

VOLUME THREE

The Water

Riedmatt, present day



**The Valley Holds Its
Breath**

A Generational Drama



aban news

Novel · written with Claude Opus

The Valley Holds Its Breath - The Water

Drama

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Chapter 1 - Return in the Summer of Drought

Eva came to the valley on an August day in 2024, and the first thing she saw was how little water was left. She had the cantonal dam authority's report in her pocket and the commission to inspect the ageing wall, and she was hydrologist enough to know the figures before she measured them: it was the driest summer on record, the lake stood lower than ever, and along the exposed banks a wide strip of cracked mud lay in the sun and stank. She was forty-two and had not been here in more than twenty years. She had told herself it was a journey like any other — a commission, a wall, measurement data; that the valley meant nothing to her any more. But as the road made the last bend and the lake appeared below her, small and grey and shrunken, with the Höfli up on the slope where none of her family lived anymore, something contracted in her that she had believed long scarred over.

She put up at the Sternen, because it was the only hotel in the village. The inn had been done up, more welcoming than she remembered, and behind the bar stood a man in his forties, calm, with attentive eyes, who introduced himself as Niklaus and gave her the key. Roos, she read on the bill later. Niklaus Roos. The name told her nothing and told her everything at once — an old chill from childhood, a not-greeting each other on Sundays whose source she had never known. She put it aside. She was not here to dig in family histories. She was here on account of a wall.

In the evening, when the heat eased, she went down to the bank, to where the water had retreated furthest. She wanted to see the water

level with her own eyes, the marks on the bank, the masonry now lying exposed. And as she walked, over the hard, cracked mud, she saw far out in the shallow remaining water something standing that did not belong there: a small structure, dark, with a roof and a crooked cross that cleared the surface entirely, down to the threshold. A chapel. A whole small sunken chapel that the drought summer had wrested from the water, accessible for the first time in over sixty years. Eva stopped and looked at it for a long time, and did not know why her heart was beating as though she had found something she had not been looking for.

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Chapter 2 - The Man from the Sternen

Niklaus Roos was a good innkeeper, attentive without being intrusive, and he knew more about the valley than an innkeeper needed to know. At breakfast, at dinner, he came to her table, not too often, and talked, and Eva, who had lived twenty years in cities, found it pleasant at first to speak with someone who knew the slopes she was surveying. Only after a few days did she notice that his conversations had a direction. He knew she was an Aregger, and he let it fall casually that the Areggers up at the Höfli were an old family, debt-free for generations, a good fortune not every farm in the valley had enjoyed. He mentioned, without the conversation demanding it, a great-uncle of his who had worked at the dam's construction and had there, in the late autumn of sixty-two, "had an accident." He said the words had an accident with a tiny pause before them, a gap into which another word would have fitted, and Eva, who thought in levels and probabilities rather than in the unsaid words of a mountain valley, did not hear the gap.

What she did notice was something else. In his small office behind the reception, whose door usually stood open, hung old photographs: the dam under construction, men on scaffolding, the chapel before it sank. On the wall, half covered by a calendar, a map of the old valley with pencil markings, and on the desk, under a stack of invoices, the edge of photocopies juttred out — yellowed documents that had nothing to do with an inn. It did not fit a landlord. It looked like the workroom of a man who had been working for

years on something no guest had any business knowing about.

"You're interested in history," she said once, half as a question.

"It's my valley," said Niklaus, and he smiled, pleasantly, and pushed, as if in passing, the stack of invoices over the photocopies.

"You want to know where you come from."

It was a harmless answer, and it was a lie — Eva could feel that without being able to prove it, the way you sense that water is deeper than it looks. Between them there had been friction from the start, the old frost between Aregger and Roos that neither of them could name, and under the frost, Eva noticed with unease, was something else: an attention to each other that she had not sought and that, the longer she stayed, became harder and harder to overlook.

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Chapter 3 - The Crack in the Dam

The wall was in worse condition than the report had suggested. Eva spent three days walking it, measuring it, mapping the cracks, and what she found she did not like. The hairline cracks that had been noted thirty years ago as "nothing serious" had grown; in the lower third a network of fine lines ran through the concrete, and at two points water was seeping through, despite the low level, where no water should have been seeping. The wall was old. It was tired. And in a wet spring with the reservoir full, Eva did not want to vouch for it. Her finding was clear: the wall had to be repaired, thoroughly, and for the repair the lake had to be lowered — permanently and far, much further than it had ever been. That meant the lower lake bed would be exposed, the old valley, the fields, the path, the chapel, everything that had lain under water since sixty-two would come to light again.

She did not sense that this sober engineering sentence was laying a hand on something that the valley had been avoiding for three generations.

She understood it when she presented her interim findings in the village hall. The mayor, an affable man who lived off tourism like half the village, listened to the cracks and then moved very quickly to the water level. Was the lowering really necessary? Could one not monitor, wait, examine smaller measures? The lake was the valley's capital — the bathers, the boats, the postcard view; a lowered lake with a stinking ring of mud was good for no one. He said it

pleasantly, reasonably, and Eva recognised the tone without being able to name it: the tone of people who do not want to refute a finding but manage it.

She held her ground, factually, with her figures, and yet saw that she stood alone, that the valley preferred to carry the risk of the wall rather than the certainty of the mud. She went back to the Sternen that evening with an uneasy feeling, the feeling of having stumbled into something larger than a wall, without knowing what.

Niklaus was waiting at the bar. He had heard how it had gone — in the valley everything got around. "They're giving you headwinds," he said. It was not a question. And then, more quietly, with a look that knew too much: "If you need material for your finding — old documents about the dam, the construction years, about what really lies down there — I have some. More than the archive." He looked at her. "I'll help you get the lake lowered, Ms Aregger. I have a reason."

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Chapter 4 - The Uncovered Chapel

The level fell further, day by day, and on a blazing afternoon the path to the chapel lay completely clear — a muddy, drying track on which you could, in boots, walk all the way out to the small, crooked wall. Eva went out because it was part of her work, she told herself, because she had to document the exposed ground; in truth she had been drawn to it since she had seen the cross jutting from the water. Niklaus came with her. He had offered that he knew the path, the firm spots in the mud, and that was true; but he was also too willing, too alert, as they stepped over the threshold of the chapel into the small porch, whose walls were black from sixty years of water and which smelled of rot and wet earth. Eva felt along the walls, photographed, measured; she saw the marks where the water had stood for decades, a horizontal line high up.

Niklaus stood by a particular stone. He stood there too long, too still, and when Eva turned around she saw that he had pulled a loose stone from the wall, quickly, practisedly, as though he had known it was loose, as though he had pulled it before. Behind it was a cavity, and in the cavity lay something: a flat piece of tin, an old tin, covered in verdigris, wrapped in cloth that had become wet.

"What's that?" said Eva.

Niklaus held the tin a moment, and something crossed his calm face that he closed off again immediately. "Nothing," he said, and slid the tin into his jacket pocket, too quickly, far too quickly for a man who has just found something by chance. "Old metal. It's all over the place down here."

But Eva had seen the movement, the practised quality of it, the preparedness, and she had seen that he was not surprised. No one who is standing by chance in a flooded chapel reaches like that. "You knew that was there," she said. It was no longer a question. Niklaus looked at her for a long time, in the half-dark of the porch, water dripping somewhere, and he said nothing, and his silence was the clearest answer she could have received in that place.

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Chapter 5 - What Niklaus Had Known All Along

She confronted him that evening in his small office, with the door closed. She demanded to know what the tin contained and how he had known it was there, and Niklaus, who saw that he could no longer talk his way out, yielded. He took a folder from the cupboard, thick with the work of many years, and laid it in front of her. "My great-uncle's name was Anton Roos," he said. "He died in November sixty-two at the dam. Officially an accident. In my family no one ever believed that, and no one could say why not — it was just a knowledge passed down like an illness." He opened the folder. Photocopies, invoices, a protocol with a missing page, letters, notes. "I've been digging for twenty years. I reconstructed the dam's accounts as far as was possible. There was fraud — material invoiced that was never delivered, and the money flowed into a few farms and into a compensation payment that was too large for the damage done. My great-uncle discovered the fraud. A few days later he was dead."

Eva went through the documents with the practised eye for figures her father had passed on to her without her knowing it, and she saw that it was right. "And the tin?"

"I found it two weeks ago, when the level freed the chapel. I opened it." He laid it on the table, the cloth beside it. "There's a letter inside. Old. With my great-uncle's name on it, in a woman's handwriting. I haven't read it." He looked at her. "For sixty years no one in my family knew what had really happened. I waited. I did not want to open it alone. I wanted an Aregger to be there when the truth

came out of the water. And now one is sitting in front of me."

Eva was torn between indignation — he had been using her since the first hour, her wall, her finding, her name — and an inkling that he was right, that this letter concerned her, that the old chill between her family and his had its origin here. She looked at the unopened tin, at the name Anton Roos in a handwriting that was strange to her and perhaps should not have been. "If we open it," she said finally, "then together. Now. Or not at all. I don't want you telling me afterwards what was in it."

Niklaus nodded. "Together," he said. But Eva raised her hand. Not today. She had to see someone first. There was a person who knew more than all the folders, and she had not spoken to him in twenty years.

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Chapter 6 - Theo's Version

Theo lived in a small flat at the edge of a small town in the lowlands, sixty-two years old, prematurely aged, alone. Eva had not seen him in more than twenty years, since that argument that had driven her from the valley and about which neither of them had ever spoken again. She had accused him of being a coward, without being able to say what he was shrinking from; she had only sensed that her father carried an open wound and preferred to leave it bleeding rather than look at it, and that he had punished her, the child, whenever she touched the spot. She had gone, young and angry, and had never named the real reason, because she had not known it herself. Now she sat facing him, and she laid the copies from Niklaus's folder on the table, and said: "I know about Anton Roos. I know about the accounts. Tell me what you know."

Theo looked at the papers for a long time, and something in his face gave way, a dam that had held for thirty years. Piece by piece it came out. How in ninety-one he had found the box in the attic. How he had read the figures and understood that the family's prosperity came from that business. How he had not gone to the truth but to young Imhof, and traded the knowledge for a loan for the Sternens. "I used it," he said, his voice hoarse. "I had it in my hands and I sold it instead of opening it. That is what I did."

And then he told her about Marlene. About her last winter, about the sentence "Ask the water, not me." About the empty envelope in her chest, addressed "For Theo," which she had never been able to fill, and about the slip in the prayer book on which only the word

Chapel was written. "She laid me a path," said Theo. "As best she could. And I didn't take it. I put the envelope in my pocket and moved away and told myself I was leaving it behind."

Eva sat still. And in that stillness she understood for the first time what had driven her from the valley as a young woman: not her father's malice but his cowardice, the burden he carried and did not put down and which left everyone around him bitter — her as a child included. The argument of those years had had a cause that neither of them had been able to name, and the cause was sitting in front of her now, an old, broken man who was finally talking.

"Go," said Theo. "Fetch the letter. Read what is true. Do what I was too much of a coward to do." He looked at her, and in his eyes was something that was almost entreaty and almost pride. "You were always the one with the straight back. Even as a child, at the bank. Go."

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Chapter 7 - The Letter

They opened it that evening in the office of the Sternen, with the door closed, the two of them together, as Eva had demanded. Niklaus carefully unwrapped the brittle cloth, then the tin, and inside lay, damp but legible, an envelope with the name Anton Roos on it, and inside the envelope a sheet of paper, closely written in a firm, sloping woman's hand. It was the hand of Marlene, Eva's grandmother, written on a November night in the year sixty-two, to her brother, whom she had meant to warn the next morning and never reached. ~~Eva read it aloud, with a steady voice that broke once. Marlene warned Anton not to go to the authorities yet, not yet. And she wrote why: because the trail of the fraud led not only to the site manager and the wealthy farms but into her own family — to a man named Roos, a cousin who had run the warehouse and covered the invoiced, never-delivered material, hand in hand with the Imhofs. "If you expose this," Marlene had written, "you won't be hitting the strangers. You'll be hitting our own blood, and you'll be hitting yourself, and in the end the whole valley." And in the last paragraph, in a shaky line, something that took Eva's and Niklaus's breath: that Marlene had gone to the building site the morning of Anton's death, with this letter in her hand, and had seen from a distance something at the scaffolding — a movement, a fall — that she had never been able to account for: whether accident, whether a hand, whose hand. "I don't know what I saw," it said there. "And because I don't know, I can say nothing, and because I say nothing, I am guilty like all the others."~~

For a long time the two of them sat still. There was no clear culprit to be called out, no simple image of victim and perpetrator. Anton's own cousin, a Roos, had covered the fraud; the Areggers and Imhofs had profited and kept silent; Marlene had kept silent out of love for her guilty blood and in so doing had become the silent woman at the window. The guilt was shared, across families and generations, act and silence woven into each other so densely that you could not pull one thread without everything unravelling.

"My great-uncle was no pure hero," said Niklaus quietly, almost to himself. "And yours was no pure villain."

"No one here was pure," said Eva. "That is exactly the point." She laid the letter on the table between them, this sixty-year-old, damp sheet on which a dead woman was finally speaking, and she knew it brought them not absolution but a task.

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Chapter 8 - What to Do with It

They argued about what should happen to the letter, and the argument was not anger but a perplexity that made them both honest. Niklaus wanted to make it public, fully, immediately; his family had waited sixty years for a truth, and now that it was there, one could not cover it up again. Eva was more cautious. What good was it, she asked, to establish the fraud of a dead cousin, the complicity of a dead grandmother? Whom did it help? There were no culprits left to punish, only descendants to shame — half a valley that lived from the old settlement without knowing it. And yet the matter could no longer be covered up, because it hung from the wall. The repair Eva had to recommend would lower the lake and expose the lake bed, the old valley, the chapel, everything; and with the water the history would come to light whether one wanted it or not. The two things could not be separated from each other. The finding about the wall and the letter from the water were the same movement.

The valley sensed it coming and closed, as it had always closed. The successor to old Ruth Berger, a capable woman in her fifties who ran the municipal office, invited Eva to a meeting and spoke, pleasantly and reasonably, of the valley's welfare. One need not stir all this up. The wall — yes, that was a factual matter, and solutions could be found. But old stories, the dead, guilt from sixty years ago — that brought nothing to anyone but discord. She said it exactly as Ruth had said it to Theo thirty years before, as the whole meeting had been saying it to each other sixty years before — the same calm,

maternal tone that does not deny a truth but manages it.

And Eva felt the pull. She felt how tempting it was to be reasonable, to soften the finding, to put the letter in the archive and let it be silent, to belong, not to unsettle the valley. It was the same pull that had bound her grandmother and bought her father, and she understood for the first time how it worked: not through threat but through reason, through the quiet, plausible voice that says it would be better for everyone. She understood why three generations had given way to it.

She did not give way. But she did not do what Niklaus wanted either. She made a decision that lay in the middle and did not entirely satisfy anyone: she would present the finding about the wall without softening, with the necessary lowering, without consideration for tourism — that was her duty and it was not negotiable. And the letter she would neither conceal nor turn into a scandal, but give it where such things belonged: to the archive, certified, openly accessible, a document among documents that anyone who asked could read and no one who did not want to had to. The truth should not break over the valley. It should simply stop being hidden.

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Chapter 9 - The Valley Speaks

Eva presented both, in the same week: the repair report with its unavoidable lowering in the village hall, and, two days later, the letter together with Niklaus's documents as a certified copy in the district archive, with a brief, factual note on what it was and where it came from. She did it without pathos, without accusation, as soberly as she measured a wall. The valley did not react with the outcry Niklaus had feared and perhaps hoped for. It reacted with the old reflex. It managed. The mayor spoke of "a historical matter to be worked through in an orderly fashion." The district newspaper ran a short, careful article. A few old people who still knew or sensed came to Eva — not loudly, but in passing, at the Sternen's door, in the street — and said quietly that it was good that it was out now, that their mother, their father had always known something and never dared; they thanked her almost furtively, as though the thanks too were something better not said aloud. Others turned away. Some Aregger relatives stopped greeting Eva. In the tourism association people worried about the lowered lake and the talk.

Niklaus endured all of it in a way Eva had not expected. He had had sixty years of family pain hanging from this one point, and now that the truth lay there, he found in it no triumph and no simple satisfaction. His great-uncle was vindicated and at the same time lifted from his pedestal — a young man who had wanted to do the right thing and found himself tangled in his own family's wrong. "I thought it would make me lighter," said Niklaus one evening. "It only

makes me clearer. That is not the same thing."

And in those weeks Eva lost the last illusion with which she had come into the valley without having known she had it: that truth sets you free, on its own, once you speak it. It set nothing free. No one fell into each other's arms, no spell broke, no valley visibly breathed out. The truth now lay in the archive, accessible, and life continued — laborious, embarrassed, a little different. It was less than she had hoped for, and it was, she slowly grasped, perhaps exactly what was possible: not redemption, only an end to the hiding.

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Chapter 10 - The Drawdown

In late autumn the repair began. They lowered the lake in a controlled drawdown, further than it had ever been, and kept it low so the construction teams could reach the wall. What the drought summer had shown by accident for a few weeks, the engineers now made permanent: the old valley floor came back to light. The path appeared, the walls of the sunken gardens, the foundations of houses no one still remembered, and the chapel stood free again on dry ground, small and black and unmoved, with its crooked cross, as though it had never been gone. Eva documented it because it was her work — levels and profiles and settlement data — and while she did, it occurred to her that her work and what was happening to her family were performing the same movement: a water sank and released what it had concealed. She had surveyed the valley and in so doing exposed her own lineage, both in a single summer, both unstoppable once the level began to fall.

Theo came to the valley one last time. He was old and unsteady on his feet, and Eva collected him from the station below and drove him up, and they stood together at the edge of the drained floor, father and daughter, there where water had once been and where the old path now lay along which Marlene had walked down to the building site in sixty-two. Theo saw the chapel, which as a young man he had known only as a cross in the lake and into which he had never gone. "So that is where it is," he said. "That close. All that time that close."

They talked little. There was not much to say that the letter had not already said. But they stood side by side, and for the first time since Eva's childhood there no longer lay between them the old lie, that covered thing against which their whole relationship had worn itself raw. It was not reconciliation, no large word, no embrace; it was something simpler and harder — two people who at last knew the same thing and no longer needed to hide it from each other. Theo placed his hand on her shoulder, as his father had once placed it on his mother's, and this time, Eva felt, the gesture meant the opposite of then: not a contract of silence but its dissolution. She let the hand rest on her shoulder. She did not shake it off. And that too was a decision, her own, set against her grandmother's, sixty years later, at the same bank.

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Chapter 11 - Niklaus and Eva

Between Eva and Niklaus something had grown that the shared history did not entirely explain, and at the same time that very history stood between them like the letter on the table that night. They had retrieved a truth from the water together, had seen the same thing, carried the same thing; that bound more tightly than a single summer should. But they were also an Aregger and a Roos, and their families had not looked each other in the eye for sixty years, and that did not dissolve simply because two people would have become honest about everything. Niklaus would stay. The Sternen was his, the valley was his; he had sixty years of family history anchored in this place and would not trade it for a city. Eva no longer belonged here; she had built herself a life elsewhere, for good reason, and the letter, however much it had brought her back, did not make the valley her home again. That was the sober situation, and they said it without prettifying it.

"I'm not going to grow old in a mountain inn," said Eva. "And you're not going to the lowlands. We both know that."

"Yes," said Niklaus. "We know that." He smiled, and it was not a bitter smile. "But there is a difference between a thing you keep quiet because it is not allowed to exist, and one you leave open because it has not yet been decided. I am for the second."

And there it stayed — open, undecided, without the kitsch of a promise and without the lie of a clean break. She would come back, sometimes, on account of the wall, on account of the archive, perhaps

on his account. He would not wait and would not close the door. It was not a love story with an ending but the honest beginning of something whose shape no one yet knew.

On the last evening they went together out to the chapel, across the drained floor, in the red light of a sinking autumn day. They stood in the small, black porch, before the empty cavity from which the tin had come, and said nothing. There was nothing left to retrieve. The water had given up what it had kept for sixty years, and the place was only a place again — an old, crooked chapel on firm ground — and that, Eva thought, was perhaps the best thing that could have happened: that a secret became once more a stone and a beam and a little damp air.

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Chapter 12 - What Remains When the Water Falls

Eva left the valley on a clear November morning, and this time it was not a flight. Twenty years ago she had left, young and angry, with an unnamed reason sitting in her stomach; now she left upright, with open eyes, and the difference between the two departures was everything these months had taught her. She took the letter with her, the original, in an acid-free sleeve, because the district archive kept a certified copy and the original was better kept by a person than in a store room. She would preserve it, not hide it — that was the whole difference, and it was a large one. What her grandmother had placed in the water out of fear, for someone who would come, she was now carrying to the light, into daylight, a piece of paper among papers, accessible, finished.

Before she left she went one more time down to the wall, up onto the crown in whose lower third the construction crews were now working, closing the cracks that had been called "nothing serious" for sixty years. She looked out over the lowered lake, over the exposed ground, over the chapel and the old path, and for a moment she had the feeling that she was not standing there alone, that at the same bank, in the same light, stood a young woman with a letter in her hand, who turned away and walked up the slope without looking back. Marlene. The same bank, three generations, an arc closing.

And Eva grasped what she had been searching for without being able to put it in words, all those weeks, all those years: that it is not truth that redeems. The truth lay open now, and no one was

redeemed; the valley had not become better, the dead were not alive, the guilt was not expunged. What had changed was one single thing, and it was enough: the managing stopped. The keeping of water over the path stopped. For three generations the valley had held its breath over a sunken matter, had kept it silent, accounted for, inherited; and now that the level had fallen and the matter had been named, it was finally allowed to breathe out — not relieved, not happy, only honest.

She got in the car and drove down the slope, past the gardens that would become gardens again, past the chapel that was a chapel again. Behind her the valley lay in the clear November light, the lowered lake, the wall being repaired, the ground that had carried everything and now lay open again. The water had fallen. And what remained when the water fell was no longer a secret, no longer a punishment, but only the valley itself — bare and real and finally visible — releasing after sixty years the breath it had held so long.

Über dieses Buch

The Valley Holds Its Breath - The Water

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