

# **The Diplomat**

**A Novel**

**Lucy Fricke**

**Translated by Sinéad Crowe**

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This is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, is purely coincidental.

**MONTEVIDEO**

Outside the window, the German flag rattled in the wind. The first thing I saw whenever I looked out was black, red and yellow. Though I barely noticed it now, the flag; it had become part of the sky, a stuck cloud. Exhausted, I put my phone down on the table. My deputy had called, talking about burnout, telling me his doctor had signed him off work for four weeks, prescribed complete rest, as much gardening as possible. He was really sorry, my deputy had muttered into the receiver, he hoped I could understand.

How could anyone, least of all a deputy, get burnt out in Montevideo? He'd just turned forty, the age at which most people's lives finally start looking up. My deputy, though, took one look at the beach and had a breakdown. Maybe he just wanted to spend time with his two kids; a bout of nervous exhaustion is always a good excuse. The really important stuff: family, garden, happiness. All the stuff I never managed to acquire, if you don't take count two miscarriages and one big, discarded love.

And now I'd been posted to a country where cows grazed in endless meadows and barbeque ash was constantly swirling through the air. Where gay marriage, abortion and marijuana were legal. Where people only ever had one hand free because they were holding a mate gourd in the other, while in their neighbouring country, a revolution was underway. Of all the places they could have sent me, they sent me to paradise. A sixteen-hour flight from headquarters, hardly anyone came to visit: no minister, no delegation strayed to this end of the world. I could be doing the best job in the world, no one would notice. My colleagues extolled the autonomy, and HR congratulated me on this unique opportunity. A load of nonsense, but I went for it nonetheless. To me, each level was just one below the next.

Without looking at me, Valentina put coffee and freshly baked bread on the laid table. She always moved around me like a ghost. We both

moved like ghosts, as if we might shatter if we bumped into each other. She was my age, which didn't make things easier. Who wants to be served by a person their own age? If you only have one thing in common with someone, the differences become even deeper. They turn into chasms. Whether I liked it or not, I'd grown accustomed to these chasms, was surrounded by them, had become a fortress. And this fortress was now leaving the residence the same way she did every morning: proud and erect.

The security guard greeted me from his cabin, and Carlos held the car door open with a wink and a "Good morning, Your Excellency."

"Enjoy!" my predecessor's debriefing report had said. "This is the most fabulous country in the world. I'll leave a few restaurant tips for you."

I'd turned the page over, opened the drawers in the empty desk, asked the secretary, but it was all he'd left me. A few recommendations for eating out. Maybe there was nothing more to say. Not for nothing did we have this saying: your predecessor is the biggest idiot, your successor the biggest crook. I'd never met him, though I might have run into him somewhere and forgotten. It was his first and last posting as ambassador. He'd gone into retirement, into insignificance. No doubt he couldn't believe that a woman twenty years younger had taken his place. He wasn't prepared for these times, and he was probably relieved his own time was now over.

As we drove down the Rambla, I sat in the backseat leafing through the newspapers. My first appointment was with the caterer. He wanted to talk to me about the food and, more importantly, the bloody tents. White, I'd said, just normal white tents. But apparently they were hard to come by, the normal things; they'd become rare commodities. The only topic of conversation since I'd landed six weeks ago had been this one event. The entire embassy was obsessed with preparing for German Unity Day, our biggest reception of the year. I'd hit rock-bottom: event management.

"Your predecessor always ordered the German colours," Carlos said. "Tents and serviettes, all German. It looked good."

Carlos's family had immigrated in the late 1930s. Anyone you met here with German roots had Jewish ancestors. All Jews; never any Nazis. It was as if they'd evaporated, been extinguished from memory, and hadn't reproduced.

Carlos, interested in neither religion nor politics, didn't explain the world to me, he explained football. Without him, I wouldn't have survived a single reception. He'd advised me to support his club. That was the safest choice, he said, it would show I'm up for the underdog. *Muy amable*, that was the most important thing when you were trying to get your foot in the door. I could always play golf with the arseholes later, Carlos said. He'd taken me to the pitch where the first World Cup had been played almost a hundred years ago. All that remained was a single mark on the ground, the final surviving, constantly repainted streak: the goal line crossed by the hosts' winning ball. Where the best football nation in the world was born. It was because of this myth that they spent their childhoods kicking balls around yards and their teens in training camps. Occasionally I got the feeling that Carlos had read the same guidebook I had just before I packed my boxes in Baghdad. The move had thrown me off balance. I could still hardly sleep in the silence here, but during the day, the peace stilled my thoughts and the tension in my body subsided.

Carlos smiled at me in the rear-view mirror. He rarely told me anything I didn't know already, but I always feigned surprise. No man wants to hear that he sounds like an old Lonely Planet.

I looked out the limousine window. On the right, the ten-storey apartment blocks; on the left, the Atlantic; and ahead, a traffic jam, every day a traffic jam, an hour to crawl fifteen kilometres. It was mid-September, spring was creeping into the city, and every evening, people stood outside applauding the sunset, that's how happy this country was. It couldn't have been more different from my previous post as director of the legal and consular department in Iraq.

I'd heard that the minister personally shot me up the ranks. I'd also heard that there weren't enough qualified women to fill the quota. I'm the right gender at last, I'd thought. After decades of fighting, I've turned my disadvantage into an advantage. Me, of all people. A woman now well over forty who wears suits and is driven around in a bulletproof limo. Who speaks four languages, has been in charge of a German president's office and lived in five different countries. Who is used to schedules so tight, she doesn't have time to pee. Who sits alone in her suite at night, rolling her tights down her legs. Who looks out at little German flags standing on tables in front of her. After twenty years of service, I'd finally made it. Me, a woman raised without a father by a waitress in a working-class Hamburg neighbourhood, at a time when there was still such a thing as working-class neighbourhoods.

"Look!" Carlos said, pointing to a paraglider hovering over the beach. He was attached to a canopy in the bright blue party colours. "The Conservatives have enough money to hang poor idiots from a wing." He laughed. "And they think that'll win them the election. They're just winging it themselves, if you ask me."

We headed towards the embassy, a building from the 1950s with photos of the Berlin Wall hanging on the fence: construction, fall and reunification celebrations at the Brandenburg Gate. The pictures the world loves us for. The dry fountain in front of the building was the work of a German architect, an austere object made of rectangles and rhombuses in yellow, blue and red, now completely decayed. The manager had told me it only gets turned on for high-level visits, so its state was an excellent reflection of what a forgotten outpost we were.

In my first week, I submitted an application to the property office, arguing that a ruin did not make an appropriate first impression. With a bit of luck, they would grant the money before my time was up and I would leave behind a gurgling fountain, if nothing else.



I'd chosen this career because I wanted to do something meaningful. And now I'd spent a solid hour discussing grilled meat and bratwurst. Just over the border there was this German butcher, folk here went nuts for his sausages, in fact they only came to our receptions because of the sausages, under no circumstances could I omit the sausages, the international community would be bitterly disappointed, and you know how unforgiving the community is, especially the international one.

In other words, if the reunification sausages weren't on the menu, I might as well just pack up and leave.

Even more torturous than the discussions about the barbecue were those about the anthem.

“Shall we play it on a CD?”

“Too sterile.”

“Get someone to sing it?”

“Who?”

“We could fly someone in.”

“Just for the anthem?”

“No, for the guests.”

But, they warned me, “Anyone who gets invited here secretly hopes it will be cancelled at the last minute.”

It was maddening.

It was just so damn far away, they said, a sixteen-hour flight to sing the anthem for a few pesos. And climate-wise, it's unjustifiable. Artists these days expect you to offset their carbon.

“The carbon offsetting costs more than their fee, believe me.”

I nodded and took notes, my urge growing to throw a party for the ages.

“What about a band?” I said, racking my brain for people I could ask. There must be musicians who’d be happy to travel to the other end of the world, people for whom a few pesos, as my cultural director said, was still money. Berlin was full of those people.

“Too expensive,” he said. “Annual budget.”

But, he added, a really good double bassist had moved here recently. World renowned, awards and everything. But politically, well ... difficult. He’d emigrated, was basically in exile here.

“For love?” I said. Because it’s nearly always love that makes people up sticks. Either love or despair over a failed life; very often, the two coincide.

“No, because of the Muslims.”

“But there aren’t any Muslims here.”

“Exactly,” Culture said. “Germany has become an Islamic country, he says. He’s convinced sharia is going to be introduced any minute. So he left. He wants to enjoy the autumn of his life without Muslims.”

“I’m open to anything, but please, no Nazis at an embassy reception,” I said.

“He’s not a Nazi, he’s a double bassist.”

“Absolutely no way.”

Culture nodded and crossed the name off his list.

“Okay,” he said. “But that makes things tricky.”

“Are you trying to tell me all we have here are exiled Nazis?”

“Well, history repeats itself.”

“No, history rhymes. Everything comes back a bit different than before. But nothing is repeated.”

“Whatever you say.”

Culture stared out the window. Someone was walking a tightrope strung between two palm trees, and a dog was peeing against the Goethe bust across the street.

He shook his head mournfully.

“It’s just a copy, you know. The original is in France. They put this copy up here, and dogs urinate against it from morning till night. It takes a lot of optimism not to see it as a metaphor.”

“It’s just a bust,” I said.

He averted his sad gaze to the portrait of the German president hanging behind my head.

“Are you going to the reception this evening?” he asked.

I nodded.

“It’s always a national day somewhere, isn’t it?”

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Do you have to do anything? Any meetings?”

“No. I just have to stand around being Germany.”

“Our job is to be a plant pot, I always say. These damn plant-pot evenings,” he sighed, dragging his feet as he left my office.

I looked out at the muddy sea as my computer started up. The same screen appeared that I saw on every posting. Regardless of where in the world I was, the screen remained the same. This interface was my home, and it made no difference whether paradise or a guarded barricade lay outside my window.

That afternoon I'd been to the chief of police's office, one of the items I was fastidiously crossing off my list: the introductory visits, the building of contacts, the network. I did my best to look dignified as I presented him with a solar-powered torch decorated with the outline of my homeland. It was ridiculous, pointless and mortifying, gifting a police chief a torch. As if he didn't have one of his own. But we didn't have much of a selection: a notebook, a plastic fountain pen, a Bauhaus catalogue. We were so terrified of the slightest whiff of corruption that we only gave disposable gifts. The police chief remained expressionless as he reached back to the desk behind him and handed me a framed welcome certificate. A stoical type, he was missing one earlobe and, like everyone else here, insisted I call him by his first name. Hector offered me mate tea and promised me we'd have nothing to do with each other. The wild days are long gone, he said proudly, as if he was personally responsible for this.

Now I examined the little printed flag, the message "Bienvenido a Uruguay" and my name written in calligraphy: "Friederike Andermann." That's how it appeared in my passports, but for anyone who knew me, I was Fred, always had been, though the name probably suited me better when I was a kid with short hair and dungarees. Now, wearing a dark blue knee-length skirt with a half-open blouse and cradling a glass of Riesling Hochgewächs from the Mosel, crates of which I had delivered for receptions and events, I sat in an armchair my predecessor and probably his predecessor had sat in before. A rigid cream-coloured cover, a stiff cushion at my back. My private quarters in the embassy resembled the average Hilton suite. I wasn't sure my ridiculous framed certificate would improve things, but it was better than the watercolour Alpine scene I'd had removed at the first opportunity.

I didn't have much flair for private things, for the personal touch, for other people's idea of homeliness. Where I come from, you're happy if you have four walls you can stick woodchip to. My colleagues in the diplomatic service had wives who took care of the residences, attending to staff and invitations, interior design and furnishings, charity and culture. They were smart, well-groomed, sometimes even entertaining, usually not, and it wasn't just a generation of ambassadors that was now retiring but also a generation of wives who would leave and never be replaced.

There was no point in looking for equivalent men. Any husband-of-a-diplomat I met was misery personified, a sweet, drunk thing that was good at cooking and plants, liked hiking, occasionally played piano, and was gradually losing interest in all these things. I don't know why, but in the shadow of a wife, every man seems to wither.

My almost-husband was very prescient in that regard; we broke up during my first posting abroad. He couldn't be an AP, an Accompanying Partner, or Arsehole at the Pool, as he liked to say. Years later, we still argued about who had left whom. We'd fallen in love at the start of our law degree, moved in together before we graduated, and years later, just when we could afford our first fitted kitchen, we realised we didn't share the same goals anymore. He dreamed of a solicitor's office and a house with a front garden, I dreamed of the world. He wanted kids, while not only did I blame myself for my two miscarriages, I secretly believed they had been intentional. I began to see myself as a bad person who couldn't grant his wish for marriage and kids. At an age when other women were becoming mothers, I was becoming lonely, but by then it was far too late to marry a diplomat. The others had met during their internships, were posted together along with their kids, spent years at headquarters, and once the children were raised, they parted ways to focus on their unstoppable rises through the ranks. They lived in different cities and countries, telling everyone who'd listen that they were each other's rocks. For their

retirement, they invested in a house in the South of France or by the lakes of Brandenburg, where they would finally be able to cook together. It would be wonderful, even I had no doubt about that. There is a love so rational that nothing can destroy it.

I buttoned up my blouse, downed the Riesling and went representing in another distant land, just four streets to the west.

My secretary had given me the schedule for the following week: a university visit; a chamber of commerce visit; the bloody caterer again; three receptions; an interdisciplinary, intercultural dance-poetry performance in the national theatre, funded by the Goethe Institute; and an invitation to a company that manufactured leather covers for car seats, the only German company with a plant here. A tour of the factory's stitching and stamping sections followed by lunch and unavoidable discussions of planned expansions, subsidies, tax relief. "At least you don't have to give a speech in front of the workers," Business said.

He'd put together a few bits of information for me, and we clicked through the homepage together, looking at tidy production halls with leather rags hanging from the ceiling like animals in an abattoir. Just as I was reading that the company developed "interior solutions for mobile life" and catered to "the modern customer's needs and wishes", the phone rang.

My secretary said there was a mother on the line. There is only one rule when a mother is on a line: calm her down. Without uttering the word "calm", of course. One should never tell a mother to calm down, and anyway, it would be hypocritical. Only the most moronic optimists can stay calm these days. "Calm" is a word that prompts three-quarters of all human beings and 100 percent of all mothers to either hit the roof or break down in tears. But as my secretary informed me, this mother had already reached both these states.

I sent Business out with a well-rehearsed and by now convincing nod signifying that I was not to be argued with and I was sure he had everything under control. Then I had my secretary put the call through, preparing myself for a shrill, sodden voice speaking in disjointed sentences. I was wrong. The woman at the other end of the line was self-control personified. I grabbed a pen and paper. When you're dealing with someone

who plays on the emotions of junior staff and talks tough with those higher up, you need to watch your step. The way she said her name made it clear that she expected me to recognise it. Which I did, but I couldn't quite place it. I was finding it increasingly difficult to place names that are supposed to be familiar.

As soberly as a press officer, she informed me of the disappearance of her daughter, who had been travelling the continent for a month.

I asked if she was on holiday here.

The familiar name said her daughter never went on holiday, she was a travel correspondent.

"What newspaper does she work for?" I asked.

"My daughter doesn't need to work for a newspaper to report."

If she doesn't need a newspaper, then she doesn't need money, I thought, and then I asked whether she was a freelancer.

"You could say that."

"So your daughter booked everything independently, there's no editor and no tour operator?"

"My daughter didn't book anything. She's searching."

"For what?"

"Aren't we all searching for something?"

If there's one thing I hate, it's when people come out with truisms instead of giving an answer.

"When did you last hear from her?"

"Yesterday, at 13:14," she said coldly.

"How do you know the time so precisely?"

"Because the time is always shown."

"That's twenty-four hours ago. Does your daughter contact you regularly, then?"

"No," the familiar voice said. "She never contacts me."

"So how did you hear from her?"

“A mother can tell when something has happened to her child. Do you have children, Ms Andermann?”

“No, I don’t, unfortunately.”

I always added the “unfortunately” bit. Mothers prefer failed women to selfish careerists, though neither of these was applicable in my case. But sometimes it’s wise to talk yourself down.

The mother said that Tamara hadn’t posted anything in twenty-four hours. She’d taken her last photo in an Irish pub near the port.

“I expect you to do something, Ms Andermann.”

She hung up, nothing but a command as a farewell. As soon as I googled her name, I called the police chief who had assured me we’d never have anything to do with each other.

I sat at a round, shiny, white bar, staring into the lobby of the Hotel Carrasco, a location I'd suggested for lack of a better idea. Within walking distance of my residence, I could get a decent black coffee here and be left in peace. Plus, there was a story that Albert Einstein had once sat here.

German tourists were a disaster. Had their wallets stolen while they were still in their taxis, rode donkeys through IS territories, checked in for their return flights with rucksacks full of drugs, and strolled through favelas with Rolexes on their wrists. And then they would call our emergency number in a state. Now an Instagram star had gone on a bender in an Irish pub, and her mother's name was one that appeared regularly in the newspaper, at the back, with the publication details. She was one of the publishers, had basically inherited the position from her husband, who had established *Die Woche* and, within just a few years, turned it into one of Germany's most influential news magazines. An art collector and tyrant, he'd been highly intelligent, quick-witted, charismatic and filthy rich. It didn't matter that journalism and circulation figures were now in free fall; the money had been invested elsewhere long ago, and this family still had a capricious, if crumbling, power.

An Irish pub, for crying out loud, I thought. A place you find in any town, a place that looks the same everywhere and is never run by an Irish person. A place where the stranded meet, where you forget where you are the moment you enter and not just over the course of the evening. An Irish pub offers about as much of a sense of home as a McDonald's. What kind of idiot flies to the other side of the world to get drunk in an Irish pub? I'd never understood this longing for home in foreign lands. Why not just stay home, for God's sake?

I watched Hector, the police chief, push open the door and trudge towards me across the marble floor.

“Next time I’ll choose the bar,” he grumbled as a greeting, heaving himself up onto the stool beside me and looking around. He took in the pillars and velvet curtains before his gaze came to rest on the two flawlessly constructed black horses by the entrance. Enormous, outrageous, elegant but completely absurd objects with lampshades perched on their heads.

“What are those ridiculous things?” Hector asked.

“They’re from Sweden,” I said, and I explained that I’d loved these animals ever since I met the designer at a function in the Swedish embassy. For years, she’d been chuckling at the fact that her horse-lamps had pride of place in the lobbies of multiple luxury hotels. It had been a joke at first, she told me, and the horses kept multiplying in lobbies at such a rate that she would probably never stop laughing.

“Your designer friend has an extremely profitable sense of humour,” Hector said and ordered a glass of Tannat, which according to him was the best red wine not just in Uruguay, but the entire world.

We examined the pictures of Tamara Büscher on Instagram. She moved through the continent at startling speed, never staying longer than three or four days in each country, mostly only taking pictures of herself. She’d probably seen nothing. How can you see anything if you’re constantly posing in the centre of the picture? To this woman, everything was just a backdrop. She possessed the smooth beauty of the affluent and an innate assurance that the world was hers. I loathed the look of insouciance on her face. I loathed everything about these pictures, and I wasn’t proud of this. I’d never been proud of my undiluted contempt for the children of rich people.

Hector grasped right away that I was more worried about mother than daughter. He too considered money and the press a terrifying combination.

“Twenty-four hours are nothing, Freda,” he said. “Especially here. Here you need twenty-four hours just to drink your tea. It takes some people twenty-four hours to put the kettle on.”

He looked at the pictures again, downed half a glass of wine in one gulp and assured me that Tamara was off enjoying herself somewhere.

“She’s young,” he said. “She’s pretty and she’s not wearing a wedding ring. Maybe she’s finally found something better to do than play with her phone. I hope so, for her sake.”

He then proceeded to extol the charms of the local men. “They’re too lazy to be macho,” he said. As I knew, we were in one of the safest countries in the world, he added, not quite Switzerland, but nearly. The longer he spoke, the more worked up he got about the racism underlying the mother’s worries, about how she was tarring the whole continent with the same brush.

“I mean, this isn’t Argentina.”

“Nowhere in the world is safe,” I countered. I couldn’t stop staring at his tattered earlobe.

Hector sighed – a sigh that seemed to encompass the futility of an entire life – and said to tell the mother they’d look into it. “I’ll go have a beer in that grotty old Irish pub.”

He knocked back the rest of his wine, patted my shoulder and thudded off. I watched him pass the horses, ordered another coffee and stared at the gleaming bar, which looked like the reception desk at a private clinic, until my phone rang.

“Well, Ms Ambassador, how are you doing?”

I still couldn’t tell whether Philipp was pleased I’d been posted here or just amused. He was such an adaptable guy that I wasn’t quite sure he had an opinion on anything. Thanks to this flexibility, he was regarded in Berlin as one of their most capable diplomats, plus he had nerves of steel, was a master of strategic patience and never openly showed interest in his

own power. He was just the kind of man that headquarters wanted. We'd stuck out the previous two years together in Baghdad, a city we didn't know, where we saw next to nothing, where we were trapped in our secured office, nothing but barbed wire in front of the bulletproof windows.

I didn't know where to begin.

"I have to host my first October Third," I said.

"You just need to remember three rules: good food, good music, good weather. Or else do the only thing people think we're good for: smiling, schmoozing, serving smoked salmon.

"We're having German sausages instead," I said.

"Not very refined."

"It's down-to-earth."

"Since when have people been so obsessed with the rustic?" he asked, as if this question had had been preoccupying him for a while.

"Since climate change?"

"I wouldn't bring that up when you open the barbeque buffet."

"Don't worry, I won't."

"Get your deputy to do it, Fred."

"What, open the buffet?"

"No, all the catering crap. You're the ambassador. You don't need to personally select each sausage. That's your number two's job."

"He's suffering from burnout."

Philipp laughed. "What the hell do you do to your deputies?"

"What do you mean, what do I do? The last one had a corneal infection."

"If that was the case, he'd have gone blind," Philipp said.

"People have been known to suddenly go blind when they're processing visa applications," I said. "It seems to have something to do with their salaries."

When the bribery rumours first started swirling, my former deputy had had himself written off sick, and I had to admit, his choice of illness revealed a surprising sense of the comic.

“Oh Fred, I miss you,” Phillip said.

“Elke Büscher phoned me this morning,” I said.

“Elke Büscher? Why?” He was all ears now.

“She thinks her daughter has gone missing.”

“What do you mean, ‘thinks?’”

“Because the kid hasn’t posted anything on Instagram in over a day.”

“Have you told HQ?” he asked.

“Not yet.”

“Fred, phone the crisis response centre!”

“We’re not her private detectives, for Christ’s sake,” I responded, irritated.

“CYA,” he said.

It was the advice Philipp always gave me: cover your ass. He himself was an impressive example of how far you could get by heeding this first diplomatic principle. It was incredible: he was never really responsible for anything, and as a reward, he was now being sent to the United Nations.

“I’ll phone them tomorrow. They’re going to think I’m overreacting. A tourist hasn’t posted anything in twenty-four hours, and the last photo she took was of herself and her beer in an Irish pub.”

“We’re talking about Büscher’s daughter here, and Büscher makes everyone overreact. That’s her one and only job, stirring people up. The newspaper’s a rag, but she’s good at her job.”

“So you think I should just play along?”

“Yes, Fred, sometimes it’s best to play along. Actually, if you ask me, it’s always best.”

I'd been playing along for more than twenty years, and I was better at it than most. Not only had I spent months preparing for the entrance exam, but I had saved up for a suit. You can buy respectability; you can earn it. I'd learned to observe myself from the outside, to see everything from all perspectives. I'd learned to banish emotion from my language, to cultivate a sharp wit; I'd developed a proud walk, a smile that people found charming; I'd learned not to put my elbows on the table at dinner and to like classical music, even football. There was just one thing I hadn't needed to learn: the instinct to grab an opportunity when it was lying in front me. My old street-kid mentality. I could grab better than anyone, and it earned me a reputation for fearlessness, though some saw nothing but obsessive careerism. In reality, I was just dangling from a rope, fumbling from one opportunity to the next, doing my best not to let go.

That evening I sent a report to Berlin, three neutral sentences about the possible disappearance of a German tourist. I mentioned that she came from a prominent family without expressing any view on the matter. Eight exemplary lines and no opinion, the latter the only noteworthy thing about the correspondence. Pure CYA.

The towels on my bed had been rolled into swans. I removed them, lay down and kicked off the bedlinen. Every evening, my room looked as if I'd just checked in for a night. I'd inherited Valentina along with everything else, and I wasn't sure whether she was scared of me or I was just dealing with my predecessor's legacy. Telling staff to not do so much, please, is utterly pointless. You might as well scream at someone to relax, for Christ's sake.

Had I known what awaited me that night, I would have stayed awake at my desk.

First, I was woken by a leg cramp.

Second, by a ludicrous nightmare that had long been one of my greatest hits. It used to surface every few months, now it was just every couple of years. I'm twenty-seven again, standing in front of the exam committee, and I keep hearing the same question: on a visit to a rural African village, you are presented with the hide of a leopard. What do you do?

I can't take it, because I'm not allowed to accept gifts worth more than €25. I can't refuse it, because that would offend my hosts. All I have to offer in return is a plastic pen – how can that compare to the hide of leopard, which in the worst case has been personally shot and skinned by my hosts? I have more questions than answers, suddenly all I have is questions, but the committee only has this one: what do you do? And then they stuff the hide into my mouth. I can't speak, I can't breathe, I taste skin

and blood. What do you do? I see a skinned leopard lunging towards me and wake up.

I knew this dream by heart. It didn't surprise me, not even in my sleep. It just irritated me.

The third time, my phone rang. Whenever my phone rang in the middle of the night, it was either my mother, who tended to forget that there are time zones and indeed a world beyond her own, or it was something I'd rather not know. Good news never arrives in the middle of the night.

It was my cultural director, who sounded wide awake but confused. He was on call that night, which simply meant going to bed reasonably sober and leaving your phone next to the bed. For the first time since he'd been here, it had actually rung. He'd barely understood a word, he said, the connection was dreadful, the caller possibly drunk. The sentences sounded woolly, but this made one statement stand out all the clearer: the caller had kidnapped a German woman.

"For the time being," Culture said, "We have to assume this isn't just a sick joke. Personally, I think it's a prank, but professionally, we have to take it seriously."

"Did he mention any demands?" I asked.

"No, at least not that I could make out."

"Any name, organisation?"

"No, nothing. He didn't even give the name of the woman."

"I'm afraid I have an idea who it might be."

"Who?" he asked with fear in his voice.

"Tamara Büscher," I said.

"Any relation to *the* Mrs Büscher?"

"I'm afraid so. She phoned me to say her daughter is missing."

The line was very quiet, that moment of quiet when someone grasps the full scale of a shitshow.

“This isn’t good, not good at all,” Culture said eventually, and I nodded in silence.

“Inform the crisis response centre,” I said. “Ask how we should proceed.”

He said he’d get back to me right away.

I knew what would happen in Berlin now. They’d report the case to the Ministry of the Interior and inform the Federal Criminal Police Office, warn the press office, and, most importantly, tell us to keep the local authorities out of it. To keep calm until we knew who we were dealing with here. It had been drilled into us: don’t do anything until HQ has made a decision. I still didn’t know why I found this so difficult.

In the dawn light, I looked at the faded flag drooping outside the window. It was the first still morning I’d experienced here, and I never thought I’d miss the wind so much.

“Are you alright?”

Carlos examined me in the rear-view window. A woman wearing too much makeup, her suit the only thing holding her together, or pulling her together, more like. I wasn't on the verge of collapse, I was on the verge of exploding. I'd never gotten something so wrong before, never allowed my emotions to cloud my judgment so badly. I felt like punching myself. And the caterwauling wasn't helping.

“Could you turn it off please, Carlos?”

“Don't you like German music? I thought it might cheer you up a bit.”

Our eyes met in the mirror, and Carlos give a start. To my relief, he turned off the music.

“Helene Fischer is one of the greats. I love her,” he said, half-apologetically.

Over the past few years, I'd seen my fair share of bodyguards sitting in bulletproof limousines, singing along to Helene Fischer at the top of their voices. And don't get me started on the internal embassy parties. Quite a few things about my native country were a source of shame and torment, and most of these I'd only become truly familiar with when I was abroad. I must admit, it was hard for me to trust staff members who knew every word to *Atemlos*. Neither bodyguards nor chauffeurs should be Helene Fischer fans. It reeks of incompetence, and it was the last thing I needed.

The gates opened in front of us, and as I was getting out of the car, I heard Carlos say, “Don't worry, Your Excellency, you've got this.”

This much I knew: when people say “you've got this,” you're on your own.

Everyone was in the conference room: seven locals and six posted staff (the seventh was busy being burnt out at home), no one daring to chow down on their *chivito*. I stood in front of them and ran through what

we knew. A mother who had reported her daughter missing, and a night caller claiming to have kidnapped a young German woman but mentioning neither names nor demands.

As the call had been made to the embassy's emergency line, I thought it was likely our contact would call the official number again. I told the staff that if this happened, they were to put the call through to me and record it.

I looked into silent faces, heard the sound of scribbling on paper and frantic, helpless tapping on a phone, and saw the first shake of a head.

"We don't have the technology," IT said. "We've never recorded a call here."

"Anyone can record a telephone call," I replied. "It must be possible. Otherwise just put the call through to my mobile."

"Okay, that should be doable," IT said, sucking his mate through a *bombilla*.

"Our last kidnapping was fifty years ago," Admin said wistfully.

This had been back in the heyday of the urban guerrillas, one of whom would later become president, probably the most popular one on the entire continent.

"I'd be surprised if this is a political kidnapping," I said.

"It's always about money one way or another," Culture said. He bit into his *chivito*, the first to do so.

"No, it's not. It's about saving people's lives."

He stared at me with his mouth full.

"We'll discuss further details with HQ," I said, asking for the usual discretion before leaving the room.

In my office, I was met with silence, the loudest silence of all – a glossy, reproachful silence – emanating from the president in his frame, while Berlin waited on high alert. I couldn't fuck up now, not in Uruguay,

and certainly not because of some spoiled little girl who thought she owned the world.

Waiting is the very worst kind of stress. There was no difference between work and my personal life in that regard, a silent telephone could make me frantic. So I frantically paced around my office, frantically scanned the news and weighed up options, frantically scrolled through Tamara's Instagram account and maps, frantically imagined worst-case scenarios, and then frantically made my way towards Ciudad Vieja.

I walked through the streets, half-hoping to find her sitting on a bench, laughing at a joke with a stranger, or standing in front of a bar with a beer. I'd grab her by the arm, put her on the next flight back to Germany, and organize my October Third in peace. That's what I wanted. But all I saw was art deco, cafés and idylls. No Tamara anywhere. The dust from the plane trees burned my eyes. I had a quick look in Starbucks; someone who goes to Irish pubs is likely to get their coffee in Starbucks. The city's first branch had opened just recently, and people flocked there as if they felt finally accepted into the international community. Right next door was a shopping centre that used to be the city's biggest prison. Practically every opponent of the regime had been locked up there at some point, in cells where trainers and underpants were now being sold. Instead of the clink, we had capitalism; some battles just can't be won.

I crossed the Plaza Independencia, which only looked impressive in photos, and entered the little streets of the Old Town, where pleasure reigned by day and poverty returned at night. When the bars and restaurants locked up, the doorways filled with expellees smoking paco, a cheap and nasty by-product of cocaine. They inhaled whatever filth was left over, lost their teeth and their minds, and when the sun rose, they vanished again.

I circled my destination; it was all I could see, everything else having faded into blurry doubt. Only when I got there did I realise how pointless it was. "Blind actionism", we called it back in Germany: doing stuff just to appear as if you're taking matters in hand. I looked through the pub window at wooden darkness and bright bunting, beer taps lined up behind the bar, two guys at a table with Pils and chips. How often I used to sit around pubs like this with staff posted to other embassies, thinking I had to. We called it networking, but really we were just frightened of our own empty apartments.

I looked around the pub and compared it to Tamara's Instagram picture of her sitting on the little empty stage, looking relaxed. All you could see was her head leaning against an amplifier and the beer she was thrusting into the camera. "Bizarra", the beer was called, and its label featured a drawing of a woman swinging upside down from a trapeze.

The phone in my hand rang. It seemed deafening, making my secretary's voice sound even quieter when she told me he'd just called.

Why hadn't she put him through to me right away, I demanded to know.

"It didn't work, for some reason," she said.

And anyway, she added, she got the feeling he didn't want to be put through.

"Send me the recording," I said, but she ignored me.

"We have the name of the abductee," she said instead. "Tamara Büscher. We've got her ID number too."

"Maybe that's all he's got," I said hopefully. "Just her wallet."

"She gave us her name and number herself," my secretary said wearily.

"How did she sound?" I tried to feign a pragmatic, routine tone, as if kidnappings were all in a day's work for me.

My secretary went quiet for a while, obviously needing to marshal every single word.

"Let me guess," I said. "She sounded calm and composed."

"It was weird. She sounded like she was applying for a visa."

"At least she won't die of fright, then," I said.

"I don't know if that's a good or bad thing."

I suspected Tamara was the kind of person who believed she would be rescued from any calamity. She was the kind of person who always gets her happy ending, she just had to wait long enough or scream loud enough.

I heard my secretary light up a cigarette. This was a first; I didn't even know she smoked.

"Did he make any demands?" I asked.

"He wants to see his kid."

"What?"

"His son. He lives with his mother in Germany. She's cut off all contact."

Now it was me who was quiet.

"He gave us their names," the secretary continued.

"So that means we have his name too?"

"Yes. And again, I don't know whether that's good or bad."

"Why doesn't he just fly over there?"

"We don't know."

"I'm on my way. We need to meet with the crisis centre."

"We're just setting the teleconference up now."

"Did he say anything else?"

"He'll contact us again in twenty-four hours. Oh, and: no police."

I hung up and felt a shadow hovering over me. Not someone looming over me threateningly, not a dark sense of foreboding, but a placid man standing there with a bottle of Bizarra in his hand. When I looked at him quizzically, he said, "I told you I was going to check this place out." Hector wanted to know everything, of course, and he had an opinion on everything too. It wasn't a local, he said; this kind of thing never happens in his country, no way. All the depraved types take the ferry westwards. "Give me his name as soon you find out," he said. "You'll see."

I had as little interest in nationality as I did in honour. The one thing I knew was that if so much as a hair on this girl's head was touched, it was my head that would roll.

"I don't have time to talk," I said. "I have to go."

“No police, right? Like in the crime shows. But then you’ll go ahead and send over your guys because you don’t trust ours.”

Hector took a gulp of Bizarra and grimaced. “I’ll tell you one thing, this Tamara kid knows nothing about beer.”

He put down the bottle, turned around and held the door open for me.

“I’ll be in touch,” I promised as I flagged down the next taxi.

When disaster strikes, there's no better place to be than the ministry. The walls are stable, the doors thick, the lines secured. It's a home where there are rules to be followed, where everyone gets a grip. There are no hugs, but always a place at the table. The teleconference started bang on time, everyone sitting there as if the appointment had been in our calendars for weeks. The crisis officer, the state secretary, the head of the regional unit, the Federal Criminal Police Office. We nodded to each other in our cameras, and I repeated the little we knew.

No, there was no recording, I said, and the regional head let it be known that he had long been saying our IT needed updating. We'd be allocated funds in the next budget at the latest, he said.

I hadn't expected him to be so defensive. Women like me have no defence. The tiniest mistake can finish us, I thought, and it would certainly finish someone like me, a woman who had slogged her way up the ladder. Yet here a huge mistake was being brushed off in the casual way I'd heard only men do. I'd only heard about it because I'd never been invited to those meetings. But now here we sat, all of us innocent and patient. We never lost our heads; we were civil servants.

The police office had run a check, and only Hector would have smiled at what they found. The man was Argentine, 36 years of age, his name already in their records. There was a warrant out for him in Germany, for battery and drug trafficking. I closed my eyes for a moment.

I'd always preferred politics to the personal. I'd rather have faced a rebel group, but what I'd got was an ex-husband and father insisting on his right to love, and this scared me. How much sense does a spurned man have? How far does negotiating get you when you're dealing with hurt feelings? How much rationality does the worst wound leave behind? What

do you do when money doesn't help, and how much money might indeed help?

Officially we never paid, unofficially we nearly always did. The sums were top secret; no state wants to appear before its citizens with a price tag stuck to its forehead. And no one mentioned money now. Instead, questions hissed down the line.

Where did the kidnapping take place? Does the kidnapper have accomplices? Are there any clues as to location? Is the area accessible? We need maps, satellite images. Did the man give a deadline? Are the authorities in the host country trustworthy? Would a letter or phone call from the foreign minister help? Should we send a GSG 9 unit? And the one question we all knew the answer to, the question that frightened us most: who is the girl?

“Has the mother been informed?” I asked.

“A psychologist is attending to her,” the crisis centre said. “She collapsed. Lost her husband a year ago, now this.”

“Let's not be so pessimistic,” the police office objected, but no one reacted, least of all the crisis centre. We had to prepare for the worst, and the worst that could happen was German victims.

“Mrs Büscher told us she informed you yesterday,” the crisis centre continued.

“She called me yesterday to say her daughter hadn't posted anything in twenty-four hours. She was worried.”

“Why weren't we told?” the regional head said.

“I sent you a report last night,” I said.

“Which arrived here with no sense of urgency.”

“A daughter hadn't posted any pictures online in a day. I didn't see it as high-priority.”

“It’s Büscher’s daughter, for God’s sake! Now we’ll have the entire German press on our hands. You might as well send a welcoming committee to the airport tomorrow evening, Ms Andermann!”

“No doubt you’d love to be there too,” I said.

“She explicitly asked us to keep the press out of it,” the crisis centre assured us.

“Because she wants exclusive rights to the story,” the state secretary said.

“My God, she’s the girl’s mother!”

For the first time ever, I saw the director of the crisis centre betray something close to panic. Even though he was still stating facts, these facts were now based on emotions, on kin, something I’d always found sinister. Family brings out the worst in people, all under the guise of love. The crisis centre director was afraid, not for the Büscher family, but for himself. His seat was getting as hot as mine.

“And the publisher of a floundering newspaper,” the state secretary added.

Clearly, he considered kidnappings of this rank to be beneath him. He shrugged his shoulders in a “Just saying” kind of way.

We went back to our checklist. If you have a checklist to hang on to, there’s still hope; lists can keep you afloat through any crisis.

“Have we managed to get in touch with the ex-wife yet?” the state secretary asked.

“No,” the police officer said. “A neighbour said she’s on holidays with her son in Spain, doesn’t know where exactly. Her phone is off. We’re going through all the passenger lists from last week.”

“Do we know anything else about her?” I asked.

“Not much of note. She works for Berlin public transport, drives a tram, lives in a rented flat in Wedding. The only thing that stands out is that she was the one who reported her husband, now ex-husband, to the police.”

“What do the Argentine authorities say? Do they know anything about him?”

“We’re making enquiries at the moment.”

A helpless silence descended across the screen.

“The little we know suggests that he didn’t plan this,” the police office said eventually. “The man isn’t a professional, unfortunately. Amateurs like him have a short fuse. We’ll send over a team and a negotiator, and until then, Ms Andermann, don’t do anything, please. No contact with the authorities, either. We need to check their reliability.”

“Of course,” I said.

The windows on the screen went black, and I took off my headset. I was drained. Night had fallen, presumably the third night Tamara was being kept captive out there somewhere. Should I have reacted more quickly, should I have reacted differently, could I have done something to prevent the kidnapping, to end it sooner? If I’d sounded the alarm straight away, I wouldn’t be sitting alone here now, I’d be with a team from the police office. That would help. I wouldn’t be alone, plus it wouldn’t be my responsibility anymore. But then the police office probably wouldn’t have sent a squad over without evidence of a serious threat.

I looked at the maps: nineteen departments, of which I’d only visited three. I knew so little about this country. I knew about smuggler havens on the border, that you could get a gramme of cocaine for six euros in the north, I knew about the endless beaches and nature reserves, and I thought about where you would hide if your luggage includes a kidnapped woman. How long would he hold out? What could we offer him? How long would Tamara hold out? How much time did we have left?

It was quiet in the embassy. Outside the doorman waited with Carlos, who hadn’t let me send him home, while I sat inside and stared at the maps. *Don’t do anything, please.* I don’t know how many lobbies and waiting rooms, how many halls and corridors I’ve fallen asleep in while

decisions were being made behind closed doors. Waiting and tension are a fatal combination. Now again, I was engulfed by exhaustion, only to be woken a short time later by my phone ringing.

Berlin had got hold of the ex-wife. She was cooperative, they said. But then most people are cooperative when the Federal Criminal Police Office shows up. That was the good news. The bad news was that she'd described her former husband as an out-of-control drug addict. When asked if she knew where he might hide in a situation like this, she just said that he loved the sea.

"We've got more than six hundred kilometres of coast here," I said.

"We have a map in front of us," the police office replied. "We're sending you a team. They'll arrive late afternoon tomorrow; we'll give you the exact time in due course. Please make sure to provide them with an appropriate room. I've informed Mr Hector Martinez and asked for his assistance."

Here it comes, I thought, here comes the question of how Hector already knew everything, but the police office said nothing. Maybe they wanted to give me a chance to come clean myself, but I'd never been overly hasty about owning up to mistakes. When asked directly, though, I'd never lied.

"How is Mrs Büscher?" I asked.

"We had to take her into hospital for monitoring. It seems her body was a little too accustomed to sedatives."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"Yes, the poor woman," the police office agreed.

Try as we might to hide it, every syllable betrayed our relief.

"Get some sleep, Ms Andermann. We're going to need you."

When we got to the residence, Carlos reached over to the passenger seat and held up a bag.

“Ms Ambassador,” he said. “I’m coming in with you for a few minutes whether you like it or not. Sometimes even a woman like you needs a man to throw a steak into a pan.”

Drivers were the one luxury I never wanted to be parted from. He held the door open for me, poured me a glass of Tannat – which, like Hector, he claimed was the best wine in the world – and disappeared into the kitchen.

Before me on the table lay today’s post: a single postcard from my mother with a picture of the St. Pauli Piers. She sent me a postcard from Hamburg every few weeks, thinking I missed my hometown. She hardly ever phoned because she was afraid of disturbing me. She’d written a couple of inane sentences about the weather, her new carer, who called in once a day, and the obligatory “I’m proud of you”. She’d been telling me this since the day I started secondary school. Once this awful kidnapping business was over, I’d phone her and spend my home leave with her next winter, something I hadn’t managed to do in years.

“Medium?” Carlos called from the kitchen.

“Yes, please,” I said, and I was served the bloodiest, most tender steak I’d ever eaten.

“*Que aproveche!*” he said.

I poured myself another glass of wine and didn’t even notice him leave the house. Being patient. Not being able to do anything. This was my job, while elsewhere, a girl might be fighting for her life. I stared at the night sky and the still slack German flag. Seconds seemed to last hours, or maybe

it was the other way around. When it comes to time spent waiting, you just want it to end. Units are meaningless.

As the sun came up, I heard a car racing down the deathly quiet street and pulling up outside the gate. A few seconds later, the security guard came on the intercom, and Hector drove up the gravel driveway. I don't know why you only ever encounter police officers when they have bad news. Though in purely statistical terms, of course, they rarely show up at the end of the night to tell you something really great has happened.

He stood in front of me and said that a young woman had been found in a shack in Cabo Polonio. Tamara's passport had been on the kitchen table.

"Let's go," he said. "Someone needs to identify her."

We left the city and headed north. Nothing but car dealerships and petrol stations, garden centres and shopping malls, supermarkets selling only meat, garages, grillrooms. The buildings thinned out. At the last set of traffic lights we passed, a man was selling toilet roll. The landscape was uneventful, and we didn't exchange a word, while behind us day broke, and two hundred kilometres ahead, a dead hostage waited.

Hector reached behind his seat and passed me a bottle of cola, which to my surprise helped. The dryness of my throat dissolved into sweetness.

"What happened?" I asked eventually.

"We just have one guy up there. He swings by every few days, sorts out the odd neighbourhood row. Loads of hippies living in shacks they cobbled together themselves, no electricity, more and more tourists. People fly halfway around the world to go properly off-grid. Strangled, he said."

"I should have done something to stop this."

"What more could you have done, Freda?"

"I should have taken it seriously from the start. And I shouldn't have told you about it."

"Don't drag me into your guilty conscience. You haven't done anything wrong."

"He obviously snapped, and I can't help but wonder why. Why so quickly? Maybe he found out I'd spoken to you. Maybe he's got friends in the pub?"

"Where you refused to talk to me?"

"Come on, hasn't it occurred to you too?"

"He's a junkie, Freda. They're all over the place here. Especially since the crisis."

"Which crisis?"

“Doesn’t matter. It’s always post-crisis here.”

I put down the window, as if the air would soothe me.

“Your first dead body?” Hector asked.

“The bodies I’ve seen up to now never had anything to do with me. People whose names I only learned after they were identified. Terrorist attacks, mostly,” I said.

“How did you cope with it?”

“I didn’t. I still can’t get a full night’s sleep, and I jump when a door slams or I see a Toyota Corolla driving along next to me.”

“Why Toyota?”

“The bombs were usually in a white Corolla. When you see one driving along beside you, just one man in the car, the boot sagging, you break out in a cold sweat in your bullet-proof limo. I think my posting here was supposed to be some kind of trauma rehab. Haven’t encountered a single Corolla yet.”

“Yeah, not too many of them here.”

Outside, the morning light vanished behind thick clouds, and the horizon turned into a grey wall.

“Is it worth it?” Hector asked.

“They give us hardship compensation,” I said. “But yes, I wouldn’t do this job if I didn’t believe in it a tiny bit.”

“You’re tough as nails, Freda.”

“I’m just good at repressing things. Like you.”

“Except I sleep like a log every night, believe me.”

“Drugs?” I asked.

He laughed.

“I’m so glad they’re legal here now. When all this is behind us, we’ll sit in my garden and smoke a big fat one.”

I nodded, unable to imagine a time when it would all be behind me.

“There are two kinds of people,” Hector said.

“Oh God, not this again!”

“He’s the kind that snaps. Those guys always lose it sooner or later. And in my humble experience, the earlier, the better.”

“He could at least have waited for the German police to get here.”

“Then there’d be ten idiots here instead of two. When do they land?”

“This afternoon.”

“I guess they won’t be needing the negotiators.”

We left Rocha and La Paloma behind us and turned right into a dirt road leading to a forlorn bus stop in front of a wooden hut. Hector stopped beside it and looked up at the black sky.

“There’s a rough one on the way,” he said.

I got out of the car, paced around a bit and breathed deeply. A marijuana cloud hung over the bus station, and a TV blared from the shelter, an action film of some kind; all I could hear was a hail of bullets. No one was watching the television; no one was interested in action here. A few tourists sat on the steps outside, waiting for the bus that would bring them back to their lives. “Cabo Polonio,” it said in white lettering on a wooden sign. Parked behind the sign was a truck with an open bed, into which someone had screwed seats. It was the only mode of transport into the nature reserve, out of which a police officer was now speeding in a four-wheel-drive jeep going 100 km per hour. He greeted Hector and me with the customary kisses. Never had such a reception seemed so inappropriate.

“Fernando,” he said, holding the car door open. Instead of a uniform, he wore a hoodie and jeans. Everything about him was friendly – sweet, even. He was no older than forty, and I suspected he was more of a mediator than a policeman. They were waiting for us in the shack, he said. “Two guys, they arrived an hour ago.”

I got in, and Hector squeezed in beside me on the passenger seat. We drove down a dirt track, past fields with grazing sheep, cows and horses, and into a wood, scaring away birds I’d never seen before, birds so beautiful I could hardly believe they existed. The track was basically a pothole-filled channel. We bounced up and down on our seats, our heads bumping against the roof, the engine roaring so loudly we couldn’t hear ourselves think. Above us, the rain got heavier, the ground below softer. Suddenly

the wood ended, and before us lay the Atlantic in a state of pure rage. The sea was black, the waves one continuous crash. The car skidded across the endless, kilometre-wide beach. It was scattered with dead sea lions, some of them already half-plundered, their bellies open, the contents devoured. We headed towards a village, a cluster of huts, most with a hostel sign on the roof and all with solar panels, albeit very small ones that probably provided just enough electricity to charge a mobile phone.

Fernando drove past them and further down the beach, where there were fewer houses. Then he turned left, went over a dune and came to a stop in front of a shack. Dirty grey stone, a wooden door banging in the wind, a covered well, the windows boarded up. A place that may once have been fit to live in but was a terrible place to die. All three of us stared through the windscreen, no one making a move.

A bedroom, a kitchen, a shithole. Of the people who had just stayed here, one was now dead, the other gone. When life vanishes from a building in such a way, what's left behind seems fake. After the big, final vanishing, nothing's real anymore. It's people's aliveness that makes a place believable. Just a few hours later, and we were standing in a museum.

We were met by two police officers clutching mate gourds, a corpse beneath the white cloth behind them.

"Probably died between eight and twelve hours ago," they said, before summarising what they knew.

Strangulation marks on the neck. Fingerprints and cocaine traces all over the shack. You could buy a gramme here for the price of two cups of coffee. The stuff was brought on horseback across the border, which was barely sixty kilometres away. No tyre tracks in front of the house. They probably got here by bus, and the victim had probably come of her own free will. Until the mood changed, until things escalated and she realised this wasn't a little trip to paradise.

Hector lifted the cloth to reveal a relaxed, almost smiling young face. I'd seen younger dead people before, I'd seen children, but never a corpse that was so intact, from which nothing had been torn away, nothing destroyed but life itself. I found it hard to believe she was dead. Cautiously, Hector pulled the cloth back further, and I felt an odd sense of relief that she was clothed, that she had at least been spared that humiliation.

They were searching the coast, the police officers said. He probably fled on foot, and if you walk northwards, keep following the sea, you get to Brazil, an unguarded border, impossible to patrol the whole length. Everyone had been informed, they said, including the Brazilian police. The photo Hector sent had been forwarded to everyone.

We looked around the room. Tamara's rucksack stood in the corner and a few clothes were strewn on the floor. No money, credit cards or phone.

"It's all so senseless," Hector said. "The guy had no plan, and no control, over anything."

"Why did she go with him?"

"He's good-looking. Didn't you think so? He probably seemed charming at first, slightly arrogant, a bit crazy. Women find that sexy. Especially when they're far from home."

I looked at the white cloth over her body and for a second I thought if I ripped it away, she would sit up. Just a trick, a touch of magic. For the first time, I felt sorry for Tamara. How could this have happened? So late, far too late. Whatever my time in Baghdad had done to me, I was ashamed. Clearly, I hadn't really come back. I'd been here for months, but in a cooling pond, and it was icy.

"Have you never done something like that, Freda? Not even when you were young? Gone on a little adventure?"

"I have to call HQ," I said and turned around.

In the kitchen there was a kettle on a camping stove, a bag of nuts on the table, two empty bottles of wine, and no mobile reception.

The rain flowed through the doorway as I went outside in search of a signal. The policemen, now sitting in their car, shook their heads when they saw me. Fernando jumped out and ran into the shack.

"We're drowning here," I said after I joined them back in the kitchen.

"Feels like it. We'll have to wait until it stops."

"What are you talking about?" Hector said in the background.

"What kind of a shitty four-wheel-drive can't handle a bit of rain?"

"We won't get across the sand, Hector, we'll sink."

"We could try."

“I’ve tried before, and it’s not an experience I’d like to repeat.”

“I don’t believe this! Can’t we take the back route – through the village, the wood?”

Fernando nodded at the open door.

“What do you see out there?” he asked.

“Rain,” Hector replied.

“What else?”

“Dunes.”

“Precisely.”

“How long do you think this is going to last?” I asked.

“Hmm,” Fernando said, looking at the leaden sky. “Until tomorrow morning, or thereabouts.”

Hector sat down on one of the rickety wooden stools, closed his eyes and tried to breathe calmly. When he opened them again, Fernando said that there was a hotel.

“A hotel? How many stars?”

“Lots, if you sit at the bar for long enough.”

“For the love of God, Fernando, we’ve got two ladies here, one is a dead millionaire, the other the German ambassador. This is not the time for bad jokes.”

I was given a room with its own toilet. The shower was downstairs, one for all of us: three policemen, Hector and me. There were no guests here; the place came alive only for the summer and then died in autumn. If you wanted warm water, you had to tell them twenty minutes in advance so they could fire up the stoves. The holiday of a youth I'd never had. I looked at a makeshift bed with a thin mattress, four grubby sheets and a filthy mosquito net. Everything was damp. What sounded like monstrous windchimes in the bay was in fact sea lions slapping their flippers in the water.

In a place like this, everything loses its significance. All you hear is the roar of the waves, for days, weeks, months, years. Everything flows into nothingness and then back again. The strongest of wills would founder here eventually, I was sure. Berlin had to be informed, repatriation organised, an investigation launched. I tried to focus. How do you get a body out of here? Hearse's don't have four-wheel drives. Or do they? I wasn't an expert on hearses, at least not in Uruguay. How was I going to explain everything? In a few hours, the team from the Federal Criminal Police Office would be landing to negotiate with the kidnapper, and here I was on a sinking hippie beach.

Had my life worked out differently, it could have been my daughter lying dead in a shack by the Atlantic. Maybe the kid was naïve, the guy nuts. Maybe these two people had brought out the worst in each other.

I left the room, my clothes sticking to my body, frozen to the bone.

"I need to contact my office," I said to Hector, who was sitting at the bar drinking mate with the others.

"Nothing's working here, Ms Ambassador. It doesn't just look like the end of the world, we're completely cut off," Fernando said.

"Haven't you got a radio signal?"

“A very weak one.”

“Has your headquarters been informed?”

“They know the basics.”

“Ask them to tell the embassy, please. We’ve enlisted a crisis team, and the German police are on their way. They need to be informed. If I disappear on top of everything else, we’ll have a national crisis on our hands.”

Fernando handed me his mate mug.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said and went into what was optimistically referred to as a lobby.

“Have they got schnapps here too?” I asked.

“I’d imagine so,” Hector said. “The bar man is blind.”

“In that case I’ll have the house special.”

### Four weeks later

My deputy was standing beside me, having recovered just in time for the reception. Looking almost offensively rested, he'd taken on the role of husband. Being the hostess can be a desperately lonely experience, and if you don't have a husband at your side, it helps to at least have a deputy, and for the last hour, my deputy had done nothing except shake hands. So many hands, nothing but hands all the way down the street to the sea. I smiled and nodded, sometimes remembering the name, usually not. The smell of charcoal wafted over and the first bars of the anthem played. We had opted for Plan Z, the German school's choir. You can't go wrong with kids, the cultural director had said apologetically.

*Your Excellencies, Friends of the German Embassy in Montevideo, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*On behalf of myself and my colleagues, I'd like to welcome you and thank you for coming in such numbers.*

I wished no one had come. I wished I was somewhere I could be invisible instead of having to stand in front of three hundred people with empty words and a microphone in my hand.

*We're delighted to celebrate German Unity Day with you today. Please allow me to share a few words that are a little more personal than usual. After all, on German Unity Day, it's hard not to get personal, even a little nostalgic.*

*My earliest childhood memories are of a concrete border. I thought it was the most normal thing in the world. I suppose I thought it was the same everywhere, that the world was made of walls. It was only when we moved to Hamburg, where instead of*

*looking out on a wall, I saw the port, that I understood the concept of freedom. I couldn't imagine this border ever falling. But since the night I saw people dancing on the Wall, I've believed in diplomacy, in dialogue, in our duty to keep talking to each other, to never stop. That night was the first time I felt joy in being German. For a moment, I could forget the guilt that never leaves us in our country. It was a peaceful German revolution, a revolution in the name of freedom.*

I only became German when I was in foreign lands. I praised my country in a way I never could at home, whatever home is. It was as if I could only love from a distance. Nearly 12,000 kilometres was just about far enough away for me.

*We live with joy as much as we live with guilt; we need to attend to both. But it is difficult for me to celebrate today. It seems wrong. Because today is not just about politics, it's about life, every single life, and we mourn every single death. Especially when we lose a young person in such a senseless and brutal way.*

*We greatly appreciate your condolences for the death of Tamara Büscher. Your kind words have comforted us and, more importantly, Tamara's friends and family during this difficult time. Tamara's mother, Elke Büscher, has asked me to thank you on her behalf.*

All I had heard from her was abuse and accusations. Her grief was naked rage. Mrs Büscher was driven by a desire for revenge; she urgently needed someone to blame, and she'd chosen me, as she'd let me know in no uncertain terms. "You're finished," were her last words to me. I knew she was serious. She'd demanded to be flown over on a government jet and had personally bawled out each member of the crisis team from her sick bed. The tranquilizers had obviously stopped working long ago. I had to keep reminding myself that everyone has their own way of grieving, and rage was hers.

All clues had vanished, washed away by the most cataclysmic rain in decades. All we had was his name and a five-year-old photo.

*Our thoughts are with her now, and we offer her our support. Tamara loved to have fun, so let's have fun in her honour tonight. Let's enjoy this evening in Montevideo.*

He was standing slightly apart from the crowd as he raised his glass to me. He was coy, but slyly coy.

“Who’s that man?” I whispered.

“Which one?” my deputy asked.

“Jeans, black shirt, 10 o’clock.”

“Well, he obviously didn’t read the dress code. I’ve never seen him before. No idea, Fred. Should I go introduce myself?”

“No, it’s alright. I’ll check him out myself.”

I grabbed a glass of wine and started making my way towards him. With small talk lurking every metre of the way, it took me half an hour to get to him, but he didn’t move an inch. He knew nobody here, spoke to nobody, just stood there watching.

“Welcome,” I said. “Are you enjoying the party?”

“I don’t like these kinds of things,” he said. “I bet you don’t either, but we’ve got to start somewhere.”

His voice was thin, he was sweating from every pore and his hand trembled as he gave me his card. In italics beneath his name stood two words with the power to ruin my evening and possibly more: *Die Woche*.

I looked back up at him and started.

“What’s wrong with your face?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he groaned. “I feel like a pumpkin.”

“Well, you look the way you feel. Which doesn’t happen very often, in my experience. Does this happen a lot?”

“What, looking the way I feel?”

“No, your face swelling up within a few minutes.”

Spittle was trickling from his mouth.

“Where’s the toilet?” he asked.

All of a sudden, I was worried for his life.

“Do you have any allergies?”

“Wasps, I think,” he wheezed, and he collapsed at my feet.