

The Hits

Friday

1

Pollsmoor Prison, 6 a.m. The chief warden frowned. No birdsong. No cacophony. There was kak in the land. You didn't need to be a bloody prophet to know this. The hell of it was he'd just eaten a decent breakfast – thick bacon slices, two eggs, fried tomato, fried banana, toast fried in the grease. The one advantage of the first shift, a breakfast like that. If the old cookie was on duty. The old cookie a lifer with one eye who escaped being dangled over the long drop when hanging was scrapped. All because of the new constitution. The old cookie who should've been dropped for all the grief he'd caused. Other hand, the old cookie did a helluva breakfast.

'You hear that?' the chief warden said to the rookie with him. A young guy, six months out of training. 'There's been shit.'

The young warden looked at him, not even a light in his pupils. Dead brown eyes. Didn't seem to know what he was talking about.

'You feel it?'

The young warden shook his head.

Before he opened the solid metal door with the peep hatch the chief warden knew there was major trouble ahead. He took a look into the corridor. Empty as it should be. The old cookie must've known. Bastard wouldn't say a bloody thing, even though he knew. Wouldn't warn you.

He unlocked the door, let the young warden pull it open. In front of them two grilles, the corridor beyond.

'You hear that?'

'No.'

'The silence. When you hear nothing then there's kak.'

Trouble was in which cell. Five cells on this corridor, could be any one of them. Or all five. Only way was to check first through the peepholes. Still gave him the sweats, these sort of situations. Could be they were

planning a mass breakout, come screaming at them waving knives, guns, screwdrivers. No matter what you did the hardware got in. Two weeks back this nine mil with a full load in the cartridge pitched up. Deep in the prison in maximum. How'd it get there? Bloody magic.

'Lock the grilles,' he told the young warder.

What he should do was get backup. But bugger that, have the youngster reckon he was chicken-shit scared? No ways. He heard the locks bang home. Drew his revolver. These savages came at him he'd take down five of them first.

'What're you going to do?' said the youngster.

He glanced at the boy. How old was he, eighteen, nineteen? From some village most likely. Not a township special, this one. Too polite. Welcome to the pisshole, my china. He watched the youngster fumbling to unholster his weapon. 'Stay behind me, okay. If I shoot, you shoot.'

'Why they so quiet?'

'That's what we gotta find out.'

The chief warder went up to the spyhole on the first door, lifted the flap to check the glass wasn't smashed. Last thing you wanted was to put your eye to the hole, some bokdrol sheep turd rams a spoke through your eye. It'd happened one time, they nailed the warder's brain as well. Poor bastard. He was singing with the heavenlies before he hit the floor.

The chief warder peered in at the first cell, the men not even standing up, lying on their beds like it was summer holidays. He banged his gun butt on the metal door. Yelled in Afrikaans, 'Stand up. Stand up.' Watched them get to their feet, twenty-eight of them in a pot meant for ten. Ugly, tattooed, scrawny gangbangers. Could slide a nail between your ribs while they asked you for a smoke.

The peephole fisheyed the room. Far as he could tell from the heaps of bedrolls on the floor no one was baiting him, wanting to lure him in so they could stick twenty-eight bits of sharpened metal into his skin.

'Stay like that,' he shouted, moved on to the next door. Went through the same procedure with the peephole: thirty arseholes in this one, grinning at him. 'Want to check them out?' He moved aside for the young warder. 'Take a long look. You check anything funny, tell me.'

'Like what?'

'You see it, you'll know it.'

His armpits were damp. The taste of bacon at the back of his mouth.

Dry. Harsh. This sort of situation brought Cookie's breakfast back very quickly.

The young warder said, 'I don't see anything.'

'Good then,' he said. 'Number three.' He rapped his gun on the metal door. 'Yous just stay like that, hear me?'

Not a response out of them. Everyone shut up, waiting.

The chief warder scoped cell three, then the remaining two. In them the men all standing up, facing the door. Some bored, some smirking, some giving him the snake-tongue when they saw his eye darken the hole. He walked slowly back to cell three, wondering how to handle this. Call backup? Or go in there?

'What's it?' said the young warder.

'Check it out,' he said. Pointed at the peephole. 'Go on, man, look for yourself.'

The young warder did. Stood back, gabbling in his own language. Grey as ash.

The chief warder gripped the youngster's shoulder. 'Been a rough night in there, hey? He put his eye to the hole. The convicts standing in two lines. Thirteen one side, twelve the other. On the floor between them a blanket. Under the blanket a body. A dark stain on the blanket at chest level.

He said to the young warder, 'I'm going to unlock the door, okay? I'm going to go in there, okay? You stay here at the door. You watch them. They do anything funny, any one of them, you shoot, okay?'

The young warder nodded.

'Say yes.'

The young warder swallowed. 'Yes, sir.'

'Okay, boykie. Here we go.'

The chief warder unlocked the door, pulled it open. The convicts leered at him. He told them to turn around, face the wall, stand with their hands above their heads. They obeyed. Taking their time, waggling their arses, giving him lots of attitude, but they obeyed. Like he reckoned they would. This wasn't about a breakout. This was about a job. Or gang initiation.

He sucked up some saliva to cover the bacon dryness in his mouth. 'Any one of yous move, you're dead, okay?'

He walked to the blanket covering the body. Lifted a corner. For a moment couldn't work out what he was staring at. Then he got it. The bloody stump of the neck. The chest opened like a box, the heart ripped out. He

wondered if the guy had still been alive at that point. Wondered how many of them had eaten it. The head he found in the toilet bowl. Carefully placed in there so the face gazed up at him, blue eyes wide open.

2

Sheemina February tapped a highlighter on the statements scored with yellow. Bank statements spread across her dining-room table. Looked up at the horizon: nothing out there to break the line of sea meets sky. A blue emptiness. She smiled. Caught the reflection of her smile in the window. Kept it muted. Thinking, well, well, well. Here were possibilities.

What made her smile, what she liked about Obed Chocho's bank statements were the large deposits. Multiples of a hundred thousand at a time. Random entries. Mostly electronic. Two cash amounts which spoke of an inside man. Knowing Obed Chocho he'd have an inside man. Or woman. Probably woman. Women were his style.

No doubt though, Obed Chocho was a very rich man. Spent it too. Lived large. But then she knew that. Just had to look at the cars, the bling on the lovely Lindiwe Chocho to know this.

Only obstruction to Obed Chocho's current lifestyle was prison. The reason he'd hired her. 'I hear you're a hotshot lawyer,' he'd said. 'Mighty fine. Show me. Look after my interests.' Why she'd made herself available. Why she'd got an inside man at the bank – men were her style – to get her Obed Chocho's bank statements. Only way to know what she was dealing with. To the cent.

Sheemina February was dealing with the sort of money that pleased her. More especially she was dealing with the sort of deals that pleased her.

She picked up her cellphone went onto the balcony to make some calls. The balcony in shadow, cool. In March the sun halfway through the morning before it reached the front of the apartments. She ran a hand lightly over the dampness on the chrome railing, something soothing about the moisture on her skin. Her left, scarred and tortured. Stared at the mutilation of her fingers, the discolouration, the glisten of water in the palm of her hand. Her rigid hand. No matter how much she willed her fingers they would never close. Nor straighten. Twitch slightly. But not close. They remained claw-like.