rickety desk, and padlocked bar fridge—key available for an extra fee. A bulky television the size of an old-fashioned toaster offered a rotating selection of adult movies, also for an extra fee. Peter had easily picked the padlock and liberated several bottles of Chang beer from the fridge, but the TV wasn't worth the effort.

In a cheap frame above the bed was a photograph that looked as if it had been cut out of a magazine, of a purple *Phalaenopsis* orchid. On the bedside table there was a “gentleman's guide” to the local red-light districts, translated into seven different languages. The crude map on the back and the vaguely Thai design on the polyester bedspread were the only clues to what city he was in this week.

Well, those and the girl.

She'd said her name was Katy. She was petite and slender, with a feathery bob haircut that had been dyed an odd reddish brown. Her face was wide and heart-shaped with a tiny, thin-lipped mouth. Earlier in the evening, she had used fuchsia lip liner to make that anime mouth twice as big, but it had quickly worn off over the course of their... encounter. Her heavy makeup didn't quite cover the scatter of acne on her cheekbones and forehead.

She'd looked a lot better under the multicolored bar lighting.

“Finished?” she asked, sitting up in bed behind him.

“Yeah.” He ran his fingers through his sweaty hair. “Finished.”

He watched her squeeze into her colorful scraps of clothing and jam her blistered feet into plastic platform heels. When she was dressed, she shrugged, slung her glittery purse over her shoulder, and left without saying goodbye.

* * *

Alone again, Peter found his mind wandering. He had been with a lot of different women from all over the world, but had a hard time making anything resembling a real, lasting connection with any of them. The few times he'd actually tried, it had inevitably gone wrong—sometimes horribly so. Eventually, he'd given up trying and resigned himself to perpetual bachelorhood.

With the occasional temporary company as needed, of course.

Most of his relationships had been so brief that he had little memory of them at all. With one exception—a girl he had met when he was just a kid. A blond girl who'd had something to do with his father's research in Florida. Even she was a blur, but he remembered her green eyes, and her drawings, and how she didn't really seem to fit in. *That* was something he could understand.

And something about tulips, a field of white tulips...

Where did that come from? he wondered, shaking his head as if that would dismiss the fleeting memory. Peter stood and padded over to the bathroom. It was cramped, windowless, and fully tiled—including the ceiling, which made it look kind of like a combination shower and toilet stall. *Or a tiled coffin.* There was a drain in the middle of the floor and a shower nozzle sticking out of a seemingly random spot on the wall.

If he angled that showerhead correctly, he could wash his hair while sitting on the john.

Instead, he opted for a more conventional, standing shower, his third since around noon, local time—when he'd awakened with a brutal hangover. It didn't seem possible to take enough showers in Bangkok. Before he could finish toweling off, though, he was already sweating again, the gritty, toxic breath of the city settling back into his pores like a houseguest who wouldn't leave.

He grabbed his knock-off Rolex from the nightstand, slipped it around his wrist and checked the time. Just after 1 a.m. He had a little over an hour and forty-five minutes to get everything in place, and get his ass where it needed to be for the 3 a.m. meet.

Once he was dressed in respectable but comfortable, unrestrictive clothes and his favorite high-end running shoes, he slid a pair of identical briefcases out from under the bed and set them side by side. He checked the contents of both cases several times and made a few minor adjustments to the weight, then snapped them both shut and headed out into the steamy Thailand night.

* * *

The Sweet Orchid Hotel was located right around the corner from the Soi Cowboy district. As he hit the street, Peter's brain was blasted with euphoric multi-sensory overload. Visually, it was a fever dream of throbbing neon signs and mirror-ball glitter, painting exposed skin and leering faces in eye-searing, unnatural colors.

His ears were assaulted by a dozen competing Thai and American pop songs all playing simultaneously, warring against the thumping, bass-heavy dance music that was blaring from the doorways of bars.

A miasma of clashing scents filled his lungs, sweat and perfume and spilled beer mingling with the meaty smoke and exotic spices, wafting from mobile grills serving late-night street food.

As he passed, bar girls in skimpy club wear tried to lure him in, waving English signs advertising cheap beer. Flushed and grinning Caucasian men reeled from bar to bar with their sunburned arms slung around each other's necks. Competing club touts called out in a variety of languages while stone-faced, silent bouncers broke up a sloppy, half-assed drunken shoving match and gave the bum's rush to a pickpocket who should have known better than to mess with the geese that laid the golden eggs.

Because Soi Cowboy was, for all its lurid tease and titillation, really just a sanitized and benign amusement park for foreign men. If you wanted a real walk on the wild side, there were plenty of sleazier, more dangerous areas in Bangkok where you could get your freak on. This place was relatively safe and non-threatening—an utterly artificial environment created solely for the purpose of separating tourists from their baht, yen, euros, or dollars.

Peter loved it.

He'd been travelling constantly, ever since he was a teenager—picking up odd jobs, engineering a variety of scams, and then moving on. Everywhere he went, he always found himself most attracted to the flashy, lurid, tourist-filled areas of the bustling cities. Because he felt inexplicably at home in places like this. Places that were no one's home, where everyone was a stranger from somewhere else. Places like this made him feel paradoxically at ease. Unnoticed.

Conversely, he hated small communities and rural areas where he was easily spotted as the blatant outsider. They reminded him far too much of the strange period of his childhood in which he'd found himself feeling like an alien in his own hometown.

As he walked the gaudy length of Soi Cowboy, he was just another big Caucasian guy from somewhere else, towering over gaggles of glammed-up farmers' daughters from backwater villages in the rural interior. Some of the bar girls he'd met were from as far away as Laos or Cambodia. After more than a dozen visits to this district, he'd met only one person who was actually born and raised in Bangkok, and that was Jaruk.

Jaruk was sharp and fiercely intelligent. A crackerjack hustler who could con a dollar out of the devil with one hand tied behind his back. He always had multiple schemes going at any given time, and was always willing to cut Peter in on a juicy setup. In exchange, Peter lent his American credibility to the pitch.

They'd met at the Classy Lady two years ago, and had been trying to run numbers on each other for about ten minutes before it had dawned on them that they were kindred spirits. Now Jaruk was Peter's local fixer, his go-to guy for any kind of action in Bangkok.

And Jaruk was going to be pissed when he realized that Peter wasn't going to cut him in on this latest deal. Sure, Peter was throwing his friend a healthy fee for the loan of a motorbike, a couple of cell phones, and a few discreet arrangements. But he'd been extremely squirrely about the exact nature of the transaction in question. He told himself that he was looking out for his friend, that he didn't want to expose Jaruk to the very real risks that were involved. But he knew better. It wasn't about that at all.

It was about the money.

It was about Big Eddie Guthrie.

If Peter cut Jaruk in on the deal, he wouldn't have enough left over to pay off Big Eddie. And if he didn't pay off Big Eddie soon, well... that wasn't something he wanted to think about. He had to stay focused on the job at hand.

"Here comes trouble."

Jaruk was standing at the back door of the Classy Lady, and spoke as Peter walked up, setting the two briefcases down on the pavement between his feet. A nearby pile of trash smelled like fish.

His English was flawless, with a slight British accent. He was short and wiry with a tousled, bed-head haircut and intense dark eyes like those of a peregrine falcon. He looked like a former teen idol gone bad, his good looks marred by years of hard living and a missing front tooth that had been knocked out by an angry Muay Thai champion.

But he more than made up for it with wit, charisma, and charm.

“How’s it hanging?” Jaruk asked, reaching out a scarred brown hand and slapping palms, then bumping fists with Peter.

“To my knees,” Peter replied with a smile.

“That’s not what I heard,” Jaruk said with a wink, extracting a cigarette from a crumpled pack and lighting up.

“Aw, man,” Peter said. “Your mom swore to me it would be our little secret.”

“My mother has been married six times,” Jaruk replied. “She would eat you alive.”

Peter laughed.

“How’s life at the Classy Lady?” he asked.

A topless girl in a pink, zebra-striped G-string staggered out through the back door, wobbling on her clear plastic heels and nearly crashing into Peter before she started throwing up into an overflowing trash barrel. Then she slumped down into the trash.

“Classy as ever,” Jaruk said, with a dryly raised eyebrow. He took a drag from the cigarette pinched between his forefinger and thumb. “But enough about me,” he added. “I want to talk about this big deal of yours. You’re not holding out on your old friend Jaruk, are you?”

“Trust me,” Peter said, fishing a cash-filled envelope out of his pants pocket. “The less you know about this one, the better.”

“When a guy like you says ‘trust me,’” Jaruk replied with a skeptical squint, “That usually means I shouldn’t.”

“Fair enough,” Peter said, holding out the envelope. “It’s just that I’m taking a hell of a risk on this one. I don’t want to put you in any more danger than you already are.”

He attempted to shore up his less-than-total sincerity by letting Jaruk see just a little bit of fear in his eyes. But once he allowed himself to think about how dangerous this deal really was, that fear started to feel real.

He dropped his gaze and looked away.

“Are you sure about this?” Jaruk asked, taking the envelope and making it disappear.

Am I? Peter wondered.

It didn’t matter. He didn’t have a choice.

“Sure I’m sure,” he said, looking his friend in the eye.

“Because if anything bad happened to you in my city,” Jaruk said, shooting him a look of stern warning, “then I’d be forced to admit that I actually care what happens to you.”

“*Chiew-chiew,*” Peter said with what he hoped was a relaxed, bemused smile on his face. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“So which is it?” Jaruk asked. “Too dangerous for me to know about, or not a big deal?” He laughed, and shook his head. “You know what, don’t answer that. You’re right, I don’t want to know.” He tossed a ring of keys, which Peter caught one-handed out of the air.

“Motorbike is there, at the end of the alley,” Jaruk said, pointing. “Cell phones are in the left saddle bag, clean, charged and ready to go. Also, I left you a little something extra. A present. Sounds like you’re going to need it.”

“You’re in my will,” Peter said, hand on his heart.

“Good,” Jaruk said. He pitched his cigarette butt into an oily puddle and turned to help the semi-conscious drunk girl back into the club. “At least I’ll get something out of this mysterious scam of yours.”

* * *

The motorbike was an orange-and-black Honda Click with hard, locking saddlebags. There was a holographic skull sticker on the left one. Peter unlocked it with a small key on the ring Jaruk had given him, and surveyed the contents.

As promised, three disposable cell phones—and the extra gift Jaruk had mentioned. Unsurprisingly, it turned out to be a Kimber 1911 Ultra Carry, and it came with a spare clip. Peter took out the pistol and two of the phones. He checked the gun, found it loaded, then reached around his back and stuck it down the sweaty waistband of his pants, covering it with the tail of his loosely fitting shirt.

He put the extra magazine and one of the two phones in his pockets, and used the other to make a call. Someone picked up immediately.

“*Moshi moshi.*”

The man on the other end spoke Japanese with a distinct Korean accent. They had compromised on Japanese because the man on the other end didn’t speak English. Peter had always had a gift for picking up languages, but his Korean was limited to a few amusingly off-color slang phrases that were good for making bar girls giggle—rarely useful during serious negotiations.

He confirmed the location of the meet, and assured the man on the other end of the line that everything was going according to plan. Then he ended the call and dialed a second number, switching to Russian. His Russian wasn’t as fluent as his Japanese, but he understood it better than he spoke, and he could speak well enough to get the message across.

“*Privet,*” a voice said. The person on the other end had a Chechen accent, and spoke with whispered, barely contained urgency, like a man making an obscene phone call. Talking to him made Peter’s skin crawl, but he kept his tone calm and friendly, telling him the same thing he’d just told the Korean.

When he ended the call, he dropped the phone to the ground, crushing it under his heel. He closed and locked the saddlebag, and then stacked and used a bungee cord to secure the two briefcases onto the package carrier. He took a moment to center himself, and let the surging adrenaline cycle through his system.

Then he mounted the motorbike, strapped the half-helmet under his chin, and keyed the machine to life, heading out toward the mouth of the alley.

As far as he was concerned, riding a motorbike was the only way to get around Southeast Asia, for a variety of reasons. It was easier to squeeze through narrow streets and zigzag through congested, erratic, and generally dangerous traffic. But for Peter, he just loved the raw *realness* of it. The feeling of independence, of the wind on his face and the olfactory overload of exotic scents both delicious and repulsive. Being in a limo or a car was like riding around in a fish tank, isolated in an air-conditioned bubble. Being on a motorbike made him feel alive, and he wanted to savor that feeling, drink it in.

Considering what he was about to do, he might never get another chance.



The Infinity Towers Hotel was located in the upscale Embassy Row neighborhood, surrounded by shopping malls, five-star restaurants, and exclusive nightclubs. A far cry from Soi Cowboy. The conjoined oval towers were designed to look like the infinity symbol, when viewed from above, but from Peter's lowly point of view as he pulled the motorbike around to the service entrance, their double-barreled shape was more reminiscent of an old side-by-side shotgun pointed into the starless sky.

He dismounted, took the cases off the package carrier, and handed the motorbike over to a twelve-or thirteen-year-old boy who was there waiting for it. The boy acknowledged him with a silent nod. Peter pressed a sweaty handful of baht into the kid's outstretched hand and told him in halting Thai not to park too far away.

A brace of young men in cooks' whites squatted against the wall by the service entrance, smoking and talking smack. They ignored Peter completely as he entered as nonchalantly as he could manage.

The door led into the narrow offshoot of a long, cement corridor that cut through the center of the west tower like an artery, providing stealthy access to all areas of the ground level. It allowed service personnel to appear—seemingly by magic—any time one of the esteemed guests knocked over a drink, or needed help finding discreet company, or asked for advice on where to buy cocaine or overpriced designer handbags.

To the left was a double door that led into the spicy sauna of the kitchen. To the right was the employee locker room, and as Peter passed, a trio of pretty young girls emerged, having just traded their drab maid uniforms for flashy club wear.

Once he reached the junction with the main corridor, Peter was greeted by a tiny, obsequious older man with a glossy black toupee and an immaculate cobalt-and-black Infinity Towers uniform. He flashed clearly fake white teeth in a smarmy smile, unleashing a cloud of strange breath that smelled as if he'd been drinking the blue liquid from that jar where the barber puts his combs.

"Good evening, Mr. McClane," the man said. "So glad to have you with us again."

Peter was going to have to kick Jaruk, and tell him to lay off the *Die*