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Opening Extract from...

Black Heart

Written by Mike Nicol

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Wednesday, 27 July

Grainy black-and-white CCTV footage: a man, tallish, bulked out in an anorak, a beanie covering his hair, face down, walking towards the camera along a corridor. Upmarket corridor: marble tiles on the walls and floor, three large photographs of wild beaches hanging on the right-hand side. The photographs in wall-mounted aluminium frames. On the left, two doors. On each the apartment number stencilled in black filling most of the door: 7, 8. A funky touch. At number eight, the man stops, keeping his back to the camera. His head bent forward like he was listening for movement inside the flat, except from the tremor in his shoulders he has to be working something with his hands. Forty seconds spool by, the door pops open. The man rolls down his beanie that becomes a balaclava covering his face. Looks up at the CCTV camera.

'Nice touch,' said the woman watching the footage on her laptop. Speaking aloud, smiling. She tapped the keyboard with her gloved hand to pause the image. Caught her own face reflecting on the screen: her high cheekbones, pencilled eyebrows, the plum richness of her lips. Her latte face ghosting over that of the balaclavaed man. She puckered her lips in a kiss. Putsch.

He was good, the balaclavaed man. Only one or two people she knew could've done it faster. She smiled. Raised her gloved hand to touch theface. 'Mace Bishop,' she said. 'Welcome to my world.'

She clicked play. The man was in. The CCTV footage running on, showing the now empty corridor, the two closed doors. After a minute the automatic timer kicked in, switched off the lights. She waited: three minutes later the lights clicked on. There was the man closing the apartment door, not rushing, keeping his back to the camera. Walking down the corridor to the lift at the far end. Going

past the lift to the stairwell, reaching up to take off the balaclava as he disappeared from the screen.

He'd behaved exactly as she'd wanted. Couldn't resist sniffing out her lair.

She ejected the DVD with the CCTV footage from her laptop, the DVD a little favour courtesy of the block's security company. She'd told them it was a friend playing the fool.

'Some friend, some fool,' the boss man at the security company had said, not making too much effort to keep his eyes off her cleavage. 'You know people with interesting skills, Miss February.'

'You better believe it,' she'd said, sashaying out of his office in her long coat, her black hair floating above the collar.

Sheemina February slotted another DVD into the laptop. Footage from her own surveillance system. There was the balaclavaed man in her apartment, picked up on infrared, the colours muted blues and blacks. The balaclava dark blue, the anorak black, the man wearing gloves, jeans, trainers. The uniform of anybody. Standing there, dead still, listening.

No visible gun.

Meant he wasn't expecting her to be home. He was scoping the terrain. Cautious Mace. Predictable Mace. Curious Mace. Exactly what she'd anticipated. Lure him in for the kill shot. It was almost too easy.

On screen the man moving into her open plan lounge by torchlight. Running his fingers along the back of her white sofa, walking across her white flokatis to her desk, opening drawers, fidgeting among her papers, moving on, sliding the beam too quickly over the pictures on the walls to take them in. But stopping at the box of cut-throat razors mounted above her desk.

Blades that had once shaved famous men. Blades she'd tracked down, paid top dollar for. A blade that'd belonged to Cecil Rhodes. Another to a killer called Joe Silver. Had his name engraved on it. A man some historian had fingered as Jack the Ripper. She liked that, the posthumous fame of the gold rush pimp and trafficker, Joe Silver.

Each of the six blades she'd collected had a story. Except there were only five there now. The missing one, her grandfather's, had been used to cut the throat of Mace Bishop's wife. Before that, quarter of a century before that, her grandfather had used it to slit his wrists. Rather die than be turfed out of his house. In a way, Sheemina believed, that particular cut-throat was an instrument of history: destiny manifest. Pity to lose a family heirloom but it couldn't be helped. The razor probably lying in some evidence box waiting for the autopsy hearing. No worries. There were ways she reckoned she could get it back.

She snapped again on Mace Bishop, Mace Bishop focusing on the empty space in her cut-throat collection. Realising that the blade used to kill his wife had once been an ornament on her wall. How'd that make him feel? Rise the rage in him? Bring up the red pulse? What was he thinking, this man, Mace Bishop? This man in her white lair, among her things. This man intent on killing her. Fired by revenge. Did he even begin to figure out why she wanted to hurt him? Why she wanted to ruin him? Wreck his life? He would. By the time she'd finished, he would.

She watched him, as she'd done so many times since he'd broken in, watched him leave the lounge, enter her bedroom. This was the part that got her agitated, excited. Brought up her heart rate. Sent a tingle through the fingers of her broken hand. The hand he'd smashed with a mallet. Back in the day. She crossed her legs.

There he was in her bedroom. Shining the torch over her bed, the bedside table with the digital clock, 04:20, the landline phone on its recharger, the photograph in a silver frame. The only photograph in the apartment. A photograph of Mace Bishop in his Speedo after a swimming session at the gym pool. One of a number she'd taken on the sly. Put it there hoping it would push him over the top.

But he didn't look closely, swept the beam to her built-in cupboards, the light reflecting off her mirror, for a moment whiting out the image. Then he was visible again, reaching to open the doors on her dresses, slacks, jackets, glancing at the racks of shoes stacked at

the bottom. She watched him run his hand over one of her evening dresses. Imagined she was wearing it, his hand gliding down her back. Sometimes she thought of him like that. His hands hard against her breasts, hard on her buttocks pulling her into him. She shook her head to throw the thought. Flushed by the thrill of it.

There was the man she wanted to kill with his hands in her underwear, coming out with one of her thongs, satin, red, holding it up, crushing it into his fist. He threw it back into the drawer. Sat on the edge of her bed, bounced like he was testing the comfort factor. Fell backwards against the pillows, his hand sliding underneath, finding a black negligee. Holding it up. Silky. His torch beam sliding from it to the photograph on her bedside table. Pity she couldn't see his expression.

He dropped the negligee, grabbed the photograph for a closer look. Brought the torch up to the glass. Stared at himself: that strong body dripping water, that small costume. Then put the photograph back on the table, carefully. Shot off the bed fast, closed the drawers in the cupboard, shut the doors. Buried the negligee in his anorak pocket, heading out the apartment. The screen darkened, the camera switched off.

Sheemina February fetched a white wine from the fridge, took her time drawing the cork, thinking, he'd aroused her taking the underwear. Something secretive about it. Exciting. Lustful. Sex and death.

She poured a glass: De Grendel sauvignon blanc, tasted it, let the wine lie in the bowl of her mouth before she swallowed. Got herself settled. Thing was, why had he treated the photograph like it didn't matter? She'd expected some violence. Wanted some violence, the glass smashed, the picture ripped out. Which was why she'd set it up. Instead he went Mr Ice. She sat again at her desk, replayed the disc.

Halfway through, her cellphone rang.

'Mart,' she said.

'Just checking in,' said Mart Velaze against a background of music, voices. Mart the government man. National Intelligence Agency.

Who'd called her out of the blue, given her the heads-up on a deal that'd gone down even better than she'd hoped. A deal that'd done for Mace Bishop. Mart who'd handled matters in recent days like he couldn't put a foot wrong. Efficient Mart, looking after her interests. The man with the wide white smile. Except you never knew, was it a smile as in friendly, or a smile as in deadly? The only black man Sheemina February had encountered who'd never pulled a move on her. Which made her wonder: why not? 'Keeping an eye out,' he said.

'There's no need.'

'Part of the service.'

'Not on this score.' Giving him the back-off but holding her voice light all the same. 'Where're you?'

'Not far away. In a cafe opposite the beach. I can come over.'

'Best if you don't.'

'In case something goes wrong.'

'Nothing'll go wrong.'

'You can't be sure in a situation like this.'

'You can't be sure ever, Mart, but you can load the dice.'

'He's going to be focused. In the kill zone.'

'You think I'm not?'

Sheemina February waited for his answer. Heard the cafe music, Tina Turner doing the only Tina Turner anyone played, Simply the Best.

'I'll call you,' she said. 'As we agreed.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'Just get in first, okay. Don't give him a chance.'

'I'm a big girl, Mart. I've been waiting for this for a long time. I'm not going to freak out.'

A pause while Tina Turner had her say.

'Till later.'

Mart said, 'Right.'

She thumbed him off. Useful guy.

He'd got her the gun. The .38 Smith & Wesson. The revolver lying beside the laptop. The gun that would be within reach every

moment of the next six, seven, eight hours, however long it was before Mace Bishop rocked up.

Sheemina February took her wine onto the balcony. Stared out over the ocean, a flat glassy sea sliding against the rocks below to break with a crack. The sun lowering, its warmth gone. Tomorrow when it came up everything would be different.

Between then and now all she had to do was wait for him. Mace Bishop. But she was good at waiting.

Tuesday, 12 July

I

No one knew where he was.

He'd been careful.

He was in a pension in Berlin, on Knesebeckstrasse, off the Kurfurstendamm, registered under a false name, J Richter. One of those family hotels.

Pension Savigny. Entered through an unpretentious door on the street, up a flight of stairs. No lift.

The proprietor apologised for the room. If Herr Richter had phoned earlier to make a reservation he could have had a better room. In the summer the hotel was always full. Would have been full had it not been for a cancellation. Herr Richter was very fortunate.

The room was long and narrow. A window into the branches of a plane tree. He couldn't see the street.

He stood at the window. Over the city a thunderstorm crashed, jags of lightning revealing the buildings in white relief. He closed the curtains, eased off his shoes, lay down.

He was on the run. A pity. Another two days he would've been away, off the radar again. What had tipped them off? His mother's death. Of course. He should've been more careful. Should've anticipated that they'd find out. He was careful. Had been careful.

Aka J Richter rubbed his eyes. He needed sleep. Nor was there any point to working out what he'd done wrong. It didn't matter. They'd found him, he was on the run. At worst an inconvenience that required a plan. Tomorrow he'd come up with a plan. A way of getting away. He had time on his side.

He could feel the drowsiness dragging behind his eyes. Being on

the run had never troubled his sleep. Not then, not now. He closed his eyes. Fully clothed he drifted off.

Fourteen hours earlier, the man, aka Herr J Richter, had returned from his morning jog to be attacked at the entrance to his mother's apartment block. Two men trying to hustle him into a white Audi. Except a neighbour with a broom came to his rescue, beating at the men. A wild violence that brought others out. The men gave up and drove off. To Richter's surprise they hadn't waved guns around. Usually the Albanians weren't so polite.

'Criminals,' said his neighbour. 'Russians most probably. They want ransom money. Anything. Even a few hundred euros.' He offered tea. Said they should call the police.

The man, aka Herr J Richter, said, no, it wasn't necessary. He would go later to report it. Right now he needed to calm down. Get his breath back. Steady his shaking hands.

'Tea with three sugars,' said the neighbour. 'And some schnapps.'

Upstairs aka Richter found the apartment trashed. At first wandered around in the chaos panting from the shock, the attack, the hour's jogging. Control, he kept telling himself. Stay alert. Clear-headed. Think about this carefully. They want you to run.

He didn't, wouldn't run blindly. Next time they'd be brutal.

He cleared up the mess, put everything to rights. Packed his suitcase and an overnight bag. Decided he would wait till dark. Do not panic, he told himself.

The hours of the morning passed minute by minute, sometimes he watched the second hand go round on the grandfather clock, thuk, thuk, thuk in the quiet. The chimes on the quarter hour. Sitting there waiting. He tried to read. Fetched the book beside his bed, settled in his mother's armchair. Found his place: chapter thirty-one. 'He knew he was dreaming, knew he couldn't stop.' Carried on to the end of the chapter: 'Ed changed and taped his spare key to the door. He left a light burning.' What had happened in between he couldn't say. His eyes sliding over the words like there wasn't a story in them. He put the book aside. He needed activity.

Richter sat down at the piano. His fingers flat on the keys. The deformed little finger of his left hand, too short to touch the ivory. But he'd learnt to compensate. He could play a jazz tune and fool most everyone. He started in on Gershwin, Summertime. Only it'd been a long while since he'd played. Too long. The notes cracking, off-key. The phrases impossible, taunting him, out of reach. He kept running through the phrases again and again until he slammed the lid down. Sat there staring at the blur of his body in the varnished wood. For half an hour he didn't move. Eventually he got up, went to the window, checked the street. The car hadn't moved. Throughout the afternoon he checked the street.

The white Audi parked a hundred metres down towards the river didn't leave all day.

They wanted him to make a move. Run scared. Make their job easier to pluck him off the street. To have him disappear.

On a Thursday like any other in Frankfurt an der Oder.

He watched the street: pedestrians, pensioners pulling shopping baskets, boys on skateboards, girls in skimpy clothes with cellphones. Traffic. A van offloaded vegetables, fruit, crates of milk at the supermarket. Municipal men repaired a water main. At the small cafe opposite, the pavement tables filled during lunchtime. Come four-thirty the owner shut up shop.

He thought about making a phone call. Throughout the day he'd thought about making a phone call. The landline would be tapped. His cellphone too. There was his mother's cellphone, he could use that. An old model. A brick. Pay as you go. But it would be unexpected. Short and sweet might be too fast for them.

He hoped there was airtime.

He put through the call. In English said, 'Quickly. They have found me. I will need help later.' He disconnected. Switched off the phone.

He doubted the men in the Audi were scanning the building but you never knew. It didn't take much equipment. If they picked up the call they would pick up the destination too. Not a happy

thought. Perhaps it had been a mistake to phone. But he'd needed to. Needed to talk. Even a few words.

He told himself to calm down. He walked around the apartment touching objects. The brass candlesticks. The carriage clock. Ornamental art deco figurines. Small busts of composers. His father's pipes on a wooden stand. The cushions his mother embroidered. The family photographs in silver frames on a silver tray with bone handles. His father, aged twenty-five, twenty-six, holding a bunch of fish. His mother, about the same age, wearing a nurse's uniform. The young family on a beach when he and his sister were children in the 1960s. His graduation day.

He poured himself a short vodka, wished his mother had kept whisky. Forced himself to sit down and drink it slowly.

July's long light was a downside. But the man Richter sat it out. With the twilight, switched on lights in the apartment for the benefit of the two men in the Audi. Ensured they saw his shadow pass across the windows.

In the dying day, fifteen minutes before the train was due, he left the apartment. Paused once in the doorway to look into the sitting room, a sentimental moment. Quickly he pulled the door closed, locked it.

He left the block by a back exit through a park. Only groups of teenagers still on the grass. Drinking beer. Smoking. Listening to loud rap music. He came out three streets from the station. Quiet streets where a man could hurry past the open doors unnoticed. He took the last train to Berlin. Easy as that. From the train's phone made the hotel reservation.

Heard the proprietor's bluster, 'This is very late for a reservation.'

'I'm sorry. Can you help me?'

The tutting. 'Ja, gut, we have one room only. A single room.'

'That is all I need.'

At Berlin Zoo the man Richter left the suitcase in a locker, walked up the Kurfurstendamm while the storm rumbled nearer. No reason to think anyone knew where he was.

He went for a run early the next morning. Along Knesebeck to Ku'damm, up the slow rise to Halensee. Running easily, sweating in the hot and humid dawn, the city unrelieved by the rain storm. At the lake he watched the swimmers, pale flesh in the brown water, couldn't see what pleasure they took. Most of them naked. Older people, impossible to tell the genders apart.

By now the men in the Audi would be hunting him again. They would know he'd caught the Berlin train. They would be here watching the airports. And the stations, Haupt, Zoo. Richter decided he would take buses, then regional trains to a big city, Leipzig maybe, hire a car there. Keep moving. It was best to keep moving. Drive to Vienna. They would not be watching that airport. Get a flight to Dubai. A link to Johannesburg. Ja, gut, to quote the pension proprietor. Why not? By Wednesday he would be home in Cape Town. A different man.

Smiling, Richter left the swimmers of Halensee, jogged easily up the hill to the interchange, crossed the railway bridge, loped down the wide pavements. Antsy to be on the stir again.

At the pension he showered, changed into a golf shirt, brown chinos, moccasins, no socks. Stuck his sunglasses in the neck of his shirt. A man with casual business in the city. Perhaps in tourism. Or sports accessories. An unpretentious man who preferred quaint pensions to the big hotels. A man relaxed in the breakfast room, admiring the high moulded ceilings, photographs of old Berlin on the walls.

In English he advised a young American couple to take a booze cruise along the Spree. They looked like kids, early twenties at best. 'Not long ago there were gunships on the canal,' he told them, 'now it is a tourist pleasure. The world changes.'

The couple laughed. The boy-man said, 'Great, hey thanks, man.' The girl-wife doing a full teeth display.

The couple went off.

Richter smiled. What was great? The world changing? The gunships? The outing? Perhaps it was George Bush-land made them peculiar.

The proprietor approached, offered a coffee refill. Asked if mein Herr would like the room for another night?

Richter said, unfortunately, no. A lovely hotel – made an expansive gesture round the room – but he was on his way to Hamburg. To spend the weekend with family. A sister's brood.

Ja, gut, said the proprietor, he would make out the bill.

An hour later aka Richter sauntered along Knesebeck towards Zoo. A man seemingly at leisure, except the man wasn't. The man watched ahead. Checked in shop windows at those behind him. Stopped suddenly to search in his bag, took time to scan the street. Ten paces on did it again. And at the railway bridge. You couldn't be too careful.

Not in this heat. Not when you sweated just walking fifty metres. The heat made you fuzzy. Inattentive. Likely to make mistakes. Better to be on a bus, minimise the risk. But first there was his suitcase in the locker. His laptop. The files.

On the corner of Kant a man grabbed his overnight bag, wrenched it from him, threw it into the back of a white Audi. The man shoving him after it. Richter sprawled onto the seat. The man ducked in behind him, pushed a gun into his kidneys.

The car pulled off slowly. A pedestrian running alongside, knocking on the window. Shouting, 'Halt, halt.'

'Polizei,' the driver shouted back. The citizen stopped, stood watching the car merge into the traffic.

'We are going somewhere quiet,' said the man in the back seat, speaking Albanian. 'And no more Herr Richter, okay.' Pinching Richter's cheek. 'What do you like to call yourself these days? Max Roland, isn't it? We have a lot to talk about, not so, Max?'

'Tricky Max,' said the driver, grinning at him in the rearview mirror. Playing with him, reaching over to grab his left hand. 'Ah, there we are, Max.' Holding up Max Roland's small finger. 'Only one knuckle. This's how they told us we would recognise you.' He held up a photograph. 'In case you were in disguise. But you're too cocksure for that.' He flipped the photograph onto the passenger seat. 'Come, Max, don't be so disappointed. Be happy it is us. If it wasn't, you would be in the shit with the guys from The Hague.'

'Locked away forever,' said the man beside him. 'What a sad life that would be.'

The two men laughed.

Max Roland swallowed hard, wanted to puke.

Saturday, 23 July

2

'Mr Oosthuizen,' the voice said. 'I think you need my help.'

Magnus Oosthuizen glanced at his cellphone screen: private number.

'Who is this?' he said.

'Right now who I am doesn't matter,' said the voice.

A woman's voice, clear, bold. Slight accent on the vowels, made them too full, over elaborate. Cape Town. Probably coloured, he reckoned. One of the educated ones straining to overcome the nasal flatness of her kind.

'What matters is that I know about your weapons system and that I know you need fathering – or should I say mothering. Seriously, I'm surprised you've managed this long without anyone to smooth your way with the government people, but as you know that time has ended.'

'I don't know who you are,' said Oosthuizen. 'Goodbye.'

'If I were you,' said the caller, 'I would be curious. I would want to know how this mysterious person got my cell number. How she knew about the weapons system. How she knew that once I had the ear of the right government men. And I would want to know what was meant by "that time has ended." With so much money at stake, I would be anxious. Like you I would huff and bluff, but I wouldn't let this unexpected conversation end, shall we say, inconclusively.'

Magnus Oosthuizen closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his

nose. Released his fingers. Shivered, turned up the temperature on the heater. Damp Cape Town winters got into your bones.

'Who are you?'

'One thing you will have to learn about me, Mr Oosthuizen, is I'm not big on repetition.'

Oosthuizen rose from the couch to stand at the window looking into the garden: long bright lawn edged with lavender bushes, at the far end the gardener skimming leaves from the pool. Might have been poling a gondola down a Venice canal with that action. John the Malawian. Probably got the motion growing up on the lake, Oosthuizen liked to joke to his cronies.

'Shall I help you out, Mr Oosthuizen? Shall I answer some of those niggling questions for you?'

Niggling. Truly a jumped-up lady.

'Ja,' said Oosthuizen. 'Okay.' He sat down again. Chin-chin his Chihuahua in a tartan jacket pawed to be picked up. Stared at him goggle-eyed, whining. 'Ag, no, man,' he whispered at the dog, brushing it away. Chin-chin came back, snapping at his fingers.

'Let me give you the name Mo Siq.'

'What about him?'

The dog yapped, high-pitched, insistent. Oosthuizen bent over to scoop him up, settled the animal on his lap.

'Is that a Chihuahua?' said the woman.

'It is.'

'Horrible dogs,' she said. 'Very northern suburbs.'

'Mrs,' said Oosthuizen 'I …'

'Ms. But we'll get to my name. Back to Mo Siq. Government front man on the arms deal, till he was assassinated. Before that your advisor. Proposer. Guardian angel. Inside man. How you've managed these last few years without him, I don't know. Congratulations, Mr Oosthuizen. You survived the vipers. That took some doing. And fancy footwork. Perhaps you are a ballroom dancer. Any questions so far?'

'How did you get my phone number?'

The woman laughed. A light gentle laugh. 'That's an easy one. It is right here in Mo's laptop. Let me put it this way: Mo's laptop was one of the things I inherited on his death.'

'You stole it.'

'Inherited, Mr Oosthuizen. There are circumstances you are not aware of. Now …' – she paused, he heard the splash of a drink being poured – '*prost*, Mr Oosthuizen …' – he heard her sip – 'nothing to beat the sauvignon blanc, when it's good.' Another sip. Oosthuizen checked his watch. Wine at eleven-forty on a Tuesday morning! 'Now, Mr Oosthuizen, what you should want to know' – her voice more liquid, oiled – 'is what do I know that you don't?'

'Listen, Ms …'

'No, you listen, Mr Oosthuizen, this will be worth your while. You see I know that the Europeans have an offset budget as part of their tender for the weapons system.'

'That is no secret.'

'By offset, I mean, not to be prissy about it, bribes. Not promises of stainless steel plants. Not aluminium smelters. Not condom factories. Bribes, Mr Oosthuizen. Money in the back pockets of the government men. In Cayman accounts. Or Channel Islands, Iceland, Barbados, wherever their back pocket happens to be. The sort of back pockets you cannot fill, Mr Oosthuizen, which is why you need me.'

'And what can you do?' Oosthuizen snorted, squirmed to resettle the dog from squashing his balls. Chin-chin grizzled.

'A lot,' said the voice. 'Believe me. Keep your scientist Max Roland alive for one thing. Get him freed for another. Even help you bring him home.'

'Where are you?' said Oosthuizen.

'In the same city as you, Mr Oosthuizen. How about a drink this afternoon at the Waterfront? Den Anker. We have much to discuss. Why don't you join me?'

'How will I recognise you? I don't even know your name.'

'You won't. And admittedly, you don't. Much better you don't

know my name until we meet. All very mysterious, I realise, but that's my style, Mr Oosthuizen. Shall we say at five? I'll be the blonde with the rosebud. But don't worry, I'll recognise you.'

3

Sheemina February switched off the handset.

Mr Magnus Oosthuizen, one of the world's survivors. Like her. Like her, an operator working the system, except he didn't know how the system was about to work him. And the attractive Max Roland. The ladies' man.

She put down the phone, went to stand on the balcony with her glass of wine. Rested her rigid left hand on the stainless steel railing. Looked down at the sea, still wild from the last storm, still lathered with brown foam, still pounding on the rocks three storeys below. She could have bought that apartment, the lowest one: had seen it on a calm day with the sea a slow gurgle along the rockline. Very beguiling. Seductive. To sit on the balcony so close to the water, like being on a boat. But she knew the Cape Town seas, knew they could rise up with power and destroy. Hadn't happened yet but the chances were it would one day.

She took a sip of the wine, held it in her mouth to absorb the flavours.

The pity of it was she would have to leave her lair. Her white lair, this cave in the cliff face. A luxurious cave in a cliff of expensive caves owned by film stars, rich business machers, trust babies, high-flying models with too much money too soon.

But for her plans to succeed she had to leave the flat and wait. Ever the black widow under the eaves, waiting for the fly, Mace Bishop.

For years she had treasured the apartment. Allowed no one into it. Not even casual lovers. Lair and sanctuary was how she saw it. All that was ended now, now it was a web.

She turned to face the room: the white couches between white flokatis on ash flooring. On most surfaces, white votive candles that she lit at night. Limewashed dining-room table and chairs.

Her haven. Her large, open-plan ritual of white.

Except she wore black: boots, slacks, a roll-neck top. A black leather glove on her tormented hand when she went out. A long black coat against the cold. Sometimes a pashmina under the collars hanging down. For flair. For her tall elegance. Black to sharpen the ice-blue of her eyes. Black in this bright white world. Apart from her short blond hair. But that was temporary, a disguise of sorts. Not her colour or her style, just an expediency. Times would change she'd go back to the black bob.

She sipped again at the wine. What a wonder was life?

Sheemina February smiled at her reflection in the plate-glass picture windows. Gave a flick to her blond hair. Sometimes life played into your hands. Hand. Magnus Oosthuizen and Max Roland were prime candidates for Mace Bishop's services. How convenient. And at a time when Mr Bishop was staggering with grief, mourning for his lovely Oumou, and slowly losing his daughter. Poor man, this couldn't come at a worse time for him. If she could swing it his way which she was sure she could. Magnus Oosthuizen would be clay. Like the clay Mace's lovely wife Oumou had used to make her little pots.

'What're you but a matchmaker, Sheemina,' she said aloud. 'You should get a commission.'

She went inside, drew closed the sliding door. On her laptop were pictures from Mart Velaze, pictures of Max Roland, a completely naked Max Roland. The background was a white tiled wall, his hands were raised above his head, tied with plastic straps to a shower nozzle. The position gave excellent definition to his body: the line of his arms, chest, flat stomach, strong thighs, although his calves were too small. A well-toned body that needed more work on the calves. A runner, they said. Sometimes runners had surprisingly small calves. Swimmers, too. Like Mace Bishop. For a long-distance swimmer he had thin calves. The longer she stared at the body of Max Roland the more his physique reminded her of Mace Bishop. Perhaps that was the attraction.

She sat down at the dining-room table, pulled the laptop closer.

A series of four photographs, taken over some hours, she imagined. In the first there was still strength in Max Roland's body. Resignation on his face, his feet planted apart. In the second: his right leg bent at the knee to prop himself against the wall. Something starting in his face: a tightening at the eyes, his lips slightly parted. The next showed his hand clasping the showerhead as if he were trying to hold himself upright. His mouth open. She imagined he was panting. Sheemina February zoomed in on his nostrils. Examined how they flared wider in each of the pictures. Also his lips were dry. She could see the tip of his tongue in the third photograph. And his eyes had gone feral: tiny black pupils staring off to the left. In the fourth he was wet, his blond hair plastered against his scalp. Droplets on his chest hair. His eyes were closed, his mouth gaping. They'd opened the shower to revive him but it hadn't: he dangled from the nozzle, his full weight dragging on his arms, his body arching forward, his feet buckled under him. He would be hurting. Sheemina February reckoned twenty-four, thirty hours maximum to get him to that state. Probably with some help that was invisible in the photographs. A couple of jabs with a taser worked wonders.

Imagine having Mace Bishop in that condition? In that position?

She zoomed in on the genitals. In number one the scrotum tight, the penis withdrawn into its bush. Reminded her of a moray eel. Number two was different: his sac fallen, his cock thrust forward by the posture. Drooping in the third photograph, thin and useless. Lastly, fallen forward like old fruit left too long on the tree, purpled, stung by wasps and flies.

Sheemina February closed the file, opened the document that contained the other information about Max Roland. For an hour she read through it, too absorbed even to refill her glass of wine.

Afterwards she made a salad for lunch, took another glass of the sauvignon blanc. Undoubtedly Max Roland and Magnus Oosthuizen would make excellent clients for Mace Bishop. How strangely the world worked. How conveniently sometimes.

She fished from her handbag the photograph of Mace Bishop she kept in a plastic sleeve. Mace wearing a black Speedo about to dive into the gym swimming pool where three times a week he put in the laps. Where she'd go to watch, if the urge took her. Watch without his knowing. Just like she'd snapped the photo surreptitiously. He had a good figure for the most part, perhaps a thickening at the waist, but otherwise trim enough. She held the picture in the fingers of her rigid hand.

At four-fifteen Sheemina February left her apartment. From the marble corridor she activated the alarm system by remote. Took the lift up two flights to the foyer, the stairs to the rooftop parking. Three cars in the visitors' bays, other than that her neighbour's Merc, the BMW of the widow below her. Next to it her big BMW X5. The breeze pulled at her coat, a cold viciousness off the sea that made her shiver. She drew closed the coat with her gloved hand. Breathed in deeply the strong tang of the sea.

Twenty-five minutes later Sheemina February took a table in the restaurant facing the door, laid a rosebud across the tablecloth. She was well ahead of time. She had no doubt that Magnus Oosthuizen would be early too. He was that sort of man. Wary. Suspicious.