

## CONTRABAND - by TJ BEHE

*How FAR would YOU go to become socials' #1?*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine activists hacked FACEBOOK, and their computer virus STRIPPED ownership from Mark Zuckerberg - shifting the app's complete control to Kim Kardashian, Ronaldo, Justin Bieber or to whoever else is the most-followed influencer, in real time? Then imagine this all happened on the DARK WEB version - where financial rewards and unpoliced power is even higher. What do think people *could* do to get to #1?

This is the world of CONTRABAND. And in this world, mainstream social is DEAD! Sick of state censorship, sponsored spam, cancel culture and inciter-banning, everyone who's anyone is on the dark web.

And no one knows it better than Tucker Scott.

Rampant cyberbullying. Fake news trolling. Spying, voyeurism and privacy invasion. Contraband is this ruthless entrepreneurs' digital underground - where PROFIT-HUNGRY mobs prowl city streets filming violent events to satisfy society's insatiable demand for sensational content.

But when this virus hack gives Contraband control to any influencer with the most followers, it's complete CHAOS as everybody chases the money and fame of being #1!

Amongst this explosion of digital and real-life carnage, the story follows citizen journalist Toby who must extract clues from Contraband to find his girlfriend Charlotte - before her captors EXECUTE her live on the app. Along his journey he meets idealistic activist Jarvis, bullied tech innovator Plugger and the narcissist app-owning Tucker - each trying to *influence* Toby in their own way. But NO ONE'S true motivations are what they seem.

18 years ago, TJ Behe began writing a graphic novel about five people facing THIS CENTURY'S greatest tech convergence - online communities and video mobiles. What resulted was an accurate prediction of today's malignant world of social media - an eerie FORESHADOWING of today's tech-driven paranoia and online political mayhem.

Read Contraband and you might think: is this how social media began back then? Or perhaps this is an alternative world of how social turned out? Or maybe this is what social could BECOME?

Contraband is a chilling collection of ideas that in an earlier era would have seemed outrageous - but which are now RAMPANT in 2021. Hyperactive "happy slapping" kids filming violent, exploitative acts. Mobile-armed pro journalists rigging video stories to gain online fame. Secret messaging apps servicing both organised and white-collar criminals banned from Twitter. As Broken Frontiers says, Contraband is "as VISIONARY as the technology Behe writes about."

Contraband has been praised by >40 mainstream and independent reviewers including WIRED, the Beat, The FT, GamesRadar and ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY. It's a gripping tale where **FIGHT CLUB meets THE SOCIAL NETWORK** - and whilst there's plenty of meaningful public dialogue around the book's issues, above all Contraband is a fun, EXCITING story that entertains as much as it provokes thought. Contraband is a unique story that can't go away. And Contraband is a story for ANYONE on social media.

As the Comics Review recently said, "Oppressive, paranoid, violent and disturbing, this sublimely inventive yarn combines CRIME THRILLER with SPY MYSTERY and delivers a splendid sequence of byzantine futuristic shocks, deliciously delineated in a potently understated fashion....don't miss the opportunity to safely see the world that's coming... before it sees you!"

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## 2. CONTRABAND SYNOPSIS

It's London in 2004. The global epicentre of this century's most disruptive tech convergence - online communities and video mobiles. Was it the start of a positive society dynamic, rich community building - the strengthening of humanity?

*No way!* Tucker Scott got in there first.

Rampant cyberbullying. Fake news trolling. Spying, voyeurism and corporate techno-manipulation. This digital world is dominated by the dark web social app Contraband. More popular than anything before it, ultra-violent and sadistic videos dominate the streams letting viewers chat, vote and bet on the hottest clip. But its popularity comes at a cost as violence and privacy invasion plagues a society eager to incite and emulate the app's content. The authorities simply can't cope - but a righteous hacker sect has finally discovered a way to bring down Contraband.

Problem is, most people *want* to be popular on this social app - and citizen journalist Toby is no different. But when he's caught filming Contraband's owner Tucker, he's yanked into the ruthless entrepreneurs voyeur underground—an "urban theatre" where youths prowl neighbourhoods to illicit, stage and film violent events to satisfy viewers' insatiable desire for sensational content. Certain of his demise, Toby's told his life would only be spared only if led Tucker to his arch-enemy Charlotte.

When Toby tracks down Charlotte and fellow tech-savvy activist Jarvis, he finds both hell-bent on shutting Contraband down. Their plan to hack the app's control from Tucker and shift ownership to each top-ranked video influencer impresses Toby, but pressure mounts to lead Tucker to them. He's eager to save his own skin, although he can't help but feel drawn to Charlotte - and her drive to complete Jarvis' mission.

Despite Toby concealing their location, Tucker finds and kidnaps Charlotte - so Toby starts to use Contraband to track down the girl who was *finally* returning his affections. The more videos Tucker broadcasts of her abduction, the more people watch - and the more Toby wants to find her. Yet Charlotte is not all that she appears.

Jarvis' hack of Contraband completely backfires as people everywhere begin doing *anything* to reach number one and control the social app. And inevitably it's insider Charlotte who first gains ownership of Contraband. But instead of shutting it down, she continues broadcasting her wildly popular (and completely staged) violent abduction videos. And for maximum fame, she uses her control of Contraband to begin framing Toby for the murder of Tucker's right hand man.

*...and here's how does it ends:*

Millions of Contraband viewers watch as Toby finally finds Charlotte. And everyone's shocked to discover she's always co-controlled Contraband - alongside TUCKER! The anti-violence campaign, the faux channel sabotage, Toby's sensational real-time chase chase for Charlotte were all carefully STAGED to build hype and attract users to Contraband. And her final tactic to lock down top spot on Contraband? Play a video implicating Toby for Plugger's murder.

But Toby has a plan of his own. Just as she's about to play the video, Toby posts this same clip of him *admitting* to the crime - shooting his profile up to number one, giving him control of the app. His first act is revenge on Charlotte and Tucker - and watches the mob close in after offering a 50/50 revenue share to anyone sending in the most gruesome footage of their death.

Toby is all alone, on the run and implicated for a murder *he didn't even commit* - all for the fame, power and money of being number one on Contraband.

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### 3. CONTRABAND CHARACTERS

#### Tucker

Dark web entrepreneur and creator of Contraband, Tucker is the leanest, MEANEST social media machine. Void of empathy, stimulated by the demise of others, this ex-Special Ops contractor is obsessed with showcasing only the most vicious, violent and explicit content on his app. Cyberbullying, fake news trolling, voyeurism, privacy invasion, kidnapping, murder - this narcissist wants only the best stuff. Contraband is this ruthless entrepreneurs' digital underground - and he knows his hefty 50/50 revenue share will drive profit-hungry mobs to prowl city streets to incite and film radical events to satisfy society's growing demand for sensational content. An antagonist with looks and attitude of TRAINSPOTTING'S SICK BOY and ruthlessness of City of God's Little Dice, Tucker will use anything and anyone to maximise the success of Contraband.

#### Toby

A college drop-out with way too much time on his hand, Toby is a product of mainstream social media. A kind of cross between FIGHT CLUB'S JACK and Sal from On the Road Sal, he has few on and offline friends, craves any attention and will take his 15 seconds (or 10k likes) of fame - for any reason possible. However the dark web is a whole new ballgame for this self-proclaimed "citizen journalist", and one simple video recording of the wrong person (Tucker) leads to blackmail and threat of death. Surprisingly RESILIENT and seemingly brave (or naive?), Toby shows exceptional talent and patience at extracting clues from Contraband to find it's kidnapped star Charlotte before her planned live execution. But Toby is still at heart a product of modern social media. So when he learns hackers have given Contraband control to any top-ranked influencer, Toby ensures a clip incriminating him for murder (he didn't even commit) handing him the money, power - and most importantly - fame of being Contraband's new number one.

#### Charlotte

Straight up, NO-NONSENSE and super-focused Charlotte was the best Special Ops surveillance agent in Afghanistan. And she uses these traits effectively as an activist seeking to take down Contraband. A bit like MAGGIE from MILLION DOLLAR BABY and Free Guys' Molotov girl, Charlotte's actions appear to be valiantly guided by morality, common sense - and revenge for what Tucker did to her on their tour. She goes missing for weeks but reappears as a kidnap victim on Contraband, the dark web's first mobile channel broadcasting radical user-generated videos. Toby relies on clues from her videos, his knowledge of mobile and his past experiences with the girl. But she's no different to anyone else - like any other social media influencer, she wants popularity and is using these videos to draw in users. And when this desire for infamy gets derailed by the hack on Contraband, she CUNNINGLY adjusts her plans to become the app's number one influencer to give her complete control. But like everyone else, she naively underestimates the supposedly naive man she uses - eventually succumbs to Toby's clever actions to take her down.

#### Plugger

The brains of Contraband, ex-rugby player, tech genius (and soft-hearted) giant Plugger is owned by Tucker. He was the entrepreneurs' protective right hand man as Special Ops in Afghanistan - and this honorable chap actually saved Tucker when they were teens by killing his friend's assailant. But this is the secret Tucker uses to blackmail Plugger into building, managing and expanding the wealth of the dark web app. A bit like JOHN from GREEN MILE he's constantly bullied, ridiculed and abused - until his patience starts to wane. And then when his moral conscience finally kicks in, he releases one of social media's most disruptive hacks in history: handing ownership of Contraband to whoever ranks the top-ranked influencer. But really it's his naivety showing through here - as despite removing the app's control from Tucker, complete chaos ensues with people everywhere going any lengths to become number one.

#### Jarvis

Jarvis is dead set on shutting Contraband down. Previously muscular and clean cut, after incurring injuries (caused by Tucker) in Afghanistan he's skinny and weathered almost like TREVOR in the MACHINIST. He's very educated and seems a bit like a religious bloke, always wanting to do the right thing. And given his exceptional public speaking and knowledge of social media behaviour, Jarvis makes an ideal activist to expose societal issues caused by the Contraband app. Jarvis vehemently campaigns for reform to address how self-celebrity obsessed youths' use of privacy-invading camera phones has turned spy-cam video recording into a multi-billion dollar business. Like a 60's beatnik leader, he's built up an underground group of fellow technology activists eager to revert back to a time when social media didn't have such an influence on society. But he's too impatient and is far too blurred by revenge - so he also fails to see how big an impact the Contraband hack will have on society.

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#### 4. WHY WRITE CONTRABAND?

TJ Behe is really passionate about data privacy. He's never been happy about big tech making money from spying on his every move. And he's pretty good at predicting state identity abuses, publishing articles and reports on the rampant Chinese IP theft last decade - and the recent Covid crisis.

That said he's not really willing to sit around and watch digital privacy abuse happen around him. For over two decades the MBA-grad product innovator has built personal data and social media solutions in Europe and the US. His case studies have been taught at Harvard, Ivey & Copenhagen business schools. And he's launched an industry-recognised identity privacy solution with long-time friend Neil that can hold its own against data-harvesting tech giants like Microsoft and Experian.

TJ created Contraband as a sharp fictional commentary on how social media technology can control society. But then by wrapping in the opportunity for influencers to own and control the social app itself - he shows that a lot more than data privacy gets thrown out the window!

##### Previous Reviews

"Behe's dialogue brings a hip, HYPER-REAL ENERGY to his plot, while Elliot's deceptively plain artwork evokes a shabby world of compromised morals." Financial Times

"Behe's critique of the public's willingness to watch all manner of depravity is a righteous, if not an original, one." Entertainment Weekly

"The sci-fi thriller unfolds amidst VENGEFUL relationships, insatiable desire, public outrage and mobiles that pack 1,000-volt electric nodes, pepper spray capability - Steve Jobs take note!" Wired

(see [www.contrabandgraphicnovel.com/copy-of-previews](http://www.contrabandgraphicnovel.com/copy-of-previews))

##### Recent Reviews

"Part cyberpunk, part crime thriller, Contraband is a refreshing take on both that shows writer TJ Behe has a good grasp on what makes for a GREAT STORY." Nerdy

"Set in a bleak world where people are more interested in views than practically anything else (which is actually QUITE BELIEVABLE), it's a wild action movie about a hellish life in a soulless world" - Florida Geek Scene

"Twelve years ago, Contraband could be marketed as science fiction, extrapolating on how mobile phones with cameras and the ability to share high resolution videos might develop into something nasty. Now we're living in that nasty world, it's a PRESENT DAY THRILLER that still has much to say about the ethics of living with unregulated social media platforms." Bear Alley

"It does remind me a bit of BLACK MIRROR, but I hesitate to compare the two because (a) the original book predates the TV series by three years, and (b) this is much better. I like Contraband quite a bit. It's entertaining and interesting throughout, and delivers a satisfying ending that caps everything off in a perfect way. I am also impressed with how PRECISE the core idea is; in 2008 it probably came across as a bit of an oddity, but in 2021 it feels like sharp social commentary." Kelvin Green

"As social media takes over more of people's lives - willing to go to EXTREMES to be influencers and keep their profile high, Contraband is an interesting look at what lengths people would go to." Geeky Brummie

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## 5. CONTRABAND GRAPHIC NOVEL DETAILS

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