

THE GREAT RESIST

FISHER SERIES
BOOK ONE

JC BLOM

BRAVENEWBOOKS

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THE GREAT RESIST, by J.C. Blom

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The lid of his laptop provided some counterpoint, and the keyboard lit up like the eyes of a green dragon. He did not get a chance to log in, for in a flash, a picture appeared, filling the entire screen and flickering, calling out that danger was imminent. Drops of sweat appeared on his forehead.

Hacked again! Another photo...

Annoyed, he pushed the laptop away. His glasses clattered to the floor under the desk. He pushed his hands off against the desk, causing his chair to ride backwards hard, and came to a halt with a bang to the bookcase, precisely next to the shelf on which the bottles stood. In an automatic motion, he reached for his name-sakes and two best friends with a swing: John Barr and Johnnie Walker. Using the napkin meant for a damp bottle of champagne, he wiped his forehead and lifted the lid of the silver bucket with the gold logo of Fisher Pharmaceuticals. The ice cubes tinkled pleasantly against the glass. The burning liquid not only numbed his mouth. His head stilled, eyes glancing around nervously as if

the culprit was hidden in one of the bookcases that reached up to the high ceiling adorned with ornamental mouldings, all custom-made to match the style of his stature and character. The picture stuck in his memory like a fly on a sticky fly trap.

That lout! What does he want to achieve with this now? Movies went by in his mind, showing chases by paparazzi and frenzied people bivouacked in front of his house. And on top of that came this daily ritual; being chased by photos that appeared on all his devices.

His inside pocket vibrated. Disoriented by the alcohol, he clumsily reached for his cell phone.

“Hey John, what’s up?”

“Hey Philip boy, how good of you to call. Now that you ask..., it’s terrible.” He looked again at the ice circling in the golden liquid and wondered if it was wise to answer the phone when he was in such a state.

“Tell...”

“As I told you before, those pictures popping up on all my devices, you know...?”

“Yes, you told me that the other day.”

“I’ve changed my passwords several times, and it keeps going on. Even an IT company can’t trace the hacker.”

“Boy, that’s a good one, then.”

“Indeed... I would have liked to have employed one of those in the past,” John said, sighing, “I feel trapped in my own house.”

“In that respect, you’re not alone. There are millions of people in quarantine.” It remained silent.

“Sorry, but I can’t feel sorry for you, John. I can only stand behind my clients who are quite damaged. You will have to pull yourself together and put things in order.”

John took another sip. “If only it were that simple.” His voice

cracked. He cleared his throat and coughed a few times as he held the phone high above his head and continued, “Drones are flying over the house here, and I don’t know by God who is watching me, whether they are good or bad. I still can’t get a clear picture of how it happened.”

“It’s about time, John.” Said Philip gruffly and without a shred of sympathy. “We’re three years old, and nothing has progressed. You need to get yourself under control, or I can’t keep doing this business for you.”

John groaned, rubbed his eyes, and then looked through the window where a heron had just perched beside the pool. He squeezed his eyes together to think clearly and heaved another deep sigh.

“Yes, Philip, I need to pull myself together. I know.”

“I’ll visit you soon to discuss some things. Make sure you get it clear, okay?”

“Yeah, man, see you then.”

He looked at the picture on his laptop again. Still reasonably sober, he was confronted with this picture that had jolted him. It was all too much for him. The movies in his head came one after another: images of people suffering from neurological disorders, soccer professionals who suddenly dropped dead, and deformed babies. Empty streets at the time of the first lockdowns, pictures of people on balconies, making music and talking to each other from such a distance, were locked in their homes, angry and sad people who had lost their jobs or their businesses. Large demonstrations and riots broke out after the mandatory QR code was introduced. As if someone was sitting across from him listening to his thoughts, he shrugged as he had learned to let go of worries, but he remained frustrated. They needed a scapegoat, and he had become one of them. His fists came down hard on the desk.

Everything screamed inside. Those idiots! Who would believe the truth out of his mouth when the world condemned him in advance? He regretted his choices and that he had been so naïve. If only he could turn back time thirty years. If I had studied surgery, everything would have turned out differently. Instead, he was told, “No, unfortunately, Mr Fisher, you are out. There is still room in pharmacy,” the lady in the administration had said, “or in business economics, there is room there too.” He felt that the cause was his non-elite background because he only saw the little guys from wealthy parents hopping around at those studies: no brains, but money enough to pay for their studies and even take a few years longer. With the scholarship he received, he had to continue and had no choice but to choose another study; he couldn’t wait another year until he was accepted. Eventually, he realised that he would never be accepted at all.

His strict Christian upbringing had often left him conflicted while studying pharmacy. He still heard his father’s voice condemning and sternly telling him that people should not go to a doctor or take medicine because they were denying the Lord. He had thought about it for four years. Should Christians not consult doctors? He concluded that God created humans as intelligent beings and allowed them to develop medicines and learn how to repair their bodies. There is nothing wrong with applying this knowledge and these skills for physical healing. He concluded that doctors could be seen as a gift from God to people. A way by which God brings healing and restoration. And with that, he had justified it to himself and thus was finally able to end the discussion with his father, who had steered the other way, for he had never before been contradicted in that way by his son.

He reflected on the company he had founded after college, Fisher Pharmaceuticals. It had grown hard in the beginning. He

envisioned Bianca at their first meeting, the love of his life. They were like molasses and pancakes and married within a year. His parents were members of the black church and, to put it mildly, could not appreciate that she was pregnant during their marriage. “You should be ashamed of yourself,” they had said the moment there was a line behind them to congratulate the bride and groom. All the guests had fallen silent and turned to them to watch the scandalous scene. He had looked deeply into his father and mother’s eyes in turn and thanked them for the parents they had been to him. Because of the stable upbringing, they had given him, he could finish his studies, he had said and then kindly requested that they leave their wedding party because this was not the day or the time to be put in the penalty box. He was a grown man, and they just had to respect that. His father could not have failed to finish his argument that it was outrageous that it had not been a church blessing. They found that all the more shameful and refused to shake their hands and congratulate them. He had not seen them since and had learned through word of mouth that his parents had died of corona five years ago during the first outbreak. Looking back on his childhood, the only holy thing he had learned from it was that he felt blessed that he could think for himself, which made him feel liberated. He was disgusted with those pessimists and doom-sayers. He would rather not live like his parents. Not only that, but he didn’t want to be poor and settle for a satisfying sandwich. He was going to do things differently!

Shortly after, their son was born. He had been happy, and yet he wanted more.

Always more, more, more. He hated that feeling now, greed and desire for power and money. That’s why he had devoured success books and attended costly workshops with success gurus. Businesspeople from all over the world came there with the desire

to become even more prosperous. And he wanted that too. He had learned to turn off his emotions by purposefully scolding people. And gradually, he became the dreaded CEO. Tons of money he had subsequently made had grown his company to over five hundred employees with offices in several countries. Until then, he had been turned over to a top executive by a commissioner who had much say in Fisher's management. A short phone call, "That person is coming along, and you should hire him." From the tone, he could tell that no dissent was tolerated. He just had to put up with it.

Own company, my hula. He had had nothing more to say in the period after his company had grown large, and it was required by law to have a board. He had nothing more to say about what was produced in the lab and nothing more to tell about his staff. This so-called top manager kept some brutal sales techniques. He instructed the marketing people to ensure doctors were rewarded with gifts if they prescribed Fisher Pharmaceuticals drugs. In retrospect, it turned out that this was the marketing followed by all pharmaceutical companies worldwide.

What he had expected happened. After a few years, the misery began, his company was fined for fraud, and he had to pay millions in damages due to the severe side effects that certain drugs had caused and made people even sicker than they already were. The company was on the precipice of bankruptcy, and the board was suddenly unavailable.

How particularly striking all that had been. I learned from it, he thought. He was still proud that he had immediately taken back the reins and deregistered all board members from the Chamber of Commerce. Then he found the right people among his staff to serve on the board. The company then flourished again, making good medicine and restoring its reputation. Until the moment a

man entered his office without an appointment. A strange bird. Black sunglasses, and hat, and a musty-smelling black suit. It was right around the time *The Matrix* was coming out. It was as if he had walked into that film. After his monotonous talk about what John had to produce and what he should and shouldn't do in manufacturing drugs, he had signalled to the guy that he could fuck off. With a redhead, John had shown this so-called Agent Smith the door. When the door had closed behind him, he had put a dent in it.

From then on, the threats began. A man from the CDC called, who told him they had heard that he did not want to cooperate but that if he still wanted approval for the new drugs they were developing, he had to do what was asked of him. They were working with foreign authorities who had to approve the drugs for sale in the rest of the world. His back was against the wall, and he had no choice but to follow what was demanded of him. At least, that's what he thought at the time. He knew better by now.

Financially, he was doing well but felt torn between his sense of right and wrong. He was no longer the cheerful man he used to be. He was always on his guard because he was being watched.

That's how it had been in the early years. All outward appearances. A successful business, a big house, in the middle of the woods in Bilthoven. They drove the latest and most excellent cars. He owned a private jet, with which he visited most countries on business. But he was constantly afraid because what if people knew what was happening behind the scenes?

Bianca and Tom regularly travelled with him when it was a school holiday. Bianca had been okay with it if he had to travel alone. She had her pursuits. They had a gardener, a housekeeper, a team of secretaries in the office, and a personal assistant at home at his disposal.

He looked again at the picture on his desk. Now everything he loved was fucked up and gone.

“I’m leaving,” she had said. Her beloved Louis Vuitton suitcases, smelling of new leather, were piled beside her in the hall. Startled, he had begged, “Bianca, please don’t, not now. I need you.” She had looked at him for a minute as if in doubt, but she had turned around, grabbed her suitcases, and pulled the door shut behind her without saying anything further. He had stood there for a long time, like the characters in *The Wizard of Oz*, petrified, unable to move because he feared that he would break. His heart had grown cold like a stone in the following days, and it had taken a long time to thaw. Since then, he had not heard from Bianca and had been too stubborn about chasing her or calling her because she had left him, hadn’t she?

His Bianca, with whom he had shared twenty-five years of joys and sorrows, had just disappeared overnight. Could he still blame her? All those problems had made him pay no attention to her or Tom. He stared at the now-blackened rectangle of his laptop, and the images in his head filled the screen.

What about Tom? After all the trouble three years ago, his son wanted nothing more to do with him. He had accidentally spotted him occasionally sitting in the kitchen, visiting the housekeeper Tom had known since birth. Then it seemed that the house was another colour, brighter. But now he thought Tom had become a tramp with his weird ideas and Rasta hair. And yet, he missed him terribly, his only son.

The ashes fell to the ground. He squeezed the stump with his fingers that had turned yellow and irritably shoved the ashes away with his foot. His nails pressed into his clenched fists.

He had to relax, he told himself and picked up the bottle he held over the glass again until it was half full and knocked it back

swiftly. Is the glass half full or half empty? He thought. It just came to him as if someone was whispering in his ear.

“Well, I prefer a full glass. What good is half a glass,” he said aloud and poured the bottle empty. “Cheers.” And raised the glass to his reflection in the bookcase window beside him. Why should he still care about his company? It wasn’t his company any more. “They’ll figure it out.”

There was a knock at the door. Staring confusedly in that direction, he realised someone must be behind it and said with a thick tongue, “Come in with your servant.”

The housekeeper looked at him around the corner with a tilted head.

“Are you alright? I heard you talking and thought there might be visitors I had yet to see coming in?”

“No way, Nellie, it’s just me.” He showed his glass to her.

“This is the culprit of my talking,” he said with a tongue that was hard to contain.

“Aha, all right. We’re about to eat, and I can’t lift you to bed if you can’t walk any more. But are you taking it easy? Last time, you slept here in your chair all night. I hope you remember how that felt the next morning,” she grumbled.

He looked at her with his eyes running red.

“Did I ever tell you’re a juggernaut, Nellie?”

“Yes, you have said that many times. But thanks,” she said gruffly. “Dinner will be ready in half an hour.” She closed the door with a bang, just a little too hard.

No, he had no more business visits. The company he had built with blood, sweat, and tears was no longer his due to a hostile takeover, and he had been bought out.

He looked at the picture on his desk. Everything he loved was on it. He heard his teeth grind but couldn’t control his sadness,

and his eyes moistened. Were they doing well? Could they manage? He had wanted to give everything if only things could return to how they were before when they were happy together. He could never spend the money he had again in his life. He had had enough. Money didn't matter to him any more. He wanted his wife and son back. He wanted his life back as a respected man. Would that ever be possible again? How could he prove that he was a victim? He needed help to prove his innocence, but he had no idea whom to turn to. He needed to get clear, and he grabbed a silver box from the drawer and sniffed the white powder with a silver spoon.

Something creaked at the garden doors. He looked up in surprise and listened, his neck hairs standing up. It was already dark outside. He thought quickly. A gust of wind made the heavy velvet curtains hanging in front of the garden doors bulge like sails in the wind. He had pulled them closed as it was about to shimmer. Never had anyone entered those doors; he only used them himself. Everyone knew that his office was his sanctuary. Only the housekeeper came there to clean, and his assistant, of course. He felt that something was wrong, and quickly, with the glass still in his right hand, he sought a button under his desk with his left hand. The yellow liquid jumped happily over the edge as he tried to rise from the heavy leather chair. In a drunken daze, he saw someone emerge. Damn, where are those glasses?

“Who’s there? Gerard, is that you?” he called toward the curtain.

He had seen the gardener working today, but he couldn’t

imagine Gerard coming in through this side now, at this time, for the first time, and at this time.

The vague figure behind the curtain emerged.

“What is that? Who are you? What are you doing here? Are you crazy to just walk in!” John’s voice snapped, and his heart was racing. The intruder emerged from behind the curtain and lingered at the doorway.

“So, there you are,” he said frighteningly calmly. “You terrible man, you devil,” he said hoarsely. “Are you sitting comfortably here in your gaudy house at your gaudy desk?” he said in a way that showed disgust and sarcasm. He took another step closer, allowing John to part his face in the faint light of his desk lamp. Without glasses, he could still see drab skin, stubble, and red run-through eyes and discern clothing too loose.

“You don’t care what happened to us, do you?” Something was threatening in the calmness of his voice.

“When are you going to take responsibility, John Fisher?” he said in a down-bending voice from which the sarcasm dripped and took another step forward so that he was only two feet away from John, who had moved to stand in front of his desk. He felt the liquor flowing in his veins and felt his heart pounding in his throat. Panic crept up his legs. He staggered.

“That will all be taken care of by the lawyers,” John said in his familiar authoritarian tone and continued, “You have no right to just come into my house. I will call the police if you don’t leave immediately.” His head was pounding with tension, and his body was shaking. Was that from the drink or the fright? He wondered.

The air in the room vibrated with tension, and John smelled his sweat. The man pulled something from behind his back. He couldn’t quite see what it was, but the length of the thing gave him an idea of what it could be.

“Don’t you understand our sorrow?” the man said as saliva appeared at the corners of his mouth. “What ails you, man! So many people are suffering. Don’t you care at all?”

The intruder lankily swung the bat from bottom to top, letting it hang there menacingly but wobbling in the air. He took another step closer. Now he raised the bat tightly and straight.

“If the government doesn’t do anything, I’ll teach you your well-deserved lesson.” John felt the splatter on his face. Behind him, he heard the door open but could not look back to see if it was Nellie or warn her because he had to step aside to avoid the bat. The alcohol had upset his balance. He staggered and fell with his head against the tip of a heavy mahogany side table next to the window. He felt his bones crack, and a fierce twinge of pain took his breath away. The room spun before his eyes. Black spots obstructed his vision, and he had to blink a few times. He fought to stay conscious. The bat had missed him, but it had hit something else because he had heard a bang, crackling, and a heavy, dull thud, like when someone fell to the floor. The floor vibrated. He tried to turn around to see where that man was in the room and noticed he couldn’t move from the pain and could only lift his head a few inches. In the corner of his eye, he saw that possessed, lanky man standing with his arms limp along his body and the bat still in his hand. He seemed stiffened and looked open-mouthed at someone lying on the ground. He followed that gaze and could tell from the clothing that it had to be Nellie. Red fluid was running down her head, gushing onto the ground in a circle of an ever-growing pool of blood.

John groaned. “What did you do, you son of a bitch!” The pain prevented him from speaking further. He felt panic; an ambulance should come, but he could do nothing. He felt the stabbing pain in

his hip and attempted to crawl in her direction, but he couldn't. It went black before his eyes, and he fell into a dark hole.

"This is not what I wanted," the intruder said in a broken voice, "this cannot be; this cannot be true." But there was no one to hear him.

The curtains bulged again as the garden doors were flung open with a swing. The long velvet fabric was pushed aside with a jerk, and two officers pointed their weapons at the intruder.

"Throw that bat away, now!"

The door to the hall was thrown open, and two more agents appeared and pointed their weapons at the man.

"Surrender! On the floor!" they shouted.

Listless and stunned, the intruder let the bat slip from his hand and dropped to his knees with his hands in the air. The intruder was pressed against the ground and cuffed.

* * *

Over the intercom, there was busy communication back and forth. A siren could be heard in the distance, coming closer and closer. Occasionally, John regained consciousness and felt a pounding headache. He couldn't get his bearings.

What's happening? Where am I? He saw Nellie lying down and remembered again what had occurred.

"How is she?" he asked, groaning to a paramedic concentrating on measuring his blood pressure while something was carefully shoved under him.

Around him, paramedics and police were busily walking back and forth. It took four men to lift him onto the stretcher.

“One..., Two..., Three..., he’s long gone from eight pounds,” the paramedic said.

“Well, that cost a bit,” said the other.

As he lay on the gurney, an officer approached him. His face was severe, and he looked at him with his head bowed.

“I’m sorry about Nellie,” he said gently. “She died instantly. What’s her last name?”

He felt his heart racing against his ribcage. Adrenaline coursed through his body, and a goitre choked his throat. He felt tears running down his cheeks like jets. He realised he hadn’t cried in a long time. What will I do without Nellie? What will her children do without her? He thought how terrible for Bianca and Tom and sank into a deep black hole.

The ambulance seemed to jerk back and forth like a camel, making him regain consciousness. The anaesthesia they had given him didn't work well because of his pain. As much as he wanted to suppress it, a few moans escaped his mouth.

“Why do they make ambulances without good suspensions anyway? My car floats over the road, but this car... unbelievable.”

John tried to remember what had happened. Surprised, the nurse looked at him but said soothingly, “We're almost there, Mr Fisher. Just hang in there.” The brother pricked a needle in his hand and attached a tube to it.

That intruder had targeted me, but he had hit Nellie. He felt dizzy and nauseous. A basin was held out to him just in time. Everything came out; that night's meal and the gallon of Whisky. Another string dripped from his nose.

“It's my fault Nellie's dead,” he said, groaning and spitting out the last remnant.

The ambulance nurse looked at him, and John saw him think-

ing, “That’s right, asshole, you have much more on your conscience than just this woman.” Instead, the man said professionally, “Everything will be fine, don’t worry now.” Had he imagined it, or had that man indeed had that thought? Oten, he could no longer discern what someone was thinking or what he had said. It went black before his eyes again, and he sank into a peaceful depth.

The colleague nurse had looked at him pityingly.

“Do you even know who this is?” she asked after checking that John was conscious.

“Yes, of course, I know.”

Heavy doors automatically moved aside as the ambulance pulled into the emergency room. As they jerkily pushed his stretcher out, he was startled awake again. It smelled nasty in there of petrol, tar, and blood. He saw containers filled with bulging dirt. The stretcher was wheeled in as if they were moving a pallet of boxes through a long corridor lit with fluorescent tubes and swinging doors opened by themselves until they left him, without saying or looking at anything, in a sterile, cold, unsociable little room. There he lay, with a pounding headache and pain in his hip and arm. What now? What time would it be? He dozed off again, not knowing there was a meeting in the other room where a discussion was taking place about whether John Fisher had the right to care. Most felt he did not because first, he had not been vaccinated, and second, if other unvaccinated people were denied care, why should John Fisher be entitled to it, especially after what he had done?

“I understand your frustration,” the head financial director said, pointing to each in the circle with his index finger as he spoke. “We can talk long and short about what is and isn’t appropriate or correct, but the hospital desperately needs the money, or

more lay-offs will follow. So, it's about your pockets. We are forced to cheat and mark John Fisher as vaccinated, or none of us will have a job anytime soon. Some too many people don't get four boosters every year, so almost everyone who comes in here these days is registered as unvaccinated with a red cross. So, from now on, we're going to do that differently. Let me be clear: Everyone has a right to care!"

One by one, the heads of those present slowly lowered after looking into each other's eyes and telepathically reading the answer on each other's faces.

"Good! Then you understand the situation, and we can all return to work."

Blue and white coats stepped silently through the door back into the corridor and disappeared through the swinging doors to their place in the building.

* * *

LIKE A ZOMBIE, HE HAD BEEN WHEELED WITH BED AND ALL TO VARIOUS EXAMINATION ROOMS. Now he lay alone again, but in another room with orange curtains that gave the sterile white walls a warm glow. He felt tired and empty, in shock and paralysed by grief. It irritated him that he had not been given a pillow. He wanted to sit up, but he wasn't allowed to, a nurse had said. The pain was milder after they gave him morphine.

The smell of flowers on his bedside table drowned out the chemical smell that hung in a hospital as usual. He heard distant voices in the hallway. The sound of footsteps came in his direction. The door opened soundlessly, and two women in blue coats appeared.

"Hello, Mr Fisher," the shorter one said softly. "I have come to

tell you what we found during the examinations and what we will do with you next.”

He saw only her eyes; the rest was shielded by a mouth guard and a screen fastened around her head. A pair of gloves and complete coveralls covered the rest as if she were prepared for a moon landing.

“Hello, doctor. Well, tell me about it. It can’t be that bad, can it?”

“We read the report saying that there was a robbery at your house, and you fell. Can you remember that now?”

“Well, and truly, those images keep coming up.”

“That’s annoying, yes; I understand that. I’m sorry the pictures showed you broke your hip during the fall. Also, your arm is broken, and you have a severe concussion. I was told by the nurses that you would like to sit up, but this is the reason you have to stay flat.”

He knew what time it was. A severe concussion... Well, then he would have to stay flat for weeks. He observed the doctor to see if she meant it.

“What may surprise you, Mr Fisher: We also diagnosed type two diabetes during blood tests,” she said softly. She looked at him questioningly and waited for his response. John saw her look, but it didn’t sink into what she had just said.

“Mr Fisher, you are concerned and may not understand me very well; that is normal with a severe concussion. We will repeat this information if you indicate you did not understand.”

John nodded. He understood that last part; she understood that he had not understood. The doctor continued, “A diabetes nurse will be with you this week to teach you what to do and what not to do, and you will be on a special diet.” She looked at her notes.

“And lastly, your bones are broken from the fall but don’t just

brake. The cause is osteoporosis. You probably have developed from smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. Therefore, I strongly advise you to quit both. Failure to do so could cost you your life in the short term.”

He saw her eyes fixed intently on him. She waited again for his response, but he didn't know what she had said. She looked at her colleague and spoke as if he wasn't there.

“I'm afraid we'll have to visit a few more times.” Her colleague nodded.

“You will have to stay here for a while, Mr Fisher. Do you have anyone who can bring stuff? Family?” she asked, muttering from behind the uncomfortable mask.

John turned his head to the side and looked straight at the doctor for the first time. Her voice and her eyes calmed him, and there was something sensual about her.

“Hasn't my assistant called yet? Marian De Meeter,” he asked.

“Yes, she is listed as the contact person here, but since she is not a relative, she is not allowed to visit you.”

“I have no contact with my family at this time.”

“I'm sorry, we have house rules. We can't change those for just anybody.” The doctor was pretty upset and hip from one leg to the other.

“Marian always arranges everything for me. You should just let her through,” he said dominantly and continued, “You don't decide who can and can't visit me. And if not, I'll turn it into a lawsuit immediately.”

The two women looked at each other with raised eyebrows, and in mutual understanding, they both shrugged.

“Fine, then we'll see what we can do for you,” the doctor said.

He had lost pieces and didn't remember exactly what had happened. Images came and went, and the feeling of sadness

remained. The doctor wrote something down. He closed his eyes. He was so tired.

“The police are here to talk to you,” she said as she wrote, “but they must be patient for a while. We will give you painkillers and sleep aid. As soon as the alcohol and drugs are gone from your blood, we will operate on you. Your hip will be replaced with a prosthesis, and your arm will go in a cast.” He had his eyes closed and was breathing heavily.

“Do you hear me, Mr Fisher?”

“Correction. Sleep aid is unnecessary.” She crossed the note for a sleep aid.

* * *

Far away, he heard buzzing and wheezing. His eyes failed to open. He tried again to open one eye ajar, but the light in the room was too bright.

Oh, pain in my head... As John scanned his body, he felt his arm hurt, and he couldn't feel his legs. Shit, what happened? The bright light made the hammer pound even harder against his skull.

“Hello John, how are you now?” Marian said softly. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it gently. “Are you awake?”

“Yes, but you startled me. And the light is too bright,” he said gruffly.

“I'll see if I can dim it.” He heard the sound of her heels across the room.

“That better?” Slowly he opened his eyes and looked around the room first, resting his eyes on the equipment and the hoses attached to him.

He groaned, and the memory of Nellie he saw lying on the floor in his office, eyes wide open and a gaping wound in her head. He closed his eyes again to repress the memory.

“Where is Nellie now?” he asked.

“Nellie was transferred to the morgue immediately after the investigation,” she said and continued, “The house was completely under searched and taped as a crime scene. Bizarre.”

“What am I going to do without her,” he said.

“Well, what will we all do without her, John,” she corrected him and continued, “I miss her. She was like a second mother to me.”

John looked at her face. Her bright blue eyes were red, and a tear slowly slid down her cheek. He had never seen Marian cry before in all these years. Maybe she had, but not in his presence. It touched him, and he continued to watch, intrigued, as her face contracted with each sob and gently patted her hand that she had placed on his bed edge.

“Well, there we are,” he said after a few minutes of silence. “At least I’m lying down, and you’re sitting. Who would have ever thought this could happen? What a state of affairs. Have you told her family yet?” he asked.

“Gee, John, yes, of course. I did that right the same day last week?”

With his face full of disbelief, John wanted to sit up. Marian gently pushed him back into bed.

“Last week? Then how long in the hell have I been lying here?” He cleared his throat.

“Calm down, John. The nurse said you’d be forgetful, but you’ve forgotten more than I realised. She looked around the room, searching for words.

“It’s been eight days..., John,” she said softly.

“Eight days!”

“Yes, John. You had surgery and went into delirium after the surgery because you were deprived of alcohol overnight. Also, you seem to have forgotten much because of the severe concus-

sion. Triple luck,” she said as she blew her nose in a clumsy attempt to lighten it all up.

He racked his brain as he tried to recall what she had said in his memory.

Marian made another attempt to help him. “You did wake up, but apparently, you forgot everything again. It must be because of that concussion. They say your memory will be fine, but it may take a while.”

“My God, Jesus... What about the funeral?”

He felt tears running down his cheeks. He hadn’t noticed he was crying and was embarrassed in front of Marian.

“That one is tomorrow. They waited until all the evidence was collected and did an autopsy.” She snatched a few tissues from a box on the nightstand and reached out to hand him some, which he wanted to grab with his right hand out of habit, but it was cast up to his shoulder.

“How can you blow your nose with your left?” he said accusingly, as if it were her fault he was lying there.

“I understand you’re reacting confused and angry, but everyone is sad,” she said to comfort him.

She could practically and quickly take care of all sorts of things, yet she wasn’t sure how to tell him they needed to look for a new housekeeper soon. Was there a right time? Could she throw it straight into the ring? She found it difficult since Nellie had yet to be buried. She knew what her boss was like, who could rant like an elephant in a glass case. She was going to say it.

“John, we need to look for a new housekeeper.” She looked at him sternly and held her breath. He examined the other way, couldn’t respond to this just yet. He didn’t want to hear it. And he didn’t want to deal with it.

She could see he was struggling but knew he could quickly put

his emotions aside if needed. She had to be patient with him and wait for him to return to it alone. That was just the way it was with him. Yet... I have never seen him like this before. She thought he looked strangely small, weak, and dependent in that big white bed. The blankets bulged where his belly should be about, and his face had a strange pale colour. His right arm was encased in plaster up to his shoulder. She had heard that after his intoxication wore off last week, he had had surgery and a total hip socket and head prosthesis.

He tried to put the tissue on the cabinet next to him, but it fell to the floor. “Damn!” Marian, will you ensure I can leave here as soon as possible? Just set up a sick room at home and get a nurse.”

The fallen tissue also brought her back to familiar territory, and something came back to her mind.

“I’ll take care of it,” she said matter-of-factly. At least this was the old John again. She felt vulnerable when he ranted like this while she was crying. She had to recover quickly; it was just her job.

In the same tone, she continued, “The police have been sitting here in the hallway every day since it happened, waiting for you to recover. They want to talk to you.”

“Does that have to be now?” He contorted his face as if asked to do the dishes.

“You’ve kept them off you for days. I think you’d better speak to them now. For your good,” she added.

Two men in uniform stood by the door. A man of medium build and grey hair pulled a chair toward him and unbuttoned his blue wool coat, revealing a jumper and jeans. He looked calm and trustworthy, but his attire did not make him appear serious about being a police officer.

“So, Mr Fisher, can we ask you a few questions?”

“Can or should,” John said gruffly. The man ignored his remark as if he were asked such rhetorical questions daily.

“I am Detective Daamen, and I, and my team...,” he pointed over his shoulder with his pencil towards the door without looking, “...are investigating the attempted murder of you and the murder of Nellie Vermeulen, your housekeeper. First, we are sorry for your loss. I understand you employed her for many years.”

“That’s right,” he said softly, surly squeezing another thank you.

“What was your relationship with Mrs Vermeulen like?”

“We had employed her for over twenty-five years. The last

few years she lived with us since her husband died. We had a kind of family relationship,” he said in a way as if he were talking to himself and only now marvelling at it. “She was one of the few people I could still trust.”

“What exactly do you think happened?”

“The man suddenly stood in my office and wanted to start hitting me with a baseball bat. I didn’t know Nellie was standing behind me. I fell. Not only that, but I think he hit Nellie when he wanted to hit me with that bat.”

“How come Mrs Vermeulen knew about the intruder?”

“I had pressed an alarm button under the desk just to be sure after I felt someone had sneaked in. Nellie knew about the silent alarm. I told her about it some time ago, and her pager was connected. She knew what to do when she heard the alarm. I think she first alerted you and then came to my office.”

“Right, yes. This is what we also determined.”

Heavy eyebrows curled inward, and he stared thoughtfully at his notebook with the pencil between his lips. As if precisely timed, he came out with another tone.

“Do you know why that man forced his way into your house? What did he want?”

John was immediately wary, sensing that this man did not like him.

“Ah,” John said, lifting his healthy shoulder and giving the impression that he had accepted that he was not liked, “I have so many enemies. I suppose it’s one of the people who filed a lawsuit against me. I think my lawyer Philip Bos can tell you better.”

“Good, then we’ll contact him. You’ll get police protection for as long as we deem necessary,” the detective said with a raised eyebrow and in an authoritarian tone that tolerated no contradiction.

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary. I doubt that man will come around again.”

“That does not imply that your other so-called enemies will not make another attempt. That intruder will be in jail for a few years and will soon be convicted of attempted manslaughter of you and Mrs Vermeulen. We have sufficient evidence,” he said, folding his notebook closed and putting it in his inside pocket. “But we still expect official testimony from you, and as soon as you can, you will come to the station.”

“I’m being watched,” he said sarcastically. “Boy, oh boy, we can add that too.”

“We know your situation and will leave nothing to chance, Mr Fisher, whether you like it or not.”

He couldn’t argue with that. He would have to put up with that too. Again, he had nothing to say.

“We’ve discovered some things we want more clarity on, Mr Fisher.”

“Go ahead.”

“You have been harassed and intimidated via your phones and computers for several months.”

“That’s right, yes,” he said, piqued and continued angrily, “Have you been snooping in all my stuff? Even on my computer?” His heart pounded hard against his chest.

Detective Daamen looked up and studied John’s face. “That is protocol indeed if a murder is committed, Mr Fisher. Why didn’t you report this or file a report?”

He felt frustrated. He had been trapped in his home for years, first by those lockdowns, then beleaguered by journalists, victimisers, that hacker, and now by the police. Furthermore, he had to let it sink in. Did he still have any freedom? What could he tell and not tell? He wanted to avoid making all private matters

public. And now that he thought about it, he realised he no longer had any privacy. Everything was already on the street. That was now apparent.

Frustrated, he continued, "I've already bought a new computer and phone a few times. With that, I thought it would stop." His eyes grew heavy, and he struggled to keep them open.

"Then why didn't you report it?"

He stared ahead into nothingness.

"Mr Fisher..., hello..., what do you say to that? Do you understand my question? Who hacked your computer?"

The nurse had come in and saw the detective bent over John, waving his hand in front of John's eyes, who did not respond.

"That is the delirium, as you have been told. He still relapses occasionally," she explained.

"Do you know who hacked your computer?" the detective tried again.

"Mr Fisher?" He stamped his foot on the ground and turned to his colleagues, who were picking up their scowls.

"That's enough for today. I urge you to leave now." The nurse said.

Detective Daamen buttoned his coat and turned around with a redhead. The other men followed him out of the room.

"Did we have to wait so long for that?" he said, irritated, as they walked out.

"What do you think?" he asked the man walking to his left. "Ah, yes ...," he said and shrugged. He stuck a piece of gum in his mouth and offered his colleagues a bar.

"I think he's telling the truth. We don't have any other evidence either," said the man walking to his right.

"Okay, clear." The three of them walked down the street. "Next case," he said.