

IF IT WAS YOUR TIME
WOULD YOU BE READY?



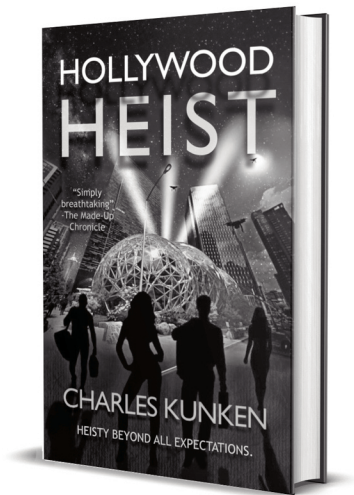
**A
HALF-EATEN
CROISSANT**

a short story

Charles Kunken

SPECIAL BONUS

Check out chapter 1 of our upcoming novel, *Hollywood Heist* in the back of this book.



Signup for the launch announcement at charleskunken.com/hollywoodheist.

A HALF-EATEN CROISSANT

CHARLES KUNKEN

MILK IN THE MATRIX

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Summary: John Eldridge gets some disturbing news that makes him question his existence. As he takes the day off he tests if this news might give him the opportunity to turn things around.

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If it was your time would you be ready?

A HALF-EATEN CROISSANT

His jaw dropped as he laid the obituary section down on the table and looked up at the wall.

John Eldridge was dead.

He pulled the paper close and read it again.

Not only was John Eldridge forty-seven years young but had a wife and two kids as well.

He was also pretty certain that John Eldridge was currently sitting at his kitchen table reading the newspaper with a half-eaten croissant left to enjoy.

His eyes looked up and to the left, the rest of him perfectly still. He patted himself on the chest and then got up to go check with his wife. She always had the last word.

“HONEY,” John yelled through the door, “whose turn is it to pick up the kids?”

He heard the squeak of the faucet over the fan. This was reassuring.

“Yours,” she said. Judy never messed up the carpool. He looked down the hall for another moment.

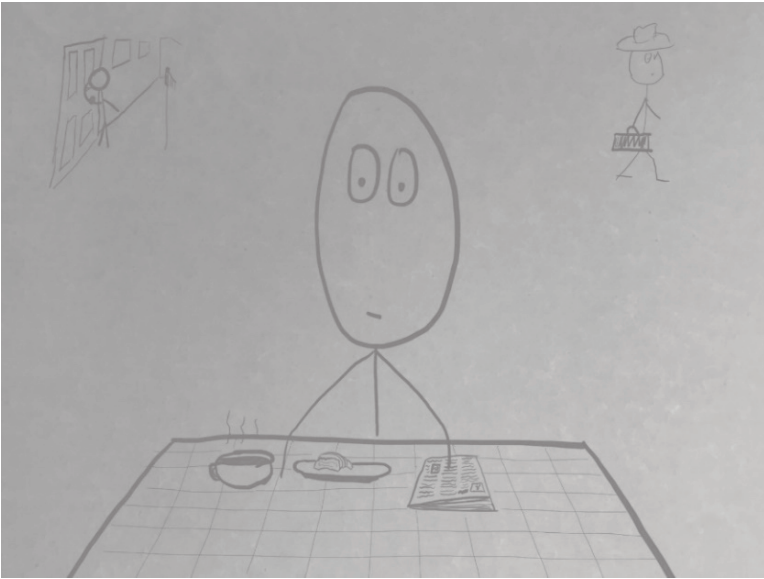
"I'm off to work."

"Honey," she called out.

John stopped.

"Don't forget to pick up some milk."

He went back downstairs, grabbed his keys, hat, and jacket, and made his way for the door. Just before leaving, he went back and grabbed the obituary section off the table, put it in his carry bag, and headed out.



AS HE MADE his way towards town, John eyed the bag sitting next to him on the front bench of the Buick. He scratched his chin and squinted out the windshield.

When he pulled up to the Doubleday Animations building the flag out front was standing at half-mast. His boss, a military man, must have already read the paper.

And at that John threw the Buick into reverse, rightly guessing that they wouldn't be expecting him in the office today.

THE DINER BAR

John's car clunked up to the old diner on the outside of town, which looked more like a tavern from the outside.

He took a seat at the counter (or bar) and glanced at the memorabilia hung randomly across the dusty walls—professional sports, local softball teams, the dart league championships, the most local game of all. Directly across from him behind the counter was an old photo of a vintage orange Mustang surrounded by a racing team each holding up a finger.

“Excuse me?”

When the voice interrupted John, he was studying the crew, hair drenched, all smiles, drinking bottles of something he couldn't quite make out

He ordered a coffee from the elder lady and began perusing the menu when he heard someone come busting in through the front door, the jingling bells signaling his arrival.

The newcomer saddled up a couple seats down and stuck out his hand. “Ron Carlson.”

John turned slowly and took in the hulking biker dude with handlebar mustache.

“John Eldridge.”

An older gentleman at the other end of the bar glanced over his newspaper in their direction.

“You’re a cartoonist?” the dude asked.

John did a double take.

“That’s your Buick out front, ain’t it? I saw the sticker.”

“Oh.” John nodded, a proud member of the Cartoonists Guild of America. “My main car is a Corvette.” He went back to reading the menu.

A coke arrived for the dude without having to order it, and he took a sip. “Sorry I’m late.”

John, studying the menu said, “Late for what?”

The dude looked at him quizzically, reached into his inside jacket pocket, and pulled out a crumpled note. He read it then looked back at John. “I’m here to take you on your trip.”

“You must have me confused,” said John. “I’m playing hooky from work,” he paused for a moment and looked up, “well, sort of. There was a misprint in the paper today..”

The dudes’ eyebrow shot up over the rim of his soda.

“Yeah, I might complain,” John continued. “But I’m taking some me time for now. Let everybody else sort it out for once.”

The dude’s mouth hung open, and his face went a little pale. He ran his hands through his hair. “Excuse me for a moment.”

John shrugged while the dude sent and received a text message on his flip phone. Once done, he zippered it back into his jacket and said, “I’m really sorry about that.”

John wasn’t looking his way.

“Must have been some confusion.”

They sat for a moment.

“May I ask,” said the dude, “at least whaddya think?”

“Hmm?” said John, putting the menu down and looking towards him.

“About the obituary. Whaddya think?”

“Eh,” John said not remembering that he’d mentioned the obituary. He bobbed his head side to side and began flicking a sugar packet.

Not wanting to push, the dude took to studying the memorabilia himself. He looked at the orange Mustang.

“You know how when people die,” John said as if he’d been thinking about it, “folks always say things like, ‘I just saw him yesterday. He was doing such and such?’” John clinked his spoon down and looked at the dude. “Well, I didn’t do anything yesterday.”

The dude stared back.

“At least nothing of note,” John said. “Or on any days before that. I’ve never done anything of note.” He looked back around. “All I’ve ever done was go where I’m told—school, college, work,” he looked back down reaching for the creamer, “picking up the milk.”

The dude listened.

“There’s not a lot to show for all the hard work,” John said. “I’ll be remembered for nothing.” He finished adding creamer and went back to the menu.

The dude looked up at the ceiling and said, “Well, that’s pretty fortunate then, isn’t it?”

John turned and raised his eyebrows. “What is?”

“Not many people get to read their own obituaries.” The dude chewed on some ice.

John mulled it over.

“Mind if I see?” the dude said.

John reached into his bag and slid the paper down the bar, folded to the page from the kitchen table.

The dude took a pair of reading glasses from his vest pocket and began to read. “You know,” said the dude without looking away, “there’s a place people eventually get to go that addresses a lot of your concerns.”

“Really?” John perked his ears.

“Yeah, it kind of explains things,” the dude continued, peering down through his glasses, not paying attention to his words. “Shows them how their lives had meaning. How they made their mark. That kind of stuff . . .”

“Where is it?” John interjected, now sitting upright.

The dude looked up at him.

“Ohh,” he said seeing John’s expression, “No, I just meant like, after you—”

“You gotta show me where it is.”

The dude paused, looking at John, his tongue resting in his cheek. He started shaking his head. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. I can’t.” He turned back to the paper. “I mean if it was a misprint—, I could lose my—” The dude began rubbing his neck. “I don’t think you could get in.”

“Forget what I said.” John’s voice was rising. “You’re right. This is my chance.”

“They won’t let you in if you’re not on the list,” the dude said.

“There’s no harm in trying.”

The dude didn’t respond as he searched for what to say next.

John looked the dude in the eye and gestured at the paper. “I can’t miss this chance.”

The dude looked back at John.

“Please,” John said.

The dude stared back. A hundred thoughts raced behind his eyes. He took a swig of Coke and then looked down, cursing himself quietly. He brought his finger to his lip and then suddenly looked up. “One condition.”

“Anything,” John exhaled as his shoulders dropped. He reached for the paper.

The dude smacked his palm down on top of it and looked John in the eye. “You can’t ever file that complaint.”

John looked back in surprise. “Why?”

“I just—,” said the dude, softening a little as he loosened his pressure on the paper, “I’m sure it was an honest mistake.”

“Okay,” John said looking at him for a moment, searching, “I promise.” He slid the paper out from under the dude’s grip.

“I can’t guarantee you’ll get in.”

“All we can do is try,” John said. He put the paper back into his bag, fastened the clasp, and gave it a pat.



TEN MINUTES LATER, he was speeding north at sixty-five miles an hour. The goggles helped, but his cheeks were flapping against his mouth.

The golden retriever shifted on his lap, so he wrapped his left arm around her tighter while gripping the handrail of the sidecar with his right. Maybe that obituary was prophetic after all.

John looked up at the dude and wondered why he couldn’t have just followed in the Buick. Who was this dude guy anyway?



But he pushed all that aside. He wasn't going to miss this chance, even if it meant riding shotgun with Hulk Hogan meets the Ghost of Christmas Past and heading towards the seedy part of town.

THE ROSE GARDEN

John and the dude took a long curvy road flanking the main entrance to the park and came up a wooded hill leading to the service lot in the back. The live music grew louder as they approached.

Once they parked, the sound of the dude's engine was replaced by the jazz band coming from the other side of the hedge rows. The hum of the crowd filled the spaces between notes.

"A music festival?" John asked.

"A food festival," dude corrected.

"Now, head in over that way." He pointed towards the line of temporary police gates at the end of the lot, like the ones they used in parades.

"Once you get in, head up to the Sheep's Meadow and find the tent with the old mystic."

John nodded.

"I'll meet you back here when you're done."



GUARDING the rear entrance (which was simply a three-foot opening in the gates) was a ten-year-old girl wearing an orange reflective vest.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“I’m, uhh—,” he said, “I’m trying to get into the park.”

“What’s your name?” she said looking down at her clipboard.

“John Eldridge.”

She flipped a couple of pages. “I’m afraid you’re not on the list.”

“Look, I’m having a pretty rough day.” He placed his hand over his bag.

“Sorry, mister. This entrance is for performers and staff only. If you’re not with any of the bands or vendors, you’ll have to go in the front.”

John looked back over his shoulder.

The girl peered around him to see what he was looking at. “You come with him?” she asked, gesturing over to the far side of the lot where the dude was parked, stretching his arms. The dog was lying on a small patch of grass.

“Uhh,” John stalled. “No?”

The dude, from the other side of the lot, saw them both looking his way.

The girl, looking across at the dude, stretched her arms out wide, palms up. *What the heck?*

The dude waved. *Sorry.*

She let out a groan, shaking her head. “Ron,” she muttered and wrote something down on her clipboard.

John looked confused.

“All right,” she said pulling a purple wristband from her back pocket. “Here’s the deal. Head in over here through the rear of the Rose Garden where the jazz band is playing.” She nodded behind her towards the hedges. “By the way, they’ve got

beer and wine all day in there, two for one. If you make your way to the far end, you'll find the exit to the rest of the park."

John made a move to enter.

"Mhmmph," she cleared her throat while rubbing her right thumb against her fingers.

John stretched his neck, not sure if he believed what he was seeing.

She didn't flinch. He reached for his wallet, looking sideways and fished out a bill. The girl raised her eyebrows.

John extended his hand. She took it, examined the five in the corner, and pushed it into the back pocket of her jeans. She then peeled the adhesive off the wristband and gestured for John to hold out his wrist. "Chop-chop."

John obeyed.

"To get to the Sheep's Meadow, you'll want to head towards the main stage at the softball fields by the front of the park," she continued. "If you can't find it, just follow the crowds."

John nodded as she stepped aside, not recalling having asked for directions.

"That's where you'll find the tents."

"Umm, thank you," he said and stepped through the opening of the gates.

"And remember," she called out as John made his way around the hedges to the Rose Garden, "if you go out the front, you can't get back in."



JOHN FOUND himself wandering the rows of tent stalls until he saw the sign for the mystic at the far end.

She sat on one of the two red metallic folding chairs, a crystal ball on a small table between them.

"Please state your name," she said.

"John Eldridge."

The mystic sat upright. "John Eldridge from the paper?"

"You read that?"

"I am so sorry to hear about your passing." She nodded. "Please sit down."

Lines formed between his eyebrows.

"You've come for answers," the woman said and gestured towards the chair. "What would you like to know?"

John looked around cautiously at the tapestries covering the sides of the tent and slowly took his seat. "Well, quite frankly, I wasn't so happy with the write-up today."

The mystic nodded as she looked into the crystal ball on her table. "A reasonable conclusion. I can see."

John shot her a sideways glance as she began to run her hands around it.

"Tell me more," she said.

"Well," he said, "I want to know how to make my mark."

"What does that mean?" she asked, continuing to rub the ball.

"It means . . ." John froze and looked at her for a moment. "It means, I guess I want to become known for something. I want to do something that people will remember me by when I'm gone."

"I see," she said. "So you want to get your work more widely known."

"Well," he said and then stopped. He opened his mouth to begin again but closed it. Then finally, he stated, "I actually don't have any work. Not of my own."

The mystic stopped running her hands and looked up. "So what do you want from me?" she asked. "You want me to just make you famous?"

"Can you do that?"

"Of course not," she said. "I work carnivals with a transparent bowling ball from a garage sale."

John looked at her confused.

“If you want to be remembered for something,” she said, “you’re going to have to do something worth remembering.”

John’s mouth was slightly agape.

“It’s not rocket surgery,” said the mystic.

John closed his mouth and then opened it again. “Yeah,” he said. “I just thought maybe there would be—”

“You thought there would be some magic?”

John looked down at his lap and then back to her. “Perhaps.”

She shook her head.

John sat for a moment and thought. He blew a puff of air out his nostrils and laughed. “Well then,” he said, slapping his hands on his knees to stand, “I guess I should get going.”

“Mhmmph,” she said glancing at the bucket on the stand beside her.

“Oh, right,” John said, going for his wallet. “How much for the reading?”

“Ninety dollars,” said the mystic.

“Ninety!”

She pointed to the sign out front of the tent. John took a step backwards and craned his neck. Frustrated, he stepped forward again.

“It’s not what I tell you that’s important,” she said. “It’s what you do with it.”

John found himself slowly fishing out his wallet again.

“It’ll mean more having made the investment,” she assured him.

John threw five bills down on the table.

“Need change?” she asked.

John scowled, collected his ten and walked away.



AS HE PACED towards the front gate, John stopped and ordered himself a cotton candy.

“How are you today sir?” the vendor asked as he twirled a little paper baton around the inside of his large metallic bowl.

“Well,” said John, “let’s see. At breakfast I read that I was pronounced dead, then I nearly lost my life riding shotgun in a circus mobile with some guy whom I’d never met before while his fifty-pound dog shed and drooled all over me, I got shaken down by a ten-year-old girl, and most recently I was the mark in an elaborate fortune-telling scam.”

The vendor glanced up at him and then went back to twirling.

“And my life has no significance.”

The vendor handed him his cotton candy and nodded. “That’ll be eleven bucks.”

“Eleven!”

The vendor didn’t respond.

“You know at least where I can catch a cab?”

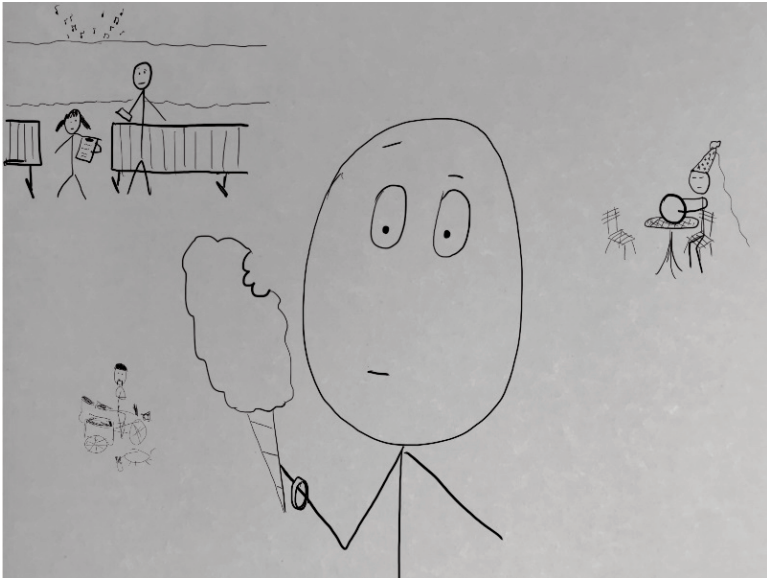
The vendor nodded in the direction of the front entrance. “I wouldn’t get one today, though,” he said. “Surge pricing. They’ll gouge you.”



JOHN SPEED-WALKED BACK towards the Rose Garden.

When he got to the rear entrance, the little girl had apparently packed it in for the day, but there sat the dude waiting for him at the other end of the lot, lounging, petting his dog, waiting without a care.

John marched over ready to give him a piece of his mind.



THE AVANT-GARDE

“Gotta stop for gas,” the dude yelled at the last bend before the diner.

John, saying nothing, continued hugging the dog.

They pulled off after the general store and stopped at a rusty old pump in front of the only other structure on this stretch of road, a huge dilapidated barn.

“C’mon,” the dude said after he cut the engine. “If you were a mark, would I have been waiting to give you a ride?”

The faded yellow sign read Louie’s Avant-Garde Garage. John let go of the dog and pushed himself out of the sidecar.

An older guy with grease-stained jeans emerged, wiping his hands on a rag. He came down to greet the dude, the last of a cig hanging off the side of his lip.

The dude introduced Louie to unhappy John.

Out of the corner of his eye, John noticed the Corvette on blocks inside the barn and forgot about his mood for an instant.

The dude shot Louie a quick nod.

“C’mon,” Louie said. “Let me show you around.”

He took a drag and flicked his cigarette into a large flower

pot by the barn door, overflowing to the brim with butts. “Welcome to the Avant-Garde,” he said while the dude stayed back filling up.

The barn was cavernous and cool and to John’s strange delight kind of smelt like a farm. It was made of old timbers and had a heavy wooden floor.

Louie showed him the Corvette and then weaved around some giant toolboxes where he had other sports cars in various stages of disarray. John noticed several large racing trophies stashed up in the rafters.

“Just finished this one last week,” Louie said, walking around a baby-blue car that was actually complete.

John watched as Louie touched up a spot of polish here, a blemish there, defects only he could see. John could tell he was in the presence of a professional.

“How long have you been doing this?” John asked.

“A long time,” Louie said standing back eyeing the hood.

“Did you always know what you wanted to do?”

“No.” Louie lit up a cigarette and took a drag.

He walked from around the car and nodded towards the back. “I got one more to show you.”

They started making their way to the back, and John said, “You seemed to have found your calling.”

Louie seemed to think about this for a moment. “When we’re younger, we get confused,” Louie began, “because we want the admiration of others. So instead of doing the work that satisfies our soul, we try to think of what would make others like us.”

They reached the back.

John thought about that as he glanced up at the rafters.

“What about these trophies?” he asked. “You gonna win any more?”

Louie smirked as he walked around to the other side of the covered car and took a drag off his cigarette. “At the end of the

day, we're not entitled to the fruits of our labor. Only the labor itself." He knelt down to untie a cord on the bottom of the cover.

"Even working on something you love for fifteen minutes can carry you through the day." His voice came from underneath the other side.

Louie stood and dusted his hands.

"And fifteen minutes a day is something you can be proud of." He gestured for John to help him pull off the cover.

"Now this one is a completely custom job," he said. "I haven't raced her yet, but I can tell you it's my best work."

Natural light poured down from the hayloft.

"Not another one like it in the world."

They pulled the cover back to reveal a bright orange Mustang.



BACK OUTSIDE, John remembered he had to pick up some milk and ran next door to grab a gallon at the general store. He was thinking about the Mustang as he paid. John wasn't about to burst Louie's bubble, but he knew he'd seen another one like it—the photo at the diner that very morning. The bell on the screen door jingled as he exited.

When he turned towards the garage the dude's bike was gone. He hadn't heard it start? The barn door was closed too.

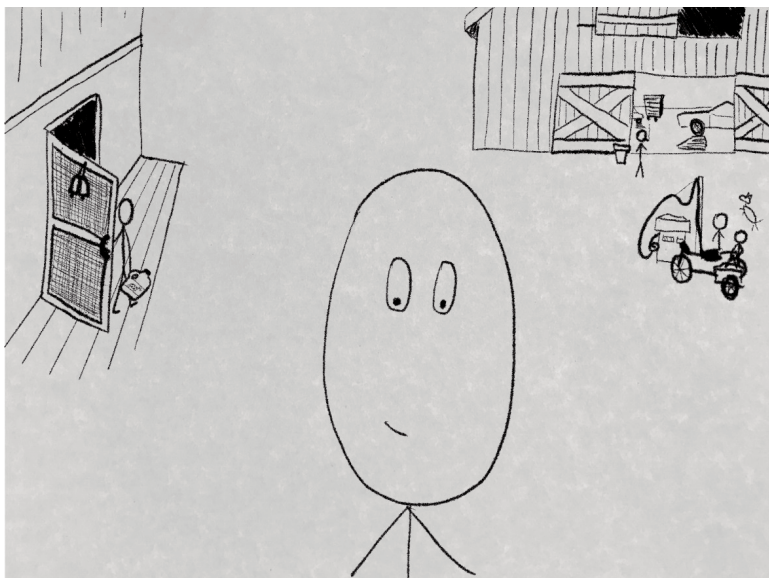
John walked over to where he had just been standing with Louie and the dude in front of the pump and looked around scratching his head. *The guys must have been in a rush.* The place looked like it had been boarded up for years rather than minutes.

John was in the mood for a stroll so he headed off on foot to retrieve his car from the diner just down the road.

Then conversation with Louie had had a calming effect on

him. He surmised that the dude was just trying to help, even if he did think it was a good idea to go visit that crackpot mystic. Good thing they happened to stop for gas.

As he walked down the road he realized he was set to be home fifteen minutes early before he had to go pick up the kids and for the first time all day John had a hop in his step.



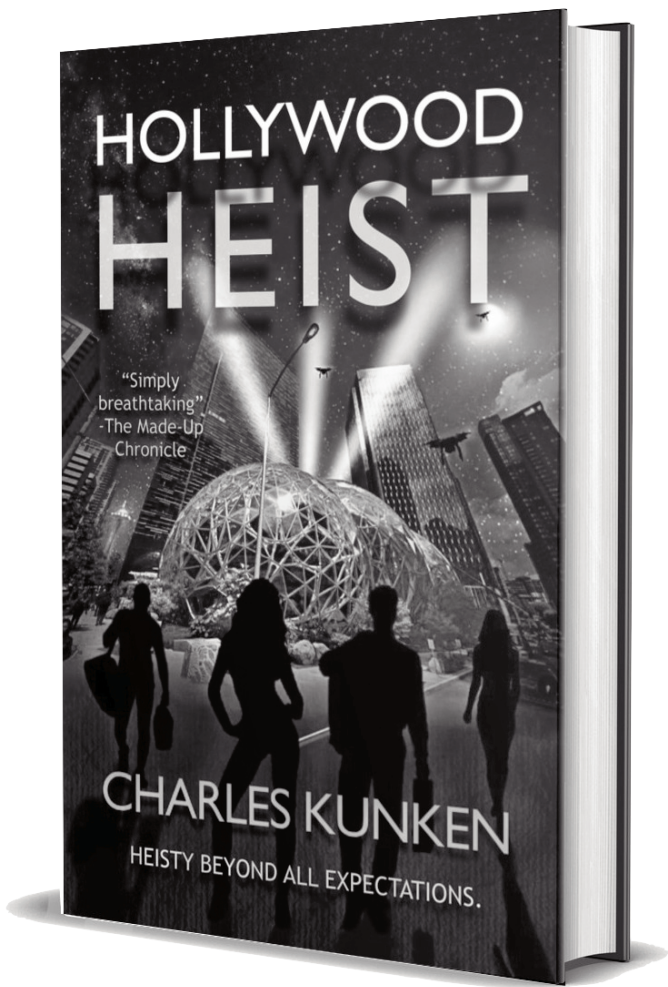
-The End-

HOLLYWOOD HEIST

"Simply
breathtaking".
-The Made-Up
Chronicle

CHARLES KUNKEN

HEISTY BEYOND ALL EXPECTATIONS.



SPECIAL BONUS

Read on for chapter 1 of *Hollywood Heist*.

CHAPTER 1

“Strange mission, getting caught.”

Oblong’s legs dangled thirty seven floors above Sixth Avenue below.

Mooch tapped his wrist. “It’s after three.”

Oblong took a drag off his cig and blew smoke at the snow-capped Olympics on the horizon of the Puget Sound. The Space Needle reflected off his shades.

“Back home we’d be having a glass of Château Simone Palette Rouge.” He said it in a thick Parisian accent.

Mooch scratched his scraggly beard and offered a piece of granola bar. Oblong shook his head.

“We’ll grab a coffee after,” Mooch said.

“What are you two doing up there?” A female voice came over the headsets. “We ain’t got all day.”

Mooch stuffed the last bite in his mouth and pulled firmly on the rope looping through the swivel arm over his head. With his weight on the line he edged off the parapet and spun around in mid-air.

“I’ll patch us in.” A small bucket of suds dangled beneath him. He squeezed the ascenders and zipped down out of sight.

Oblong took another puff and stubbed his smoke out on top of the wall. He tucked the butt into an outer pocket of his vest, pulled at his gloves, and checked the carabiners on his harness, then spun-kicked off the ledge and went zipping down after Mooch.

He bounced to a stop at the thirty-fifth where Mooch had already affixed a suction cup to the window and was squeegeeing away with his free hand.

"I'm not hearing anything," Nisha said.

"Hold on." Mooch adjusted the suction cup while continuing his swipes, careful of the black wire running up his sleeve. Twenty people sat around the conference table inside. "Anything now?"

"I think they're praying," Oblong said. He worked his squeegee around the glass.

A click came over the headsets followed by dead air. Seconds later Nisha came back on.

"Mooch, your brother asked if they're reading a document?"

"Tell Larry he's welcome to come on up here if he wants to have a look."

Oblong turned his head. "I knew he was the smart one."

"And all I got were these good looks." Mooch brushed the suds off his beard and re-dipped the squeegee.

"Would you two quit yacking and confirm the target," Nisha said. "Start the pattern."

Mooch and Oblong began the sequence they'd been shown. Squeegees and suction cups smacked against the glass.

"Looks like they're sitting around a piece of plywood," Oblong said.

"And wearing jeans." Mooch added. "You sure we're in the right place?"

"Yes," Nisha said. "It's the Day One building, corporate headquarters."

“I see her,” Mooch said. He adjusted his position. “She just got up from the table.”

“Has she seen you?” Nisha said.

“No idea.

“Alright, make the plant,” Nisha said. “Oblong, keep running the sequence.”

“Where are the Persian rugs?” Oblong said. “I thought this was like the biggest tech company in the world?”

“Maybe they’re meditating?” Mooch said. “I mean the people.”

He angled over to the right side of the window, transferred his squeegee, and pulled a pen-sized apparatus out of his pocket. It snapped to the metal frame as he touched it. He then angled the small wire over the edge of the glass and pressed a tiny button on the device.

“You think she’ll remember the signal?” Mooch said.

“Absolutely not.” Oblong replied.

“Alright, I’ve got a visual,” Nisha said.

Mooch clicked another button.

“Audio is good too. You guys get out of there. I’ll watch for the response.”

Oblong and Mooch were finishing up the windows when Nisha came back on.

“Guys, she just looked directly at the camera.”

“And?” Oblong said.

“We got the sign.”

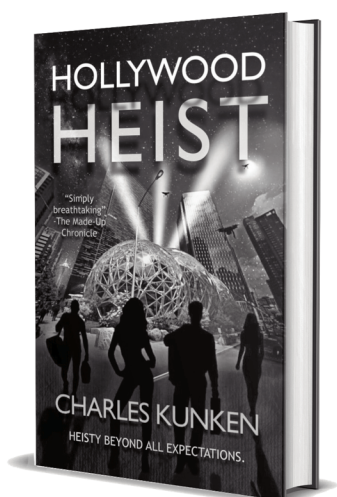
“Well I’ll be. Now what?”

“We wait for the call.”

Mooch reached for the ascenders and gave his partner a glance. “So, how about that coffee?”

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Signup for the launch announcement at
charleskunken.com/hollywoodheist.



Thank You!

If you have enjoyed this book, it would be tremendously helpful if you were able to leave a review for A Half-Eaten Croissant!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Charlie lives in Seattle, Washington and works in finance at Amazon. He rides an '88 Honda Hawk, and plays in a band with his wife, Nikki. They have two baby daughters who have watched over forty heist movies.

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