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The Morning after the Rain

Novel

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Prologue

Johanna, Den Haag, 2013

Pressing my coat tightly to my body, I squeezed into a free seat in the last row. Here at the back was a good spot. Here I could go unnoticed. If I cried, no one would see and I could leave during the hearing without disturbing.

The room was packed and I was on very familiar terms with the audience members from my past humanitarian missions: journalists poised by cameras on tripods, diplomats and delegates from international organizations in dark suits, mixed with NGO reps in jeans and sweatshirts. For a moment, I thought back wistfully to my time here, when I was still burning with a passion for my work. When Julian was still around and my life still seemed full of possibilities.

The air in the auditorium was warm and humming with murmurs. I could make out English, some French and the odd word of Liberian Kreyol. Someone cleared their throat and somewhere, paper rustled.

I didn't know what to expect or how I would react. But I knew myself: the uneasy hammering in my ribcage, my cold hands, the twinge in my guts. All these were harbingers of a pain that sat deep inside me like a prisoner, ready to break free at any moment.

My gaze drifted over to the thick glass wall that separated the audience area from the courtroom. Bulletproof glass, I'd read somewhere. But even the thickest wall wouldn't be able to protect my heart.

Behind it was the courtroom, an enormous, windowless cube: Elsa's territory. Neon strip lights lit the sparse, sand-coloured interior. Everything seemed far away and unreal: the high walls with the inserted glass panels behind which interpreters prepared for a long day, the raised rows of judges' tables, and the two flags with the court's emblem.

Nothing about the neutral décor of the room indicated the brutality of the words that would be spoken here in a matter of minutes. Shivering, I pressed my arms more tightly around the soft material of my coat.

Never before had there been such a case, as I'd heard on the taxi radio while driving over here. The civil war in Liberia would be reappraised here, that much I knew, of course. But this was the first time that a former child soldier would appear in court, the first time the indictment ran to eighty counts, and the first time that the perpetrator himself was accused of the same crimes he had suffered: the enlistment and deployment of child soldiers.

The headlines about the trial behaved like wild dogs. They jumped up at me from all sides – from the news snippets on my iPhone, the newspapers in the breakfast room of my hotel, and the TV in my room. Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't have avoided them.

But I didn't want to avoid them, not today. After all, I was here because of Elsa.

This was her first trial at the International Criminal Court, I thought, feeling emotional, as I rubbed my cold hands. She'd been working towards this moment for years. And for years, I'd been waiting for this moment, the chance to get close to her again.

About a month earlier, she'd phoned me out of the blue and asked me to attend the trial. 'No one knows the conditions in Liberia back then as well as you do, Mother.'

Naturally, there was another, hidden reason for her request. She wanted to show me what an excellent criminal defence lawyer she'd become. That she'd 'made it'. I was proud of her and grateful she'd phoned. After a long time during which she'd distanced herself from me more and more, she was letting me back into her life again. Full of anticipation at seeing her again, I took a couple of days' vacation and took a flight to Amsterdam. Because of an appointment in New York that I couldn't postpone, I was only able to make it to Holland on the second day of the hearing. But it didn't matter too much – I followed the opening day in the press.

Our meeting at the airport brought me back down to earth with a bump. Elsa greeted me coolly and formally, with a stiff embrace as if greeting a stranger. She'd lost weight and looked tired. Was she eating properly? I tried to hide my worry and disappointment, trying to give her time to get used to me again.

Before we even reached the exit, she told me she'd booked a hotel for me. Her apartment was too small, she explained and she needed the little space she had, and her sleep. It didn't bother me. On the contrary, I sympathised with her excuses and shared her concern about being close together all of a sudden.

I wanted to understand everything. To do it all right. And yet, I couldn't accept her role as a criminal defence lawyer. I hadn't been able to think of anything else during the

whole flight. My daughter, defending a person who was responsible for murder, enslavement, and rape? It was her job as a criminal defence lawyer, and part of a functioning state with rule of law – and if it was anyone else, I'd have been unreservedly in favour.

But this was about Liberia. And I had a very deep, personal connection to that country that I couldn't share with anyone, especially not with Elsa. Some images still haunted me and I felt a guilt so huge and unimaginable that it almost crushed me.

'Don't forget that my client himself was kidnapped and enslaved as a child,' Elsa pointed out on the train journey from Amsterdam to The Hague as if she'd guessed what I was thinking.

She was convinced that the defendant could not be punished for crimes he too had been a victim of.

I said nothing in reply and tried to sort out my thoughts, I tried to accept it.

All I had were memories. Elsa, on the other hand, had been dealing with the case in depth for months and had information she wasn't allowed to divulge. 'He only did what he was forced to do.'

That was typical of her – to be broad-minded and empathetic. Every side had the right to be heard, is what she always said. It wasn't my job to criticize her. It was her life, her career. It was right – and yet . . .

The woman next to me was fiddling with the language settings on her headphones. Suddenly, two young men who were sitting in the front row jumped to their feet and hammered on the bulletproof glass with their fists. 'Mass murderer!' yelled the taller one of the two. 'Slave owner!' shouted the other. Their protest only lasted a few seconds before armed security guards appeared and escorted the men outside.

Below us, invisible to the audience, sat the witnesses, as I knew from Elsa. It was a protective measure to ensure their anonymity.

When the red numbers of the digital clock jumped to 9.00, the large screen mounted on one side of the glass wall began to flicker. In the courtroom, a side door opened and the prosecutors and defence lawyers entered and took their seats, the prosecution on the left, and the defence team with Elsa on the right.

I couldn't take my eyes off my daughter. How wonderful it was to see her in her black robes and white jabot, self-confident and proud, and not a trace of nervousness on her face as if she'd been born to do this.

'All rise, *veuillez vous lever,*' proclaimed the usher into his microphone. Elsa and the others stood up. From the loudspeakers in the audience area came the grating sound of chairs scraping.

Robes billowing, the judges entered the courtroom. My gaze flicked back and forth between the close-up on the screen and the whole scene going on behind the glass. I examined the defendant, who took a seat slightly to the side and behind Elsa. He was probably in his mid-thirties, older than her by just a few years and with soft, smooth features. He was the only person in the courtroom not wearing robes or a uniform, but a suit with a light blue shirt and a burgundy tie instead. He didn't look like a man who had raped women or hacked off men's arms if they didn't obey him. Or like someone who boasted about how many children fought in his brigade. But how was such a person supposed to look?

The presiding judge, a portly man with dark blond hair and frameless spectacles, greeted all those present. Then he turned to the defendant. 'Mr Akerele, you claim not to have understood the charges listed against you in the indictment. Do you remember that you said the following – and I quote – 'I have read and understood the indictment papers'?

On the big screen, Akerele appeared. Unsurely, he blinked around the courtroom while an interpreter translated the question into his language. Then he cleared his throat.

‘I have understood the indictment papers, your Honour, but not the charges against me. I have been the victim of this crime and I deny all counts of the indictment.’

I kneaded the cable of my headphones. How could he claim such a thing? And how much of what he was saying had been written by Elsa and her team?

Speaking was visibly difficult for Akerele. Sweat was beading on his face. He placed a hand on his forehead.

‘Is everything OK?’ the judge asked.

Gripped, I alternated between watching the screen and what was going on down in the courtroom, looking at Elsa. Her expression was rigid.

‘I’m, er . . . I’ll be fine in a second,’ Akerele murmured, struggling to breathe. He grasped his tie and loosened the knot, then opened the top button of his shirt. A murmur passed through the rows of people behind me.

‘So you plead not guilty to all eighty counts of the indictment?’ the judge asked.

‘Yes,’ replied Akerele, freeing his neck from his too-tight shirt collar.

And then I saw it: three horizontal and four vertical stripes, as red as blood. The tattoo was burned as deeply into my memory as it was into the left side of Akerele’s neck.

My whole body began to tremble. An icy feeling grasped my throat and made it hard for me to breathe. The courtroom became a blur.

I was back in that fateful place, reliving the moment that sealed my guilt and ruined my life.

Then I saw nothing.

Chapter 1

Johanna, Sankt Gaor, 2023

‘Higher, Hanni, higher,’ Toni panted up above me, as she reached for a branch and swung herself up. Twigs snapped, leaves rustled. ‘We’re almost there.’

I clung to the trunk of the enormous beech and stared, blinking, down at the ground. The garden chairs looked like toys in the grass below and their red cushions had dwindled to tiny dots. We’d never dared climb up this far before. Was it fifteen metres? Or even twenty?

A light breeze moved the branches and strips of sunlight glinted through the leaves. The air smelled of summer and freedom. A feeling of happiness surged in me. *The world belongs to those who dare*, as Aunt Toni always said. I thrust my chin up into the sunlight and listened to the sound of the whispering leaves.

‘Incredible!’ said my aunt above my head. ‘You can see all the way to the Lorelei from here!’

‘I’m coming,’ I called up to her, happily, and seized the next branch to swing myself up a little higher.

The images in my mind faded. The grey sky descended over me and rain drummed on my shoulders. The beech stood alone and proud in the front garden as if we’d never climbed it. Tears sprang to my eyes and merged with the rain on my skin.

My beloved Aunt Toni, I thought, why are you no longer here, damn it?

I took a deep breath and wiped my eyes. Then from my bag, I pulled out the bunch of keys sent to me by Herbert, the executor of Toni’s will, and opened the front door.

Every time I'd entered this house in the past and caught sight of the wallpaper in the hallway with its pattern of gold lilies, the pressure I felt had fallen away. 'Welcome home,' the lilies seemed to whisper, their heads affectionately bowed in my direction.

My aunt's face instantly appeared in my mind's eye and I heard her warm laughter and the way she threw her head back as she did. Her honest, astonished cry – 'Goodness, Hanni, you've grown!' – before she gently led me through the hallway and the old-fashioned charm of the house pulled me in.

Toni's furniture told stories of bygone times when people paid in marks and the Wall still divided Berlin. There was always an aroma of freshly ground coffee, Speick soap and the small lavender sacs she kept in all her cupboards.

But not today. Instead of the usual mixture of smells, I was greeted by a cold, slightly musty smell as if the place hadn't been aired for a long time. Darkness flooded the hallway. When I was standing in the front garden, I'd already noticed that all the window shutters were closed. The house was grieving.

I switched the light on and smoothed the lilies with my finger. They were stuck to the wall, rigidly blossoming for eternity.

And now *I* would be living here in these walls, mixing memories with a new start in life, mixing yesterday and tomorrow. Just as Toni had wanted and laid out in her will. Her marriage had been childless and so I'd inherited the old house on the Rhine. After thirty years in restless New York, I'd returned to my quiet, beautiful roots. I'd signed the early retirement package of the UN and sold my apartment in Manhattan.

A cold shiver ran down my spine. Had I made the right decision? Would I ever readjust to the slow pace of everyday life here in Germany? And to shop closing times and the lethargy of public holidays, like in the past?

‘Of course you will,’ I heard Toni’s voice saying. ‘You were happy here.’

I thrust my hands into my pockets. She was right. Over the past few years in New York, my desire to move back to Germany had grown and grown. While looking out of my window on the thirty-fifth floor at the roaring traffic below, I’d dreamed of the vast Rhine Valley and its sloping embankments of hand-farmed terraces and vineyards. And of the smell of ripe yellow plums in Aunt Toni’s garden, the view across the river and the taste of apple pancakes. The small things from my childhood that had carried me through life were the things I now wanted to be surrounded by. Without Toni’s inheritance, I would perhaps never have dared take this step back.

‘Sometimes you have to force people to do what’s good for them,’ Toni said, her tone tongue-in-cheek.

‘How well you know me,’ I murmured to the lilies.

Once I’d dragged my two heavy cases over the doorstep, I went in search of the bathroom to wash my hands.

Everything in the room was a dark, froggy green – the tiles, the walls, the towels. Toni loved strong, matte colours and as a child, I’d liked them much more than the boring beige tones of my parents’ home. But when I stood on the dark green, fluffy mat and it felt as if I were sitting at the bottom of a pond, one thing was clear. The green had to go.

I turned on the old-fashioned tap. At first, it just spat out some rusty gobbets but it didn’t take long for the water to run warm across my hands.

While drying them off, I took a look around. Everything was outdated and worn. Cracks were showing in the enamel bathtub, the oval washbasin was heavily scratched and green wallpaper was starting to peel off the wall above the toilet. Hopefully, there wasn’t a leaky water pipe underneath. This place needed urgent renovations.

I hung the towel back on the hook and went up the old wooden staircase to the upper floor. When my aunt and Otto had moved in here over half a century earlier, they'd made the darker downstairs floor into the bedroom and bathroom and their kitchen and living room were upstairs so they could enjoy the wonderful views from all rooms during the day. The stairs groaned as I went up, much as my aunt had in the past few years when she'd found them ever more difficult to climb.

Once upstairs, I went into the kitchen, opened the shutters and looked around.

The room seemed cold and deserted. The large round cookie jar on the sideboard, which had been filled with Toni's homemade macarons and almond biscuits since time immemorial was empty except for a few crumbs. The dining table, where piles of recipes, shopping lists and volumes of poetry were usually kept, was clear except for a single book, and the chairs were pushed under the table in an orderly fashion.

I noticed again how worn out the furniture looked – the clunky fridge, which always hummed loudly, the light brown cupboards with decorative inlays, the net curtains. I used to love it all. It was as much a part of Toni as her laugh. But now I was going to be the one living here. And I needed a modern kitchen.

My gaze fixed on the ivory Bosch oven. It was from the 1970s, with raised hob plates and gigantic knobs. As a small girl, I'd cooked my first instant chocolate pudding on it, which had turned out floury and lumpy because I'd got the quantities wrong.

That cooker had never been particularly nice to look at, with its encrusted edges and dark oven door. But on Sunday mornings, when I watched, captivated, as Toni made her famous apple pancakes, it transformed itself into an altar.

They tasted soft and sweet, of a world full of miracles, of carefreeness and school holidays that I never wanted to end.

‘The trick is to add a large glug of fizzy water,’ Toni said, winking at me, as she poured the thick mixture into a cast iron frying pan. ‘The fizz makes the dough fluffy.’ I noted her words and movements with precision as if she were revealing a precious family secret.

She wiped her hands on her apron and together we watched the round pancakes sizzling in the foamy butter and turning a dark golden yellow. We’d picked the apples from the dizzying heights of her tree just that day. ‘The ones at the top are the best,’ she claimed.

A sweet smell of caramel filled the kitchen. My mouth watered and I could hardly wait to put a piece in my mouth.

Many years later, Elsa had stood here too, just like I had, in her nightdress and with crooked braids, waiting for the first mouthful from the hot pan.

‘Blow on it first, darling, otherwise, you’ll burn your tongue.’

‘I know, Mama.’

I wondered whether Elsa was happy in the Hague. I really hoped so.

[...]

Chapter 2

Elsa, The Hague, 2023

‘We’ve got a huge fish tugging on the line,’ Adrian thundered, ‘this witness changes everything. Everything, Elsa, do you hear?’

I cut off the voice message and stared into the dark. I knew what the rest of his message said and I’d listened to it over and over again that day, my heart beating fast. His call from Bangui had gone off like a bomb when I’d told my team about it that morning. But we still hadn’t agreed on the best way to go about things.

I gave a loud sigh. For hours I’d been lying in bed wide awake, the pillow stuffed under my neck, fast-forwarding and rewinding the arguments in a never-ending loop.

No matter what angle I looked at things from, we needed this witness. At all costs. Adrian was right – if we managed to get her to make a statement in court, we stood a chance. But she lived in the Central African Republic and was refusing to travel to The Hague. I understood her fear. It’s risky to exonerate someone who has to answer for the deaths of half your country’s population.

If only I’d flown to Bangui myself. As a woman, I’d probably have built up a better relation to her than Adrian. Conversations like these required the highest sensitivity possible.

Outside, a car drove past. Matte light from its headlamps filtered through the gap in the curtains, making stripes on my face and then darted across the bedroom wall. All went dark again as the car drove on past. At night, there were rarely cars around my area. People usually rode bikes.

I looked at my phone again. Quarter past three. In about two hours, my day would begin.

My eyelids were scratchy. I slid the phone under the cover, closed my eyes and gave in to exhaustion. At night, when the day's colours had given way to gleaming blackness and silence enveloped me, my tiredness was especially heavy. Then I could feel it paralysing me all the way to the tips of my hair.

It had started about six months ago. Slowly and relentlessly, it had spread through my body until it took over my thoughts, emotions and actions. I was sometimes tempted to take the sleeping tablets that the court's clinic prescribed for long-haul flights. But what made me steer clear of them was the mere thought of my mother. Even if I had to crawl, exhausted, into the office, I would.

Today would be particularly difficult to get through. I'd need every quantum of energy I could muster. At six a.m. on the dot, our client was expecting the entire team at the UN prison for preliminary talks. The subsequent trial at the ICC would go on until the evening. Then the debriefing and preparations for the next day would follow.

I had to function. We'd been working on this trial for over two years. The indictment consisted of twenty counts, including war crimes, rape, massacre and torture.

Our client's crimes were as unimaginable as they were brutal. But even criminals were people. People who had a right to recognition as a person before the law. Article six, paragraph three of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

I dozed lightly. Once again, I thought of the witness. There must be a way to change her mind and bring her over here.

Slowly, my limbs grew lighter, and the arguments and concerns evaporated. Finally, long-awaited sleep came.

Three hours later, I was rushing through the medieval gate of the UN prison in the Scheveningen district, not far from the North Sea beach promenade. Here, the ICC's defendants – former government officials, warlords and rebel leaders – awaited trial. Because of its upscale facilities, it was known in our circles as 'The Hague Hilton'.

Despite my iPhone alarm set for half past four, I'd dozed off a short while afterwards and was now a quarter of an hour late.

Once I'd passed through the security screening, and had stowed my bag in the locker, a guard brought me into the briefing room – a narrow space with grey concrete walls, a rectangular table and several plastic chairs. Next to the door hung an evacuation plan in case of fire.

My fellow lawyers from the defence team, our two paralegals, the investigators and an interpreter were already sitting at the table with our client, Germain Vounbo, dubbed 'The Butcher' in his home country. Their laptops were open and paper cups of vending machine coffee were set in front of them. The kiosk that sold the better coffee didn't open until seven a.m..

Vounbo was staring absently at the wall as if his thoughts were elsewhere. He was wearing the dark suit that he'd been given to him for his trial when he was arrested, together with a blue tie. On the ceiling, the red light of the CCTV camera was blinking.

Robert, the main investigator and team leader, looked at me without saying anything, raising his eyebrows. I felt myself blush, murmured an apology and quickly looked for a free space between my colleague Christopher and the interpreter.

As soon as I was sitting down, I felt a feverish leadenness in my shoulders. Like warm syrup, it flowed through my stomach and legs down to my feet. I felt dizzy.

‘Late again,’ whispered Christopher, grinning and running a hand through his curls and poking me amiably in the ribs. ‘Should I come by personally to wake you up?’

We often wound each other up; but today, I was not in the mood. The exhaustion from the past few months, years even, made my eyelids sticky. I mustered a curt smile, placed my laptop on the table and struggled out of my coat. My fingers were trembling slightly as I typed in my password and opened the case file.

I could have killed for a coffee. In the rush to get up, I hadn’t had time to make myself one.

Robert cleared his throat loudly. ‘Where were we? Count number five. The Bambari attack.’ His words echoed around me as if we were in an enormous auditorium. The table began to drift slightly. It wasn’t anything new – I’d often felt dizzy recently and knew it would soon pass.

Robert opened a file and started leafing through it. ‘Of a total of twenty-four witnesses summoned by the prosecution, two claim to have seen Mr Vounbo in Bambari on the day of the attack.’ He paused and waited for the interpreter to translate these two sentences into Sango.

Vounbo nodded pensively and took a sip from his cup. I sat next to him, envious as I smelled the faint coffee aroma that was drifting above us.

‘Elsa,’ said Robert, pulling me out of my trance. He looked over the rim of his glasses at me. ‘Am I right in assuming that we have enough material to refute these claims?’

All eyes latched onto me.

We had rehashed it over a hundred times and I was thoroughly prepared. But at that moment, in those seconds of silence following his question, it was as if my thoughts had all

dried up. I swallowed and made several attempts to compose myself. Slowly, sentences formed in my mind.

‘Perhaps not enough to refute them,’ I said, ‘but enough to raise credible doubt.’

Dancing shadows drifted across my eyes. I tried to blink them away.

‘Can you be a bit more precise?’ Robert insisted as he tapped the nib of his ballpoint pen on the desk.

I scrolled through the open document on my screen. The words became blurred before my eyes and the shadows folded in on me. What the hell was wrong with me today? These episodes usually only lasted a few moments.

‘We don’t have forever,’ Robert insisted.

The ballpoint pen tapped louder, hammering into my ears. Until I realized it was my own heartbeat.

‘Witness P-037,’ I mumbled, ‘he . . .’ I inhaled, felt the scratchy material of my blouse on my back and a rising heat while my legs began to tingle. And then everything went dark around me as if someone had turned out the light.

‘Elsa, what’s the matter?’ I heard Christopher saying as if from very far away.

Someone grabbed my arm.

There were murmurs in the room, getting louder. A door opened, and there were footsteps. Then the noises ebbed away until I couldn’t hear anything anymore.

When I came round, I was lying on a stretcher, wrapped in a blanket. Neon light lit up a bright room. It smelled of rubber and disinfectant.

Was I back in hospital? I wondered. How could that be? All that was over.

I shielded my eyes with my hand and lifted my head. The painful memory faded.

An almost bald man with a thin rim of grey hair approached me. He was wearing a white doctor's coat. 'Mrs Forbes, how do you feel?'

I looked at him uncomprehendingly.

'I'm Dr van den Berg, the chief medic of this detention centre. You lost consciousness early this morning and have been in a deep sleep for several hours.' He placed a cuff around my arm, which inflated tightly with a buzzing sound.

'Early this *morning*?' I repeated, frowning.

Dr van der Berg checked his watch. 'Well, it's now just gone 12 o'clock. So about six hours ago.'

A shock rippled through my entire body. 'Good God, I have to go. The trial . . .' With a jerk, I sat bolt upright and pulled the blanket away. The cuff around my arm began beeping loudly. Everything went black before my eyes. I stopped, waiting for the faintness to pass.

'I'll be alright in a moment,' I murmured, 'haven't eaten anything yet today.'

'Take it easy, Mrs Forbes.' Dr van den Berg softly tapped my shoulder. 'Get a warm meal inside you. The trial will go ahead even if you're not there.'

I shook my head vehemently. 'That's not possible.'

'Oh yes it is,' he said, and gently guided me back into a lying position on the stretcher. 'Please relax so that I can take your blood pressure.'

Reluctantly, I gave in. It was better to play along so that he'd discharge me more quickly. I felt tired and disoriented, like after a short afternoon nap.

As he wrapped the cuff around my arm a second time, I thought of my colleagues. In the three hours of the trial I'd missed, not a great deal would have happened yet. The agenda would have been read out, the summary of the previous day's events. But after the lunch break, the focus would be on the conditions in Bangui's prisons. I could not miss that at any cost. We had found exonerating evidence that I was supposed to be presenting.

The ICC was only a few bus stops from the UN prison. If I set off in the next ten minutes, I'd be there on time and would have the opportunity to go through the most important points beforehand.

Off came the cuff again. 'A little low, but nothing to be worried about.'

'Good, I said, relieved. 'I probably just needed a strong coffee this morning.' I sat up. My right hand started shaking. Not again, not now. I quickly thrust it into my trouser pocket.

'Right then, I'll get going.'

'That's out of the question,' replied Dr van den Berg, raising his index finger as if he was telling off a disobedient child. 'You need to go home, eat something and take some rest.'

'But they're expecting me at the court,' I objected and looked around for my laptop and coat. I saw them lying on a stool next to the stretcher.

'I've signed you off sick for the foreseeable future, Mrs Forbes.'

I stared at him incredulously. 'But why?'

He went over to his office chair and sat down. 'You are in a state of chronic exhaustion. Burnout, most likely.' His voice had suddenly taken on a very serious tone.

'Sometimes I have trouble falling asleep, but that's all,' I lied. 'I feel fine.'

‘I’m not so sure about that,’ replied Dr van der Berg. ‘Your symptoms indicate something quite different. I’m very sorry but your work has to come second. You have to seek treatment. Slow down.’

‘Tell my boss that,’ I responded, with a sardonic smile. ‘He’ll love that.’

Dr van der Berg’s expression did not change. ‘I already have, and I’ve urgently advised him to give you a few months’ leave. Burnout should not be treated lightly.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding.’ In my pocket, I balled my hand into a fist. ‘The defence hearings started this morning. Every statement counts. I have to be there.’

‘No one is irreplaceable, not even you,’ said Dr van den Berg in reply with a shrug. ‘What I’d like most is to send you straight to a clinic. You need a thorough medical examination.’ He crossed his arms. ‘But you should discuss that with your family physician.’

‘I don’t have a family physician,’ I replied acerbically. *Burnout. Clinic. Family physician.* None of these words had a place in my life.

My gaze was drawn to the wall clock above his desk. When I looked at it, it wobbled slightly as if it were trying to get away from me. I screwed up my eyes, but I still couldn’t tell the time.

‘Well, anyway, I really have to go now,’ I said, nodding at the clock. ‘The hearing is about to start.’ I slipped my coat on and fiddled around with my buttons.

When I noticed that Dr van den Berg was watching me, I stuffed my trembling hand back into my pocket.

‘Don’t bother, Mrs Forbes,’ he said. I felt caught out and my face flushed.

‘Your boss has already agreed to your leave. When an employee collapses while on duty, life doesn’t just go on regardless. Something like this has consequences. Especially in an international bureaucracy like yours.’

I lowered my gaze. As if in slow motion, his words dawned on me.

‘I can recommend a burnout specialist,’ he continued.

I didn’t react but stared instead at the linoleum floor. It was grey and slightly rippled in places.

A deep-seated, lurking fear gripped me. This incident could mean the end of my career. High psychological resilience and the ability to deal with stress were two of the fundamental requirements to succeed in court in the long term.

I had excelled in this system for years. And now it might all be over all of a sudden? My throat felt corded up and tears welled in my eyes.

Dr van den Berg bent over his desk, scribbled something down and handed me the piece of paper. ‘This is a prescription for sleeping tablets. It’ll tide you over until you have a treatment plan. I’ve also noted the specialist’s number.’

I took the paper with a mechanical movement, thanked him and left the room. As soon as I had closed the door behind me, I screwed up the prescription and stuffed it into my coat pocket. No pills, I’d sworn to myself, never ever.

I walked in the direction of the lobby and felt the heft of my laptop in my arm. Two years of work. Two years in which I’d given my all.

A dim feeling of being suspended in time coupled with aimlessness spread through me as my steps echoed through the corridors.

I pulled my bag out of the locker and waited until the guards unbolted the first, then the second security door. Then I walked outdoors into the half-wasted day. The North Sea wind blew salt and a vacuum into my face.

As I walked into my apartment, everything was unusually quiet. No water was gurgling through the pipes, no children upstairs were jumping around and no voices echoed on the stairs. The residents of this block were all out in their offices, surgeries, schools, businesses or firms. They were dealing with clients, taking part in meetings or writing reports. Everyone except me.

I already felt a twinge of regret not to have gone straight to the courtroom. But what use would that have been? The decision had long been made. Robert had granted me a three-month furlough, as I'd gathered from reading my emails on the way home. Human resources would confirm this soon with details of sick pay and potential salary reduction if my furlough needed to be extended by a few months, he wrote. Then he wished me a 'speedy recovery' as if I was suffering from a cold.

Robert wasn't one for great verbal gestures, and today was no exception. But still, the sober tone of his message caused me a stab of pain. For years, we'd fought side by side for justice and fairness. I'd always seen to his requests and instructions, sacrificing many a weekend, turning down invitations to dinner and postponing vacations. And now he couldn't even spare two minutes of his time to send me a couple of empathetic words.

Christopher had sent me a text. 'Call me if you need anything,' it said, followed by rows of crying, outraged and worried emojis that waved and danced around. I wondered whether he would really come if I asked him for help, or whether he'd excuse himself at the last minute with a sorry emoji.

After I'd put down my bag and taken off my coat, I stood around in the hallway, not knowing what to do. A whole afternoon without obligations or appointments, no trial or deadline. A three-month state of suspended animation. What if I didn't manage to get back into the swing of work afterwards? What if my replacement proved to be more competent, charismatic and suited to the job than I was?

'No one is irreplaceable.' Dr van den Berg's words echoed in my mind. Instantly, the anxiety rose in me again. My heart raced and a cold sweat broke out on my forehead. With my back pressed against the door to my apartment, I tugged at the top button of my blouse. Calling Niklas was the only thing I could think of doing. But that was out of the question.

After a while, the violent hammering in my body began to calm itself. I pulled myself away from the door, wiped my forehead and stumbled into the kitchen. It was high time I ate something.

In the fridge, I found a pot of yoghurt several days past its sell-by date, and the take-out carton of Thai noodles from yesterday evening. I put it in the microwave. 'Here's the warm meal you prescribed me, Mr Prison Doctor,' I yelled, slamming the microwave door and pulling a face in its reflection.

The microwave began humming serenely. It was wonderful to interrupt the silence for a moment. After a few seconds, the pleasant smell of spicy curry and lemongrass filled my nostrils. But instead of the appetite I hoped for, it brought on a wistful wrench in my stomach. Because the Thai noodles reminded me of the excitement leading up to a hearing when I had no time to cook for myself. They smelled of a mission I'd devoted myself to, body and soul.

I ignored the wrenching feeling in the pit of my stomach, just like I'd learned to ignore all the other symptoms in my body, and concentrated on the humming of the microwave.

As soon as the carton was warmed up and in my hands, I started to eat, standing up and leaning on the counter, just as I always did when I had no time.

But that was all over now, the thought shot through my mind. I didn't have to be quick any more. *Slow down*, the doctor had said.

Everything in me resisted that whole idea. It brought up images of scented candles, yoga pants and breathwork. I'd deleted the meditation app that my colleague Martha swore by as soon as I'd downloaded it. Meditating with an iPhone – how absurd.

In truth, slowing down was the same as going backwards. A diminishing of things. Going downhill, mothballed in the smell of lavender.

My first chakra was my work. My core. It strengthened and grounded me. It had helped me get back on my feet when I'd lost my footing.

Goose pimples pricked the skin on my arms. I stabbed a fork into my noodles and dragged myself into the living room.

I didn't own a dining table anymore. Niklas had taken it with him. So I sat down at my desk which was directly by the window. I placed the carton on the transcripts and protocols of the Vounbo trial and carried on eating. Once again, I saw The Butcher before me in his dark suit and remembered the composure with which he'd drunk his coffee that morning. A forkful of noodles landed on one of the trial files. It didn't matter anymore.

I looked over at the red brick houses on the other side of the street. They stood there like a scene in a picture book, tightly packed in rows with white lattice windows and arched gables. In the evenings and at the weekends, countless bicycles were parked outside the front doors. Now the bike stands were empty.

I'd immediately fallen in love with the numerous bikes and pretty old houses when I'd moved to The Hague eleven years earlier. I couldn't get enough of them and had taken dozens of photos.

By now, I didn't even notice them; they were just there.

I forced down a couple of mouthfuls and then shoved the carton away. Here, at my desk, next to words like 'massacre', 'crime', and 'torture', the food tasted too strongly of yesterday when I'd been deep in preparation and thinking ecstatically about the witness Adrian had mentioned.

My gaze fell on the picture frame face down next to the telephone. It lay there like a memorial to the past. I hadn't been able to bring myself to clear it away. I placed the flat of my hand on top of it but didn't dare turn it over. I couldn't bear to see the happiness that it contained. Niklas and I on the beach, the sun in our hair, smiling, having just fallen in love.

When he'd been living here, I hadn't eaten out of brown take-out cartons. Niklas had taken care of the food. He'd made sure that the milk for our coffee was always fresh, stopped at the baker's after jogging and went to the market at weekends. But Niklas was no longer around. And since then, I'd drunk my coffee black.

I stood up and dithered about the room. I stopped in front of the bookcase and brushed my fingers across the bookspines. International criminal law, international law, the ICC's last few annual reports and among them, a few unread novels. I pulled one out. Now I had time. Then I shoved it back into its place, not in the mood for reading.

So that I didn't have to be constantly reminded of work, I went into my bedroom. The curtains were still drawn and the bedclothes in a tangle. In front of my open wardrobe, lay individual shoes, hangers and a few crumpled clothes I'd been meaning to take to the cleaners for a long time. When I looked at my haggard figure in the wardrobe mirror, I got a shock. My

face was thin and as white as my blouse, and my trousers were much too loose. My long, dark hair, once my crowning glory, looked matt and frizzy at the ends.

I turned away and let myself fall back, just as I was in my trousers and blouse, onto my unmade bed.

It wasn't until I was lying there, eyes closed and the covers pulled up to my chin, the silence all around hurting me, that I allowed the thoughts to come that I'd been running from for months like a wild animal: my strength had been sapped, down to the last. Exhaustion that sleep couldn't cure was eating away at me.

Dr van den Berg knew it. Robert knew it. Everyone knew it. Even Christopher had given himself away with his sarcastic, 'Late again.'

And I knew it too, of course. For a long time, I'd felt like I was going down on a sinking ship. But I'd ignored all my body's warning signs. The way I started trembling for no reason and the way it stopped again just as inexplicably. My dizziness, lack of appetite, and the deep rings below my eyes.

I'd persuaded myself that it would work itself out somehow because it always had. Until today.

I was afraid of what lay ahead of me. Of all the time I couldn't fill with work anymore, and the questions I couldn't answer. Of the quiet in my apartment and the long, wakeful nights.

I thought of Niklas and what might have been and should not have been. My stomach cramped up and I pulled the covers more tightly around me.

If only I could lay low at Great-aunt Toni's for a few weeks. She'd have known what to do and pulled me out of this despair. Like in the past when I hurt myself climbing or burned myself on the hob or fell into the nettles.

'You'll be fine, darling. We don't let things like this get us down.' Some ointment, a smile, a kiss on my forehead.

I missed her so much. And her laugh that felt like the sun was shining even on grey days. The impish sparkle in her eyes when we did things that weren't allowed – snacking before mealtimes, staying up late and reading. Her hands, cooking kilo upon kilo of yellow plums and trimming hedges and stroking my head, even when I was long since grown up. No one would ever make me feel so at home as she did.

Her house on the Rhine where I'd spent the happiest weeks of my childhood, now belonged to my mother. I hoped she would preserve our memories of Toni and not make too many changes. Goose pimples pricked the skin on my arms.

I quickly steered my thoughts back to Toni. I thought of my last visit in winter, shortly before she died. She'd been weak and thin, with blueish lips and swollen feet. Her skin had been as translucent as paper. Only her bright blue eyes were still shining as always. In them was an expression of peace and contentment, a readiness to let go, which comforted me for days.

And while in my mind, I felt Toni's cold hand with its arching blue veins in mine, I managed to fall asleep in the middle of the day.