

VOLUME TWO

The Middle

Riedmatt, 1991-1992



The Valley Holds Its Breath

A Generational Drama



aban news

Novel · written with Claude Opus

The Valley Holds Its Breath - The Middle

Drama

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Chapter 1 - The Heir to the Sternen

Theo took over the Sternen on a March day in 1991, and it was not a solemn occasion but a stack of papers and a bunch of keys and an old man who was relieved to be rid of all of it. Uncle Sepp, who had managed the inn for thirty years rather than run it, sat ill in his room behind the kitchen and said: "Watch out for the heating in February! And the bank!" That was the entire handover. The Sternen had grown tired. The wallpaper in the main room was the same as in Theo's childhood, the antlers above the bar, the bench where the valley had always concluded its arrangements. But guests were fewer, and the young stayed away, and in the books Theo went through in the first week there were more figures in the red than in the black. He saw it and was not discouraged. He was twenty-eight, and he had something to prove, and a half-decayed inn was for a man who wants to prove something not an obstacle but a stage.

Because the valley was talking in those weeks about something large. A ski lift was to be built, up on the north slope, with money from below, from investors who had discovered the valley like a child discovers a toy. Winter tourism: those were the words now appearing in every second speech at the inn, and Theo saw immediately what it could mean for the Sternen: beds, guests, a second life. He was already calculating while the others were still talking.

On Sunday he went up to the Höfli where he had grown up and where his mother lived. Marlene sat at the window, as she always sat at the window, an old woman with a closed face looking out at the

lake lying grey and smooth in the valley. She was not yet sixty but she seemed older, as though she had lived faster than the years. Theo told her about the lift and the Sternens and his plans, and she listened without turning her gaze from the water, and at the end said only: "The Sternens." A pause. "Ask your uncle whose luck the Sternens owes. Ask him where the money came from, back then, when he was able to hold on to it." Then she was silent again, and Theo, who knew his mother's silences as well as he knew the weather, could not tell whether that was a warning or only the talk of an old woman.

He did not ask the uncle. There were more pressing matters. That same evening he sat alone in the main room of the Sternens, by the light of the one lamp he left burning, and wrote on a beer mat the figures he would need: for the new heating, for the rooms, for the paint, for everything that would make the Sternens again a place people came to. It was a large number. It did not frighten him. He crossed it out and wrote a larger one below it, because it occurred to him that if you were going to do it you had to start properly, and he promised the bank and himself and the quiet, tired house around him more than anyone could have held that evening.

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Chapter 2 - The Lift

The investors came to the Sternen on an April evening, three men from below in good jackets, and Theo had had the main room set up and the best beer put on ice, as though the guests he was building all this for were already there. They showed plans — glossy, a cable car climbing the north slope, a valley station, a restaurant — and in every picture the valley was full of people who did not exist in the real valley. The village split over this plan as it had split thirty years before over the dam, and the fault lines ran almost the same way. Some saw money and a future, others saw noise and debt and a slope that until now had belonged to the cows. Theo belonged to the first group, and not just to it — he became its voice. He spoke at the meeting, spoke well, spoke of beds and work for the young who would otherwise all move down to the lowlands, and people listened because he was one of them and yet had something most people here did not have: the belief that things could be changed.

Ruth Berger sat at the municipal table and kept the minutes, as she had kept every set of minutes for thirty years. She was old now, a thin, upright woman with glasses behind which nothing escaped. When the speeches were over, she said only one sentence, quietly, addressed to no one in particular: "The valley has built something before because the money came from below. It might do well to remember what that cost." She looked at Theo as she said it, steadily, and Theo did not know why that look chilled him, and put it down to old people warning because warning came easier to them than

hoping.

Against the lift stood mainly one man: old Roos, from the lower farm, a tough, taciturn man whose family had never come into money in the valley and who did not look the Areggers in the eye if he could help it. He said little, but what he said had weight. "You're building on debt again," he said, "and debt in the valley is paid in the end by someone other than the one who makes it." And then, more quietly, almost only for the front row: "The Areggers know that. Someone should ask the Areggers."

Theo did not understand the sentence and yet felt its point. Between the Areggers and the Roosses lay something he had known all his life and never named, a coldness, a not-greeting each other on Sundays, an old story of which the children knew only that it existed. He had never asked where it came from. Today, for the first time, the question itched.

The vote was close. The lift passed, with three votes' majority, and half the room cheered, and the other half stood and went out into the night without a word. Old Roos went first. At the door he stopped briefly beside Theo, looked at him, did not nod, did not greet him, said only: "Your father won then too." And left. Theo stood with his victory and a sentence he could not account for, and with the first feeling that on this evening he had not only made friends but also woken something that would have been better left sleeping.

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Chapter 3 - The Box in the Attic

To make room for the new guest rooms, the attic of the Sternen had to be cleared, and so Theo stood one May day in the dust under the old roof beams, among broken chairs, yellowed inn signs, and the clutter of a hundred years. Most of it he threw away without looking. But right at the back, under a broken mirror, stood a wooden box, tied shut, and when he opened it he found papers, neatly bundled, from a time before he was born. They were documents from the years of the dam construction. Order forms, receipts, invoices, the letterhead of a construction firm that no longer existed. Theo did not understand much of it, but he was enough of an innkeeper to see that something in these figures did not add up. On one sheet material was ordered and paid for; on the corresponding sheet, less had arrived, and the discrepancy was no accident — it was too even, too consistent. And again and again, in the margin, in an old handwriting, small notations, tick marks, a name abbreviated, which he found familiar and could not place.

He sensed, without being able to think it through, that two things were knotted together here that he had until now known separately: money and silence. The Sternen had kept these papers all those years like a bad conscience that you neither throw away nor look at.

That evening he went up to the Höfli and asked his mother, casually, while clearing the table, whether she remembered which firm had built the dam back then; he had found old papers in the attic. Marlene, who was sitting at the window, did not turn around. She said nothing. The silence that followed was different from her usual

silence, denser, colder, a silence that wrapped around the question like ice around a branch, and Theo, who thought he knew his mother, went cold suddenly in the warm room. After a long moment she said, without taking her gaze from the lake: "Throw them away, those papers. Old things." It did not sound like advice. It sounded like a request that had dressed itself as a command because as a request it would have been too naked.

Theo did not throw the box away. He told himself he had no time to go through it, that he had the lift and the renovation and the bank on his back. But he did not put it back in the attic. He carried it down to the room behind the kitchen where Uncle Sepp had lived, and pushed it under the bed, and in the weeks that followed he did not forget it once, even when he went days without thinking about it. It lay there, under the bed, like a stone in a shoe that you do not feel while standing and that presses with every step.

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Chapter 4 - Money That Isn't Enough

It went wrong faster than Theo had expected, and it went wrong in the usual way: the lift cost more than the glossy plans had promised, and because the Sternens was tied to the lift, the lift pulled the Sternens with it. The investors from below withheld their share until this and that was resolved, and the resolutions took time, and while they took time the bills from Theo's renovation kept coming. The new heating was in, the rooms half finished, and the money was gone, and a little more than gone. In autumn came the first letter from the bank, polite, then a second, less polite, and finally a man in a dark suit sat in Theo's own main room, drank the coffee Theo offered him, and set him a deadline. Until spring. After that, the man said, they would have to "examine possibilities," and Theo knew what that meant, because in the valley it had never meant anything else: seizure, auction, the Sternens in other hands, and himself the Aregger who had gambled away the family's inheritance, he of all people, the one who had wanted to prove something.

He went to the Höfli. It took an effort, because he knew how it would sound — the son who needed money — but he went, because the Höfli had money, the whole valley knew it, the debt-free farm, the good pastures. He sat with his mother and laid it out, as dignifiedly as he could. Marlene listened. Then she had the nurse, who was now in the house half-days, convey the answer — not directly but through the nurse, as though the distance between them was already too great for a word of her own — that she could not

give him anything. The Höfli needed what it had. Nothing more.

Theo walked down the slope, and in him something worked that he was ashamed to think and yet thought. He knew the Höfli. He knew the good pastures, the debt-free parlour spanning two generations, the money that had never run short for as long as he could remember, while other farms in the valley struggled. Where did that come from? A farm on a slope, no bigger than others, no better positioned — and yet always a shade richer, a shade more secure than the rest. He had never asked, because a child does not question its prosperity. Now, with the bank's reminders in his pocket, he was asking.

That night he pulled the box from under the bed. He put on the lamp in the room behind the kitchen, spread out the papers, and began to read them seriously, sheet by sheet, with the cool, hungry look of a man who is no longer searching the figures for truth but for a way out.

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Chapter 5 - What the Accounts Reveal

It took three nights. Theo was no bookkeeper, but he was tenacious, and he had the municipal land register, to which every citizen was entitled access, and he had the patience of a man with a deadline at his neck. He laid the old invoices beside the entries for purchases and compensation payments from the years 1962 and 1963, and slowly, line by line, a picture formed. The compensation the valley had received for the flooded land had been substantial — larger than the damage could ever have justified. And it had not flowed equally. A large portion had gone to a few farms up on the slopes, and two names appeared again and again, thick and often: Aregger and Imhof. In precisely those years the Höfli had become debt-free, had bought the upper pasture; in precisely those years old Imhof had come by his first tractor. The money that had established the prosperity in which Theo had grown up did not come from hard work and good land. It came from that settlement of 1962.

And then he found the name that had caught his eye in the margins of the old receipts, abbreviated, with tick marks beside it. In a yellowed list of construction workers it was written out in full: A. Roos. Anton Roos. Beside it, in a different ink, a notation and a date in November, and in the municipal records that Theo leafed through the next day in the archive anteroom he found the sparse entry: a worker, an accident at the dam, in the late autumn of 1962. A Roos. And Theo remembered, dimly, something his mother had never told him but which he nonetheless knew, the way you know things that

stand around in a house without anyone naming them: that his mother, born a Roos, had had a brother. Anton. Who had died young. At the dam.

Theo sat still for a long time. He held the threads in his hands and saw how they converged: a dead labourer, his mother's brother; a compensation payment too large for an accident; a prosperity that had not wavered since; a silence between the Areggers and the Roosses that he had felt all his life. He sensed that the ground on which his family stood was not firm ground but a covered pit.

Another man would have paused here and asked: what happened back then? What do I owe the Roosses, what do I owe the truth? Theo did not pause. He was tired, and the bank was waiting, and in his head, without quite letting himself acknowledge it, a different thought was forming, a practical one, an ugly one: that this knowledge was worth something. That it could help him. He pushed the question of what had happened aside, like something you put away for later, and kept only the one thread in his hand, which, if pulled correctly, might perhaps move money.

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Chapter 6 - Ruth Berger Knows

Theo went to the municipal archive, and he gave on as the reason the lift. They needed old plans for the permit, he said, rights of way, parcel numbers, the usual, and that was even half true. Ruth Berger received him in the narrow, paper-smelling room behind the municipal office where she had spent half her life, and she was helpful and precise as she always was helpful and precise. She fetched folders, opened registers, found every parcel, every right of way, every date. ~~Until Theo, as casually as he had rehearsed for three nights, asked for the construction documents from the dam. For the protocol from 1962. For the old water rights, he said, for the lift company.~~ There was nothing she could not find.

Ruth Berger paused for a moment, only one, then went to the shelf and pulled out a folder and laid it on the table and opened it. The construction protocol, the meetings, the resolutions — all there, tidy, complete. Almost complete. "Here," she said, and leafed through it, "is what you need for the water rights." And then, without changing her tone, without becoming louder or quieter: "The accident protocol from November sixty-two isn't quite complete. A page is missing. Always has been. Some files are like that."

She looked at him over the top of her glasses, and in that look lay thirty years of precision and everything that precision knows about a valley. "You're not looking for water rights, Mr Aregger," she said, pleasantly, almost maternally, and it was not a question. "You're looking for where your farm's money comes from."

Theo could not get a word out. Ruth closed the folder again, slowly, and placed her hand on it, an old, spotted hand with steady fingers. "I don't have that page. No one does. And believe me, young man: it is better that way, for more people than you can imagine. Half the valley hangs on that missing page. Your mother too. You too." She looked at him, without hardness, almost sadly. "Some walls should not be torn down because half the village has built upon them. Don't touch it."

Theo left with empty hands and a full head. He had found a door, he now knew — a real door, behind which something lay. And he had understood at the same time that it was locked, and that the woman who held the key would never give it out, not out of malice but out of something older and stronger than malice in this valley. What he did not understand was that Ruth Berger in those minutes had not shot a bolt against him but had done him a favour that he would only comprehend years later.

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Chapter 7 - The Daughter

It was a dry summer that year, one of the driest in memory, and the lake shrank. Week by week the water retreated, releasing muddy banks, old posts, a rusted bucket that had lain on the bottom for thirty years, and on the hottest days a dark point appeared in the lower lake, far out, and grew: the ridge turret of the sunken chapel, with its crooked cross, rising from the falling water like something struggling for air. Eva, Theo's daughter, nine years old, tanned and full of questions, watched it from the bank where she stood barefoot in the warm mud. "Papa," she called, "there's a cross in the lake. Is there a cross in the water?" Theo came and looked out, and something contracted in him without his being able to say why, because he did not know the story, only that there was one.

"There was a village there," he said, "before they built the dam. Down there were fields and a path and a small chapel. And when they made the dam, everything went under water. The cross is from the chapel."

Eva looked out with wide eyes. "And the people?"

"The people moved away. To dry ground." It was a harmless story, a true one even as far as it went, and yet Theo felt, while telling it, that he was doing something he did not fully understand. He was giving his daughter a smooth, clean version of something that had not been smooth or clean. And with it he passed on for the first time what his mother had given him — a silence, prettily packaged as an explanation. It was so easy. That was the frightening thing. It came

so readily to hand.

Eva sensed, with the fine ear children have for what adults are not saying, that behind the story there was something more. She did not ask further, not that day. But she kept her gaze on the cross for a long time, and then she took her father's hand, and they stood together for a while at the receding bank looking out — the man who knew too much and was using it, and the child who knew nothing and felt everything. It was a good moment, one of the few quiet ones that year, and Theo put his arm around his daughter and did not know that he would remember this afternoon when everything else between them had long since broken, and that it would be his own child who eventually came for what lay beneath the water.

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Chapter 8 - The Bargain

Theo did not go to his mother, and he did not go to the Roosses. He could have gone to both, with what he knew; he could have asked what had happened, could have brought the old debt to light, could have given the Roosses what had been withheld from them. That was one way. He chose the other, and he chose it because the Sternes would be taken from him in spring and because a desperate man sees the shortest route, not the right one. He went to young Imhof, the heir of the old man who had driven the valley's first tractor and died rich. Young Imhof sat on his father's money, had multiplied it, was the wealthiest man in the valley. Theo visited him on a November evening, and after the second glass, carefully, he raised it: that in clearing out the Sternes he had found old papers from the dam-building years, interesting papers, invoices in which various things did not add up. And that he, right now, between relations — they were connected through those old stories after all — urgently needed a loan for the Sternes.

He said no threat. He needed none. Young Imhof looked at him, and in his face worked the same calculation Theo knew from his own head, and after a moment he said, yes, between relations, that could be arranged, a loan, favourable, on friendly terms, one helped each other in the valley. The old papers, he added casually, Theo should just forget them; they were worthless, old ink, half-things. Theo nodded. The money came within the same week.

The Sternes was saved, for the moment. The bank backed off, the work on the lift continued, the opening drew closer. Theo had

achieved what he had wanted, and it tasted of nothing. Because he understood, in the moment the money came, that he had not bought Imhof but sold himself. He had traded the knowledge that could have been his as truth, exchanged it for a loan, and with that he was no longer a man who could expose something but one who kept silent alongside them, for payment, one of them, lined up in the long chain of mouths that the valley had kept closed for thirty years. He was younger than the others in the chain — that was the only difference. He had sold himself for less. He walked home through the cold night and washed his hands, without knowing why, and they did not get any cleaner.

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Chapter 9 - The Opening

They opened the lift on a brilliant January day, with a brass band from the next valley, a flag, a man from the district newspaper taking photographs. There was enough snow, just enough, the gondolas ran, the children cheered, and for a few hours the valley looked like the glossy pictures — full of people, full of future. Theo stood at the front, as innkeeper of the Stern and as one of the fathers of the project, and he was to give a speech.

He had prepared a good one, about fresh starts and solidarity, about the valley now having its own hand on the wheel instead of waiting for someone from below to come. He began well. But in the middle of a sentence about the future we owe our children, he faltered, because the word future brought him the other word he was not saying, and for a moment the speech stuck in his throat and he had to swallow and start again, and only a few noticed it, and none of them knew why.

Old Roos had not come. No Roos had come; the entire lower valley stayed away from the opening, and this was noticed, the way an empty chair at a full table is noticed. Areggers and Roosses did not greet each other; here too they did not, the one side by being present, the other by being absent, and Theo felt the gap in the celebrating crowd like a draught of cold air.

His mother had been brought along. The nurse had insisted — a bit of fresh air, a bit of life — and so Marlene sat in her wheelchair at the edge of the square, wrapped in blankets, watching. She was not watching the lift. She was looking, Theo alone noticed, out over the

heads and down the valley to where under snow and ice the lake lay, and over her old, closed face tears ran, soundlessly, without a muscle moving. The people who saw it smiled, moved, and said how touching, the old woman weeping with joy over progress, her son had helped make it happen, a proud day for the Areggers. Only Theo, who had watched his mother sit at the window all his life, knew that those tears had nothing to do with the lift and everything to do with what lay under the ice, and he stood in his victory and his guilt and could not even straighten her blanket without it looking like sentiment.

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Chapter 10 - The Conversation No One Has

It gave him no peace. Weeks after the opening, on a quiet February evening, Theo went to the Höfli, firmly resolved this time not to evade. He wanted to ask. He wanted to hear it from his mother's mouth — what lay under the ice, what the farm had been paid for, what stood between her and the Roosses. He had carried the question all the way up the slope as if it were something fragile. Mother sat at the window, grown thinner, almost transparent, but her eyes were clear. Theo sat beside her, closer than usual, and said: "Mother. I've read the papers. The ones from the dam. I know about Anton. Your brother." He heard his own voice tremble. "I have to know what happened back then."

For a long time she said nothing, and Theo thought she was going to sink into her silence again as she always did. Then, without taking her gaze from the lake, she said quietly, almost without tone: "Ask the water, Theo. Not me." A pause in which only the clock moved. "I wrote it down once, back then. I wrote what is true. But I didn't send it." Her hand moved on the blanket, a small, helpless feeling about. "It lies where the water keeps it. That is all I can do. That is all I have ever been able to do."

There it was. Theo had it in his hands, nearly — the existence of a letter, a written, true sentence, somewhere down there or at the bank, where the water keeps it. He should have pressed on, should have held her to that one thread, carefully, should have said: where, Mother, where does it lie, let us go and find it together. But he was frightened by what she was holding out to him. It was too large, too

heavy; it demanded something of him that he could no longer produce, having just sold himself to Imhof. And so he turned aside. He talked about the lift. He said she should not upset herself, these were old things, things were looking up now, the Sternen was running, guests were coming. He covered her open word with his talk, the way you stamp out an ember from fear that it might set something alight.

Marlene closed her eyes. It was not tiredness. It was a closing-off, final, a door falling shut, and Theo felt that he had gambled something away, something that would not come again. The chance was gone. What his mother had carried for thirty years and had in this one moment wanted to pass across to him remained now with him, unresolved, a shapeless weight, and he carried it down the dark slope, and it grew heavier with every step, because he knew that no one would take it from him anymore.

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Chapter 11 - Cracks

The winter that was supposed to bring the lift its first real money did not come. After the brilliant January arrived a mild, sluggish February — rain instead of snow, the slopes brown and wet, the gondolas running empty over green grass. What had been built as salvation became a second burden: the lift cost money every day it did not run, and it did not run on too many days. The investors from below suddenly talked of "adjustments," and Theo understood that this meant they would limit their losses and leave him, the man from the valley, sitting with the rest. In the same winter came another piece of news, quieter but colder. The cantonal dam authority had at the annual inspection found hairline cracks in the lower third of the wall. Nothing acute, said the letter that lay at the municipal office and which Theo happened to see, a matter of observation, the dam was thirty years old, that was normal. Nothing serious. Theo read the word and had to think of his grandmother, of whom he had never heard much, and of another winter he knew nothing about, and an uneasy feeling crept over him: that in this valley the things people called "nothing serious" had a habit of becoming serious.

Young Imhof, to whom he had sold himself, grew impatient. The loan had been favourable, friendly, between relations, but friendship in the valley had an expiry date, and now that the lift was faltering, Imhof wanted security, wanted a share of the Sternen, talked of "conversion," and Theo felt how the noose he had put around his own neck was slowly tightening. He had not rid himself of the Sternen by

saving it; he had only pledged it to someone more patient than a bank and who would in the end take more.

Eva sensed that her father had changed. He was short-tempered, absent, sometimes in the room behind the kitchen at night with the old papers she knew nothing about. One Sunday, when they stood together at the bank and the level was low again and the cross was jutting from the water, she asked once more about the sunken village, harmlessly, childishly, whether one could dive down there, whether the houses were still standing. And Theo, to whom everything was too much — the lift, the debts, Imhof, the letter he did not want to fetch — turned on her, harder than he had ever done: she should stop going on about that damned lake, there was nothing down there, nothing at all, and she should leave him in peace.

Eva fell silent. She was ten, and she understood nothing of what was torturing her father, but she understood that she had touched him in a place that hurt, and that he had punished her for it. Between the two of them, who had stood at the receding bank and looked out together, there ran from that day on a fine crack, barely visible, like the cracks in the wall that were said to be nothing serious.

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Chapter 12 - Marlene's Silence Does Not End

Marlene died in spring 1992, on a mild April day, in her sleep, at the window that looked out over the lake. The nurse found her in the morning, her head tilted to one side, her face finally open, relaxed, as though only death had lifted from her what she had carried a whole life long. She had never said the word. For thirty years she had carried it, and she took it with her, almost entirely. Almost. Because when Theo went through the estate, the few things belonging to a woman who had never owned much — he found two things. In her worn prayer book, between the pages for Good Friday, lay a slip of paper, narrow, in her old, firm hand, and on it was written a single word: Chapel. Nothing more. And in the chest, under the linen, lay an envelope. It was old, yellowed, and it was addressed, in the same hand, with two words: For Theo. Theo tore it open, his heart beating, and the envelope was empty. She had addressed it and never filled it. All her life she had wanted to tell her son something, had set the envelope aside for the letter she owed him, and the letter had never been written, because she had not been able to, not to the last.

Theo sat with the empty envelope in his hand and the slip of paper beside it, on which Chapel was written, and slowly what she had told him in February joined together: Ask the water. It lies where the water keeps it. Down there, at the sunken chapel whose cross had risen from the lake in the dry summer, lay a letter — the real one, the written one, the true one — that his mother had composed thirty years ago and never sent. The water kept it. And she had laid him a

path there, with the empty envelope and the one word, as best she could, a last, mute attempt to give him what she had not been able to give him in life.

Theo stood the day after the funeral at the dam, up on the wall in whose lower third the cracks ran that were said to be nothing serious, and looked out over the lake. He could have gone down. He could have waited for the next dry summer, for the falling level, could have sought out the chapel, retrieved the letter, read what was true, could have given the Roosses what was owed them, could have torn down the wall that Ruth Berger had said half the village had built upon.

He did not do it. He was tired, and he was in debt, and he had already sold himself, and a man who has sold himself does not fetch truth from the water. He put the empty envelope and the slip of paper in his inside pocket, in the place where his mother thirty years before had carried a different letter without his knowing it, and he let the lake be the lake. The following summer he sold his share of the Sternens to Imhof and moved with Eva out of the valley, down to the lowlands, away from the wall and the water and the cross that jutted from it. He believed he was leaving it behind. He took it with him. What he should have held, he let go; what he hoped to lose, he carried away. And deep under the lake, in the dark, the letter went on waiting, patiently, for someone who would come — and it would be, though Theo did not know it, his own child.

Über dieses Buch

The Valley Holds Its Breath - The Middle

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