

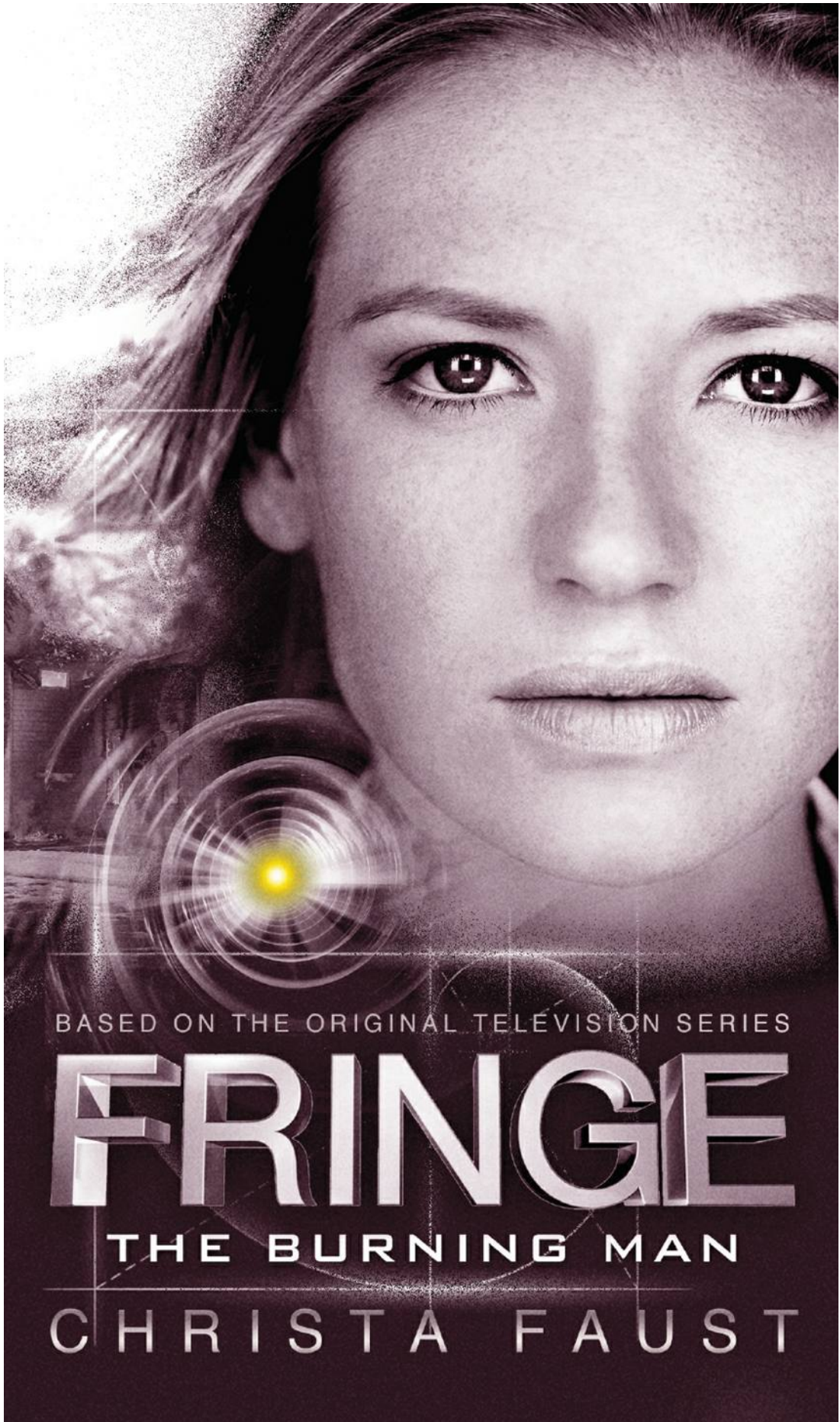


BASED ON THE ORIGINAL TELEVISION SERIES

FRINGE

THE BURNING MAN

CHRISTA FAUST



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ALSO AVAILABLE FROM CHRISTA FAUST AND TITAN BOOKS

FRINGE

THE ZODIAC PARADOX

SINS OF THE FATHER (OCTOBER 2013)

CHRISTA FAUST

FRINGE

THE BURNING MAN

TITAN BOOKS

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JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA

1982

Olivia was playing a game with the nice doctor. This new game had rubber blocks in different shapes and colors that had to be sorted based on whether or not they were the same as the one the doctor had picked. It was kind of fun at first, but she was starting to get sick of it, and wanted to hear a story instead.

She was happy to see her mommy come through the door, but she got even more excited when she saw her daddy there, too, standing back in the doorway.

“Daddy!” Olivia cried, dropping the yellow triangle she was holding and running to hug him.

But when she reached the doorway she stopped short, because the man in the doorway wasn’t her daddy at all. It was a different man, wearing her daddy’s special Marine clothes.

Olivia had never seen a grown-up man cry before, but that was exactly what the strange man in her daddy’s clothes did. Not real loud and snuffly like a kid would, but quietly.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Dunham,” he said softly to her mommy.

Her mommy picked her up then, and held her so that she was sitting up high on the big bump in her mommy’s tummy where her new brother or sister was sleeping. Her mommy was crying, too, as she kissed Olivia’s face and squeezed her way too hard.

“Can we have a minute alone with her, Doctor Bishop?” she asked the nice doctor.

“Certainly,” the doctor said. “Take your time.”

The nice doctor left the room, and Olivia started to feel panicky.

Whatever was going on, she didn't like it one bit.

"This is Lieutenant Kent," her mommy said. "He's your daddy's best friend, and he wants to tell you something really important, okay?"

Olivia nodded, but she wasn't really sure it was okay.

"Hi, sweetheart," the strange Marine man said. "Your daddy told me all about you."

Olivia turned her face shyly away from the stranger.

"Are you sure about this?" her mommy asked over the top of her head.

"He made me promise," the stranger said.

Her mommy nodded, rubbing Olivia's back. That felt good.

"Listen," the man said. "Your daddy gave me a message to give to you. He said he loves you more than anything, and that the world is much bigger than you think. Those were his exact words... His last words." His voice started sounding all funny, like maybe he was going to cry some more. "I don't know what he meant, but he made me promise to tell you that. So here I am."

Olivia didn't really understand anything the stranger was talking about, but what he was saying was making her mommy cry even harder, and that made her feel like crying, too.

"Where's my daddy?" Olivia asked. "I don't want you here." She reached out and shoved at the stranger's shoulder to push him away. "I want my daddy."

"Daddy..." her mommy said. "Daddy has gone away to heaven."

Olivia looked into her mommy's face, frowning.

"He's not in heaven," she said. "He's in Beirut!"

"Not any more, honey," her mommy said. "He left Beirut and went to go live in heaven with the angels."

"No!" Olivia said, squirming and struggling against her mommy's arms. "No you're *wrong*. He's coming home soon. He promised!"

Her mommy put her down and started talking in a low voice to the

man who wasn't her daddy. Then the nice doctor came back in, and her mommy talked to him, too.

That made her even angrier, so Olivia ran over to the table with the blocks on it and started picking them up and throwing them as hard as she could. Then she hid her face.

"Let me try talking to her," she heard the doctor say, but no one answered.

When Olivia looked back over at the door, her mother and the strange Marine man weren't there anymore.

Suddenly she was afraid. She ran to the door, banging on it with her fists.

"Where's my mommy?" she cried. "I want my mommy and daddy!"

"Can you tell me how you're feeling right now, Olive?" the doctor asked. "What happened to your daddy? What did your mother mean when she said he went to heaven?"

"Nothing!" Olivia said. "He's fine. He's doing a very important job in Beirut with his Marine friends but he'll be home soon. He's JUST FINE!"

The doctor went over to his machines and started doing stuff, turning knobs and flipping switches. He did that a lot, and it made her feel like she wasn't there. Then he turned back toward her.

"Do you understand what it means when I say that someone is dead, Olive?" he asked.

"I know what *dead* means," Olivia said. "Dead means you go down the toilet like Goldie the fish."

"Will you ever see Goldie again?"

Olivia frowned. That was a stupid question.

"No," she said. "Because when you go down the toilet, you don't ever come out again."

"That's right," the doctor said, and he looked pleased at her answer. "Once someone is dead, they can't come back."

He took out a funny tiara that had lights on it, and put it on her head

like she was a robot princess. It pinched, but she didn't try to take it off. One of the screens started showing a bunch of squiggly lines.

"How would you feel if I told you your father was dead, just like Goldie?" he asked.

"You're stupid," she said. "Daddy can't fit in the toilet!"

"I assure you," the doctor said, but he was looking at the machine. "It's true. Your daddy is dead, and he won't ever come back. That's what people mean when they say someone went to heaven."

"He is NOT dead," Olivia said. "You don't know *anything*."

"Why do you think your mother and Lieutenant Kent were crying?"

"Because..." Olivia clenched her fists, panic surging up the back of her throat and making it hard to breathe. "Because..."

"Tell me how you feel right now," the doctor said, looking at her, and then the machine.

"Shut up," she screeched. "*Shut up!* I hate you! I want to go home! I want my mommy!"

The pile of blocks on the floor by the table burst into sudden smoky flame.

MARCH 1986

Olivia lay in her bed, running her tongue over her split lip and listening to Rachel snore below her.

She didn't blame Doctor Walter for her busted lip. After all, he was only trying to help. He had no way of knowing that threatening to call social services would only make her stepfather angrier. Randall had started unbuckling his belt before she'd even gotten in the front door, cracking her across the face for "spreading their private family business all around town." He'd made it crystal clear that if she ever spoke to anybody again, about what went on in *their* house, she'd be sorry.

It was her own fault for asking Doctor Walter for help. She also knew, in her heart, that from now on the only person she could really count on was herself.

But as she lay there, she found herself thinking about that odd, lonely boy she'd met at the daycare center. His name had been Peter. She thought about the blimps, and white tulips, and about how strange and confusing the last few days had been.

Was it really possible to imagine herself somewhere else, or had she just made up the whole thing?

Because if it was true, if she really *could* imagine herself somewhere else, then why couldn't she do it right now? Why couldn't she take Rachel and disappear into another world, where there was no Randall?

She rolled over to look down at Rachel, sleeping on the lower trundle bed with one little hand curled against her cheek. Olivia took her sleeping sister's hand, and then squeezed her eyes closed, trying to picture the two of them lying on their backs in a never-ending field of white tulips, laughing and watching chubby white clouds and zeppelins drift across the bright blue sky.

She pictured Peter lying beside them, smiling and safe just like they were. She imagined him reaching out and taking her hand, comforting her.

Nothing happened.

“Livie?” Rachel whispered. “What are you doing?”

Olivia opened her eyes. Still in their same old bedroom. She let go of Rachel’s hand.

“Nothing,” she said. “Go back to sleep.”

Olivia turned away from Rachel and faced the wall, feeling a dark, bitter despair wash over her. What was the point of being able to imagine yourself into another world, if you couldn’t do it when you really needed to? If it had even happened at all. Maybe she had just imagined the whole thing.

She should have known it was too good to be true.

1

JUNE 1988

Jacksonville summer. Muggy and stagnant, the only breeze generated by the wings of mosquitos. Sweat pasted Randy's limp thinning hair to the back of his neck as he sat on the front porch in the late evening sun, rolling another wet beer can back and forth across his forehead.

It didn't help.

Neither did drinking the beer inside the cans, although that didn't stop Randy from trying.

"Randy...?"

That was Denise. Just hearing the sound of her whiny, nagging voice made his fingers curl into fists. The way she said his name, all stretched out and quivery, he knew what was coming. More of her bitchy little insults, disguised as questions.

Randy, don't you think you should slow down a little on them beers?

Randy, don't you think you maybe oughta try looking for a job tomorrow?

Randy, don't you think you're a worthless piece of trash who'll never amount to anything?

It didn't used to be this way with Denise. When he first met her, she used to be fun. A good-time party girl who could drink any man under the table. Back then she'd been the quintessential blond beach babe—leggy, tan and perfect, like she just stepped out of a Coppertone ad. She'd been looking for a walk on the wild side, after her uptight military husband had kicked the bucket, and Randy was just the bad boy to take her there. She'd climbed on the back of his Harley the night they'd met and never looked

back.

And the way she used to look up at him with those big blue eyes, like he was a rock star. Like he was the only man in the whole world.

Now she looked at him like he was some kind of alcoholic, just because she'd suddenly decided to stop drinking during the week. Like he was a worthless bum, even though he worked his ass off to support her and her two bratty kids. Okay, so maybe he didn't have some respectable nine-to-five type job, but he was out there hustling every day.

A little of this, a little of that. Dealing skunk weed to dumb-ass frat boys and tourists. Fencing stolen car stereos. Plus, he had a real good score lined up later that night. Something big. Something that'd change their lives and get them out of this dump. Something that would shut her whining mouth for good.

"Randy, honey," she said, pushing the creaking screen door open. "They're gonna shut the phone off tomorrow. Think you could go on down the office first thing and take care of this bill?"

"Tomorrow," Randy said, pausing to down the last of the beer. "Tomorrow I'll get you a brand-new phone in a brand-new house, how'd that be?"

"That's what you said last month," she said, and she gave him that look.

"Dammit, Denise," Randy said, crushing the beer can and tossing it out into the sandy front yard. "Why you always gotta be so negative?"

He turned to look at her, standing there in the doorway. She was dressed up all fancy in an acid-washed denim mini skirt, neon pink halter top, and high white heels. Pretty much everything hanging out like it was on sale. Hair all poofed up and bright pink lipstick like some kind of rock video tramp. He stood up, eyes narrow as he turned to face her.

"Where the *hell* you think you're going dressed like that?"

"I..." She took a tentative step back. "I told you it was Joelle's birthday tonight. Me and Lisa are throwing a little party for her down at

Sandie's. You said you'd watch the girls, remember?"

He stepped into the doorway, backing her into the sweltering house. It was a good ten degrees hotter inside. Air conditioner on the fritz again.

"And I'm supposed to believe you're dressed like a slut for some chick's birthday party?" He let the screen door close, then backed her up against the living room wall. "No, no, wait a minute. Doesn't that spic ex-boyfriend of yours work at Sandie's? What was his name? José?"

"Jorge," she stuttered. "But that was way back in high school. Years ago, Randy. He's married now, with kids."

"You're married with kids," he said. "Doesn't seem to stop you from whoring around behind my back, now does it?"

"Randy, please..."

"Here's what you're gonna do," he said, keeping his voice low and even. "You're gonna go back in the bedroom and put on some decent clothes that cover up that fat ass of yours, and then you're gonna stay right here in this house and take care of your own damn kids while I go out and make us a living. How's that sound?"

She was silent for a moment, and then her eyes got wide.

"I can't take this anymore!" she screeched, her voice turning high and grating. "I've got no life because of you and your crazy jealousy. I never go anywhere. I never do *anything*. It's like I'm in goddamn prison with you."

Her shrill voice drilled into Randy's aching head, going on and on and on. Blaming him for all her problems. Swearing and squawking just like a talking parrot. A whole lot of annoying noise that didn't mean anything. He could feel sweat dripping down the center of his back, and gathering under the rim of his ball cap. His head was pounding, the nice comfortable buzz he'd been working on swiftly decimated by her bitchy little tantrum.

"Maybe I *should* use my fat ass to find a new man," she was saying. "A real man—with a *job*."

Randy punched her in the face.

There was a nice, satisfying double crunch, first his fist hitting her face and then her head snapping back and hitting the wall behind her. She slid down the wall to the spotty carpet, knees to her chest and both hands covering her bleeding nose.

He shook out his throbbing right hand, flexing the fingers.

“Talk like that to me again,” he said, “Ever. I’ll kill you.”

He checked his watch. Nearly nine p.m. He really needed to get going if he was going to meet up with Tony for this big score.

There was a soft shuffling sound in the hallway and when he looked up he saw Denise’s older daughter. She was dressed in a thin, sweat-damp nightgown, her long blond hair loose around her narrow face. The younger kid was okay, pretty quiet and easy to ignore, but this older one was a pain in Randy’s ass. Just like her momma, always begging for the back of his hand. Always judging him.

She was judging him right now, staring at him like he was some kind of bad guy, when Denise was the one who started it.

“What the hell are you looking at?” he asked, glaring at her.

The girl didn’t respond, but she didn’t look away. She just stared at him with those spooky green eyes of hers. Like grown-up eyes in a little kid’s face. He raised his hand to her, but she didn’t flinch. She just narrowed her expression.

“To hell with you both,” he said, almost to himself. “Somebody has to make a living around here.”

He turned on his heel and left, slamming the screen door on the pathetic snuffling and boo-hooing of Denise’s little pity party.

* * *

It was dark when Randy pulled his sorry-ass pickup truck into the empty parking lot of the Save Rite, and there was only one other vehicle there.

Normally, he wouldn't be caught dead within a mile of a police prowler, but this was Tony's car, so Randy eased the pickup into the slot beside it and killed the engine.

Tony Orsini was the older brother of this girl Sherry he used to bang a few years back. Handsome son of a bitch with a square, comic-book hero jaw and a toothpaste commercial smile. He was five years older than Randy, but he still had a full head of thick, perfectly gelled black hair while Randy's was more like a dying lawn—thin, patchy and pale brown. Tony was the kind of guy who had a five o' clock shadow by noon. A real he-man type. Chicks couldn't get enough of him.

It took Randy a couple of months to start trusting Tony, since he was a cop and all. But it soon became clear that he was as crooked as they come. He was also a generous friend. Always picking up the tab when they went drinking, always sharing the coke he'd confiscated from some lowlife, and always offering up freebies from the working girls he kept out of jail.

Tony talked all the time about how the drug dealers he arrested had stacks of money just lying around, and how easy it would be to make that cash disappear. After all, if you rob a drug dealer, it's not like he's gonna call the cops. And even if he did, Tony *was* the cops.

All Tony needed was a good trustworthy partner. Someone he could count on to stay cool under pressure, and back him up on the score.

That's where Randy came in.

Randy got out of the pickup and slid into the passenger side of the prowler. It was nice and cool, air conditioning running at full blast. But even under the circumstances, being inside a cop car still made him sweat a little.

"You're late, Randall," Tony said, instead of a greeting.

"Sorry, man," Randy replied. "My old lady's been giving me grief all night. Practically had to chew my own leg off to get away. You'd think that bitch would be a little more appreciative, seeing as how I'm about to

make her rich and all.”

“Focus,” Tony said. “We got a big night ahead of us.” He looked over. “Let me see your gun.”

Randy felt a rush of hot blood to his face.

“Goddammit,” he said. “I knew I forgot something.”

Tony just stared at him, flat black eyes ice-cold in his stony, expressionless face.

“Get out,” Tony said.

“Now just hold on a second, Tony,” Randy began.

“I said get out.”

“Look, man,” Randy said, palms out. “I’m sorry. I just let that whiny bitch get to me, break my concentration. Give me a second chance, willya?”

“Now you listen to me, Randall,” Tony said, twisting a fistful of Randy’s sweaty T-shirt and pulling him close enough to kiss. “I’m trusting you with my life here. My life will literally be in your hands, do you understand that? If you screw this up, I’m a dead man.”

“I understand,” Randy said, trying to keep his voice steady. “Honest. It’s not a big deal. We can just swing back by my place and pick up the piece, okay? It won’t take any time at all.”

Tony didn’t say anything for a long, drawn out moment, leaving Randy to sweat in silence. Getting in on a score like this was by far the best and most important thing that had ever happened to Randy. No more smalltime action, this was his ticket to the big leagues. A score like this would change his life forever, and if he screwed it up before it even got off the ground, he didn’t think he could live with himself.

“All right,” Tony said finally, letting go of Randy’s shirt and putting the prowler in gear. “I’m gonna let it slide, just this once. But I expect better from you from here on out.”

“Absolutely,” Randy said, straightening his stretched out collar. “You bet. I won’t let you down. You can count on me, man.”