

The Punch Escrow

Tal M. Klein

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It's 2109. Teleportation coexists with Rome's iconic Vespa scooters, and the *Mona Lisa* has just disappeared. Following a plasma storm that knocks out the city's tech network, Joel Byram wakes up with a very loose grasp on time: "That solar storm hit the Earth with such force, it ionized the sky, creating a vast cloud of hyperactive electrons that bounced around inside the atmosphere above Italy." Of course, it gets worse, and soon Joel is plunged into a plot that only gets thicker.

The Punch Escrow is written in an appealing direct address: one part adventure journal, one part letter from the future. It's a clever way to explore this brave new world, and author Tal M. Klein makes the most of it, adding details in Joel's distinct, likeable voice. He is a salter, a low-level computer tech: "I imagine in your time, salting will have become as extinct as riverboat piloting, chauffeuring, or teaching, because apps will have outsmarted and replaced us in every conceivable way," Joel says. Whatever he learns in his lowly line of work makes him a threat to International Transport (IT), a massive corporation that controls the lines of communication in this new world. Darting between *The Bourne Identity* and *Blade Runner*, *The Punch Escrow* travels through time to unwind the global conspiracy theory. When Joel's wife, Sylvia, is implicated in the company's grab for power, questions arise. Whom can he trust? And is he the same person he was before he stepped into the teleporter?

Klein makes the most of Joel's character, and the sections written in his voice are zingy and funny. Footnotes peppered throughout explain changes in corporations, environment, technology, and other fine points of life in the future. Although the plot of *The Punch Escrow* is a fairly straight thriller—action sequences, missing artwork, and all—the futuristic setting and the wonder of discovering an alternate universe is a delight. Without leaning too heavily on long exposition, Klein has written a quick-witted, self-aware thriller that is addictive and fun.

Neatly combining sci-fi tropes and thriller pacing, *The Punch Escrow* is a terrific new novel that explores the terrifying side effects of the tech utopia we've been promised.

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