THE TRILOGY

Three Volumes

Riedmatt · 1961 to the present

The Valley Holds Its Breath

A Generational Drama

aban news

Novel · written with Claude Opus

The Valley Holds Its Breath

Drama

aban news

geschrieben mit Claude Opus · aban news

ERSTER BAND

The Slope

Riedmatt, 1961–1963

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Chapter 1 - The Woman Who Married In

The post van left her at the lower bridge because the road up to the Höfli was too steep for it, so Marlene walked the last twenty minutes beside Kaspar, switching the suitcase from her left hand to her right. It was the first day of September, and the valley lay in a light she did not know from home: hard, almost metallic, as though the sun up here had less air to cross. Above them, on the slope, the farm stood like an animal that had lain down against the mountain.

Kaspar did not talk. He had talked little during the whole journey, and Marlene had learned not to read this as coldness but as a kind of economy that ran through everything here. Words cost something. Only when the path levelled out and the farmhouse emerged from the fruit trees did he say: "This is it. The Höfli." And then, after three steps: "My mother has already cooked."

The mother stood in the doorway as though she had stood there all afternoon. A small, dry woman with hands that seemed larger than the rest of her. She looked Marlene over, from her shoes upward to her hair, and it was not an unfriendly look but an appraising one, the way you appraise a scythe before taking it into the grass. "So you're the schoolmaster's daughter," she said. It was not a question, and Marlene did not answer it but held out her hand, which hung in the air a moment too long before the old woman took it.

"Come inside. There's a draught."

Inside it smelled of wood, of smoke, and of something sour, preserved. The parlour was low, its beams dark with wax, and on the wall hung a cross and beside it a photograph of a man who resembled

Kaspar and yet was not — the father, she understood, who had lain in the churchyard below for five years. She set her suitcase where Kaspar set it, beside the chest, and realised she did not know whether this was her place now or only the place for this evening.

Anton arrived in time for supper. He had spent the afternoon looking around the village, her brother, and he brought the smell of outdoors with him, of beer and cold smoke, and a laughter that was too large for this room. "A fine spot," he said, dropping onto the bench so that the crockery rattled. "At the Sternen they're already sitting and talking about the dam as if it were their own. I told them I'd get involved the moment they need hands." He looked at Marlene and winked, the way he had as a boy when he had done something and needed her to cover for him.

The mother ladled without looking up. There was rösti and a piece of bacon and afterwards cider from their own cellar, and talk moved over the table, but Marlene noticed already on this first evening what was not talked about. They spoke of the weather and the late harvest, of a cow that was about to calve, of the pastor's wife who was unwell. They did not speak of money, though the Höfli, she could see even then, carried more debt than livestock. And they did not speak of the dam, even though it ran through every sentence like water under floorboards — when Kaspar spoke of the late harvest he was speaking of the dam; when the mother praised the cider, the last this year perhaps from the lower garden, she was speaking of the dam.

"Those people down there," the mother said once, meaning the construction firm, and then stopped and pushed the bread across to Marlene.

Later, when the dishes were cleared and Anton had already slipped out again into the cool night — "just an hour, I know a few

people now" — Kaspar showed her the room under the roof. A narrow bed, a chair, a window facing south, onto the slope and whatever lay below in the dark. He stood in the doorway and did not quite know whether to stay, and Marlene did not know either, and so she said: "Go on then, if you must." And he went, with a nod that was half a promise.

She did not sleep that first night. She lay and listened to the valley, and the valley was not quiet, as she had imagined it would be when she had said yes to this man and this place. There was the livestock in the barn below shifting weight, a dull, patient sound. There was the wind moving through the fruit trees. And there was, far below and yet distinct when the wind dropped, a hammering, a thudding, a striking of iron on stone that did not stop, not even at night — the construction site at the dam working in shifts because time was pressing before the spring water came. Marlene lay and counted the blows until she stopped counting, and thought that this pounding must be the valley's heart, and could not say why the thought gave her no comfort.

Towards morning, dozing rather than sleeping, she heard Anton come home, quietly, with the careful movements of the drunk, and she heard the mother, who was already awake or had never slept, put another log on the fire in the parlour.

The next morning, during the milking, the mother stood beside her and watched her handle it clumsily and did not correct her, but said, as though remarking on the weather: "You need to understand that here you don't marry a man. You marry a farm." She wiped her hands on her apron. "My son is a good man. But the farm is older than he is, and it will still be here after him. Don't forget that, and things will get easier."

Marlene held the pail steady and looked at the old woman and searched the dry face for malice and found none. What she found was worse: a truth that had held so long it no longer needed an edge. The mother nodded to her, almost kindly, and went to the door, and outside, below in the valley, the hammering had started again, as though it had never stopped.

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Chapter 2 - The Building Site

Anton started on Monday. They took him without much ceremony because they needed hands and because he was strong and quick to learn, and on Friday he brought home the first wages and laid them on the table as if he had found them. It was more than a farmhand in the valley earned in two weeks. The mother looked at the money and looked away, and Kaspar did not count it, but Marlene saw that he counted it in his head.

"They pay well," said Anton. "They pay well because no one likes going down there. It's wet and it's narrow, and the mountain pushes back. But money is money."

Marlene went down herself one of those first days, under the pretext of bringing him the lunch he had forgotten. In truth she wanted to see it, this thing no one talked about. The path led past the lower meadows, past the gardens that still yielded now and would stand under water come spring, and then the valley opened and there it was. A wound in the rock, grey and vast, scaffolding, skips, a crane turning, and everywhere men who were small against what they were building. The noise, close up, was no longer a thudding but a grinding, a roar that sat in the chest.

Anton found her at the edge and walked her along a stretch, proud, as if all of it were his. "The water will come up to here, all along the slopes," he said and gestured a line she could not see, and yet it took her breath away because it ran over the gardens, over the old path, over the small chapel by the lower track. "All that goes under. In return the valley gets its money."

It was the site manager who disturbed them. A man from below, from the city, in a clean coat that was out of place up here and knew it and wore it anyway like a reproach. He came over because a woman had no business at the building site, and said so, politely and from above, in a standard German that made the valley people small. "Private visits are not welcome," he said to Anton, not to her, as though she were an object Anton ought to have kept better secured.

Anton laughed. It was the wrong laugh at the wrong moment. "My sister is bringing me bread, Herr Ingenieur. Are you going to forbid her that?"

The site manager looked at him briefly, appraisingly, and left without another word. But Marlene had seen the look, and she recognised such looks from her father's school, from men who had power and did not need to show it because they knew they had it. "Be careful with that one," she said. Anton waved it off. "Him? He spends all day counting and sweats when someone looks over his shoulder."

They ate together at the edge of the pit, and Anton talked, as he always talked, about everything and nothing, and then, half in jest, with a piece of bread in his hand, he said the sentence Marlene would come back to so often that it eventually lost its casualness. "You know what's odd? I sometimes carry the delivery notes from the warehouse to the office. And the figures don't add up front or back. Cement arrives that never arrives. Iron gets paid for that I never see anywhere." He chewed. "Someone here is making twice over. But that's not my business. I dig and I get my wages."

Marlene said nothing to that. She looked down into the pit where the men were working, and up along the slopes where the invisible line ran, to which the water would rise, and she had for the first time

the feeling that would not leave her in this valley: that everything here was connected to everything else, and that the weave was so fine that you could not pull one thread without something, far away, snapping.

Evening caught her on the way home. Light was already burning in the Höfli, and through the window she saw Kaspar and his mother at the table, motionless, in the half-dark, two people saying nothing to each other and yet thinking about the same thing. She stood a moment in the yard before she went in, and above her, in the clear September air, the wind carried up the grinding of the building site, quieter now but steady, and she thought: the money for all this is already spent, in every head up here, long before it is paid out.

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Chapter 3 - Water Rights

The meeting was on a Thursday at the Sternen, in the main room, and half the valley came because it was about money, even though no one called it that. It concerned, said the notice on the church door, rights of way and the settlement of compensation for the properties to be flooded. Marlene was not allowed to vote — no woman was — but she was allowed to stand at the back against the wall, and she stood and watched a valley decide about itself.

At the front sat the mayor, a heavy man named Lüthi, and beside him the young municipal clerk and a representative of the construction firm — not the site manager, another one, smoother still. The list was read out: who lost how much land and who received how much in return. Marlene quickly saw that the figures were not distributed equally. The large farms up on the slopes — the Areggers, the Imhofs, the Lüthis themselves — lost little and received much; the small tenants below, who worked the best and most fertile land, precisely the land that was being flooded, lost everything and received, measured against that, an alms. And it was arranged so that the tenants could not vote against it, because the land they worked was not theirs but belonged to the men sitting above.

When it came to the vote, Kaspar raised his hand with the majority. He did it without hesitation and without triumph, with the calm face of a man doing something necessary. Marlene looked at one of the tenants, an old man named Roduner whose garden would sink come spring, and watched him see Kaspar's hand, and watched nothing move in his face, because he had expected nothing different.

That was how things worked here. You voted for your farm, and the farm voted for itself.

Afterwards, over cider, Marlene understood the whole weave. She listened to the men talk — who owed what to whom, whose cattle someone had kept over winter, whose brother was with whose daughter — and she understood that none of those hands were free. Each hung from another. Lüthi owed the bank, the bank knew the firm's representative, Imhof had helped Aregger in a bad year, and Aregger would not contradict Imhof while that debt was unpaid. There was no evil plan behind it. There was something worse: a grown network in which every vote was already given before the question was asked.

Anton, who had come along, could not bear it. He had drunk two ciders and stood up just as the firm's representative was speaking of the "generous solution" that had been offered to the valley, and said, loudly enough for the room to go quiet: "Generous. And the iron that you invoice but don't deliver — is that generous too?"

For a moment no one said anything. The representative smiled, thinly. "The young man," he said, "understands bookkeeping about as well as I understand scything." A few people laughed, relieved, and the conversation moved on and the moment closed over Anton's words like water over a stone. But Marlene, standing at the back, saw that Kaspar did not turn towards his brother-in-law, and she saw that Imhof did turn, slowly, and look at Anton, weighing something with his eyes.

On the walk home, in the dark, the three of them went side by side, Kaspar in the middle. For a while no one said anything. Then, casually, almost warmly, Kaspar said: "You should be working at the site, Anton. Not talking. Talking doesn't help anyone here." It

sounded like the advice of an older brother, which he was not, and Anton took it that way and laughed. "Fair enough. I'll dig."

But Marlene, walking behind them, heard what Kaspar had not said, and it was more than what he had said. Above them the sky was full of stars, cold and uninvolved, and from below, through the night, the thudding came up, steady, patient, and Marlene thought that the dam was growing, blow by blow, and that something else was growing alongside it, slower and in the dark, for which there was not yet a name.

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Chapter 4 - What Anton Knew

He came to her in the barn one evening at the end of October, when she was alone and the lantern was already burning, and he had something inside his jacket that he did not show her at first. He stood there and watched her throw the hay, and finally said: "I need to show you something. But you can't tell anyone. Not even Kaspar."

It was a piece of paper, copied out by hand in Anton's awkward writing: figures, dates, entries. Cement, iron, timber, amounts beside them, and beside those, in a second column, different amounts. "The left-hand column is what was ordered and paid for," he said quietly. "The right-hand column is what actually came to the site. I've been comparing it for a week, every time I carried the slips." He tapped his finger on the difference. "Enough material for half a house is missing. Paid from the money that was meant for the valley. For the compensation payments. Do you understand? They're taking it from us before we even have it."

Marlene held the paper closer to the lantern. She understood figures — her father had taught her that — and she saw that Anton was right. "What are you going to do with this?"

"Take it to the authorities. To Interlaken, to the district office. They have to investigate. Then the valley gets its rights and the swindlers get what they deserve." He was proud of himself, she could see it, proud and a little excited, like a boy who has caught an adult lying and believes the world is waiting for his report.

She looked at the paper again, and the longer she looked, the more warmth drained from her hands, though the barn was warm. Because

the money was not only flowing out of the valley. Part of it, the figures showed, went through the warehouse, and the warehouse was run by a man from the valley, and that man did not stand alone. Whoever was earning double here was not earning against the valley but with it, with some of the men up on the slopes, with names she saw every Sunday in church two pews ahead. It was not a stranger stealing. It was the valley helping itself to itself, and the trail, she sensed suddenly with a coldness that had nothing to do with the barn, ran closer than Anton knew — almost to the table where she ate.

"Anton." She put her hand on his arm. "Wait. Not this weekend. Let me find something out first."

"What is there to find out? The figures are the figures."

"Please. Wait one week."

He looked at her, and because he loved her he said: "All right. One week." But she knew her brother. She heard the promise and heard at the same time that he would not keep it, that even as he made it he no longer meant it, because in his head the right thing was always simple.

He put the paper back in his jacket, which he hung on a nail because he wanted to help her with the watering, and so the jacket hung half an hour on the barn wall, in the light of the lantern. And when Marlene looked up later, Kaspar was standing in the barn door, without her having heard him come, and he was not looking at her or at Anton but at the jacket, from whose pocket the corner of the paper jutted. He said nothing. He said the gate needed to be latched better, the wind would otherwise pull at it. And left. But Marlene had seen what he had been looking at, and that night she did not count the blows of the building site but lay awake trying to calculate how many people a single piece of paper could save and ruin at the same time.

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Chapter 5 - The First Snow

Winter came early that year. In the first week of November snow fell far down the slopes, wet, heavy snow that made the scaffolding at the dam dangerous and halted work for a few days. The men loitered about, irritable, because no shift meant no wages, and the money the valley had already spent in its head, before it arrived, now came slower than expected.

In the Höfli things grew tight. The mother counted the wood. Kaspar counted in his head. And between everyone lay something Marlene could not name but which had grown denser since Kaspar had stood in the barn door. He looked at Anton differently now. Not with hostility — Kaspar was too contained for hostility — but watchfully, the way you watch a sky that has not yet decided.

On one of those grey afternoons Imhof came. The brother-in-law, the husband of Kaspar's sister, a large, affable man with a handshake like a vice. He and Kaspar sat in the parlour, and Marlene was in the kitchen and could hear their voices, partial, muffled. She heard the word "authority," she heard "the young man," she heard Imhof say: "If this gets down to them, then not only him, then —" and then she came in with the jug to refill the glasses, and the conversation broke off mid-sentence, and both men looked at her with the polite, blank faces of people who have been talking about something that is not continued when a woman comes in.

"Cider?" she said.

"Thank you," said Imhof and smiled, and the smile stayed in the lower part of his face and did not come higher.

That evening Anton announced it at supper, casually, with a full mouth, as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world. "Saturday I'm going to Interlaken. Got something to sort out." He did not look at Marlene as he said it, and precisely because he did not look at her she knew what he wanted to sort out. The week was not up. He had not waited. Kaspar put his spoon down slowly and said: "What do you have in Interlaken?" And Anton, lightly, cheerfully, without thinking: "Business." The mother looked from one to the other, and in her dry face something moved that Marlene recognised as fear, an old, practised fear that knew how to hide itself.

That night Marlene got up when everyone was asleep, lit a splint at the stove, and sat at the table and wrote. She wrote to Anton. She wrote that he should wait, just a few more days, that he did not know who he would be dealing with when he followed the trail to the end, that these figures referred to people closer to them than the site manager with his clean coat. She wrote it as plainly as she dared not say it, and at the end she wrote that she loved him and that love sometimes meant carrying a truth for a while instead of letting it drop, because when it fell it would break too many things.

She read the letter twice. Then she folded it and put it in an envelope and wrote his name on it. But she did not put it in the post box down by the bridge, as she had intended. It was too late for the post, and besides, she thought, a letter was the wrong thing; she would give it to him herself in the morning, press it into his hand and look him in the eyes, and then he would wait, because he could not refuse her face to face. She put the envelope under her pillow and snuffed the splint and went back to bed, and outside it was silent, completely silent, because the snow swallowed everything, even the thudding of the building site, which for this one night did not sound.

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Chapter 6 - The Day at the Tunnel

She overslept. It was the snow that made her oversleep, that unaccustomed, absolute silence, and when she woke and reached under her pillow for the envelope and ran downstairs, Anton's place at the table was already empty and cold. "He's gone up to the site," the mother said without looking up. "They're clearing the scaffolding of snow. Need every hand. He said he'll go to Interlaken in the afternoon."

Marlene pulled on her boots before she knew she was doing it. She put the envelope in her coat pocket. She said she wanted to bring Anton something, and no one asked what, and she went out into the clear, bitter morning where the snow squeaked under her soles, down the path, past the snow-covered gardens, to where the valley opened and the wound in the rock lay.

From a distance she already heard that something was wrong. Not the steady grinding but shouts, isolated, sharp shouts, and the bark of a siren. She walked faster. At the site there was commotion. Men running, one shouting for ropes, one for the doctor. At the lower tunnel, she heard as she passed, water had broken through, a seam the frost had split, and with the water something had come from the slope, rubble, a piece of scaffolding.

She stopped at the upper edge, because the guard post below let no one past, and from there, through the milling about, she saw it. Saw it only for a moment and never quite clearly, for the rest of her life: three figures up on the side scaffolding, where the water was coming out. Anton, she recognised his jacket. Beside him, larger, in a

dark coat, the site manager. And a third, with his back to her, who from up here looked like Kaspar and who might have been Kaspar and might have been Imhof and might have been a stranger. A movement, hurried, a reaching or a pushing, she could not tell the difference, the water between them, the steam in the cold air. And then Anton fell. He did not fall far, but he fell wrong, onto the stone and the iron, and the water went over him.

By the time Marlene reached him below — she did not know afterwards how she had got past the guard post — they had already pulled him out and laid him on a sheet of canvas, and a man was kneeling beside him and straightened up and shook his head, and around her the voices were already saying the word that would henceforth apply. "An accident." "The water, the frost, no one could have —" "An accident, a terrible accident." They were saying it already before the constable arrived, saying it to one another, firmly and quickly, the way you apply a bandage to make a wound stop bleeding.

Marlene knelt beside her brother. His face was calm, wet, strange. In her coat pocket, against her thigh, lay the envelope with his name on it, which she had meant to give him and had not given him, one hour too late, one sleep too late. She felt someone put a hand on her shoulder and knew, without looking up, that it was Kaspar, whose coat was wet to the knees. She did not look up. She closed her hand around the envelope in her pocket, tighter, and left it there, and said nothing, and that was the first.

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Chapter 7 - The Record

The constable came in the afternoon from the district, a tall, tired man who had taken down many accidents and showed it, cursing the winter and the road under his breath. He took statements in the firm's office, a plank shed beside the pit, and Marlene was allowed to be present because she was the sister, and so she watched a morning she had only partly seen become a sentence that would stand forever.

It was remarkable how smoothly it went. Everyone said the same thing, and no one needed to coordinate because everyone already knew what would be said. A water intrusion, caused by frost. A man who had worked too close to the edge. A piece of scaffolding that gave way. No one nearby who could have intervened. An accident. The words fitted together like the stones of a wall, each stone held by the next, and the more stones, the more solid the whole.

A young woman was typing. She sat in the corner at a machine, sent by the municipal clerk who could not get away himself, and she typed quickly and precisely without looking up, and only once, when the site manager used the word "regrettably" and paused, did she glance up briefly, and her gaze crossed Marlene's, and in that look was something Marlene held onto: a recognition, a knowledge, that more was being written here than was true. Ruth, Marlene heard her name later. Ruth Berger. She would remember that look for thirty years, forty.

Kaspar gave his statement, terse, in complete, firm sentences. He said he had been above, helping with the clearing. He said the water had come suddenly. He said he had called out to Anton. What he did

not say — and only Marlene, who knew him, heard the gap, heard the silence he placed around this one point — was who else had been on the side scaffolding and how close and in what movement. He did not say "I was with him." He said "I was above." Between those two sentences lay the whole day.

The site manager was forthcoming. He spoke of the diligence of the deceased, of the tragedy, and then, casually, of the "generous settlement" that the company would of course be making available to the family and to the valley, especially now, in these difficult days. No one asked what a generous settlement had to do with an accident.

Last, the constable asked Marlene. Tiredly, almost paternally. Whether she, having been nearby, had seen anything he needed to know. Her coat pocket was empty; she had gone upstairs in the interim and, before the hearing began, pushed the envelope under a loose stone at the barn threshold, without knowing why, only that it must not be on her. She could feel the place in her pocket where it had been, the way you feel a scar. She looked at the constable. She looked at Kaspar, who was not looking at her. She looked at young Ruth, whose fingers hovered above the keys and waited.

"No," said Marlene. "I arrived too late. I saw nothing."

Ruth's fingers fell on the keys. The word was in the record before it had finished sounding.

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Chapter 8 - The Settlement

The settlement came faster than spring. Before Christmas the money was there, more money than a dead man had any right to be worth, paid out to the next of kin and, in a second instalment, to the valley, to the municipality, for the properties to be flooded, and no one said it aloud, but everyone knew that the second instalment came out more generously since the first had become necessary. The Höfli was debt-free at a stroke. The mother stopped counting the wood. Kaspar paid back the bank and in spring bought the upper pasture they had been missing for years.

Anton's estate — a pay packet, a few clothes, a watch — went to Marlene. No one spoke about the figures he had shown her in the barn. The paper was gone; she did not know whether it had gone into the grave with him, in his jacket pocket, or whether someone had removed it beforehand, and she did not dare ask. What she knew was that the two columns had vanished, the left and the right, and with them the difference, and from the difference a pasture had been made, and a paid-off loan, and the smile with which the mother poured cider again.

Imhof was suddenly liquid. He bought a tractor, the first in the valley, and drove it through the village on Sunday, and people watched him go by and said that Imhof had made good, and Marlene calculated in her head, the way her father had taught her, calculated the tractor and the pasture and the debt-free parlour against a man who lay at the tunnel, and the result was a number she kept to herself, because there was no one she could have given it to without bringing

everything down, herself included.

The funeral was on a clear, hard winter's day. Half the valley came, because half the valley came when someone died, and the pastor spoke of a diligent, cheerful young man whom the Lord had called to him too soon, of one who in his short time had been a good neighbour to the valley. The valley nodded. It nodded in unison, with the relief of people who have jointly moved a heavy stone to the right place. Imhof carried the coffin. Kaspar carried the coffin. Marlene walked behind and watched the broad backs of the men who were carrying her brother, and thought that it was an image that was right and that lied, both at once, and that from now on she would live inside such images.

At the graveside, when the earth fell, Kaspar placed his hand on her shoulder. It was the same gesture as at the tunnel, the same man, the same hand. And Marlene understood for the first time, fully, what that hand meant. It meant comfort, yes. But it also meant a contract that had never been written and would never be dissolved: that they now belonged to each other, not only as husband and wife, but as two people who knew the same thing and kept silent about the same thing, bound more tightly by what was left unsaid than by any promise before the altar. She let the hand rest on her shoulder. She should have shaken it off, and she knew it, and she did not, and that was the second stone, her own, set against the first.

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Chapter 9 - Winter over the Reservoir

In February they closed the dam. They sealed the last sluices, and the water, which until then had run through the valley as it always had, found no way out and began to rise. It rose slowly, barely perceptibly day by day, and yet Marlene saw it every morning from the attic room: how the valley filled, how the lower gardens first only got wet feet and then vanished, how the old path down which she had walked in autumn to the building site sank piece by piece beneath a grey, smooth surface.

The chapel held out longest. The small chapel on the lower track, in which her predecessors had married and baptised and mourned for generations, stood at the end alone in the rising water, an island, then only the roof, then only the narrow ridge turret with its crooked cross, jutting from the lake like a finger. Marlene stood at the shore — the new, strange shore that had not existed a year ago — and watched the water creep up the cross, and could not turn away.

In those weeks she did something she never quite explained to herself. She retrieved the envelope from the barn, from under the loose stone of the threshold, where it had lain through the winter, damp but legible. She could have burned it. That would have been sensible, that was what a shrewd woman would have done if she wanted to go on living. She did not burn it. She wrapped it in waxed cloth and then in a piece of tin that had once been a tobacco tin, and one grey afternoon, before the rising water reached the entrance, she went down, waded the last ankle-deep stretch to the chapel whose porch still lay dry, and pushed the tin behind a loose stone in the

wall, in a spot where the water, she thought, would never quite reach it and never quite wash it away. She did not know for whom she hid it there. Not for herself. Perhaps for no one. Perhaps for someone who did not yet exist.

That winter Kaspar and she found each other, in a way Marlene had not expected and which made her sad precisely because it was real. They lay together in the attic room, and outside the water stood, and Kaspar, the taciturn man, was tender in the dark, careful, almost grateful, and Marlene returned it, and it was not a lie. That was the hardest thing. It was not a lie. They had each other, and they had buried the same thing, and neither could be separated from the other anymore: the unsaid and the closeness grew from the same root, and when she held him she also held the silence, and when she hated the silence the hatred touched him too.

In March, when the snow was going from the slopes, she noticed she was pregnant. She stood at the window and looked out at the lake, now full, a calm, leaden surface beneath which the old valley lay with its gardens and its path and its letter, and she laid her hand on her belly and thought: something new begins here. On this ground. And she knew in that moment, clearly and without hope, that the new would stand on the old whether she wanted it to or not, that the child coming would draw its first breaths above a sunken ground, and that it would never learn that, and yet would always carry it, the way water carries the path it covers.

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Chapter 10 - Who Asks

In April a man came from below whom no one had expected. He was from the construction firm, but not from the site — an auditor, a pale, courteous man with a briefcase, who explained that the dam's accounts would, as with any major project, be subjected to a post-review, a pure formality, and he would be in the valley for a few days and would ask this and that.

The valley closed around him, noiselessly and completely, the way flesh closes over a splinter the body will not yield. It happened without an order, without a meeting, without anyone directing it. It simply happened, because everyone knew what was at stake, and because everyone was connected to everyone else. Wherever the auditor asked, he received the same polite, empty answers. Delivery notes? At the warehouse, certainly, but the warehouse had been cleared after the build. The accident victim who had allegedly noticed irregularities? A diligent but young man, God rest him, who had known little about bookkeeping. They were sorry, they would gladly help, they were afraid they could not oblige.

Marlene watched, and she saw something that took from her the last remnant of a hope she had not known she was carrying. She saw that even young Ruth Berger was carrying it now. The auditor wanted the municipal archive, wanted the construction protocol, wanted the delivery lists that should have been filed there. And Ruth, precise, orderly Ruth, searched and searched and could not find one folder. "It must have been mislaid at the handover," she said, with a face that held no lie, only regret, and Marlene, who happened to be

waiting in the anteroom, saw that Ruth knew where the folder was and that she would not find it, never, because she too was now one of them, drawn in by a single missing page that she herself had typed or not typed.

After three days the auditor left, with an empty briefcase and a courteous farewell. That evening the Sternen was full. It was not an announced celebration — no one would have dared call it that — but people drank, and people laughed, louder than usual, and Imhof bought a round, and the mayor bought a second, and over everything lay the relief of people who have walked together along a cliff edge and now, in safety, become almost giddy.

Marlene sat with them, because she belonged, and she did not drink. She looked at the red, cheerful faces and understood the last thing that had been missing from her understanding. The lie was no longer Anton's and no longer hers. It was no longer even only the Areggers' or the Imhofs'. It had grown larger than its occasion; it had branched and taken root in every house that had benefited from the settlement, in every hand that had waved things away, in every folder that had not been found. It belonged to all of them now. And something that belongs to everyone, Marlene thought, cannot be taken back by anyone. It is carried because everyone carries it. She stood before the third round of cider came and went out into the cool night, and above the dark lake the stars stood, and she laid both hands on her belly and said quietly, to the child or to herself, she did not know: "Not you. You shall not carry it." And knew in the same breath that it was a promise like Anton's promise in the barn — meant and already broken in the meaning.

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Chapter 11 - The Child

Theo came in October, on a windy evening when the first snow already lay on the high ridges and below the window the last leaves of the fruit trees were turning. It was a hard birth; the midwife from the next valley arrived too late, and it was old mother Aregger who helped, with her large, dry hands, calm and practised, as if she had done it a hundred times, and perhaps she had. When the child finally cried — a fierce, living cry that went through the whole room — Marlene looked into the old face above her and saw something there she had never seen: naked, unguarded relief, almost happiness. "A boy," the mother said. "The Höfli has an heir." And she said it as if thereby a bill had been settled that had been outstanding a long time.

They laid him on Marlene's chest, and she held him, this small, hot, strange person, and something broke open in her that had nothing to do with duty and nothing to do with the farm — a tenderness that rose into her throat and at the same time frightened her. And in that love, at its centre, like a dark seed in a fruit, sat the thought of Anton, who would never see this child, and the letter in the chapel under water, and the ground on which they all lived. She wept, and everyone took it for a mother's tears, and it was that too, but not only.

Kaspar came to the bedside, shy, as he always was before large things. He looked at his son for a long time. Then he said something he had never said before and would never say again, quietly, almost only to himself, in a voice in which something tore: "I would have liked it different —" And stopped. He did not say what he would

have wanted different. He did not say it because the whole valley lay in that unfinished sentence, the tunnel and the water and the man on the canvas, and because a man like Kaspar would rather break off a sentence than think it to its end. But Marlene had heard him, the broken sentence, and she knew it was the closest thing to a confession she would ever have from him, and that it would have to be enough, because nothing more was coming.

In the nights when she nursed the child and the valley was quiet, she made her decision. She would never tell Theo. Not when he was small, not when he was grown, never. She would hold the silence like a shield over him, give him a valley that was simple, a farm that was simple, a father that was simple, and she would cover the fissures that ran under everything with her own body, for life. She called it protection. She believed it, too. Only much later, as an old woman, would she sense that a silence laid over a child is not a shield but a weight it carries without ever knowing what it carries.

One morning when the child was a few weeks old, she happened to look in the tarnished mirror above the chest that had already been the mother's. She saw her face, still young but changed, with a set about her mouth that she did not recognise, a firm, closed set that she knew from old mother Aregger and from the old women of the valley who sat at their windows and said nothing more. And Marlene recognised for the first time with full clarity the woman she would become: the silent woman at the window who knows everything and says nothing. She was twenty-three. She laid the mirror face down on the chest and picked up her son and stepped to the window, out over the lake that lay calm and gleaming, and held the child in such a way that he could not see the water.

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Chapter 12 - Spring Flood

In the first spring after the child the snowmelt came quickly and forcefully. A warm föhn lay over the mountains for days, and the water came from all the slopes at once, and the lake — the young, untested lake — rose higher than the engineers had calculated. For a time it looked as though it might go over the wall. Men stood at the dam all night with lanterns, Kaspar among them, and down in the district they were already talking of evacuation. Then they opened the sluices fully, and the water shot white and thundering into the valley below, and the level held, barely, and in the morning everyone said the wall had proved itself. But Marlene heard Kaspar say quietly to Imhof in the evening that the inspectors had noted a suspected crack in the lower third, nothing serious, they said, it would be monitored. Nothing serious. She had heard that before, about something else.

When the level was at its height and the water reached far beyond the old banks, a cold fear gripped Marlene that had nothing to do with the wall. She thought of the chapel. At this height the water must be going into the porch, up to the wall behind which the tin lay. She went down, having left the child with the mother, and stood at the churning, brown bank, and nothing of the chapel was to be seen, not even the ridge turret; the whole lower lake was a single churned surface. Somewhere down there, she thought, my letter is perhaps loosening from the stone right now and drifting away, and no one will ever read it, and perhaps that is good. Perhaps the water is relieving me of it.

But then, in the following days, the level fell again, the meltwater ran off, the lake settled, and on a clear May day when she went down again, the ridge turret jutted from the smooth water as before, the crooked cross, unchanged. The chapel stood. The tin, she sensed, lay where she had put it. The water had not taken it.

She stood at the bank for a long time, deliberating. She could have waded out and retrieved the tin, now, at low water. She could have finally burned the letter, removed the last thing that remained of the truth, and been free, as free as one could be in this valley. She considered it seriously. And then she left it. She left the letter where it was, behind the loose stone, in the waxed cloth, in the tin, beneath the water that watched over it. Not from weakness — she knew that precisely. From something that was almost hope: that one distant day there would be someone who asked, who would truly ask, and that then there should be something able to answer, when all the mouths that were now keeping silent had long fallen quiet. She could not say it. But she could let it lie, for whoever would come.

"Marlene!" It was Kaspar, up on the slope, calling to her. The child was crying; she should come up. His voice carried far across the still water. She looked once more out at the lake, at the cross jutting from it, at the ground that held everything — the gardens, the path, her brother in memory, the letter in the wall. Then she turned and walked up the slope, to her husband and her son, and did not turn back.

Behind her the valley lay in the May rain that was beginning now, quiet, steady. The wall held. The lake lay grey and patient. And deep beneath its surface, in the dark, a letter waited for a time that had not yet been born.

ZWEITER BAND

The Middle

Riedmatt, 1991–1992

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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 Sternen and his plans, and she listened without turning her gaze from the water, and at the end said only: "The Sternen." A pause. "Ask your uncle whose luck the Sternen 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 Sternen, 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 Sternen 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.

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 Sternen was tied to the lift, the lift pulled the Sternen 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 Sternen 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. There was nothing she could not find.

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.

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.

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 Sternen 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 Sternen 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 Sternen.

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 Sternen 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 Sternen 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.

Marlene 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 Sternen 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.

DRITTER BAND

The Water

Riedmatt, present day

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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 jutted 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, worn, 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 Sternen. "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 liked it to.

They talked about it honestly, as they had 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
Ein Schreib-Experiment von aban news, Kapitel für Kapitel mit Claude Opus verfasst und redigiert.
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