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# FRINGE

THE ZODIAC PARADOX

CHRISTA FAUST

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## **FRINGE**

**THE BURNING MAN (JULY 2013)**

**CHRISTA FAUST**

**FRINGE**

**THE ZODIAC PARADOX**

**TITAN BOOKS**

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# **PART ONE**

# 1

## SEPTEMBER 1968

He liked to kill the young men first.

Not because he was afraid of an act of retaliation, or heroism. This particular kid was a cocky little bastard, arm around the dull, dumpy blonde in the passenger seat like he owned her, but he'd be no match for Allan's superior physical strength and mental acumen.

They never were.

No, Allan Mather would kill the young man first because he wanted to show the blonde that no one could save her. He wanted to give her time to live inside that terrible moment of understanding before she met her own, inevitable end.

Just thinking it, about sharing that special, intimate moment with a new girl sent a flush of heat over the surface of his skin, warming the cool barrel of the Whitmer 9 mm he had tucked into the waistband of his faded fatigue pants.

It was an unexpected Indian summer night, probably the last hot night of the year. Yet there was just this one car. Just this one couple. When Allan first started hunting here, a popular make-out spot like Reiden Lake would look like a drive-in on a Saturday night. Dozens of cars, all packed with sweaty human vermin, offering shallow promises in exchange for meaningless animal copulations.

Now the cocky kid's souped-up '66 Edsel Lynx was the only vehicle parked at the eastern scenic overlook. Which showed just how cocky he was—and how stupid his date was. Because the "Lover's Lane" murders were all over the papers, and anyone with a lick of sense would have

stayed home. It was almost like they wanted to be there. Almost like destiny.

\* \* \*

A pair of young graduate students sat side by side on a rocky outcropping at the western edge of the lake, a small open cooler at their feet and a brand new red Coleman lantern casting a gentle glow across the rippling water. The autumn night was brisk, but comfortable.

The one on the left was clean cut and well dressed, his dark hair neatly combed into a mathematically perfect side part. Tall and rakish, he had a strong profile and a deep baritone voice that made everything he said seem weighty and significant. Particularly to female undergrads.

The one on the right looked like an unmade bed. With his long, frizzy, light brown hair, he might have been mistaken for a stylish British rock star, but in reality he only looked that way because he couldn't be bothered to cut or comb it. His clothes, on the other hand, were square and schizophrenically whimsical. A moth-eaten tweed Norfolk jacket that might have been new in 1929, worn over a hand-me-down athletic shirt featuring the name of a Catholic high school he never attended. His pants were too short, revealing wildly mismatched socks, one solid brown and the other bright blue argyle. Both of his scuffed dress shoes were untied.

"Listen, Belly," the one with the mismatched socks said. "While your argument for the inclusion of caffeine to provide an additional generalized arousal of the senses is both well reasoned and valid, I would counter that the unique balance between phosphoric acid and citric acid in grape Nehi will better complement the biosynthetic ergoline compound in our newly formulated pharmacological launchpad."

"Forget it, Walter," Bell replied. "I'd rather drink Denatonium Benzoate than grape Nehi. Besides, we must remain consistent in what we use as a supplement, so that the findings will be accurately measurable."

“Fine,” Walter said. “I reluctantly capitulate to the cola option... this time.” He grabbed a bottle of RC Cola from the cooler and popped the cap. “However, I want it on record that I felt it was *not* the ideal combination.”

“Duly noted.” Bell removed a tiny vial and a capped syringe from the inner pocket of his sport coat. “We’re going with the usual five hundred micrograms, right?”

“Right,” Walter replied, taking a swig. “The dosage also must remain consistent, so that any observable differences in the effect will be clearly attributable to variations in the formula.”

Bell nodded, uncapping the syringe and piercing the rubber top of the tiny vial. He tipped the vial upside down and drew out the correct quantity of the clear liquid. Walter held out his cola, and Bell inserted the needle into the neck of the bottle, squirting the contents of the syringe into the fizzy beverage.

Walter balanced his bottle on the rock beside him and opened a second cola for Bell. Bell dosed it like the first, and then took the bottle from Walter, pocketing the vial and syringe.

Walter raised his bottle.

“To paraphrase the great German physicist Max Born,” he said. “‘Here’s to building our road behind us as we proceed.’” He frowned and looked out over the dark water. “Or maybe that was Donovan.”

“*L’Chaim*,” Bell replied with a crooked grin, clinking his own bottle against Walter’s.

Walter nodded, and they lifted the bottles to their lips.

\* \* \*

The sky above Allan’s head was starless and blank, like the gray, dead screen of an unplugged television.

The still surface of Reiden Lake was the sky’s twin, just as dead.

Once the young man and woman were dead, the tableau would be

perfect.

Allan's night vision was already superb—sharp and clear, almost like that of a nocturnal animal—but now he was beginning to see and hear things even more clearly. The trees whispered, gossiping behind their crisscrossed branches. The rich, loamy dirt seemed to breathe under Allan's boots, and shadows were gathering behind him like shy children. The acid he had dropped was just starting to kick in.

He'd calculated the dose so that he would be peaking right around the time when the murder was complete, and he'd returned to the safety of his own hidden car to bask in the afterglow, relishing and reliving each perfectly executed moment. He kept a notebook in his glove box, and that's where he would compose his next epic letter for the local newspaper, describing the killing in glorious detail and taunting the hapless authorities.

If he was lucky, he might even get to watch the discovery of the bodies, and the investigation in process. That was his favorite part, watching the police and their pathetic, ineffectual flailing. It was like watching insects drowning in a gob of his spit.

It was time.

He was ready.

He pulled on his gloves, then slid the gun from his waistband and strode purposefully over to the passenger-side door of the Lynx.

The windows were down, and an infuriatingly banal pop song was bubbling out of the radio. The girl was wearing an unflattering, baggy floral print dress that looked like she'd borrowed it from a maiden aunt. Up close, it was clear that her blond bouffant was a cheap wig. Its coarse, synthetic texture was deeply disturbing to Allan's chemically enhanced mind, reminiscent of dead insect legs and abandoned cocoons.

The shadows around his ankles struck up a high-pitched keening. Something was wrong.

*Run*, the shadows cried.

The girl turned toward him in horrible, unnatural slow motion and he was frozen, riveted, unable to look away.

“Police,” she said. “Drop your weapon.”

There was a gun in her thick, hairy hand. She wasn't a girl at all. She was a man. A police officer. And so was her cocky date. Both of them were staring him down with steely eyes as cold and professional as the bores of their guns.

He was the one who'd let himself get too cocky, and now he would have to pay for his arrogance.

## 2

Walter looked longingly into the cooler, at a bottle of grape Nehi. Its gracious, almost feminine shape shimmered with lush condensation and he was suddenly convinced that this particular bottle contained an elixir of perfect, exquisite refreshment the likes of which had never been experienced by mere mortals. Its mysterious deep purple hue seemed profoundly significant.

Ordinary purple was at the very bottom of the CIE 1931 color space chromaticity diagram, and represented one of the limits of human color perception. Yet *this* purple seemed to contain elusive, twisting glints of a color that was just beyond the normal range. If he were to ingest such a color, he felt sure that it would instantly bond itself to the rhodopsin inside the photoreceptor cells of his retina, and endow him with a new, unprecedented kind of vision.

He reached for the bottle and it slipped, mercurylike, out of his grasp. Taunting him.

“Note,” Bell said, writing in a small red notebook. “Initial onset of hallucinogenic effect observed at...” He looked down at his watch. “10:17 p.m.”

“Fifty-four minutes from ingestion,” Walter said. “That’s almost twenty minutes faster than the previous formula.”

He looked back at the seductive bottle of grape Nehi and saw that it had transformed into a small, purpleskinned woman with white, finger-waved hair and a hat shaped like a bottle cap. She undulated gracefully amid the ice cubes, seemingly unaffected by the cold beneath her tiny bare feet. The other bottles became women, too, and within minutes the entire cooler had become a miniature Busby Berkeley musical number, complete

with synchronized swimming in the water from the melted ice.

While such a hallucination was cute and charming, it wasn't particularly significant, or unusual. Walter needed to focus, to meditate and look inward, to try and elevate his consciousness to a higher level.

He turned away from the cooler and looked out over the surface of Reiden Lake.

\* \* \*

A searing beam of light from a stealthy police zeppelin flooded the scene, half blinding Allan and causing a nauseating burst of agitated color around the edges of everything. His mounting anxiety was amplifying and intensifying the effect of the acid, but he had to keep it together. Had to use his superior intellect to beat these animals.

He knew what he had to do.

He dropped the gun and held up his hands.

"That's it," the cop in the wig said, reaching for the handle of the Lynx's door. "Now go on and back up. Nice and slow."

"Yes, sir," Allan said, smirking inside.

This was his chance.

He did as he was ordered, but cheated his step toward the overlook. There was a low log rail edging the parking area, then a thirty-foot drop down an eroding bank to the sand dunes and sawgrass of the small public beach below.

The two undercover cops started shouldering out of the car. For a split second, their attentions were divided. Their guns lost their aim in the shuffle.

Allan jumped.

A lesser man, a weaker man, might have broken his leg falling down that cliff. Or maybe even his neck.

Allan was not a lesser man.



He was in peak physical condition. Strong, powerful, and at the top of his game. Even in his altered state, he maintained perfect balance and presence of mind. As heavy as he was, he could be as graceful as a cat when he needed to be.

The slope wasn't entirely vertical—more like an eighty-five percent grade, he judged. He went down facing inward, hands crossed in front of his eyes and the steel toe tips of his combat boots digging into the crumbly clay to slow his descent. Still, it was a hard landing, buckling his knees and jarring his brain, and he crouched, gasping in the sawgrass for precious seconds.

His heart pounded unnaturally loud in his ears, Mandelbrot patterns spiraling in the corners of his eyes.

*Not very catlike at all*, he thought with irritation.

Above him, he could hear the pigs swearing. The dust kicked up by their frantic feet drifted out over the edge of the drop, transformed into glowing white ectoplasm lit by the dirigible's searchlight. Then a bewigged head peered over the edge, silhouetted in the luminous cloud.

"Where the hell is he?" one gruff voice called.

"I can't see a damn thing down there!" the other replied.

Just as Allan had planned. The blinding glare of the searchlight had turned the shadow of the cliff into impenetrable blackness. Within it, he was invisible.

"Come on, Charlie," the first pig said to the other. "We gotta find a way down."

Allan rose to his feet as the cop thudded off to the left, heading for the curving railroad-tie stair that led from the overlook to the beach. His knees sent spinning purple and red pinwheels of glowing pain into the night, lighting him up. He froze, suddenly certain that the police would be able to see his every step.

*Keep it together. It's just the acid. They can't see you.* He was the only one who could see the pain.

He limped to the right, hugging the base of the embankment and heading for cover of the pinewoods on the south edge of the beach. Before he got halfway there, the *basso profundo* rumble of the dirigible's engines fired up, sending throbbing black pulses through his brain. The police blimp was on the move, edging out over the beach. His sheltering shadow began to narrow.

Then there was no more shadow except for the lurching black shape directly below him. The white beam of light smashed down on his shoulders with the weight of a waterfall, slowing him, trying to crush him to his knees.

"Stop or we'll shoot!" a distant voice called, faint and nearly lost under the deep hum of the dirigible's engine.

Allan glanced back the way he had come. The cops had reached the beach and were running toward him, guns out, kicking up the sand with their piggy cloven feet.

There was a loud *crack*, then another. He heard something thump into the sand close to his left.

He picked up his pace, fighting through the pain in his battered knees.

\* \* \*

"There's something special about this place," Walter said. "Ever since I was a boy, I always felt this lake was... for lack of a better word, *magical*. That's why I brought you here, Belly. I wanted you to feel it, too."

"I..." Bell said, his forehead creasing. "I do. I feel it."

Walter had been a loner as a kid, singled out as weird and uncool, but not unhappy with his isolation. Social interactions always left him feeling anxious and awkward. He'd never really understood the point of friendship as defined by books and movies, and preferred to spend time alone in the woods or the library. Or here, at Reiden Lake, where his Uncle Henry had a cabin.

When he'd first met Bell, they'd clicked instantly, bonded by their love of organic chemistry, and of chess. But while Walter was grateful for the company, and enjoyed having someone with whom to share his more controversial theories on the use of consciousness-expanding drugs, he never felt like he really understood William.

Bell was charming. He knew what to say to girls and, more importantly, what *not* to say. He knew which tie would go with which shirt. He had a cool car and never got lost. He was Walter's only real friend, but he still seemed kind of like an alien, or a member of a different species.

Until that night.

That night, with their latest psychotropic formula coursing through their brains, Walter felt closer to Bell than he'd ever felt to anyone. Siamese twin close. The Hollywood cliché—of army buddies so tight they would take bullets for each other—suddenly made perfect sense to Walter.

Not only did Walter feel like he finally, truly understood his friend, but in that moment, he also felt completely understood by Bell. A feeling so monumental and unprecedented that it almost brought him to tears. Never once in his twenty-two years of life had he ever felt that level of understanding from another human being.

Not from family. Not from a woman. Not ever.

It was as if their skulls had become transparent, allowing the secret patterns of their thought processes to sync up in a mirrored burst of neurological fireworks. He looked at Bell, and heard that deep, distinctive voice even though his lips weren't moving, except for the slightest hint of a Mona Lisa smile.

*Unlike the previous blend, this formula seems to induce a profound empathy, bordering on telepathic.*

Still clinging to the rigid guide rails of scientific method, even at the height of his trip, he forced himself to double-check his own slippery perception.

“What did you say?” he asked Bell.

“I said,” Bell replied, his lips moving normally, “That unlike the previous blend, this formula seems to induce a profound empathy...” But he didn’t finish his sentence. Instead he stared toward the lake, a look of awestruck wonder washing over his face.

\* \* \*

Another bullet cracked off of a nearby rock.

“Ten more bodies,” Allan called out over his shoulder. “Ten more victims. Kill me now and you’ll never find them! Think of their families, never knowing what has become of their loved ones!”

It was a lie, of course. Allan *never* hid his work. But the police were fools, and easily manipulated.

“Sir?”

The voice was questioning, its owner desperate to be told what to do by someone in a position of authority. Hopeless without orders, like they all were.

“Awaiting orders, sir.” Another voice, another pig, equally flummoxed. Just like Allan knew they would be.

*Pathetic.*

“Hold your fire!” This new voice stronger, more cocksure. The boss pig. “Take him alive!”

And then there he was—a fat, pig-snouted silhouette, squealing orders from the cliff top, police lights edging everything with red and blue. Reinforcements had arrived. The bait had been taken.

With the police bullets held momentarily in check, Allan took advantage and broke for the pines at a dead run, keeping to the hard-packed sand and shale near the cliff. Behind him, the cops floundered in the loose sand of the beach, their sty-mates stumbling and squealing as they came stampeding down the steep embankment as if herded by