

# code 44

IF ROGUE => DELETE

A NOVEL BY

S. D. CROCKETT

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***Dedicated to the journalists and  
whistleblowers, the unsung heroes.***



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# chapter 1

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Nick was thick into the game when a sense of doom crept over him—he didn't like his choice: save himself or save humanity. A flash of yellow exploded into Nick's vision. Fire. As he aimed his arrow, he heard a crunch behind him. He could see the castle up ahead. Another attacker. He pulled back the arrow. Before he could sling, a husky man fell with one gruesome shot between his eyes. Who had killed him?

Nick lost sight of his teammates. Jeremy hunched low in the bushes. The other guys, Sam and Victor, remained out of sight except for a slight glint off their silver armor. The intruding army had come out of nowhere. Behind him, a noise.

Nick swung around.

Jeremy.

His heart skipped a beat. *Damnit.*

"Don't sneak up on me like that!" Nick snapped.

"I'm trying to save your ass. Come on, let's get out of here," Jeremy insisted.

"We're so close. We can't retreat. If we don't get the key, we won't get to the next level."

“The enemy is everywhere. We need to be in a better position to grab it. Let’s get reinforcements first.”

No way. Nick wasn’t going to listen to him. The team was slowing him down. They were too careful. “Screw it, I’m going in.”

“Don’t! You’ll get us all killed if you reach for it now,” Jeremy called out.

Nick spotted the golden key sitting on the moss-covered rock. To hell with it. He dashed into the forest, throwing fireballs at figures around him like a maniac, then dove for the key. The glimmering gold slipped through his fingers. A piercing scream came from behind.

Nick spun around and saw Jeremy fall to the ground. He had been hit by enemy fire.

Nick rushed over to him.

Blood gurgled out of Jeremy’s mouth. “You selfish prick,” he muttered.

Nick removed his VR headset. Where did he go? He looked down. Joker stayed down on the ground to prove his point.

“You always put yourself first, you know that?” Jeremy uttered, pretending to lay there lifeless.

“I’m trying to win,” Nick clarified.

Jeremy finally lifted his headset. “You’re the reason no one wants to play on our team.”

“I was trying to save humanity. It’s just a game. Come on.” Nick stood up with an outstretched hand for Jeremy to take.

Jeremy ignored Nick’s offer, curled himself up by his abs, and jumped up to his feet. His Navy training never left him. Damn bastard had always been more athletic.

“Yeah, at the cost of getting your teammates killed,” Jeremy reminded him. “You know I saved your life when we were kids. I dragged you out of that lake, and yet you get me killed every time we play this game.” He made off through the lobby and dumped his headset into the bin.

Nick threw his headset into the pile after Jeremy, noticing the “B” in BrainShare Labs had faded on the Virtual Reality Recreation sign as he ran to catch up. Ahead, Jeremy approached Nick’s black Tesla, strategically parked in the far corner of the lot. With Nick not far behind, the car turned on, anticipating his approach and the doors zoomed open.

“I can give you a ride home, but I need to get Emily’s gift before going back to work,” Nick said, falling into pace beside his friend.

“You mess up again?”

“It’s our two-year anniversary. She likes to celebrate these things.”

“You proposing?”

Nick scoured Jeremy’s face. His best friend liked to push his buttons, ever since they were young.

“You know she’s waiting for a ring, right?” Jeremy hopped into the passenger seat.

“She knows I don’t want marriage or kids.” Nick slid behind the wheel. A rush of cold fall air rushed in before the door shut. He spied the dark lenses of the four cameras perched high above the parking lot staring back at him. Facial recognition cameras were everywhere. He then noticed the same bearded man, disheveled, dirty, stared at him from the street corner where he held a sign that read, “Privacy Matters, Say No to the Chip.” Poor guy was always there.

Nick instructed the car, “Go to Georgetown Jewelry.”

“Okay, Nick,” a woman’s sultry voice echoed from the speakers. The self-driving car backed up and slowly maneuvered through the crowded parking lot while Nick scanned his work emails on the car’s dashboard.

“That’s your problem man,” Jeremy said. “You’re too selfish.”

“And you aren’t?” Nick shot back.

“I’m extremely flawed, but that’s not my problem. You don’t volunteer. Your whole life is work. You don’t even have pets.”

“I take care of Lola,” Nick protested.

“Emily’s dog?” Jeremy asked. “You’re not even that nice to her. How

many times have you walked her? I bet you can't count that on your hands."

"It's Emily's dog."

"See, that's what I'm talking about," he said, trying to prove his point.

"Slow down," Nick said to the car. He reached into his wallet and pulled out a twenty. "Window, down."

The window rolled down and the car came to a stop in front of the homeless man. Nick hoped the guy was sane. It was the first time he gave him money. "Here you go, man."

The man leaned forward and snatched the bill. "Say no to the chip."

"You did that to prove me wrong," Jeremy said.

"Not true." Nick smiled, pushed the accelerate button and the car sped off.



"Surprise!" a crowd of employees shouted in unison.

Nick stopped in his tracks as red and white balloons sprang upwards amidst a room of smiling faces. Somewhere in the large office hall, a cork popped.

Embarrassment spread through Nick. He knew he was going to be put in the spotlight and disliked it, yet he flashed a self-assured smile. Best in his class at Stanford and now Chief Technology Officer of Hospitality Inc., and he still didn't enjoy the attention.

His boss Bill approached. "You need to choose a chip before the NSA team arrives tomorrow. If we're asking our employees to be chipped, I can't have you be the holdout. It's bad optics."

Nick bristled. Before he could respond, Bill clanked a spoon on his champagne glass.

The room's chatter quieted, all eyes on Bill.

"We're here to celebrate Nick Winston, our hailed CTO," Bill

announced. “Not only has it been a great year for Hospitality, with nearly ten billion hotel rooms booked this year, but in his spare time, Nick created LightHorse, a proactive AI firewall that has everyone talking. Clearly Nick doesn’t have enough work to do around here.”

A few chuckles rose from the crowd. Nick forced a smile.

Emily appeared to his left, winked, and handed him a glass of champagne. He caught a glimmer in her green eyes. She probably planned this whole thing. Her specialty was to make everything look easy—like that time she ran a twenty-mile marathon and then afterwards still cooked a full five-course meal for their friends. Always on top of it.

“Hailed by the *New York Times* as one of the best inventions in cyber security, LightHorse uses AI to fight itself, protecting our devices, and us, in the tangle of the Internet of Things.” Bill continued in his gravelly voice. “*Wired* magazine hailed him saying, ‘The tech world is calling it a revolution. What blockchain did for finance, LightHorse is doing for cyber security.’ I could go on, but I won’t. Nick, your success is our success. You’re making us look good, and you’re making our company safer, so we’ll keep you on...for now.”

The room erupted in laughter.

Nick took it in—what a dog and pony show.

Bill raised his glass. “A toast to you, Nick.”

Everyone lifted champagne flutes. Clinks echoed throughout the open space.

“You really shouldn’t have,” Nick said, a pointed remark specifically for Bill. The toast was an employee morale booster, nothing more. “I appreciate all of you coming together to do this for me. It means a lot. As you may know, I’ve been at this company for eleven years, and I am truly grateful to work with such a talented group of people. Thank you.”

“See everyone, Nick’s trying to upstage me with a more eloquent message,” Bill shouted. “Typical.”

Laughs rippled throughout followed by a few claps and whistles.

“Alright everyone, as your CEO, I say enjoy! But one drink only. We still have work to do.” Bill stepped down from the small stage to stand by Nick, leaned close to his ear, and whispered, “Choose a chip by tomorrow.”

“Are you going to take the chip, Bill?”

“I’m not going in circles with you on this.” Bill’s jaw tightened causing his second chin to jiggle. “Just decide.”

Bill turned his fat, slightly slumped body and pushed through the crowd toward the door.

Nick felt a hand on his arm.

“Don’t kill me. I know you don’t like attention like this. It was Bill’s idea. I just helped,” Emily confessed.

“The jerk just threatened to fire me.” Nick took a swig of his champagne and slung a few smiles at people.

“The chip again?” she asked.

“What else?”

“You can work anywhere now,” Emily assured him. “Let’s talk about it tonight. This is a celebration, remember?” She quickly pecked him on the cheek.

“I don’t like ultimatums.”

“Trust me, I know.” She smirked and walked away.



Nick headed back to his office with a slight rush to his head. The drink had kicked in. As he approached his desk, he glanced at the photo of him and his grandfather on their last fishing trip. *Rest in peace.*

Muffled chants seeped into the building, drawing his attention to the window. From the eighth floor, Nick peered down to see the protestors, punching signs in the air and chanting, “Privacy matters! Privacy matters!”

Ever since Hospitality decided to be the poster child for the

government's chip incentive program, privacy activists protested almost every day. Nothing new for Washington D.C. He would have joined them if he didn't have so much money on the line. If he left before the company went public, he'd risk not cashing out. But he shuddered to think of a neural implant in his forehead.

"Shades," he commanded.

An opaque metal plate moved down the glass wall. Couldn't be too careful. China's latest corporate espionage scandals populated the headlines. Cameras were everywhere—in trees, drones, people's foreheads.

Nick called out, "Shop BrainShare chips."

His desktop image appeared on his office wall.

"Hi Nick," a soothing woman's voice responded. "Here are some brain chips at BrainShare.gov that you might like."

Nick remembered the headline that day—the largest social network and search engine were now one. Then came the announcement BrainShare had partnered with the government to make the neural implants, and that's when all hell broke loose. That was then, this is now. There was still an uproar, but most people just accepted it.

The algorithm sped to customize his results based on age, interests, Internet searches, and phone conversations. Share had been eavesdropping for years and that, too, had become accepted. Between the two companies, they knew everything about him, and his info was sold to the highest bidder. And now they wanted to stick a chip in him to access his body, his brain.

Nick squinted at the long list of implants displayed in front of him. He approached the wall and touched the chip at the top of the selection.

"Maximus, chip #12," the woman's melodious voice flooded the room, "comes with Showtime, HBO, and Netflix Originals, as well as unlimited ESPN. Full access to virtual reality experiences at no additional cost. Health benefits include greater stamina due to slow-release testosterone, as needed. Other health benefits available."

Nick swiped again.

“Caligula, chip #13, for men only. Comes pre-bundled with Fox, HBO, YouTube Exclusives, Showtime, and the Film Channel. Health Benefits include intravenous Viagra on demand, slow-release endorphins to treat depression, and early detection of prostate cancer. Periodic upgrade for additional medical benefits.”

A terrible unease crawled over him. He'd either keep his integrity and resign or stay at the company, take the chip, and make millions.

A buzzing sound broke his concentration. An encrypted message appeared on his Watch.

Odd. It was old-school code he recognized from ten years ago. Intrigued and slightly confounded, he pushed a button on his Watch and waited for it to unscramble until it finally decrypted:

*I have information you want.*

Nick frowned, then quickly deleted it. *Spam.*

The screens in his office immediately shut off.

What the hell? Nick grabbed the remote from his desk and punched the power button. Nothing.

“Reception,” he called out. The phone dialed, so the power wasn't completely out.

An unease crawled over him.

“Yes, Nick?” the receptionist asked.

“Did we just have a blackout?”

“I'm not sure what you mean.” She seemed confused.

“Did the electricity just go off in certain parts of the building? My computers and screens lost power.”

Another message popped on his Watch: *Glad we got your attention. We need to talk. You have a choice to do the right thing. Otherwise, we're all in danger. Do you understand?*

“We haven't heard of anything, but we can send facilities up there,” the receptionist finally responded. “Nick?”

Nick hung up. A surge of panic swept over him. Nick dictated into his Watch.

*I don't understand. What do you want?*

He waited for a response.

His pulse sped up as he incessantly punched the power button on the remote to get the screens working again.

An answering ping.

He looked at his Watch.

*The truth about your collusion with the NSA.*