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Foreword to King of Grossglockner

First of all, thanks for your interest and purchase of the eBook.

For my readers world-wide, who are not familiar with the location, please read the following information for a better understanding, what is it about.

There is the highest mountain in Austria. It's called »Grossglockner«, and there is a yearly bicycle race up to the top of the pass. A few thousand participants fight against one's weaker self. The best gets the title of the »King of Grossglockner« (Glocknerkoenig).

More information about the book and myself, as well a link to the soundtrack, and more can be found on my website:

www.autorandreastrautwein.com

Now please swipe & get into the story & be curious what is going to happen.

Have a lot of fun and great hours of reading!

Feel free to send me feedbacks.

Andreas Trautwein

WILLY, The King of Grossglockner

A Novel

Chapter 1

There's some boring series on TV. I don't know exactly what kind. I lie down on the sofa. The position is normally comfortable, but after a while it becomes uncomfortable, because I'm lying more than I'm sitting. My head on a cushion, my hips just barely on the seat, my legs on the coffee table. I could take a great photo and post it on my social media channels. A photo in which only the feet and a large part of the legs are visible. You sort of follow the camera away from the body, from the upper thighs to the lower thighs to above the feet. In the background of such shots, you usually see a great panorama, like mountain ranges, lakes, the sea or a pool. But these pictures on the platforms often have one thing in common: they are taken during a holiday. But on my picture, you would only see the TV. Sad somehow. Outside, the weather is beautiful, it's around 20 degrees and there's hardly any wind. It's actually too bad to kill time indoors - or so you'd think. But I've become cushy, no, even lazy. I used to do sport and tried out a lot: Running, badminton, tennis, fitness in the gym, basketball, I rode my trekking bike a bit and I wasn't doing too badly. I was thrilled to sweat, to push the body, to get in shape. I wanted to feel sore muscles, to simply be fit. But then I had to invest a lot of time to further my education. Unfortunately, I am someone who has to make up for a lack of talent with hard work. At that time, however, I didn't mind concentrating completely on this one thing. Once I set my mind to something, I go through with it without mercy, even if it is tough and often looks like I will fail. In the end it paid off professionally, but I let some things slide, and a big issue here is sport. Today, I'm extremely annoyed that I'm sitting around and letting time pass quite pointlessly in weather like this. Fortunately, my body has remained slim because I pay attention to my diet in spite of everything, only my muscles are no longer so perfect, and my condition also leaves a lot to be desired. Actually, I'm a beanpole with long, thin legs, a so-called spaghetti Tarzan, but you can see from the muscle remnants that I used to do sport. Only the fitness was unfortunately neglected. I'm not defined at all, and my friends have always said that I don't get wet when it rains, because raindrops can't hit me, no matter how I move. The questions on my mind today are: How do I get my butt moving? What can motivate me to start exercising again on a regular basis?

I turn off the TV, go out on the balcony, enjoy the sun, see someone jogging by here and there, children playing, and yes, people are a bit ahead of me, I would say. I decide to go for a walk now to at least get some exercise.

That same day I meet Timo for dinner, a colleague from my new company. He is a little taller and three years younger than me, weighs a few kilos more, his legs are rather short in relation to his upper body, but he looks muscular. His face is round and his bushy, dark eyebrows don't really match his already thinning hair. We each order a cool, but non-alcoholic wheat beer and talk about our work, the resulting stress and what we do to compensate for it in our free time. For Timo, it's sport, for me, it's currently music; listening to music, not playing it myself. I'm a bit of an idiot when it comes to that. I'm constantly on the lookout for bands I don't know. They can be newcomers or have been in business for years, successful or not. It doesn't matter to me. The main thing is that they play songs that I can really enjoy while consciously listening to them. Most of the time, vinyl is played. In the evening, before I go to sleep, I read a lot. That's my kind of meditation.

Before Timo and I can delve into our topics, the food is served. It looks very appetising and also healthy. Timo has something with chia seeds and bulgur in front of him, while I have ordered a pasta

variation with colourful, fresh vegetables. You can see that we are hungry, because after a short time both plates look like they have been licked. »The food is just the best,« I remark with my mouth full. »We must come here more often, super-duper! But where did we stop?«

After a moment's thought, Timo answers: »The topic was cycling. Well ... I ride my road bike after work and at weekends when it suits me, or at home on my roller trainer. Both totally relieve stress. I can really let off steam, and for me the best way to do that is on a road bike. I go full throttle on the open road, feel the wind, sweat up the hills until my legs burn. That's my thing. Riding intervals and finding out how the body responds.« I listen with interest. A feeling of envy arises, but I can very well imagine that this could also be something for me. In the past, I was often out in the fresh air myself and did sports, sometimes pushing myself to the limit.

We order a dessert and an espresso. Timo has noticed that I'm hanging on his every word and continues: »I've been doing this for a few years now. There are also many offers of hobby cycling races where you can measure yourself against others. You also have a goal, and once you've caught the road bike fever, you're hooked and can't stop. You even have to stop yourself so that you don't overtrain and give your body a rest.«

I listen intently to his explanations and feel that this sport could really be something for me. »That sounds great.« I'll think about it and go for a ride on my old bike, a trekking bike - before I buy an expensive one and afterwards maybe won't use it. Timo then says benevolently, »Let me know if you have any questions or if I can help you in any other way.«

We end the evening, finish our drinks and say goodbye to the well-deserved weekend.

On the way back to my flat, I'm already thinking about a tour for tomorrow. Frankly speaking, I'm really keen to get out again. I know from the past that being lazy is not my thing. Maybe I could finally overcome my lethargy and, after the further studies and the new job, I would have a great, new, interesting goal, which could even help me to reduce stress and at the same time get fitter again.

The next morning, I get up wildly, without the help of an annoying alarm clock, freshen up, and before breakfast I go down to the cellar and examine my trekking bike to check whether it is still fit to ride at all. Luckily, I only have to pump up the tyres, clean the chain and oil it. Great! When I get back to the top, I eat my muesli, drink a coffee and change clothes: T-shirt, shorts, running shoes, and off I go. Again, it's around 20 degrees, perfect for a test ride. After an hour I realise that I don't have anything to drink. Stupid beginner's mistake, I think. OK, then I'll take a short cut and go home again; it's a kid's game. A well-developed cycle path runs right next to a motorway. A cycle path that you have to share with pedestrians, without a boundary line. I take the opportunity to get away from the cars and know that the cycle path is a few kilometres long. But since there are many walkers or families with small children also enjoying the nice weather, blocking the way with and without bikes, I can't really go fast. Then I notice that I don't have a bell mounted on my bike, so I keep calling out: »Attention!« People are startled, jump apart and awkwardly clear the way. Some seem annoyed, others call after me because I don't have a bell.

As I drive on, I wonder what the difference is between a normal call and a bell, which usually emits an extremely irritating and authoritarian sound. Which is better? I can't find an answer, at least not today. Maybe I should ask the annoyed pedestrians. But I don't have time for that, because I have to get home - by now I'm not only thirsty, but also hungry. So I need water and something to eat. I ignore the feeling for the next half an hour. But then it happens: the hypoglycaemia comes suddenly, gives me a blow, and from one moment to the next I have no more strength, see stars before my eyes and I am extremely weak. Even weaker than I already was. Luckily for me, I'm not far from my flat and somehow make it home - after just under two hours. Well, the trip wasn't exactly what I had in mind. A bonk - after such a relatively short tour! I'll definitely have to avoid that the next time I try it. Besides, my buttocks hurts. No, it's really no fun. There's no sign of stress relief, relaxation or enjoying nature. So much for feelings of happiness, they just don't want to arise. What's more, it takes me far too long to cover the relatively short distance and I'm now rather annoyed by the result - after finally getting up from the sofa. But at least I've learned something: take a drink with you and eat a banana in between. I also need different clothes, at least a cycling jersey with pockets on the back and cycling shorts with padding. The bike already has a bottle holder therefore I

only need a bottle. After drinking a litre of water and eating a banana, my circulation gets going again. After a shower, I go online and look for new sport clothes. I also find a few gels for the sugar kick in between, and after a short while the »Buy« button is clicked.

Chapter 2

After a few days, the ordered items are delivered. Long live parcel delivery! I'm like a child looking forward to Christmas when the presents are under the tree and it's time to unwrap them. Surprisingly, everything fits. The anticipation is hard to beat. These new clothes have to be tried on. The following weekend, the weather luckily cooperates again. I have arranged to go for a ride with Timo. We meet at a crossroads near where we live, roughly we meet in the middle. Once there, my eyes almost fall out. A racing cyclist, who, in my eyes, is very well equipped, stands in front of me with an extremely styled outfit: helmet, jersey, trousers, clipless pedals, awesome road bike. Wow! I am really impressed. Next to me I look like a wannabe cyclist who has dressed up like for carnival and thinks it looks funny. At school they used to call that »missing the point«.

My colleague knows the suburbs, he told me. We set off. There is no big trip planned. Somehow, I feel very soon that there is a huge difference here, because even on flat terrain I can hardly keep up in his slipstream. What is going on? Can it be? Then comes the first climb. Well, climb is perhaps an exaggeration. It's more like a hummock, and off he goes Timo. There's no way I can keep up. Well, I think, he is three years younger. But I wouldn't have expected such a difference. If you think about it further and compare the performances of the professionals, we are, of course, total losers on two wheels. Me even more than Timo. My pulse feels like it's already at its limit, my legs are burning. Somehow, it's still a great feeling. I hardly have an eye for the landscape, because I'm just trying to keep up with him and not touch his back wheel, which would inevitably lead to a stupid crash. He really knows his way around here. We are usually only on back or remote country roads. At the same time, I have to keep an eye on the road conditions and remain concentrated looking-out for potholes or stones and branches, otherwise I might unexpectedly lie down and kissing the road is not a good idea. Riding alone is more relaxing, I think, but I can't worry about that now. I have to keep accelerating, take advantage of Timo's slipstream. Then he swerves to the left and lets me hang my nose into the headwind.

Suddenly the view ahead is clear. I could enjoy the glance for once, and I just try to keep up with Timo's pace, but I fail miserably, despite trying to make myself as small as possible, with the high handlebars. Aerodynamic certainly looks different. The speed goes down drastically, my pulse goes up again at the same time, just like the short climb before, you can feel it. I'm huffing like an ox and giving it my all as if I'm fleeing from a large predator, but it's only my colleague who isn't baring his teeth and has a smile on his face. At least that's what I'm imagining right now. It goes without saying that I can't withstand the headwind for long. After a short while I let Timo back in front and am glad to be in his slipstream. It continues to go back and forth like this for the rest of the ride. I don't just want to chase after his rear wheel. Despite the effort, the lap ends far too quickly. Time flies, that's the advantage of riding in pairs.

Back at the starting point, Timo smiles with pleasure, while I'm sure I already look totally exhausted. The difference between Timo and me is extreme, and I just think to myself: Willy, you still have a lot of room for improvement. But I have tasted blood, I can definitely confirm that. I realise that the torture doesn't bother me much; I even like it when my legs burn.

»Well done, Willy. You were brave for your first ride. It's clear that there's a big difference between us. For one thing, the rolling resistance between trekking and road bike is enormous, the seating position, too, I'm also in training and you basically just struggled without having prepared your body for it.«

I understand everything. It still annoys me that the difference is so big. We arrange to meet for dinner that evening in the same restaurant where we had such a good time last week.

I use the time until then to think about what I could improve in terms of equipment alone, so that it would be easier to keep up with Timo. A seemingly endless list is created in my head, starting with a road bike, of course, clipless pedals and so on. Meanwhile, I listen to music by THE WEDDING PRESENT. It's an extraordinary band from the UK that has been around for a very long time now with different line-ups and I never get tired of listening to them.

A few hours later, I am sitting with Timo at the table in the restaurant with many questions.

»Do you feel your legs like I feel mine?,« I ask.

»Not really,« is all he says.

I think to myself: Hm, he rides more often and is well trained. That must be it. He regenerates much better than I do at the moment, that's for sure. He is used to the strain. We place the order in a good mood, and I also feel somehow more relaxed in my mind, only physically I notice that I have been active, but the feeling is rather positive and feels good. Today, I treat myself to another dessert to release even more happiness hormones.

We have a good chat, and apart from professional races like the Tour de France, which is currently taking place in France, the topic is of course mainly about what I could do to start cycling seriously and motivated. The aim to improve my conditioning, build up strength, and then at some point also be a slipstream for Timo without the speed being at the bottom straight away, where I don't just stick to his rear wheel and have to constantly try not to let it fall away. The result is costly at first, which I am aware of, but I like to suppress this fact. A road bike is needed! At least two more cycling jerseys with pockets on the back for gels and food as well as the possibility to take along a smartphone, small pump, money or even a rain jacket and a bicycle tyre inflator. Another pair of cycling shorts with padding wouldn't hurt either. And clipless pedals with the right shoes so that I can smoothly pedal. A cycling device that measures heart rate, records the distance ridden with GPS and breaks down the metres in altitude, recognises the cadence and the speed indicator - which goes without saying. Timo is by my side with advice and support, and so I can already get everything in a few days. I don't want to lose any time. I find a second-hand road bike in a newspaper ad, which saves a lot of money.

Timo helps me with the frame size and equipment, so I don't end up buying crap. Motivated as I am, I get right on it and adjust the saddle height, distance to the handlebars and handlebar height so that it is comfortable for me. The clipless pedals are quickly screwed on. Only the cleats are a bit tricky. These are mounted on the sole at the front of the shoes. I want to achieve the best possible foot position. The contact surface with the pedals is supposed to be very important and has to be adjusted. At first, I have no idea which position is best. I am looking for help on the internet and have to get on the bike again and again, click in, check the foot position, click out, loosen the plates, readjust, and do it all over again. After a lot of back and forth, I reach a position that is plausible for me and try a test lap. I am thrilled. A road bike really rolls much more easily than anything else I've ridden so far. The clipless pedals take some getting used to, and, of course, I make a few mistakes. At an intersection that is fortunately not very busy, I have no choice but to stop. I can't even look as fast as I am lying on the road. Timo's words come to mind: »What happens to many beginners is that they put their weight on the wrong side and forget to click their feet out of the pedals and inevitably fall over, because no one comes out that fast. But it becomes a habit, you'll see.«

Well, that's exactly what just happened. Luckily, I came away with only a bleeding elbow and a slightly bruised hip. The pedals are scratched and the handlebars are also dented, great! At least my bike pants are not damaged. If you compare that with the pros, who lie down on the road at high speeds and only have their pants and jersey on, with a bit of blood ... and I'm only bleeding from falling over? But that doesn't distract from it. Nobody saw it either!

As the speed is higher simply because of the lower rolling resistance, I really get a feeling of freedom and boundlessness when the wind blows around my ears. Drinking continuously definitely helps to keep going without losing strength too quickly and drying out. It sounds simple, but you have to do it. The only negative thing after the ride is the aching and tense neck. I've never had that before. But it goes away quickly when I let my shoulders rotate, lift and lower. Just turn my head a little and it's good again.

Time passes while I very often swap the sofa for the bike after work and on weekends. Soon I don't miss the sofa at all and am totally satisfied with my decision to ride a road bike.

Chapter 3

It's the autumnal season, the days are getting shorter. I can only ride on Saturdays and Sundays when the weather is nice. During the week, it's no longer possible after work because it gets dark early, and so the frequent training with up to five cycling sessions a week is over. For the weekends I bought warmer clothes and a light for the road bike - safety first and only in case it takes longer in the evening. Maybe there will be a flat tyre or some other unplanned event that completely destroys my schedule.

Several times a week I now also train in the gym, where I work out the rest of my body, i.e. core training, and occasionally sitting on the cross trainer or one of those uncomfortable, static bikes that some people probably have at home but never use. With a saddle that covers almost a square metre. Who, please, invented that? Who would think that such a huge thing is comfortable? I haven't been able to find out yet. But this way I can use the winter and shorten the time without losing all my form. I'm very happy with the result so far, considering that just a few months ago the TV was my most faithful companion, but now I'm getting back on track with the road bike. It feels so good! Timo has also noticed my change. He said recently when we ran into each other at work: »You seem more balanced somehow, and have you noticed that you also breathe less heavily when you take the stairs?«

He's right. My body is reacting very well to the change, but unfortunately, it's now going in the other direction again, as the opportunities to cycle outside are limited. But I remain motivated and try to make the best possible use of the dull season on weekends. Just keep going because it's fun and good for me. Currently, I pedal rather irregularly. I recently signed up for a spinning class. You meet all kinds of different people there. Some want to keep fit, others are dressed like professionals and want to prepare for the new season. The main thing is to sweat for all you're worth. But it seems too hard to me. You're always in a pretty high heart rate zone, which doesn't bother me outdoors, but indoors it takes some getting used to. But what annoys me most is the music that is played. It may sound very arrogant or idiosyncratic, but only dull techno or this party music from Oktoberfest is absolutely not my thing. Each song also brings in variety, so depending on the speed the brakes are pulled harder, pedaled slower and hill climbs are simulated, or sprints are built in to improve your cadence. Or the chorus is used for various rhythm changes on the bike. All this is entertaining and also gets me through the cold season relatively well, since I didn't just stay with the trial lesson. But in the long run I have to think about something else.

The weeks pass with work and training at a lower level, but they pass.

Normally the coldest month of the year is now knocking. Fortunately, a few outdoor rides are still possible on the weekends. But you have to wrap up very warmly like today. It's Sunday morning, I have breakfast with a final espresso, fill a thermos bottle with warm water, which is said to insulate, dress warmly, with several layers under a jacket that keeps the wind out, a hat under my helmet, gloves, overshoes for the warmest possible feet, plus long, warm pants. I feel a bit like the Michelin man. Even after a few rides, this layer of clothing is still unfamiliar to me. But what the hell. It's been permafrost for the last few days, but today it's a hot five degrees, hazy, foggy and damp. Actually, disgusting and weather to stay at home, but the roads are dry. So, don't be a sissy, I tell myself, and make sure I leave quickly. On the one hand, to no change my mind, and on the other hand, I'm already very warm in the flat with my clothes on. Before I start sweating, I should just get outside.

Today I decided to do an easy round. Not too long or steep, but flat. Just to get my circulation going, to toughen up a bit. I'm the only road cyclist for miles around. My route takes me more along lonely roads. Every now and then I pass isolated houses as I drive through remote villages. There is a certain dreary mood, where everything is grey and dreary and reminds me of a funeral, but I am above that. I'm in a good mood and let it roll. What strikes me is that in winter, nature doesn't smell.

There are no blossoms, only leafless trees around you. Some of the fields in the shade are still covered in hoarfrost from the previous days. They are as if dusted with powder sugar. I pass the fallow areas. Only on sections of the route that lead through the forest do I notice a musty smell. A small stream flows parallel to my route and accompanies me for a while until it has had enough of me, turns off and loses itself again in the depths of the forest. It feels damn good. I love it.

Gradually it becomes noon. I come up a small hill and recognise a single, detached house in the distance. The kind where the power lines are still fed from the roof, with a large garden all around, typical of a country idyll. With a little imagination, you might think of it as a witch's cottage, like in the fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, only without all the calories on the outside. What kind of dream world have I entered, I think. As I approach the building, I am met by a seductive smell that reminds me of home, of my childhood. The smell of a freshly cooked Sunday meal. I imagine that now, in the house, the family is gathered around the dining table, the roast with potatoes and vegetables, served with a tasty brown sauce. It can be so different - some sit in the warm and enjoy the time together, and I freeze on the bike, with only a cold gel and a drink from the even colder thermos bottle. But I also enjoy the time, just in a different way. Unfortunately, the thermo effect of my Bidon doesn't last long, and the water is only five degrees. Advertising is everything, but I have to drink regularly. You still lose fluid, even if not as noticeably as in the summer. I try to keep the water in my mouth as long as possible and warm it up before I swallow it. But that only works to a limited extent.

By the time I get home, I'm well chilled, but it was a very nice ride. A warm shower makes me forget all about it. My reheated meal tastes very good, but is nowhere near as good as the roast in the witch's cottage. I am sure of that.

Chapter 4

The weeks go by with irregular training. I can hardly wait until it finally gets warmer. Eventually it happens. The kick comes when the time change occurs at the end of March. When it stays lighter longer in the evening. You can also go out after work during the week. Of course, only if the temperatures are bearable. Emergency lighting is always there in case it gets unplanned later. My personal and so far positive experiences help me very well not to misjudge distance and time. The rest is out of my hands, such as a technical defect or a flat tyre. That's why I'm having fun on the road, usually still wearing a hat and gloves. It is only warmer for a short time in the afternoon, if at all. As soon as the sun is lower, the temperatures drop dramatically.

After a few weeks, my average speed gradually increases. The degree of exhaustion decreases at the same time. That feels good. I'm »back on track« again. In April, Timo and I sit down together to exchange ideas over dinner.

»How did you get through the winter?« I ask. He replies: »Everything was great, I wasn't sick, I was able to train a lot and I've already cycled 2,000 kilometres. He says it as if it's the most normal thing in the world. I am shocked and surprised at the same time.

»How can you have cycled 2,000 kilometres by April?« I ask incredulously, »I've only done 500 kilometres in the same time.

To which he replied: »Well, on the street they weren't really 2,000 kilometres, but with the hours on the bike in the flat, I can get that high.«

My gaze still seems to express astonishment, because Timo explains further: »You don't really ride track at home, but you know how many hours you spend on your bike, right?« I nod. »You also know your average speed over the year, subtract one kilometre per hour, and that multiplied by the time. Therefore, I've practically cycled 1,000 kilometres at home and 1,000 kilometres on the road. You understand? As a house number, so you can compare.«

»And how do you train at home?« I ask, and he answers: »You've probably already heard. There are the static bikes you know from the gym. But there are more and more roller trainers available for home use. You simply put the wheel in the device and fold the roller onto your rear wheel as a kind of counterweight. Then you can change the difficulty with a lever by pressing this little roller

sometimes harder, sometimes softer against the rear tyre, and thus control your riding, sometimes slower or harder. It's a great thing.«

»That makes sense to me. It's also an advantage that you can always train after work and on weekends, no matter what the weather. The breaks are shorter and I'm much more independent than if I always have to wait for good times because of the weather.« He agrees. We change the subject. As we're about to pay, Timo asks: »Hey, don't you want to come along to a cycling race this year in June? I've participated in this race for the last five years. It's super organised, and it's basically all uphill. The whole thing takes place in Austria, and you simply cycle up 1,700 metres in altitude to almost 2,700 metres above sea level. Do you know the Grossglockner in Austria?«

»Of course! It's well known, and I know it from when we used to drive over the Glockner to Italy. My parents always had to stop because my siblings and I always got car sick due to the winding roads.« I laugh. »But that was ages ago.«

»I'll send you the link. Check it out on their homepage. By the way, the race is called Glocknerkoenig, 'The King of Grossglockner'«.

Okay, I think to myself, that would be a challenge and a goal I could tackle.

»Well,« I say, »I'll get back to you with my decision once I've studied all the details. But with my current form, I can't tell you if I'll even make it up there.«

We leave the restaurant in a good mood. It was so obvious that in the same evening, honestly, I was already determined when we left the restaurant, to boot up my computer when I got home and search for all the information about that race.

It's also clear that I quickly find what I'm looking for. I click through and find out so much. The date of the event, the starting point is Bruck at the Glockner Road in Austria, the starting time is seven o'clock in the morning, the route and altitude profile, and even accommodation options are all described. Of course, I immediately register online, pay and thus secure a starting place. Not knowing what I was doing to myself, I went to bed with a satisfied smile.

The next day I call Timo and say, »Get dressed warmly, I'm going to ride in the race. Let's see who's faster. «

He says: »Great, I'm glad. Then I won't be alone on the road. But there are starting blocks. You have to start pretty far back and fight your way through the masses, whereas I can already start from the second starting group, because I already have good times from before.«

»It doesn't matter. I'll just take a look at it; it'll work out. The main goal is to get up there in a not a bad time and to gain experience. It's all good ...«, I reply, fully motivated. Having a goal is something completely different from just cycling because it's fun, healthy and you enjoy nature.

My training sessions are getting harder, longer and the average speed is getting higher all the time. I usually really exhaust myself, but I always do compensation programs by exercises to stabilise and maintain balance which also strengthens my core. Of course, there are also a few days with a break in between. I don't know how Timo is preparing for the race, because we haven't spoken to each other since the last time. I think everyone does their thing, and at the end we settle the score.

Chapter 5

Every time I ride along and concentrate on my training, I experience different situations in traffic. It's Saturday. I start early because I'm planning a long ride today. I will inevitably pass through towns and villages where you really have to expect everything. I find myself on a main road. The driveways of the houses are lined up, cars parked at the side of the road. A car overtakes me, as many have done before. Suddenly and without blinking, shortly after it has passed me, the car brakes abruptly and turns right into a courtyard entrance, so that I only avoid a collision with great difficulty by braking hard. The rear wheel locks and slips away. Fortunately, I avoid a fall. The guy at the wheel doesn't hear me screaming. My adrenaline is pumping. That was close. It's good that I always have my hands on the brakes in built-up areas so that I can react quickly. But what the hell was that? Didn't he see me? Yes, he must have, otherwise he wouldn't have overtaken me, but would have hit me in the

back. How can you underestimate speed like that? Or did he forget me during the overtaking process? Something like that is incomprehensible, dangerous and totally unnecessary.

After my pulse is down once again, I continue my tour as planned.

I am satisfied and from week to week I feel a little better. However, there are also days when I notice that my legs don't want to do what I'm asking them to do. They are angry, and I convince myself that a little break is probably necessary - which is difficult for me. I immediately have a guilty conscience and fear that I could lose strength in the resting phase. But I have to go through with it, because it doesn't make sense to go on like this.

I use the days off from training to clean my bike and find out online how the race is going to work, and every now and then I go to the lonely sofa, which has certainly missed me. I also give my ears a rest and put on the TEMPLES record »Volcano«. The band from England plays psychedelic, vintage rock music with relevant melodies that is second to none. After a few days, however, nothing stops me from getting on my bike. Promptly I feel that the break has brought something. My thighs feel good, no longer over-acidified, and it rolls much better than before. I am satisfied and continue training. Before I know it, race day is just around the corner - only one week away. Timo and I agree on a meeting point the day before the race, in Bruck at the Glockner Road. I keep reading the homepage of the race and I'm starting to get nervous. The start is at seven in the morning. I don't want to be at the very back of the starting line, and I'm also supposed to eat breakfast. At least I hope that my accommodation can prepare something so early so that the participants can fight their way up with full stomachs. I calculate that it is best to get up around five o'clock so that there is no stress. After all, there are still a few days to go. I'm already putting together a list of things to take with me, because I'm one of those guys who likes to plan and prepare. Because the climb is so high up, temperatures can be around zero degrees, despite it being summer. It could also be summery warm. That's why my packing list is very long. It ranges from road bike, shoes, glasses, heart rate monitor device to complete summer and winter clothing including hat and gloves as well as a rain jacket. I'd rather have too much with me than end up forgetting something important and then possibly not being able to race because of I was so stupid.

Every day I think of another thing that I immediately write down. Simple things like a bicycle tyre inflator, spare tube, rags and oil come surprisingly late, but they definitely shouldn't be missing. I am convinced that my preparations have gone well. I wonder how Timo is doing. I will know soon. Of course, when we were still riding together, he was clearly better. The difference between him and me was more than considerable. That's why I don't give myself false hopes or build up pressure. It is the very first cycling race for me. And that is only uphill. What will it be like to ride in a crowd with so many other participants? Will there be crashes? Will I even make it to the top? I have a lot of questions. It will be a completely new experience. The joy increases enormously; I love this tension!

Four days before the actual race, I get my bike out of the basement, train on one of my home laps and check my legs - how they are before I really wear them out. There are two short uphill and of course, two downhill. Both roads lead through a forest and have a gradient of around nine percent. I come to one of the descents, a narrow little road reminiscent of a lonely mountain road. Cars have to brake and pass each other slowly, or even stop when oncoming traffic in the form of a lorry arrives because there is not enough room on the road. Every now and then, racing cyclists overtake me, just barely, and think they have to use the slipstream of cars even when going downhill. They underestimate the braking distance, which is relatively short for cars, but significantly longer on a bike. Up to now it has always gone well at this point, but not far before the first tight bend I have to brake sharply and thankfully come to a halt. A very unpleasant scene follows: a van is in front of me. It is stationary. The hazard lights are on. The rear window is gone. Shards of glass are scattered on the road. A totally deformed road bike is lying on the kerb, a cyclist is sitting on the side of the road, upper part of his body leaning back against a tree, his legs drawn up; trembling, he holds his hands in front of his face, blood oozing from between his fingers. Another cyclist, presumably his buddy, is standing next to him, gesticulating frantically on his mobile phone. The cause of the accident is easy to explain: Cyclist - twenty centimetres behind the car. Then oncoming traffic, both cars have to brake sharply because the road is too narrow. The cyclist is the one who can no longer brake in time. With full speed, he smashes into the rear of the car, head first. The rest is history. This accident is a

classic and could have been avoided if the cyclist had kept his distance and driven with foresight. Unfortunately, things can happen that quickly.

After a short conversation, I drive on because the guys have already gone for help and have everything under control. My feelings might catch up with me later, but for now I complete my planned ride and am back home, satisfied, luckily without an accident. With these violent images in my mind, I think that racing is not without danger. It's mostly in your own hands. With enough distance, nothing would have happened. I hope the guy didn't hurt himself too badly. At first glance, it often looks worse than it actually is. I will never know...

Chapter 6

The rest of the week passes quickly. On Friday, after work, I pack up my things, put the bike in the car and hope I haven't forgotten anything. According to my list, everything should actually be there. With anticipation, but also with respect for the altitude metres to be achieved during the race, I get into the car and drive off. I arrive at the guesthouse three hours later without a traffic jam. It is pitch dark. I have a quick dinner before ducking into my room. It is cold outside. The weather report on Austrian television does not predict anything good for the race day on Sunday. In the mountains, the weather can change quickly. Stay positive. Good night.

The next morning after breakfast, I walk around a bit in the area, take a look at the ambience near the guesthouse for the first time during the day. Wherever I look, high mountains, fresh scent fills my lungs, damp mist drifts up the steep walls, clouds hide the sun, it's hazy but dry and still early in the day. No matter, I go back, change, get on my bike and ride to the starting point, to Bruck, to pick up my race number at the race office. Once there, I am surprised at how many cyclists gather there, all with the same demand... or commit the same stupidity? I can't tell. There are normal people with simple equipment mixed in with athletes who show off their super road bikes and mountain bikes. There are certainly also amateurs among them who can afford the best equipment or are even supported by sponsors.

I get a bag with advertising flyers, as well as my start number with a chip for automatic time recording, which I have to attach to my bike, plus a banana and a bar from one of the event sponsors. I stow everything in my backpack, then I check out the conditions, the starting area, where I have to go on Sunday morning. Everything will be closed off. Later, I mustn't forget to stuff my change of clothes into a plastic bag included in the starter pack and hand it in to one of the buses that will take them up ahead of us on race day. After all, you have to go back down the course after the race. Sweaty, that's probably not a good idea. It's supposed to be cold up there at the finish line.

On the way to my accommodations, I get settled in, test my legs on a part of the original course until the first real uphill starts. One day before the race, I don't conquer it, but instead allow my legs to relax and hope for full performance the following morning. And now, off to the guesthouse. It looks like rain. I attach the race number with the chip to the handlebars with cable ties and put my bike in the garage with the others. It has filled up. The guesthouse is fully booked, the woman at the reception told me.

For dinner, I meet Timo in Bruck for the last briefing and hand in the bag with the change of clothes for the finish line. I racked my brains as to what to put in there. Hat and gloves, dry undershirt, warm jacket, overshoes or more? I drive there by car, because it's already raining, at a cool nine degrees.

»One year was really tough,« says Timo as we sit together. »There was already rain at the bottom, and then snow was forecasted at the top. The organisers even had to move the finish line further down because there were snow-covered roads at the top. With the thin road bike tyres, there's no getting through, and the descent after the race would have been impossible, too.«

»You really encourage me for tomorrow,« I reply, »Have you looked at the temperature and the forecast? It's going to be cruel!«

Timo just says, »You won't be the only crazy one who does this tomorrow.« He laughs because he surely knows exactly what we can expect tomorrow. The food tastes good anyway; Wiener Schnitzel with fried potatoes, an Austrian specialty. Timo still says that he is in a good mood and fit for the race. I can't say that about myself, as I've never taken part in a race before, but I'll give it my all.

A little nervous, I drive back to the guesthouse and go straight to bed after thinking a thousand times about what to wear in the morning. It will be seven degrees with constant rain. I've never cycled in weather like this before. All I know is that you still get warm when you're going uphill, so you'd better not wrap up too thickly. Then I think I don't need to put any pressure on myself. If worst comes to worst, I'll just get off my bike and ride back to the guesthouse. You don't have to force it, just stay sensible.

I can't fall asleep because I'm so nervous, even though my body is exhausted. Suddenly I'm jolted out of sleep - because the alarm clock rings: five o'clock in the morning. I must have fallen asleep at some point anyway. What a madness! Outside, as announced: rain, rain, rain. You can hear it pattering through the closed window as the drops tap on the copper-plated windowsill. Definitely not a good sign! I check several weather apps to see if a little sun or at least no rain is in the forecast for the next few hours. I'm flabbergasted; every app only reports rain.

At the breakfast table, I had my first conversations with the other participants, who all are going to ride. They don't care about the weather. »It's only once a year, and now I've trained, I'll go, too,« says one of them. That seems to be what most of them think. I can hardly eat anything because of the tension; just a bread roll and some orange juice. I don't know if that will be enough. It's not much, but my stomach is completely cramped. So I slip into the warmest clothes I have, put on my rain jacket and head for the starting block. I deliberately drive slowly so as not to get too much spray. But it's only an attempt. My legs and feet are quickly soaked. The water splashes unpleasantly from the rear wheel into my lower back and runs down the crack of my buttocks, where the rain jacket can no longer reach. Super annoying. As if in a trance, I follow the other guys, who gather as if for a demonstration. From all the entrances and streets, more and more cycling maniacs turn onto the main road; all in the same direction.

Hands, ears, nose - everything is cold. Completely wet after about twenty minutes, I finally arrive at the starting line together with another 2,000 totally crazy cyclists in a crowd of colourfully dressed people with bicycles. Many of them are even wearing shorts! That doesn't work for me at all. I'm afraid of getting cramps. My long pants are not much better, because they soak up the water mercilessly and thus become heavier.

Everywhere you see shivering people with goose bumps on their legs, very often shaved. No one speaks. Either they are all grumpy in the morning or so tense, annoyed by the weather, that they just want to get through the race somehow. Or it's a mixture of both. The rain continues. We stand between the barriers; music is heard from the loudspeakers. As if everyone has switched off their brains, we stand nervously and like robots on the street that runs through a row of houses. At the top of the balconies are the reasonable people, it seems to me. After the start, they will go back to bed and will only leave the buildings again when there is more light and you can see the rainwater in the puddles better. Over the sound system, I hear interviews with the fast riders in the first group, who have probably already won one race or another or made a name for themselves in the hobby racing scene. Of course, I don't know any of them.

What do you do during the time until the starting signal? Like the others, I just look like a drowned animal with my thoughts circling around and around. My pulse is already very high from excitement when I'm standing still. I keep looking around, catching many petrified faces from which all life seems to have disappeared. Many a head is jerked forward to get rid of the water on their helmets, which inevitably accumulates there but is undesirable. Luckily, there is adrenaline, otherwise I wouldn't be standing here among all the others. Wouldn't it be super interesting to be able to listen into the heads of the other participants right now? But I don't have that gift.

The crowd moves forward a little. There is pushing, shoving. It's as if we were in a summer sale where everyone wants to be the first at the sale table. Here comes the countdown:

10 - 9 - 8 - 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - Shot!

Chapter 7

We don't really move. It takes minutes before we too can gradually get going, as the crowds are certainly 500 metres thick on the road leading to the start line. You can hear the clacking of the shoes clicking into the pedals, an incredible inferno of noise echoing between the walls of the houses. Unforgettable! The scene could be compared to a long line of dominoes. When the first domino falls, they all click, one after the other. It's my turn; I give momentum with my standing leg and also connect my other foot to the pedal. With a click it starts. And how it starts! Wow! Total hecticness breaks out, as if panic is in the room, as if everyone just wants to flee, like in a bomb scare, all at once, but all in one direction. After I ride over the the sensor mat which starts the time tracking, extreme attention is called for. Even here is more pushing needed. The people are trying to fill gaps, rush ahead quickly and constantly try to reach or keep behind the slipstream of the others. I have to be brutally careful not to fall. Full concentration! It's slightly uphill, but we're going very fast. My pulse is already in the red zone. I can never keep this up. Then you hear screams in front and the brakes are applied abruptly. A parked car obstructs the free ride; the road narrows; the masses of cyclists squeeze past.

Then there is another sprint to the man in front. The water from his rear wheel constantly splashes into my face. I can hardly see through my wet glasses, my feet are already cold. But the adrenaline just keeps me going. The rain pelts my back. No time to take a quick look at the landscape, but I'm not here for the romance anyway. Far too dangerous. If you don't pay attention for a moment, the brakes may be applied without warning, and if I don't have my hands on the brakes, I'll quickly be killed, because I'll crash into the man in front of me. He will thank me very much. In the worst-case scenario, neither of them can drive on. He's not to blame; I'm to blame and then I'm the bad guy. I have to avoid that at all costs. It can also happen the other way round, that someone behind me can't brake and I fall down through no fault of my own. It's better not to think about it. But that's easier said than done, because you're riding very close to each other. I wouldn't be surprised if I fell. When riders fall en masse in professional races, from the helicopter's point of view it's probably similar to what you see on TV - when the peloton suddenly splits up and a bunch of cyclists lie tangled up in the road. The only difference is that they immediately get help, a new bike is handed to them, and if no bones are broken, they continue to ride. I can't even imagine how that might happen here. I try again to block out the thoughts and concentrate on what I am doing. Live only in the now!

Unfortunately, I have to slow down and bring my pulse down. It's impossible for me to maintain this heart rate much longer. The wetness and the low temperature want to finish me off. Who is stronger? I continue to ride my boot. It goes on like this for about half an hour until we all reach the first real climb together, which leads up to the tollgate. Again, I hear the clicks, but this time it's the downshifting to the small chainring at the front, as the gradient reaches up to ten percent and stays that way for the time being. Totally soaked, I finally reach the climb, my pulse remains extremely high, however the speed is very slow. Everyone is wet, but still sweating and giving off a lot of heat. My glasses fog up because the wind is gone. When I try to take them off and put them in my jersey pocket under my rain jacket, they fall off. Shit! I panic and stop to save them before someone runs over them. It actually works, even though a few of my fellow riders have to swear and swerve out of the way. I get hectic, annoyed by everyone who passes me. In my mind, I imagine the drivers pointing their fingers at me and saying: »You're a beginner. But that thought is gone in a flash, like a card trick, where the magician magically swipes away a card just like that. When I try to get up, it's hard for me to get going again. First, I can't attach the shoes to the pedals. Starting with clipless pedals on a hill is not easy. After several attempts, I manage it and start riding again. I first have to find my rhythm once more, but I'm already pretty exhausted and really angry at myself and my clumsiness for losing so much time because of a stupid mistake. Unbelievable! But now it really starts. We gain more and more altitude; I can't feel my toes anymore. Not a good sign. I can see my breath; it's so cold. The riders' warm backs are steaming, they are all so wet and heated. Don't forget to drink, I say to myself. You don't realise that even though you're freezing, you're also sweating and have to compensate for

the loss of fluids. The water in my bottle is very cold. I can hardly keep it in my mouth. Everything has to be done quickly, because my lungs keep demanding air at very short intervals. So I have no choice but to simply swallow the ice cold drink. That can't be healthy. Inwardly I curse that I signed up for this race. Many riders roll past me from behind. There is much more space now, as the masses have spread out. No one is really following anyone. Everyone rides at their own pace and just for themselves. We come through a short gallery, the so-called »Hohe Wand«, which is carved into the stone. Yeah, the rain stops for sixty metres. Although I ride very slowly, the covered ride is over quickly. I also overtake a few riders, which makes me a bit more optimistic again and gives me hope that I'll make it up somehow. Sense of time, I have none. I hear excited honking from behind. Motorcycles push past us. They must be from the race commission, our chaperones. They are probably all cold as well.

I have set the bike computer so that I can only see the distance ridden and the pulse, not the riding time. I'd have to switch to another page for that, but I can't with my ice-cold fingers, which are at least getting warmer now that the wind is gone, because I'm hardly riding any more, just moving forward somehow. Also because of the rain, I had to lock the touchscreen display at the start, otherwise every drop would change the settings. All the things you have to think about...

As I crawl further up and take the curves, I become aware of how the rain and the wet nature, the forest, the rocks, simply everything, smells in a beguiling way. Simply fantastic. A pleasure every time I breathe in. This humid air. Every breath is deep. Positive people see something good in everything. I'm one of them. I can hear the water rippling down the rocks I'm pedaling by. I can also let my gaze wander down into the valley from time to time, because fortunately the danger of falling is over now. I see clouds of mist rising in between the fir trees, which don't mind the cold and wet weather much, unlike me and the many others here. I unzip my jacket a little. I feel warm, at least on my upper body. My toes, on the other hand, are just numb. Next to me I hear a creaking sound with every step. Probably one of my comrades' gunk is washing off his cleats or whatever it is. That would drive me crazy. To have to hear all the time such a noise with every pedal turn, as if someone is driving from behind you and cracking a whip in rhythm. I was so annoyed by the cracking noise on my old trekking bike that I took it to the bicycle dealer. After a short inspection, he found out that the problem was the seat post. The shaft was cleaned, the post lubricated and the saddle readjusted. Sure enough, the noise was gone.

A little further to my left, I notice a very short, breathless gasp from a rider that I'm overtaking. I wonder how he's going to cope with all the exertion. I'm at my limit, too, but I'm breathing much more efficiently and deeply. Good for me. Nevertheless, this realisation doesn't make it any easier.

After an almost endless fifteen kilometres in the rain, I reach the first and last really flat point, the long-awaited tollgate. Should I continue to ride flat out and pick up speed or take it easy and lose time? I decide on the latter, take a gel, drink again, because who knows when I'll be able to do it so easily again. Time is of no importance. Many now take off their rain jackets; some while riding; others stop. When I pass the toll station, I also pass the second mat for the split time recognition. I have no idea how long I've been cold. Fortunately, there is no time to think of.

The road continues. I can already see the first real ramp. According to the altitude profile on the homepage, the next twelve kilometres will hardly be any flatter. The first fears shoot through my head. I hope I don't cramp in the cold. I've noticed that I'm more of a rider who can ride in the heat. But it's too late. There is no turning back. When I look briefly at the overcast sky, all I see is grey, rain chilling my face. I don't know what I'm thinking. Probably the last glimmer of hope that it will open up after all, or am I secretly hoping for help from above? Now that I can really forget it, I stare intently at the asphalt, darkened by the wet. Crank turn after crank turn. Only now do I notice that I can no longer maintain a real cadence. The gear ratio is probably too high for the big mountains. Crap again. It worked before. This is going to be fun. Further ahead, you can see wisps of mist rising and streaking past the slopes as if they were watching us, shaking their heads and wondering what the cheese is all about. The haze doesn't care about us at all. Through the monotony I suddenly have this song by KRAFTWERK in my ear: »Autobahn«. It's fitting, I think, and there's not even a traffic jam here. It's flowing, but without oncoming traffic because the road is closed. That's exactly what it is. It's a viscous flow of black and coloured bodies on wheels, bobbing forward with effort, literally

tearing at the top tube of the handlebars as if that would make it easier. You could be forgiven for thinking they were colourful sugar masses for a lolly production. A chewy, sweet mass that is unfolded here and slowly drifts along the production line, in guided paths. Only the direction of flow is reversed, not downwards, but upwards. A topsy-turvy world. After countless more hits of pedals, I reach a place that seems flatter for a short while. Warm tea is served there. Surprise! How cool is that. The paper cups are handed to you and you can drink while riding. At least that's my idea. But I spill almost everything and have to be careful to get through the crowd unscathed. Others also stop abruptly and briefly miss the warmth. But I am not here to stand still. My plan from the start was to ride through, not to push or have to dismount for any other reason. Well, apart from saving my cycling glasses. That was clumsy and doesn't count as stopping.

The ascent continues right away, mercilessly. The bends begin, and at every 180-degree turn you can briefly look back down, where the many participants are fighting their way up the mountain. It's a total torture up here. I don't know if my toes have already said goodbye to life. The higher you get, the colder it gets, of course. It's unbelievable what you can put your body through - and completely voluntarily. How is Timo faring? He has already been through such experiences. He must be far ahead of me on the mountain.

The serpentine winds their way upwards. I gain more and more altitude. My pulse is still extremely high. Strangely enough, my legs don't hurt. I only felt them the first few kilometres, when the pack surprised me with the high speed. There was no sign of rolling in. I thought my thighs were going to explode. But now, everything is fine, so at least my legs are still working. Nevertheless, I've just reached a dead point where I'd like to get off, just stop, get on a warm bus, ride down and immerse myself in the warmth of a shower. However, I direct my thoughts straight back to my legs and order them not to stop until they have taken me through the finish line. That actually works. It continues at a speed where spectators could even run alongside you and shout out at us without much effort. A few isolated people are actually standing up here on the side of the road. And suddenly I'm met by the fast riders who are already heading back and have long since left the finish line behind them. It's not easy - in this fog. Those who are still struggling uphill have to stay to the right so that no one collides with the downhill riders.

When I look at my computer, I see the distance display jump to 25 kilometres. No, it's only 23. A drop of water has covered up the number so that I can only see the digits in a blur. No matter, there are still four kilometres to go. I'm almost done. But when you really want to get off and all you can think about is the warm shower at the pension, four kilometres is a hell of a long time. I'm right in the middle of a cloud. The fog is getting thicker and thicker and I can only see about 50 metres ahead. Suddenly I feel loneliness. I no longer pay attention to whether I have passed many people myself or am constantly being overtaken. There is also a headwind that pulls at the last of my energy. Up until now, I hadn't really noticed my hands, but all of a sudden my fingers were getting cold as well - due to the wind and the wetness. It's time for me to reach the finish line.

Suddenly I hear loudspeaker voices in the distance and music plays during the breaks. They are really having fun up there and are in a good mood. But I still can't see anything through the fog. The sounds get louder. The haze is clearing more and more. Two more hairpin bends and the finish line is finally visible. A few hardy spectators pause here and literally shout me into the finale. Actually, I would like to do a final sprint, as I used to do when I was still practising track and field and was always able to gain a little more speed at the end of a five-kilometre run. Today my body is on strike. With my last ounces of strength, I roll over the time measurement mat and cross the finish line. With my mouth agape, as if I were screaming for all I was worth, I gasp for air without making a sound. I stop immediately behind the line, because it's not that flat. As soon as I stop pedaling, the earth's gravity leaves me standing mercilessly, as if this force caught me with a lasso and was pulling hard on it.

Volunteers welcomed us. Every finisher gets a medal hung around our neck. Very nice idea. That way, everyone who reaches the top feels like a winner, which is actually true. We have all won against the swine dog, and today it must have been whole packs of swine dogs. In any case, it's done. Breathe deeply. Wow, what a race! I can't think about anything right now, I'm just exhausted and happy to be here, among all the others who had nothing better to do on Sunday than to get up early,

cycle through a car wash that was far too big, uphill and with water that unfortunately didn't run through a water heater beforehand.

I push the bike to the place where they have laid out the bags with my change of clothes. That's when I feel my knees for the first time. They hurt and it is extremely uncomfortable to walk. What is the reason for this? Is it the cold?

Of course, there are hundreds of cyclists on the same quest. I see the athletes in the rain, how they change their wet and sweaty clothes on the spot, slip into warm rain gear so that they are prepared for the descent. At the moment, I don't know how I feel. I'm not feeling happy, because I'm totally exhausted. Luckily, I have a muesli bar hidden in my plastic bag, which I now try to chew with relish. But my jaw hurts. Have I cramped up so much?

As soon as I finish, someone taps me on the shoulder from behind. I turn around and recognise the grinning Timo, who is congratulating me. He already changed his clothes.

»Hi, how was it?« he asks.

»I'm totally exhausted and freezing like crazy,« I moan.

»Yeah sure, everyone's freezing up here and everyone's glad it's over,« Timo says and laughs. He doesn't seem to mind much. I only briefly give him my feedback: »Do they always go from zero to hundred after the start? My pulse went straight to red and I had to slow down. Then there are the masses around you, who don't hold the line and think they gain a lot of time by meandering along. Other than that, it was fun.«

Timo replies: »Yes, it's like that every time, and on the first real climb, after the chapel, you overtake them, because they can put pressure on the pedals on the flatter section, but are weaker on the uphill. Those are usually the stronger cyclists.«

Of course, he was faster up there than I was - he has to point that out, too. I compare the weight of the bikes, lift his bike first and then mine. Clear difference!

»How much does your bike weigh?« I ask.

»About seven kilos,« he says.

»That's why you were faster,« I reply with a grin, because my bike weighs a good nine kilograms. Either way ... I pulled it off and I am very proud of myself. We'll find out the exact results down at the race office. However, at the moment I have other worries. My body is still freezing, even though I am now wearing winter clothing and overshoes. Of course I forgot socks to change into, so my feet remain cold. Would I still be able to feel my toes if I had put on the overshoes straight away, I ask myself. The cap is put on. The helmet is turned over and the gloves are protecting my bare hands. We get ready for the descent, arrange to meet downstairs for lunch, and then watch the award ceremony, where we will logically only watch and applaud. With an encouraging »Have a good trip!« Timo says goodbye.

It has become a bit hectic up here by now. Everyone is freezing; they just want to get back down as quickly as possible and put the day behind them. At least that's how it seems to me. I join the queue of people who want to go down. Off we go. Hands down on the horn and careful braking. At first I don't have a good braking effect with the rim brakes in the rain, which sometimes turns into sleet, but then, a few braking manoeuvres later, they work and it feels safer right away, although I still have to be really careful that my bike doesn't slip away on the wet road. You can't let it crash like on a dry surface on such a day. That would be far too dangerous, and the poorest cyclists, who still have a kilometre or two to go, should not be ignored, as they often take up the entire width of the road. The fog does the rest. As soon as I pick up speed, I feel the headwind. The cold goes through me, despite my good clothing. It continues to rain, and the water from the road splashes heavily on my feet and back due to the speed. It is even more uncomfortable than during the race. I don't have to pedal anymore, because it is only downhill. My body cools down even faster. I start to tremble. But it's not just a tremor or a brief tingling along the spine, like when you ride a ghost train for the first time. No! I feel an unprecedented shaking that makes my whole body jerk uncontrollably. Even going straight becomes difficult because the shaking is transferred to the front wheel. It's almost like the first time you rode a bike as a child, when you swung the handlebars back and forth with jerky movements to keep your balance. Even braking becomes difficult, the fingers cramp, the arms twitch uncontrollably and even the teeth chatter. I have never experienced anything like it. My lower jaw

shifts forward, freezes. I can hear my teeth hitting each other, my head becomes a sound box. My gloves are not waterproof. Now my fingers feel like my toes. It's a mixture of pain and feeling nothing. After just a few bends I have to stop. With my whole body shaking, I can't go on, otherwise I'll slam into the handlebars.

I stop in a parking bay. What should I do? How do I get down there? There's not a warm thing in sight. I remember skiing as a child. Back then, we didn't have any good gloves either. With double-digit temperatures below zero, it was often critical in winter. To get warmer blood into my fingers, I circle my arms as I did back then and hope to warm up my fingers, to get blood into them, at least for a while. I think that I have to do this more often on the way until it gets warmer down at the tollgate. An older cyclist approaches from behind. He has the same intention. I want to say something in a shaky voice. But all that comes out is gibberish, because the facial muscles don't work properly. My jaw is frozen shut. »Why are we doing this here?« I slur, »and then voluntarily, too?«

The answer comes spontaneously, surprisingly very understandable and is really an eye opener for me. It immediately brings me back down to earth. Because while we both continue to twirl our arms around, he says: »Because we're doing too well!« That's all he says. Just that. And he's right. It's only because we're too well off that we can afford to ride such races, buy bikes, clothes, accessories, etc., and have time to train. Many people are not in a position to do that. The man is so right! Therefore, I'm almost thankful that I'm freezing like a dog right now. Somehow I will get back.

With this ray of hope, I also notice that my fingers are okay again. Unfortunately, I can't roll my legs around to feel my toes. I get back on the bike, let it roll slowly, hands on the lower handlebars and grip the brakes. After a few more hairpin bends, my feet get clammy again. The extreme trembling starts again. It is unbelievable! I can't control the shaking with sheer willpower. It is a reflex of the organism to somehow generate warmth. I realise that my body is now in survival mode. I cool down. There is less oncoming traffic. Slowly, the last uphill riders have come far enough so that you can use the road a little better. I almost feel a little sorry for these cyclists, because they still have so much ahead of them and have been freezing for much longer than I have. I wonder if they have properly prepared for such a race.

My body just doesn't get used to the cold. I have to stop several times and circle my arms. Considering that I haven't ridden any mountain passes so far, I descend safely and well, apart from the shivering. I must be a natural, I mused to myself. Then I finally come to the place where it flattens out a bit, where the warm tea was served earlier. I stop, after all there is nothing left to do, and awkwardly take off my gloves. My cold hands warm up on the tightly clasped cup. Despite the initial tremor, I spill nothing and enjoy every sip. More and more drivers join us from behind, like on a conveyor belt, as one parcel after another approaches and is only slowed magically down at the last moment. Lost in thought, I ask for another tea. It's like being at a Christmas market in the depths of winter. People are standing around just like that, only then they are drinking mulled wine and stamping their feet silently because they are freezing. Slowly and even more awkwardly, I slip back into my wet gloves, almost unable to put them on.

Then I continue. This time without another stop. Funnily enough the rain has stopped during the last few metres, but the road is still wet. Down here it must have poured even more, because there are stones on the asphalt that have come loose from the rocks above. So even more attention is called for. The long-awaited cash point comes closer. After passing it, I pull over and drink from my cold bottle, since there is still a little left. At least it's already ten degrees here, which feels really warm right away. But only when you're standing. As I set off, the wind comes into play again, and from now on, more athletes come together. We ride the last metres down together in the slipstream, further towards the starting point. The trembling subsides considerably. My bike remains stable under my buttocks. My guesthouse is right next to the course. I simply rope off there and turn right into the car park. Get off the bike. Gloves off, unzip the jacket, helmet and goggles off, finally the relief. Now I can say I made it. I lean my upper body over the handlebars, catch my breath and stay in this position for a few minutes. Mentally, I bow to myself. What an incredible thing I have achieved today! I feel so happy that I want to throw up my arms, run around the car park and cheer like footballers do on the pitch when they score a goal. But I can only do that in my mind; I simply don't have the strength for anything else. With a grin on my face, I know that I'm now one of the tough

guys of the racing cyclists. It is actually totally idiotic, and for most people certainly not comprehensible, that you ride a bike race in this weather at an altitude.

I break free of my rigidity, and stow it in the garage. The adrenaline, the fight against the cold and the shivering makes me strangely not feel hungry yet. First I get rid of the wet stuff, then I take a shower. What a relief. I mustn't turn the water on hot, otherwise I'd feel like I'd be scalded. I'm so frozen through that a lukewarm temperature is enough to slowly make me feel human again.

My toes are still on! Everyone probably knows the feeling when it starts to tingle, when life comes back into the limbs. I can hardly describe that moment. I pulled through, I held on and that in these adverse conditions! But my knees hurt and my shoulders are totally tense. Hopefully that will go away on its own. Then I get dressed and pack my bag. My bike has had time to dry out, dirty as it is, I put it in the car with the bag, check out and drive to the starting point to return the chip. I have not seen Timo yet. Right on time, I feel hunger. At the agreed upon restaurant, I order a non-alcoholic wheat beer and spaghetti to revive my body.

When I'm done, my comrade-in-arms comes in and sits down next to me.

»Hi Timo,« I say, »I survived. I got up and down, but I don't need anything like that ever again. It's pretty intense. How are you feeling?«

After ordering something to eat, he answers: »You're right, it wasn't funny. But my legs still didn't feel too bad. Of course, I couldn't get the best result.« »Do you already know the finish times? How long did it take you? I didn't see you at all on the track. You must have been way ahead of me,« I say.

»I haven't had time to look at the results lists in the race office yet. We'll do that on the way to the award ceremony,« he says.

When we finished eating and paid, we turn to leave the restaurant. While I get up, I extremely feel my legs. They are completely destroyed, my knees as well. We pull open the entrance door to the inside, and what do my eyes see when we are outside? The clouds are breaking, the sun is coming out, as if to say with a smug grin: »Did you miss me very much today? Well, I'm back now.«

The list of times is quickly found. We look for our names. There it is. I crossed the finish line at 1:59:53 h, Timo at 1:45:58 h. He congratulates me on my result and says: »Next year you can start from the second starting block. Everyone under two hours is allowed to do that. I just missed qualifying for the first starting block. That starts under 1:45:00 h.«

»Okay, that was super close!« I am impressed by his result. 15 minutes faster. Not bad. I tell him about my knee problems, whereupon he says: »It could be the cleats. If you adjust the angle on the pedals incorrectly, i.e. you don't follow the natural course of the knee, it could be that you constantly have the wrong load on the foot, which then passes it on to the knee. I would recommend that you go to a bike expert, who will check your entire position on the bike. They measure everything perfectly and also adjust your cleats correctly.«

»You might be right, because I have no idea and I just adjusted everything by feel.«

The winning time is 1:22:45 h. Unbelievable! However, good, I am totally satisfied with my performance, considering that I have only been riding a road bike for just under a year. My mood is also slowly lifting, the agony caused by the cold and the wet is quickly forgotten.

We decided to skip the award ceremony after all. They will have to get the trophies without us, and we say goodbye.

»Have a good trip home! See you in the office tomorrow,« says Timo.

»Have fun cleaning your bike,« I reply.

Timo just smiles tiredly and everyone goes their separate ways.

Chapter 8

On the way back, they play »Disco 2000« by PULP in the radio. I can't help it, I have to turn up the volume and sing along, which I'm not very good at, but at this volume it doesn't matter. Besides, nobody can hear me. Satisfaction, happiness and relief finally go through my mind. During the ride, I review the madness of today in my head. It's amazing what you can do to your body. I only

considered giving up once. When your heart rate can't go down any more, your cadence is so low that you're just pulling on the handlebars, pushing your legs towards the ground and trying not to fall over, then at some point your head starts to wonder what's going on. But what is the rest of the body doing? Why does the rest of the body act so completely against the mind? If you listened to it at that very moment, you would immediately stop and give up. But whether that makes you happy is the question. I was able to overcome this point, which came up in the upper third of the track. I just wanted to get up there and prove to Timo that I could do it. Just don't show any weakness. Pushing your bike is not an option. The downhill ride was also extremely borderline - in the wet and cold. Of course, the wrong clothes didn't really help. However, I couldn't have asked for better equipment, because I don't have them. I don't normally cycle in weather like this. Like anyone with common sense, I stay at home. Nevertheless, I'm already thinking about what I can do better next year. Where were my weak points? First of all, I'll probably go to one of those bike expert shops where they look at how I sit on the bike, because I can't go on with this knee pain. Then maybe I'll improve my clothing so that when it rains I won't be so cold. But in any case I have to improve something in my training. Because I'm sure I can do it faster and with a rounder pedal stroke, but I have no idea how. Surprised, I realise that all these mental leaps have only one goal: I will take part in the race next year and hopefully be better prepared. No one can take away the experience of today. Now I know what is waiting for me.

When I get home, I clean out the car, fill the washing machine and switch it on. While the drum spins like mad and rinses the memories out of the dirty laundry, I immediately get to work on the bike, clean it in the garden, grease the chain. Over dinner, I sit down at the computer and look for a Bikefit station. After a long search, I find one not too far away. This website immediately becomes one of my new favorites, with the intention of calling there on Monday. The sportswear is hung up. I have eaten well. With a great feeling and new plans, I allow my body a hopefully restful sleep.

The recovery the next morning is so-so, but could really be worse. Unfortunately, the problem with my knees hasn't improved much; the race was probably too hard for them, but the pain reminds me to call them right away, where I'm sure they can help me. There's a woman on the phone at the Bikefit. Her name is Eva; she has a Spanish accent, a little smoky, typical Spanish woman's voice. Cool, I think, because I know a bit of Spanish, too. I explain my problem:

»Hi, Eva, I'm calling for the following reason: My knees are hurting after I finished a race up the mountain, called »Kind of The Grossglockner«. I can't explain where that comes from. I don't have many training kilometres to offer, because I've only been in road bike fever for a year, so I'm still a newcomer.«

We are on a first-name basis and can be quite relaxed with each other. I have no idea how old she is. She immediately understands my problem, because she also rides a lot of road bikes, but also mountain bikes, she mentions, and is otherwise very sporty. »As I see and understand, the two of us should make an appointment. You should come to our company, bring your bike, your shoes and also your cycling clothes. I want to look at you on the roller, how you sit on it. It could be that you just have your bike set up wrong, and with a few changes, the pain in your knees will soon go away. In the best case, you'll get faster, too.«

She seems to be very sympathetic. We arrange to meet for the coming Friday afternoon, and I'm really looking forward to it. Eva seems to know her way around and I am optimistic that she will be able to help me. Until then, I'll clean my bike again. You want to make a good first impression...

Chapter 9

The days go by quickly. Surprisingly, I didn't get sick from hypothermia at the bike race, which surprises me a little, but it's better that way than the other way round.

And then I'm already standing in front of the door of the Bikefit. The sliding door opens as if by magic. So I don't have to put down my bag to open the door, because I have both hands full. The

entrance area is not large. I'm just turning the corner with my bike when a man comes out from behind the counter.

»Is there anything I can do to help you?«

»Maybe, but I have an appointment with an Eva to adjust the seating position ... she knows.«
Shortly afterwards, Eva comes out of the next room and steps in front of the reception.

»Hi, you must be Willy. I'm Eva.«

We shake hands. She has a nice strong handshake. Sometimes I think I'm holding a dead fish in my hand when I shake hands with other people - including many men. Therefore I immediately notice it in a positive way. Good character, I think to myself. Her face looks typically Spanish, but she has long blonde hair, is a good deal shorter than me, but comes across as well trained. I can't miss her firm buttocks. Her skin is well tanned. I also recognise the white edges on the otherwise brown arms that stick out from under the short T-shirt. Well-trained calves peek out from a sporty skirt. The face is adorned with a sweet smile, high cheekbones and a small snub nose. There are many people who only appear likeable when they smile. With a normal look, they usually come across as sour or disgruntled, as, to be honest, I do, too. But when these people smile, they impressively turn this expression into sunshine.

It's different with Eva. Her face permanently reflects this sunshine. The raspy voice is even more sexy in real life than on the phone.

»Correct, the one with the knee problems was me,« I say.

»Very good,« she says, »no, of course not very good, the knee pain,« she smiles away the faux pas, »I mean, very good of you to come and meet us. Go into that room over there.« She points to an adjoining area where I recognise a rack, see measuring rods and a video camera. »I'll be right there, just have to finish something. You can go ahead and get changed.«

The room is about 20 square metres in size, brightly flooded with daylight. In the middle of the room is a fixed frame that imaginatively represents a bicycle, but only shows the really necessary devices: a vertical, height- and length-adjustable square stand for the saddle, one where the crank set with pedals is mounted, another for holding the handlebar with an adjustable stem. All this on a kind of gear rack to adjust the distance between the handlebar and the saddle.

A short time later Eva comes back and starts measuring me. Very routinely she notes down the measurements, including the length of my arms, legs and torso, and she also tests my flexibility when bending over and has me perform further contortions. Then she measures the bike I brought with me and transfers the settings to the contraption in front of me. »Now sit on this bike here.« She points to the thing next to me. »Put your feet on the pedals and start as if you were riding normally. I'm going to film you and watch you first.«

No sooner said than done. I roll around for a few minutes with varying intensity. I'm really curious about the result. Of course, I feel like I'm being watched, but that's the whole point. Then the criticism starts. Well, not really criticism. She explains what she's noticed: »I don't want to demotivate you, but if you keep going like this, you'll never reach your full capacity and you'll have more and more pain.

»Okay, give it to me straight!« I say with a smile.

The smile is returned.

»Let's start with the knees. They hurt because, on the one hand, the saddle is too far forward and, on the other, the shoe plates are mounted incorrectly. Seen from the front, your knees turn in a circle. But they are only allowed to move up and down.« I look at the video she has recorded and see it very clearly.

»Don't you have pain or tension in your neck?« she asks.

I nod in agreement. »Yes, but only if I drive longer.«

»Look how you sit overstretched on the bike. You automatically pull your shoulders up and after a while you can't turn around without pain. That completely restricts you.«

Almost dismayed by this negative news, I ask: »Okay, this all doesn't sound good, but surely there's a solution you can show me and everything will be fine, right?«

She fetches tools and asks me to get off. First she takes the cleats, loosens and fixes them in a new position. She uses a kind of template for this. Then it's time for the saddle. She measures it a bit,

changes the distance between the seat and the centre of the pedal as well as the tip of the saddle and the upper handlebar. The height difference between the new seat position and the handlebars is also corrected. I watch her with great expectations and get a queasy feeling, because she is already changing a lot.

»So, please take a seat again.« She shows me the old video once more. »Try to memorise your position from the actual state. If you just sit on it .., how does it feel?«

»If I'm honest ... at first it feels completely different from before, but also more comfortable.« I start pedaling loosely and she records it once more. Already with the first pedal rotation I notice a huge difference. Unaccustomed to it, but definitely more comfortable.

A few minutes later: »You can stop and I can tell you that it looks much better. Look ...«, she shows me the recording while I'm still sitting on the bike.

»You're right. Even as a layman I can see that the shoulders are where they belong, even the knees have no longer a circular movement as they did at the beginning and when viewed from the front. Great, isn't it?«

»Yes, I have been able to adjust a lot so you can get a feel for the change and the comfort. Get off, please.«

As I stand next to the bike, she explains further: »If you look at the saddle position, you will notice that if we transfer it to your bike, we are now completely at the outermost edge here. Normal would be the middle by the markings. You would also need a super-short stem. It would be much too short and you wouldn't be able to manoeuvre safely on the road. «

»I'm sorry to admit it ... I don't foresee anything good.«

»In order for all this to work, you need a bike with a smaller frame. A new bike in size of 54 or 56 at the most, depending on the geometry. You've got 58 here, it can't work. I am not able to adjust it to fit your needs.«

Shit, I think. Timo recommended this frame size to me, but it's obviously much bigger than I thought. Every centimetre is relevant here.

»Not good news, but fortunately I bought my bicycle second-hand. It's still annoying. I wish I'd met you sooner,« I say and hint at a wink. Eva presses her lips together, raises her brow and nods in the affirmative.

»You know about road bikes ...«, I say.

»Don't you have someone who can sell me a suitable bike? With your tips and measurements? What do you advise?«

»I'd be happy to help you. In fact, we work together with a bike shop. With my expertise and recommendation, you can even get a discount to bring the price down there. Let me advise you. Try to sell this bike. I also recommend another saddle. You need a slimmer, harder saddle so your bottom doesn't hurt.«

I understand; get dressed while Eva writes up the documents with the test results and the optimal measurements so that I can add this to my documents and go to the bike dealer with it. I grab my road bike.

»The buyer must be about ten centimetres taller than you,« Eva says. With the bike in one hand, we shake hands with my other.

»Thank you for your tips and advice. I can definitely do something with it and I will follow it.«

She gives me the address of her bicycle dealer. I then leave the shop with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I'm angry that I naively bought a bike without really informing myself, and trusted Timo. On the other hand, I am glad that I got help and that the knee pain will probably disappear with the right advice. But I don't blame Timo, because I could have approached the matter differently. For example, I could have taken his bike for a test drive. Well, in hindsight you're always smarter...

Since it's summer, I won't hesitate for long to get a new bike. I can't wait to get back on the road, but pain-free. The best thing about the check is that I really like Eva and she has a clue.

Those who know me understand that I have to do this act of adjustment very promptly. Early on Saturday, I'm right away in the bike shop. They have a good selection, which you can see as soon as you walk in. Lots of accessories, spare parts, clothes, helmets, bikes of all kinds and colours welcome me. Lined up against the walls is a huge selection of frames from different manufacturers, the floor is

full of city bikes, children's bikes, mountain bikes, and at the top of the gallery I see the road bike department. I ask for the man Eva told me to contact, tell him my story and my maximum possible budget. The advice is exactly as Eva said. Everything is top-notch. After only two hours, I say goodbye and leave the shop with a new road bike, which is much more expensive than the old one because it is brand new, lighter and equipped with the latest technology. I was also able to find a harder saddle right away. Super feeling! I am happy to have followed Timo's advice to have the overall human-wheel system successfully adjusted.

Chapter 10

After just four weeks the knee pain was gone and I no longer have neck tension. It's so cool to ride and even more fun than before. A dream! If I had been riding the wrong bike for longer and the pain in my knees had continued to ignite, I would have had to go to a doctor's marathon. X-rays would have been necessary, maybe even an expensive MRI, and no one would have been able to say anything about the cause. I was really lucky to meet like-minded people who practise the sport themselves and immediately know where the pain is coming from and have a solution ready.

A few nice rides later, I have become very accustomed to the changed riding position on the new bike. The gears work perfectly and the bike purrs like a kitten.

Today I am on the road again and have chosen a hilly route. As I take the gentle climb at a low cadence, the trees move past me left and right to the rear. But suddenly, in addition to the sound of the wind in my ears, I hear a kind of squeaking or whistling at regular intervals. What is that? Exactly at the cadence I am pedaling. I look down at my legs and try to get to the bottom of the cause, but without success at first. I pedal faster, but the rhythm of the disturbing sound remains the same, so it can't come from pedaling. Suddenly a bird flies by, with exactly the same whistling, and I have to laugh inside. Because of the wind, I couldn't tell if the sound was coming from a bird or from my new bike. If I ever told this to anyone, they would shake their head and call me crazy. But that's exactly what happened.

The late summer landscape inspires me. The maize is as tall as a man. The sunflowers on the side of the road are looking at me. The shadows are getting longer. On the way home, the low sun is blinding. I have to ride the last bit directly towards it. I'm worried that the drivers might not see me before they overtake. By the time I reach my flat in good shape, I've scrubbed down a good few kilometres and also quite a few metres of altitude in my legs. Now it's time to rest. After showering and eating, I sit down at my desk. There I see the documents Eva gave me - with my measurements, and the invoice. Oops, I haven't paid it yet. I completely forgot. When I fish it out of the folder to pay it online, various flyers fall into my lap. I hadn't even noticed them until now. Eva didn't tell me about them, or forgot to mention them, because I only came for the bike fitting. The flyers point to coaching, drawing up training plans, also conducting performance tests. Eva has probably created a second mainstay for herself, because she is listed everywhere as a contact person. I am impressed. I was already impressed by her at the first meeting, and she continues to impress me more and more.

It makes me think, because up to now I've only been riding for myself, doing a few intervals, i.e. the effort alternates between harder and easier, but there's no plan behind it. I don't really feel whether I'm getting faster or my performance is improving. In principle, I'm a complete beginner. I just really enjoy cycling. But as I sit there, a thought comes to me out of nowhere, a flash of inspiration. I have a new goal in mind: someday I want to beat Timo in the race »Kind of Grossglockner« and cross the finish line ahead of him. Just because I'm interested in whether I can achieve that with hard training. Is it a pipe dream? Is it impossible? It's definitely worth a try. I know that goals should have a date by which you want to have achieved something, but I can't estimate that at all at the moment, so I'm staying cool and waiting. This also takes the pressure off me personally, but I know that if I set myself such a goal, I will work hard to achieve it. I quickly realise that I can't do it without professional help. That would be another challenge that I could handle. A dream that at first seems unattainable, but which, on closer inspection, is not necessarily so

unrealistic. With discipline I have never had any problems. When I set my mind to something, I give it everything. Friends realised early on that there is nothing in between for me. One or zero, black or white, never grey.

The bill is paid quickly, and because I'm already sitting at the computer, I immediately write an email to Team Eva and ask what the fun costs, how it works and what I can expect. After pressing »Send«, I call Timo to exchange news. Professionally, we've always been under the gun and haven't run into each other in the office. With a hot cappuccino in my hand, I make myself comfortable on the sofa, but leave the TV switched off. There's only rubbish on anyway. A few rings later, Timo answers.

»Hi, how's everything going? I haven't heard from you for a long time. What's new?« I ask.

»Nice of you to call. Thanks, I'm doing great. You know, work is stressful at the moment, but as long as I get to cycle, all is well with my world.«

I have to agree with him, cycling really takes your mind off things. Even though it's physically demanding, you can completely relax mentally.

Timo continues: »By the way, I bought a new road bike. I'd had the old one for six years, and I wanted something new. It rides much better, different from the previous one, although the dimensions haven't really changed. The measurements are a little different. Of course, the frame is much stiffer. You notice that you can put more power on the road and generate better propulsion. I am totally thrilled. «

He explains all the details, brand, colour and goes deep into the technical stuff. Then I realise that I have the same bike.

»Timo, I think it's great that you got yourself a new bike. You won't believe it, but I followed your advice and went to a Bikefit, with the result that the frame of my road bike turned out to be too big and it couldn't really be adjusted well to fit my physical conditions. Unfortunately, the frame size you recommended was totally wrong.«

»I'm sorry about that. Hopefully the financial damage was not too high.«

»No problem, I found a solution. I could also have sat on your bike once. No one thought of a test ride.« I smile away Timo's guilty conscience, tell him briefly how the consultation went and mention Eva briefly. »She then recommended that I get another bike, otherwise I wouldn't enjoy riding for long. The knee problems went away after the cleats were adjusted and I reeled off a few kilometres. And here's the thing, Timo: I happened to buy the same bike as you. Funny, isn't it?«

»It's really funny, without any consultation and with the huge choice, we bought the same bike.«

»Only, my bike is white and the frame size is one size down. The bicycle gear system is also from a different manufacturer, but that doesn't really matter, there are hardly any differences. Now there's no excuse,« I say, »next year we'll fight with the same weapons. Same bike, same weight. In the end, it's all about the training, or what do you think? I'm sure I'll be back at the Glocknerkoenig. Will you be there, too?«

»Yes, of course I'm in. I've done two other races this year and I've done quite well for myself. «

I decide not to tell him about my plans with the performance test and that I'm going to ask Eva to be my coach. Otherwise, if I don't improve, he'll say I did it all for nothing. I want to protect myself from that humiliation. I'll keep the coaching thing to myself for now and practice in secret. Before we end the conversation, there is a bit of small talk and stories from work.

I have to try this with the training plan. The sooner, the better. It's already the beginning of autumn and I still have nine months to specifically prepare. I feel my life has taken on a new meaning since I got off the sofa a year and a half ago. A lot has happened, and I'm sure a lot more will happen. I'm really looking forward to seeing what else I can achieve with sport.

Chapter 11

You can now see that October is upon us. The air is fresher, clearer and drier. But forest trails often remain damp all day. It always seems to me that when the wind blows, the mean trees deliberately throw acorns or beechnuts at me and the good ones only leaves.

It's still rolling relatively well, but my form is disappearing more and more. The days are getting shorter, so I can hardly get on my bike during the week, and the number of training sessions decreases significantly. When the weather turns bad at the weekend, I leave my bike in the cellar. I don't need to get wet now. To compensate, I try to strengthen my belly and back at home with core exercises, as well as my inner deep muscles, just to stay fit. I once heard that this should not only help me to ride more efficiently on the mountain, but also as a way of pretend against physical complaints - resulting from hours of monotonous sitting in the saddle. I try to do that twice a week now. Otherwise, it's quiet, and I occasionally return to the sofa. However, the TV usually stays off. I listen to more music. My ears get spoiled with PULP's album »Different Class«, which is definitely one of my favorite records. Even though the music has been around for a few years, it's always a pleasure to hear. As I loll on the sofa, enjoying the music, the variety in the songs and the never-ending individual passages, I remember the flyer Eva uses to advertise her performance test and training plan. I get up when I have to change the side of the record anyway and use the moment to get the flyer, read through it again while the song »I Spy« starts. But suddenly my mobile rings, which is on the dining table. I get up again, stop the record and answer the phone.

»Hi Willy, what's up?« Timo is on the line.

»Everything is great, I'm listening to music and enjoying the time with less training, giving my body a break. And you? What did I do wrong to make you call me?« I ask with a fake laugh.

»Don't worry,« he replies, »I want to buy a new roller trainer, and since the current one still works great, I immediately thought of you. Would you buy it from me for seventy Euros?«

Not a bad idea, I think to myself. Spinning in the gym isn't really my thing anyway, with all the others and the bum-bum music.

»Cool idea. I could do that. What do you think about sixty Euros and you bring it to work tomorrow?«

»Okay, sixty Euros,« he says, without wanting to negotiate for long. »You'll see that it works and you'll be more flexible with the training times, especially over the winter. Try it out.«

»That's a damn good idea. Because if I get bored with the thing alone at home, not much money is lost and I'm richer with this experience. Let's do it!«

»Great, see you tomorrow then. Please, only cash is real.« He laughs through the small speaker at my ear. »See you tomorrow.«

Fantastic, I think to myself, that's a great fit. I'm looking forward to it, but I'm not too euphoric either, because I've already heard from many people that a roller trainer like this isn't suitable for everyone. Too boring. Too much sweating. Too lonely. Too monotonous. Let's see...

Wednesday after work. I am at home. Timo kept his word, so I am now in possession of a roller trainer. Who would have thought that a little over a year ago? Because I'm curious, I set the thing up in my living room the same evening. It's very simple. I quickly clamp my road bike between the two supports at the back and fold the heavy flywheel onto the tyre of the rear wheel, then I move the lever with the cable for controlling the braking power to the handlebars - that's it. Without changing my clothes, I sit on it and try it out. It works quite well. I am satisfied. I just have to think about something for the floor, because I don't want to sweat all over it.

My mind is made up. I definitely want to learn how to specifically train and I think it's the best way to get in shape during autumn as well as over the winter for buildup into spring, slowly and guided. Then I'll see what I can do with it.

So far I haven't received a reply from Team Eva to my email enquiry, so I dial the number on the flyer the next day during my lunch break. Since it's a different number from the one at Bikefit, I don't expect Eva on the phone right away. The dial tone sounds and after four rings a woman answers. I recognise her by her Spanish accent. Eva!

»Hi, Eva, it's Willy. Do you remember me? I went to see you a few weeks ago for the bike fitting, where you adjusted my bike and my seating position,« I explain happily.

»Yeah, sure I remember you. How are things? What have you been able to change so far? Are you still cycling hard?«

»Sure,« I reply, »I followed your advice and bought a new bike that fits my dimensions. The hint was great, and I was able to sell the old bike with the frame that was too big, for almost no loss to another colleague who is also bigger than me. All good.«

»Glad to hear it. How can I help you today? I assume you discovered the flyer in the documents. Unfortunately, I forgot to tell you at the time. It all happened too fast and you were gone. That's why you're calling me now? Are you interested?«

I nod, even though she can't see me. Everyone knows that. You gesticulate on the phone as if the person on the other end of the line can see you and think that your sentences will be better understood. That's exactly how I feel now. Actually, I'm really only calling about the performance test and an appointment. But I also wanted to hear her voice again, which I admit to myself.

»Yes, I'm interested in a performance test, but also in a training plan from you based on that, preferably complete right up to the race, so that I don't go in like that again next year. What do you think?«

Of course, she's immediately on board, on the one hand, because I'm a new customer, and on the other hand, I think she also loves the challenge and wants to see how far she can take me with targeted training. Or does she also like me?

Eva asks me to send her the training rides I have recorded so far so that she can see what I already have done. I give her the link to the page where I always upload my data and my password. Data protection doesn't matter, only these files are stored.

Chapter 12

We meet as early as next week in the evening after work. I take my bike with me, heart rate monitor and bike computer. Eva looks stunning, even though she's only wearing normal sportswear.

»Super road bike,« she says. »I like it. It's super light, too. First we'll hitch it up to this roller trainer. It's hooked up to my computer,« she explains, pointing to the screen in front of me as I sit on my trestle. »Then when it starts, you always keep the cadence of 85, no matter how the brake is pulled. It gets thirty watts harder every three and a half minutes. You give it your all as long as you can. The legs will burn, I promise you.« She smiles up at me. »Then I'll prick your earlobe with every step and get a drop of blood to determine the lactate level. I do that with this device here.« She shows it to me. It's just a little testing device. »Okay, let's start.«

I warm up for about ten minutes at a relaxed pace while she prepares everything. Then I stop.

»Ready?« she asks.

»Ready!« I say.

She presses the start button on the screen. I set off, with a constant cadence, just as she told me to. The pulse and wattage are also displayed directly, so I can see that everything is still good at the first stage. A prick in the earlobe and just keep pedaling. Suddenly I feel more resistance. It becomes heavier. I watch the display to keep my cadence under control. The heart rate rises slowly, but steadily. Each stage becomes more difficult, of course, and it goes very quickly until I really have to pant. I start to sweat. Another prick. Next. The step changes become more and more violent. The sweat is already dripping on the frame. The interval of three and a half minutes seems to get longer and longer. Another example that time itself is relative. A second is short when you are sitting comfortably somewhere, but very long, when you put your hand on a hot burner.

It goes on mercilessly. Sweat pours out of every pore as if someone were squeezing me like a lemon. Breathing has become violent. From one moment to the next I can hardly keep up the cadence. I actually want to stand up and really push, but I was told to stay seated. My legs burn enormously. The oxygen my lungs is getting is nowhere near enough to supply the muscles. Now I contort my face, tear open my mouth, try to get everything out of me. Even more than in the Glockner race. No mercy. Another prick in the ear.

»How do you feel?« asks Eva. As if I could answer now! I only moan briefly and barely with an inarticulate »ghoad« and keep on fighting. What did Jens Voigt, an exceptional cyclist, always say to himself? »Shut Up Legs.« I'm trying that now, too, but I can clearly feel my strength fading. The next stage is ignited, but I have to stop there. No more chance. I'm in the red zone, where nothing works anymore. I can no longer move the pedals at the same speed.

Eva presses the stop button and praises: »Super job! Now take a ten-minute ride until your legs have recovered. After that you can take a shower. I'll get everything ready, and later we'll talk through your results. See you soon.«

What a unit! Actually super short, but extremely intense. Oh Man, dude! I didn't expect it to be this hard. I do as instructed and a short time later, freshly showered and with wet hair, I'm sitting at a table with Eva. Her outward appearance makes me very happy right. Now she explains my results to me. It is sobering. I build up far too much lactate far too early and my performance leaves a lot to be desired. Then she pulls the laptop towards her, types something in, doesn't say anything at first. She looks intently at the screen, as if a very interesting series is on. Then she unexpectedly looks over the edge of the screen at me and says: »I'm just looking at your data on the page you sent me and I can already see the cause of the rather poor results.«

Apparently I put on a disappointed expression, because as if she can read minds, she informs me: »Fortunately, it's nothing that can't be corrected.«

My facial expression changes to a relieved one, a shy grin with enormous anticipation behind it - which she again correctly interprets. »You will certainly be able to get more out of yourself, but you need patience, diligence and you have to keep at it. But you seem to be determined and able to endure the hardships and pains that will come.

So far I understood everything and feel ready for any shameful deed.

»I will draw up a training plan for you. Please let me know if you can't follow the plan well due to illness or time constraints, and I'll adjust it for you.«

After I told her my expected weekly hours of free time, she recommends to me before we say goodbye that I should definitely roll only loosely for the next six to eight weeks. »You need a low basic level, which you don't have at the moment because you always ride way too hard. There are far too few easy sessions,« she admonishes me and gives me the pulse ranges in which I have to ride the base. There are five ranges in total within which you build up the training. For now, I'm only allowed to stay in the lowest two.

»It's going to be an adjustment and it's going to seem very boring. But if you go through with it, you'll go on, and then you'll see what you're made of, Willy. More watts will be possible with better pulse values. I'll keep my fingers crossed and get back to you as soon as I've prepared a training plan for the first few weeks, okay?«

»Thank you very much for everything. I'm looking forward to working together and can't wait to get my first personal training plan.«

We say goodbye with a handshake, although I would like to dare a cautious approach and give a half hug with a cheek-to-cheek kiss, just like friends do amongst themselves. I'll try that next time. Eva is really sweet and a lovely, smart woman. I find her accent magically attractive. Well yeah, not everything at once...

The weather is changing. It is no longer advisable to train outdoors for several hours. After a few casual rides in nature, the training shifts exclusively indoors and I can finally try out the new roller. In the meantime, I got a mat to put between the floor and the bike to protect it from sweat. The bike is quickly clamped. My coach told me that I should only pedal very easily now. I haven't received her training plan yet; it's only been two weeks since I did the performance test. She doesn't seem to be in a hurry either, because my task is already the beginning of the structured training. I know what I have to do, start and stay within the given heart rate range. I just try to train for as long as possible and see how the sweating is. Does it get boring? Soon I notice that I look at the clock on the bike computer too often. I have the feeling that time doesn't pass at all. That has to change in the future. But I notice that after a good ten minutes I not only start to sweat, but drops of sweat are already forming on the tip of my nose and dripping onto the bike frame. I also have to cover the top tube

until the next time. It's as if someone is squeezing me like a sponge and pressing out all the water. My arms are also covered in a layer of sweat. My hands hold on to the top tube which I have covered with a towel. At the bottom, drops land on the floor, coming off my wrists after liquid has collected there. It seems to me that each of them is a parachutist who, after much deliberation, eventually pushes off, but the parachute doesn't open. A bit like in an old computer game. They jump, plop down and smash on the mat. One after the other. And the imaginary player doesn't manage to open the chute, which would be his job. I realise what strange thoughts come into my mind...

In all this monotony, I listen to music. Since I'm a total Britpop fan from the very beginning, I still enjoy this kind of thing very much. These are all classics for me, such as the song »Jubilee« by BLUR or »Girls and Boys«. Anyone who was allowed to spend their adolescence at that time will certainly also know the band ASH with the hits »Oh Yeah«, »Goldfinger«, or also »Evel Knievel«. Memories come flooding back - as I tread along so monotonously. My mind wanders. I see myself in clubs back then, where this music was continuously played. Small to even smaller clubs, overcrowded, extremely smoky at the time. Bad air. Always a bottle of beer in my hand. Sweaty bodies everywhere, swaying, dancing, sometimes debauched, sometimes rather rigid. Everyone wanted to get in; we had fun. It was one of the few opportunities to catch the latest records. In Germany, songs like that were hardly ever played on the radio. There was no Internet back then. People spent hours in record shops. CDs were the latest thing. Discos were important to stay on the ball, to get to know the latest songs and to exchange ideas with like-minded people. It was a completely different time. Not at all comparable to today, when many people don't even own music anymore, they just stream it. But I still buy songs in the form of vinyl or audio files and download them onto my little MP3 player, which is packed in a small plastic bag in my right jersey pocket, protected from sweat. That way, I can also just tap along to songs, skip or listen to them when I feel like it. The in-ear headphones are connected in the old-fashioned way with a cable.

My legs feel good. It's not really exhausting either, just very warm, although the thermometer doesn't show as much as my body is suggesting at the moment. It's amazing to imagine that I sweat a similar amount outside, but hardly notice it because of the wind. Well, in summer and on longer climbs up hills, the feeling is comparable. But even when I get home, I can't wring out my training shorts and jersey like I can now. At the moment it feels like I've been caught in a rainstorm or someone has poured a bucket of water over my head.

I end the session after about two hours with the soft song »All My Life« by THE LATHUMS from the UK.

Not bad, I think to myself. I've heard from others that they can only do the indoor training for ten minutes and then get off again because of the monotony. They argue that they miss the movement, the movement in the landscape that passes by during the ride. I have to agree with them that indoor training is different, but I don't seem to mind spending more time doing it. Good for the training schedule! It can only be an advantage not to need a motivator to get through it, because I find it easier than I thought without getting any further. I get off the bike and am happy. I go straight to the shower and hang up my wet clothes. I have to say, though, that the clothes from training at home smell a lot more. I don't get that when I ride outside, even when I'm out for a long time in the summer heat. I switch from the bathroom back to the living room where the training equipment is. My lungs fill with totally stale and unprecedentedly bad air quality. I can't believe I've been cycling in it for two hours and haven't noticed. Okay, new experience. I tear open the windows and the balcony door, exchange the stench for fresh air. But what seems to remain the same is the hunger. So I prepare some noodles and grab some food. Very good. I feel great. I also keep uploading the data to my page so that Eva can check it, as proof so to speak, that I've behaved well and I am easily exercising. Because I am in the so-called virtual world, I also check my inbox. Many emails appear, and I can delete a whole bunch just like that. Otherwise, there is no interesting inbox. But there, in the spam folder ... an email from Eva. Yeah! I have to save the address in my contacts right away. Okay. I skim the message. She writes that she has unfortunately been ill and that the training schedule will therefore be delayed. And that she hasn't forgotten about me. She will be ready next weekend. Until then I should just carry on as before. Easy, easy. Lay the groundwork. No problem. I'll

do it. Whenever I have time, I sit on the roller and let my legs circle. That's how I get in about eight hours of training a week. And a little stretching in between.

Chapter 13

The next seven days fly by. Then I receive an email informing me that Eva created a plan for the following month and uploaded it to my site. Curious, I immediately click on it. With a surprised look, wide eyes and a frown, I take a closer look. It looks very complicated. However, when I take a closer look, all it says is the number of intervals, how long which pulse should be, how much rest needs to be taken with which pulse in between. An unbelievable number of changes within a week, but the weeks are similar. I have to look at the sequences per day more often because I don't understand them straight away. But good, I'm sure that will come with practice. I write Eva back briefly, thank her and hope that she is well again. In four weeks I will call her so that we can talk briefly about my experiences. Maybe the planning will be adjusted. At least that's my plan. And the realisation starts a week later, because then I'll also have the eight weeks of easy cranking behind me. I've really got used to indoor sports.

At the end of November, the weather becomes less and less cycling-friendly, the days have become very short after the clocks were changed at the end of October. The annual run, I think to myself, only this year I have something planned and I can't effectively miss the dark season. I am really motivated down to the smallest cell of my body. Sometimes I ask myself where I get this from, or what has triggered it. On the one hand, it may be a matter of type. Nevertheless, I am convinced that everyone can be enthusiastic about something. No matter what. If you're totally behind it, into it, and find yourself one hundred percent in something, if you've found your passion, that's when it clicks. Everything happens by itself, you don't need a motivator or a kick in the pants. Things happen out of self-motivation and conviction. Because they are good for you. It no longer feels like a compulsion. There is no obligation behind it. You don't think about it, you don't question it - because you are so convinced that you don't care what others think and say about it. You do your thing, that's it. That's exactly what I'm going to do for the next few months, maybe years, until I beat Timo at the annual Glocknerkoenig. But a little respect for what lies ahead of me is unavoidable.

Chapter 14

The time has come; I have covered my bicycle frame well so that the dripping sweat does not destroy the paint. The salt is supposed to be very aggressive. I filled my MP3 player with the best songs of the day to have enough variety. Even this topic may sound strange to some people, but I get tired when I hear songs a hundred times, always the same ones in a row. You know them inside and out. That's why I have to constantly change the playlist, renew it, buy new music and mix it with old classics, which I then find great for years. Yes, there are songs like that. But mostly I'm looking for new bands. It's very interesting when you consider that the number of notes is limited, and yet completely new songs, new sequences of notes, melodies and also new styles are always created. The rhythm is often decisive. I could never be a choreographer, work in the dance genre, not even as a hobby. Listening to the same song a thousand times while you try to trim your movements to perfection, the same song over and over again.

I have had a good breakfast, the water bottle is filled. I am already dressed and start the bike computer, the chest strap connects. Let's start with the warm-up. According to the training plan, there are a few easier intervals on the programme today. Half an hour of warming up is new for me, but I translate Eva's instructions one-to-one, because only then can I not blame myself if progress doesn't work out. During the relaxed phase, I compile a list of must-have songs. Songs by LADYTRON come to mind, like »Ace of Hz« or »White Elephant«. The music of this band is characterised by simple, easy-to-follow structures and is reminiscent of the often minimal music of the early 1980s,

electropop from Liverpool, UK, according to Wikipedia. The group RIDE from the UK, founded in 1988, is also very exciting. »Dreams Burn Down« as well as the absolute classic »OX4« on top of that, for me a must and definitely one of the rare pieces I can listen to over and over again. It doesn't get boring. What should also not be missing today is the band TOY from England. This driving music and the simple melodies like in »Dead & Gone«, over seven minutes long, or »Kopter« with almost ten minutes duration, is simply brilliant, perfect for indoor cycling. This driving force of the rhythm, the power behind it causes a monotony that alternates with incredible breaks. If the band NEU! hadn't already existed in the seventies, TOY would have had to be used for it, pushing the pulsating rhythm further and reinventing it. I'm starting to get tired of pedaling and complete my playlist. The half hour is running out, and now there are short, but not really intensive intervals, eight times with the same breaks. The whole thing is then done three to four times in total with longer, looser pedaling at a much longer duration. That alone sounds complicated. But when you're doing it, it suddenly makes sense, something you don't understand on paper at first. I enjoy the music, but I can't follow the rhythm, I can't start pedaling to that beat, because the cadence is also set. The beads of sweat have been squeezing out of the pores of my forehead for a long time. The drops become more and more until the first brave one starts to flow towards the tip of my nose. It apparently doesn't dare to do it alone and waits for reinforcements until together they are heavy enough to make the leap down onto the bicycle frame.

It goes on like this all the time. My gaze turns to the opposite window. Outside it is quite uncomfortable, grey in grey, and a cold wind is blowing. I'm really glad to be inside and sweating. The drops from my arms and head form funny shapes on the mat. Right now I can clearly see a heart made of sweat. Does that mean something? The session ends as Eva described, with a thirty-minute cool down. I'm not really exhausted. After that I stretch my upper body on the bike, my legs and even my calves are not neglected. That was just the beginning of a long journey, I guess. I enjoyed it. I also realise that I can use this time to consciously listen to music.

Every now and then I think about what Eva is up to. How she keeps fit. We haven't talked about that at all yet. Of course she'll do some cycling. She's great at helping herself. But does she also have goals, races she's preparing for? I will have the opportunity to ask her these and other questions at some point.

The next day has dawned. The training continues immediately with a longer and stupider, relaxed session. Close your eyes and go for it. All is well. There's a lot going on at work right now. I don't really know what needs to be done first. But no matter what's happening in the office, my thoughts are always a little bit focused on the end of the day, when the next training session is due. There are always four to five sessions a week in a similar style, which I can do well. One day after the last session, I call Eva.

»Hi, this is Willy. Are you all right? «

»Sure, hi, everything's fine, I had just a little cold. That was a while ago. How's tricks?«

»That's exactly why I'm calling ... to tell you that so far everything is going as you planned. I was able to implement everything well. It's really completely different from the way I trained before. I don't even think you can call my early training as a training, but just cycling - to reel off kilometres without any sense or understanding.«

»Exactly, you put it very harshly, but in principle that was actually it. What makes a good training is that you are not knackered after most of the units. That's why there is almost always more than 66 per cent base built in, and the rest is divided into various intervals. This way the body can come down and recover during the action. What you have been doing all the time so far was basically almost a race. You were proud when you arrived home exhausted. You have to change that in your mind. Don't be sad if you don't fall off the bike totally exhausted, but get off with your head held high if you don't really feel the work after the session.«

»That's true, it's a complete change of thinking, but I'm beginning to see the point. I've always paid more attention to the average speed at the end of a ride.«

»This is the mistake that many people make. Training is all about duration and what you do during it. It doesn't matter what speed you end up with or how many kilometres you've done. You will

notice that you will achieve more with less distance because you will use the time more efficiently. Let yourself be surprised!«

»Thank you for the instructive words. I think it's great how you put it across and help me get started. I'm looking forward to the next part of your plan. You know I'll see it through. No matter what nastiness you have prepared for me,« I reply confidently and laugh. You can sense that she feels the same. I can imagine her face very well: the way her eyes shine now, the dimples that form on the left and right. With her straight teeth that flash out, I complete the picture and am thrilled. She is simply sweet. Before we end the conversation, we wish each other a good week. It was another interesting and entertaining conversation.

Chapter 15

The Advent season is upon us, and the consumption of cookies is clearly increasing. More often than not, I can't resist and eat what I can get, but I resolve to stop again after Christmas. But it's winter, the body needs a few fat deposits for the cold season. Fortunately, it's hardly noticeable in my case. That's why I don't worry about it.

On Christmas Eve, I sit with my family, we haven't had the pleasure for a long time. We were always in touch by phone, but work and the distance to my parents' house don't make it possible to see each other often. That's why the joy is all the greater. My siblings are all there as well. My mother's routine remains, the traditions will probably last forever and ever. Every year she tries anew to give us a good time. At the richly laid table, I tell everyone about my new hobby. They knew that I ride a road bike, but they didn't know yet that I've got myself a coach with whom I'm trying to improve my athletic performance. They listen with interest, nod and say unimpressed: »Everyone needs something to do. « They smile and are rather amused. I think that they can't really imagine what it means to work out according to a relatively fixed plan. I also spill the beans and explain why I'm doing it. »It probably sounds a bit restrictive for you, maybe even arrogant, but the real reason is that I have made up my mind to beat my colleague Timo at the Glocknerkoenig one day; the race I've already told you about.«

»The one where you almost froze to death? That means you're going to race there more often now and try to improve your times and at best be faster than him, even though you are three years older? «

They probably think that such bad weather and conditions would put me off racing. I totally understand that they can't really understand that. But I don't care. They'll see, I think to myself. To each his own. I'm not angry or disappointed. I don't expect them to do the same.

»At least now you know when I'm not available. I'll be sitting on my bike and train, indoors or outdoors.«

I smile defiantly and that's that. The support from my family will come later, when they see what it means to me and that I am serious about it. I am quite sure of that. We change the subject, everyone has something on their mind, the delicious biscuits disappear like hot cakes. I don't drink wine with them since I still have to drive home. I have a good time with the family. After the ritual of opening presents and the singing of »Silent Night, Holy Night« at the end, I say goodbye, my thoughts, funnily enough, already focused on tomorrow's unit, although ... tomorrow is already today. It's one o'clock in the morning. Okay, sleep in and just start the unit later.

After the last, somewhat harder and shorter blocks, it's back to long duration. I have time. I have the will, but also respect for the incredible four-hour slow session. This time I try not to listen to music, but position my bike so that I can comfortably look at the TV. There's a documentary about the social behaviour of orangutans on Sumatra. Afterwards I switch to the sports summary of the last ski jumping competition and a few detailed recordings of the last biathlon races, which are now in their main season, while the professional cyclists are left alone and can enjoy themselves. Time flies here, too. I think the mix is quite good. For very long sessions I prefer TV, for specific interval blocks I

listen to music, because here I have to constantly keep an eye on the clock to make sure that the phases between hard and easy are kept. Nice combination and variety.

Chapter 16

Another year, new luck. New Year's Eve is over, work calls again, but my training schedule doesn't wait. There is no break; it goes on. What can I say? The rhythms are changing now. Hard and shorter intervals alternate with long and easy ones. Fortunately, the really tough and long blocks are scheduled for the weekend. Thank you, Eva, you've done some good thinking! Nevertheless, the number of hours per week are increasing. More often I don't get off my bike until after 8 pm. Then eat, come down, sleep. That's how it goes on. Building up in a three-week rhythm, with more hours and alternating actions every week. Sometimes it's only sprints, then only cadence games, and later I switch to strength endurance. Overall, I'm recovering well because so far I've been able to follow the program without any problems and without my body rebelling. The fourth week is usually a regenerative one, which means more days off in between, where I just crank loosely. Eva explained to me that this week is almost more important than the weeks before. Because here the body comes to rest. It has time to adapt to what I ask of it and to prepare for what is to come. Rest is extremely important.

I can't complain. I'm aware that I can't really use these days off at first. The free time is unfamiliar, almost like a small hole into which I fall. But I quickly find a replacement and fill the time with reading and listening to music. Or I work longer hours, which is not a problem because I don't miss out on the training afterwards.

One Monday I wake up with a scratchy throat. Otherwise I feel fine, but I'm worried because a scratchy throat usually means more than just a scratchy throat, it's followed by a sore throat, a cough, a cold and maybe a fever. When I get out of bed, I notice my circulation which is currently not running as it should. I see stars, too many to be able to interpret them. I get ready like any other day, go to work. But at lunchtime I notice that things are getting worse. Total bullshit. Now it has hit me. With a hot forehead I say goodbye to my colleagues and call in sick. I hope I haven't infected anyone. It goes downhill fast, unfortunately not like on the road after a long climb. I feel exhausted, totally annoyed. Tired, I collapse onto the sofa. When something like this happens, I know I'm really sick. Normally I don't feel the need to lie down. This is close to a drama. I'm angry, disappointed, furious. Just at what or who? I don't know. I'm thinking about the race in three months and I'm sick. I was in such a good mood, my form was improving. Is it all over now? My thoughts always revolve around the topic of the Glocknerkoenig. That pulls me down even more. A world is collapsing for me, I only think in the subjunctive, which doesn't help at all. I know that, but at the moment I find myself in a downward spiral, so that in the end everything just sucks. And this for me, as I am such a positive-thinking person. After making some tea and drinking it, I lie down. That's it. I would like to give up everything, cancel the race and already think about the year after. I have no idea where I might have caught it. It doesn't matter. What do I do now? I fall deeper and deeper and finally into sleep.

When I wake up, it is already light. I have slept for almost twelve hours. The body really does take what it needs. You can't fight that. It is also clumsy to try something counterproductive. So much effort I put into the training. Has it all been in vain? Has all the work I put into getting in shape been undone by this flu? I am in despair. I have to cough, my nose is running, but my temperature is only a little higher. I drink a lot.

On the third day at home I start to accept my fate and think that the race with a good time is probably history for this year. I continue to be dissatisfied, still sleep a lot, but then start a new book: »The Power of One«, by BRYCE COURTENAY. Simply ingenious, so pictorially written. You are right in the middle of the action. The boxing matches are so realistically depicted that you get the impression you are sitting right at the ring. It is unbelievable how the story builds you up when you read what you can achieve if you really want something. I'm already getting philosophical. The same idea comes into my mind, as in music, with the limited number of tones. In literature, there is only a limited

number of words, and yet there are an infinite number of different stories in each language. There is something mystical about that, don't you think?

I feel much better on Friday, but I won't get on my bike yet. The nose is no longer running, the fever has also stopped, only the cough is still noticeable, and the lungs are not yet clear. But I see light on the horizon. FINALLY! Just don't do anything wrong now. I write an email to Eva on my phone and explain my condition to her, because I am at a loss and yet also restless somehow. The energy seems to be getting the upper hand again. I want to start training as soon as possible, catch up on the backlog of training. But something tells me that starting too early would do more harm than good. My thoughts are turned back towards the race, and I have hope that it could be something this year - with a good time.

Eva calls me in the afternoon. She asks about me, wants to know how I'm feeling.

»There is only a residual cough. My body itself is more than recovered. I can already feel the strength rising again. The will to do some training is there, but is it wise? And was it all for nothing now?«

»It would be wise to wait a little longer. Fever is the most dangerous thing. If you ignore it, you can damage your heart forever. But since you no longer have a high temperature, the cold is also gone, the cough is slowly but surely taking over, I would recommend that you try an hour of easy riding on Sunday and pay attention to your heart rate, to how you feel on the bike itself. Does it feel good, or more like a struggle? Please write me another email on Sunday. Because if it's going away and the cough is gone too, then I'll change your training plan, build you back up. No problem.«

I thank Eva and say: »I'm totally disappointed. Having the flu so close to the race is the stupidest thing that can happen, isn't it? It really makes me a bit depressed. I'm losing faith that I can do well in the Glocknerkoenig.«

»Don't worry about that. Before the illness you were at a super level, nobody can take that away from you. Now you just have a dip in your progress. But your body will make up for it, and in the end, you'll hardly notice any difference between having a compulsory break for a week and being able to go all the way with your training. Don't panic. Every athlete has these thoughts. They are quite normal. You have to get over it, stay cool, just start again. In about two weeks you'll be back at the level you were before the illness, and you can go on. If you start too early, you might have a relapse. That would be really stupid and critical for the race. You can rely on me. «

With these comforting words, we say goodbye.

In the next few days I finish reading the book so that I can have my head clear for my preparation. I can describe the feeling of this forced training interruption as a journey through a long tunnel: First I notice the change. It gets darker and darker, the bright sections become fewer, my eyes have become accustomed to the darkness. Then I accept the black. I drive on. It remains dark, very dark. At some point, the bright spots of the overhead lighting begin to flash by again. Slowly at first, then the intervals become smaller. It gets brighter. The mood rises. Only briefly are dark sections visible. At the end of the tunnel there is daylight, and all is well.

As Eva had predicted, things are looking up for me again. My mood and confidence are rising; that racing won't be as bad as I first thought. An illness like this doesn't just take its toll on you physically, but also mentally. It's unbelievable how it pulls you down, tries to crush you metaphorically. But I see it in a positive light, because a broken leg or another ailment would have been much worse than a week of compulsory rest. I can implement the adapted training plan well again. The cough has completely disappeared - like the dark clouds after last year's competition in Bruck. I am back on track. Now it's only upwards, I hope.

Chapter 17

While I'm getting ready for another training ride, I listen to the song »One Step Beyond« by MADNESS, which always lifts my spirits. This ska rhythm is so intoxicating that my legs almost move

automatically. It would also be a great song for the playlist for one of my indoor workouts. I'll have to remember that.

It is very windy outside. But since I only have a short training session today, namely hill sprints, I ride on the road. Almost exactly half an hour away from me there is a two kilometres climb, not too steep. Perfect for a session like this. I'm well warmed up by the time I reach the bottom of the hill. Especially today, as I already have a headwind on the way there. But I'm already looking forward to the ride home with a tailwind. I ride up and back with different cadence, sprint after sprint, with easy pauses in between. My heart rate drops and is in the famous red zone for a short while each time. On the way down, I fight the headwind. I somehow manage it. Then it's straight home, six intervals are enough. Now only wind from behind. At least that was the plan. But no way! The wind gets gustier and comes from all sides. On the last descent I even have to pedal to avoid losing speed. Only to find out that the wind is completely gone.

Later, on the way home, a gust hits me from the side. I have to counter steer hard. My bike tilts to the right, towards the side of the edge of the road, against the crosswind. From behind, it looks as if I'm about to fall over and land in the ditch. It's not such a far-fetched thought, because all of a sudden this gust is gone too. I really do almost fall over, it happens so quickly. I can hardly wait to get back home. Actually, I should be coasting along, but that's only possible to a certain extent. It doesn't matter, it was a short one. Tomorrow I have another long session planned, which I'll do at home because it's supposed to rain. That's probably why the wind is bringing the change in weather.

The relaxed training today, the day after, is very good after yesterday's intervals. The muscle fibres that are there for fast strength were activated, and today they are the ones that nature invented for endurance. A constant alternation of different activation of the muscles ultimately brings success, I learned from Eva. The body accepts the workouts very well. I regenerate really easily. The curve is rising eventually, at least emotionally. I share this with Eva after the weekend was so successful:

»Hi, it's me again, Willy. Are you okay?«

»Sure, everything's under control, I'm just a bit under the gun at the moment, hardly have time, sorry.«

»No problem. I'll make it short, because I just wanted to share that it feels great again after the illness.«

»That's perfect. Feeling is one thing, proof is another. I could squeeze you in this week in the evening after work so that we can do another lactate test. Then we'll see the development in black and white and can make adjustments if something still doesn't fit. The Glocknerkoenig is close. Two months to go, that's eight weeks. How about on Wednesday evening?«

»Cool. I'll come by. After all, I want to know what level I'm at and what the training has brought. Deal! I'll leave you in peace.«

I laugh, with the intention of maybe taking a little stress off Eva. She thanks me and we hang up.

Wednesday comes with great strides. I'm already standing with my bike in front of the Bikefit door, where Eva welcomes me in a friendly manner. She looks enchanting. This time her long blonde hair is pinned back so that I can see her sweet neck. You can't see the stress on her face.

We prepare everything. I already know my way around.

The test starts right away, as if it were routine. After the warm-up, another prick at the beginning and off we go! Same wattage at the start, same cadence speed. Same procedure. Again and again it becomes more difficult, while Eva at the same intervals takes blood from my earlobe. I hope that my ear is free of earwax. The thought vanishes as quickly as it came. Sweat is pouring down, my legs are starting to burn, and I know I have to give it my all, because I also want to show what I have become over the months. Well, I can't influence what the lactate is doing at the moment, but I keep on kicking like an animal. I'm at the limit.

»Is the next level still possible?« Eva asks, and I answer with an indistinct mumble during my short breathing: »Yes, we can try it!« As if SHE is actively involved now, I think in plural. Why am I talking about »we«? I guess these thoughts come from the undersupply of oxygen. I almost have to smile, although it definitely can't be done. So, stay seated, maintain cadence, contort your face, open your mouth and hope that the chemical element O₂ will somehow be enough for the last stage. It's so

easy to underestimate how long three minutes can be. I pull on the pedals, the seconds tick by and ... bingo, done. Totally done, but happy. Because even without waiting for the result, I can already say: I was able to hold out one step harder. Success is already clearly visible here.

»Super. Congratulations! See? One step just put on loosely.« »Well, loose is an exaggeration, but you're right. Your training plan is working, Eva!«

She laughs and says, »Did you doubt it?«

Relaxed, I cool down, sweat it out, and off into the shower. Today, too, a short time later we sit at the table. She prints out the new curves of the results on paper and immediately explains: »Simply top, I can only say. You respond really well to the training. Look at the comparison here. Not only did you manage one more step ... your lactate also stays down much longer, then rises steeply, but nowhere near as fast as in the first test. See that?«

I can only confirm it. It really does make a difference if you continuously train. I am totally happy with myself. To thank her, I grab one of her hands lying on the paper, touch it rather unconsciously and say, »I'm so happy, really, you're the best. I am thrilled! Thank you so much!«

Suddenly I become aware of the touch and pull my hands back, startled.

»Sorry! I'm not in control of my emotions right now. This is all more than I expected. Maybe the adrenaline is to blame as well.« I laugh sheepishly.

»You're welcome. I'm glad to be able to help you. You see, the flu doesn't really have that much of an impact if you were well before.«

Now she takes my hand, which I shyly withdrew a short while ago, and continues to encourage me: »Keep it up. I'll send you the next plan, which will last until the race. You'll let me know if anything comes up, okay?«

She withdraws her hand with her friendly smile. Our eyes meet for longer than usual. If we were to mix colours, it would probably come out some kind of cyan, my blue and her green. My heart beats faster. No one really dares to say anything, probably for fear that it might come across as stupid, which of course would certainly not be the case. But I'm just a shy guy...

Eva packs up the pages with the results, takes them vertically, taps them on the table so that the paper is one on top of the other. She gives me a copy to take home again, for my records. We both stand up, push the chairs backwards simultaneously, making the same noise at the same time. We have to laugh at that. This time I spread my arms out, indicating that I would like to give her a quick hug. She returns the gesture and we hug. Our cheeks touch briefly. With a smile on both our faces, we say goodbye.

»Have a good evening. Don't get too stressed. I'll be in touch. Thanks for everything. See you next time!«

»It's fun to work with you and to see that you're making really good progress. See you next time, take care, Willy!«

I pack my bike and ride home. It's already late, so I stop briefly at my Italian restaurant around the corner to get a well-deserved pizza. Overjoyed, I turn on the music and crank up the song »Streetlights« by SHIVERY SHAKES. The Texans are incredible. The credits of the song - how do you come up with such ingenious melodies, I ask myself, as I sink my teeth into what is only lukewarm pizza and take a bite. What has just happened to Eva and me occupies my mind very much. I then go to bed with these thoughts.

The rest of the week passes very quickly. A short unit is reeled off, loosely, so that the lactate from the test disappears.

The weekend is here. Raise your hands! The weather is once again spring-like. The tyres are quickly inflated, I'm changed, the bottle is filled, bars and emergency gel are packed. Off we go! After about two hours of training, I ride along a country road at a brisk pace. The road is wide enough for two buses or trucks. I come to a long right-hand bend where a huge lorry is coming towards me. I prepare myself for a short but strong gust of wind, which the mass of the vehicle generates and hurls against me. From behind I hear a small car. By now I can place it very well. It is approaching at high speed. Of course, the speed limit is actually a hundred kilometres per hour. The truck is almost at my height. I am at the apex of the bend. The car behind me gets louder and louder and overtakes me. I

can't believe what is happening now. The lorry is already much too close - and fast! It doesn't look as if it can get out of the way. I see the small car whizz past my handlebars just five centimetres to the left. What was that? In any case, extremely close. Lucky again!

The tour comes to an end without any further excitement. Many more rides follow with varying degrees of intensity until there are only four weeks left until the Glockner race. My form is good!

Chapter 18

With all the preparations for the competition, I notice that I haven't met Timo at work for a long time. I am a curious person and want to know how he has been doing with his preparation so far.

It's Saturday. I'm sitting outside on the balcony with a cappuccino. The sun is finally shining, after it was rather rainy last week. Amused, I watch the birds flying from branch to branch and from tree to tree. They all seem to be very excited because it is once again mating season. It is the month of May. After I put the cup down on the table in front of me, I call Timo. Maybe he is available and not training yet. I dial his number and let it ring a lot, but no one answers. Okay, I think to myself, then he must be away. No big deal either. I'll just try again later. It's clear that I'm taking advantage of the great weather. Eva's training plan is still on the agenda. Keep going until the race! Today it will be a longer session which can be hilly and where I have to climb every hill with a high gear. So endurance training, pulse only up to the threshold value, which was corrected upwards by Eva after the test not so long ago. No full speed today, no going into the red zone. I don't want my muscles to over acidify, but still get enough oxygen and not start to burn. A nice unit. Of course it's exhausting in the long run, but not in comparison to the extreme, high-intensity intervals.

By now I know my surroundings very well. I head in the direction where the hills are lined up one after the other. On the way there, I am extremely excited about spring. Everything is green. The farmers are also active. They are ploughing up the fields. The scent of fresh earth is a blessing, and the numerous blossoms already exude a kind of perfume. I could just sit down in it. My lungs really open up. Fortunately, I have no allergies and don't have to worry about my respiratory system at this time. No matter what is flying around in the air, my lungs tolerate it like pure oxygen. In this human-friendly climate, there are of course many motorcyclists and Cabrio enthusiasts on the road. They take a leisurely stroll in their convertibles. I've seen one or two people sitting in the car with a red head who underestimated the power of the sun and forgot to put on lotion. But that doesn't seem to detract from the joy and fun. People always claim that there is nothing better than driving around in an open car and letting the wind blow around your nose while polluting the environment with exhaust fumes. But okay, that's another topic. I always say: cycling is the better way of driving a convertible. And so I glide over the hills, up and down, with a low cadence of the pedals. I pass through a small village that seems to have only one main road, with a few branching side streets that flow into the main stream like arms of a river. A small S-shaped incline rolls under my wheels, the best surface. I make out a car approaching from behind. The radio is on. I can hear it clearly. The bass is powerful. Either the windows are open or it is a car without a roof. It drives quickly and overtakes me. But the distance leaves something to be desired. When I pull in, the convertible cuts me off. I am totally surprised. The driver must have underestimated the speed of us racing cyclists or was not paying attention because he was distracted by the blonde sitting next to him with dark sunglasses and a waving scarf. I react angrily and shout loudly only once, so that he realises that this was absolutely not okay. He turns to me briefly, raises his right hand and shows me his opinion with his middle finger. He definitely doesn't have a guilty conscience. It's just bad luck for him that the road comes to a junction where we have to give way. He stops. I come up behind him and stop to the right of him.

»Hey, what the fuck!«, I yell at him. »Don't you have eyes in your head?«

He then turns to me in surprise and says, »Leave me alone and don't bug me, or do you like trouble?« But he has to look past his girlfriend or wife. She has a bitter look on her face, is totally pissed off, and an argument between the two starts. The blonde didn't like what her sweetie had just

done either. She turns to me and says, »Sorry, he didn't do it on purpose.« Nothing else came from him. He doesn't realise his mistake. The road we are entering is clear again, he immediately gives it full throttle, and with screeching tyres, he roars off. I can still see the woman tapping him on the right shoulder. They must be having a good time today, I think sarcastically. Maybe she'll leave him after the drive out. I don't know. For me it's fun. I don't care about the middle finger gesture, I don't see that any more. It happens all the time. Don't get too worked up about it. No harm done. I just can't comprehend what people benefit from cutting cyclists off or deliberately overtaking them at too short a distance. Because they know they are the stronger ones? I guess I'll never know.

The whole ride my legs feel great, my lungs also make a very good impression when I push air into the last little bubble.

Arriving home, I take my things out of the jersey pockets. My mobile phone shows me a new message. It's from Timo. While I eat a banana, I read his text: »Hi, Willy. I'm currently training on Mallorca. I won't be back until next week. Nice sports hotel here with lots of cyclists. Splendid groups, great weather. Will be super fit at the start. We'll see us soon. I'll be in touch before then. Best regards. Timo«

Wow, he must be serious about the race, too. Or he's afraid that I'll drive by him this year? I don't think so, but who knows? I'm sure he can be reassured. My performance will definitely be stronger than last year, but I will never be faster than him. Only if he has a flat tyre. But I don't want to win like that. It pisses me off a little that he can train for a whole week. On the other hand, I've heard that it's easy to get over trained. But don't have to care about that. I just concentrate on my own possibilities and trust Eva completely. Speaking of Eva. I could give her a quick call, give her some last feedback before I make myself important in Austria. No sooner said than done. I can't. I only have the number of the shop. But it's the weekend. That's more than stupid. I'll have to wait until Monday and ask her for her private number. Just to exchange updates, of course, I think with a twinkle in my eye, smile and go into the kitchen to cook myself another large portion of pasta.

Today it's very simple with a quickly prepared sauce of garlic, courgettes and prawns in vegetable broth. That's it. And I treat myself to a non-alcoholic wheat beer. That's how a day can end. Finally, I put on a record by SHANNON AND THE CLAMS, called »Onion«. Very interesting music. The band comes from California and plays garage punk in vintage style, psych, surf music from the 60's. Totally ingenious. One song better than the other.

It's time to make a list of what I want to do. I have to pack everything for the race, which is much more routine than last time. Only one more week and then I can finally show what I've got. I forgot about Eva because of all the stress at work. I wanted to call her to get a few more tips. I'll do that right now. Friday afternoon, I'm sure she's still available.

»Eva? Hi, I'm glad I caught you. How are you? Less stress? I wanted to get in touch earlier, but I can't call you on the company number at the weekend. Can you give me your mobile number? Then we'd be more flexible with our calls.«

Before I can continue, she interrupts me: »That's right. I've wanted to do that for a long time, but I've always forgotten. She tells me the series of numbers, which I naturally write down immediately so that I can save them on my phone. Very good.

»It's only one week away. What do you think I should do? I've been training exactly the way you told me to.«

She asks me what I did last weekend before the race. When I tell her about it, she answers: »Okay. Firstly, you let your body regenerate this week. You ride a few short, very short sprints twice more. On the Saturday before race day, only for a maximum of one hour. Here, too, give your legs a short signal that the fun is yet to come by getting your heart rate up with a few hard starts, the rest easy, with a roll in and roll out. Go to bed early. Make sure you warm up before the start. You have to get your body up to operating temperature. You also warm up a car before you give it full throttle so that the engine doesn't get damaged. It's no different with your own motor. Maybe half an hour, test your legs, just get your pulse up for a moment. Then get to the start ... and enjoy.«

»That sounds super. It all seems very logical to me. I've never thought of that before, but it makes total sense. I hope I don't get a flat tyre beforehand.«

»You mustn't think about that. Something can always happen. Even a crash in the crowd. Stay focused and clear your head. You can do that, Willy. I'm counting on you. Don't let me down. After all, I have a reputation to lose here in the company. However, I don't want to put any pressure on you.«

We both laugh. She wishes me good luck and success. »Call me after the race. I will be curious to know how you did.«

I thank her and hang up. It was very nice talking to Eva again. I'll send her a message straight away so that she has my number, too. That's done. There you go.

Timo and I run into each other by chance in the corridors at work during the last week. »Hello, how was your holiday? You've really got some colour. Here it was good weather, too, but there were times when it was raining.«

»Hello. Mallorca is a mecca for road bikes. So many cyclists on the roads. The poor car drivers. There are big groups of rows of two, made up of hobby cyclists like you and me. You have to go there one day.«

»It's expensive though, isn't it? How did it go with the bike?«

»When God distributed the talents for the technically gifted, I was apparently in the first or second row. I can do things myself very well. That's why I take the bike apart, put it in a bike transport case and rebuild it on Mallorca. Of course, at the airport you have to deal with bulky luggage, you have to hope that your bike arrives safely at its destination, but so far it's always been fine.«

»That's good to hear. Then you're certainly perfectly prepared for our fight!«

»Of course. Why don't we meet in Bruck on Saturday, then we can talk longer. I have to go to the next meeting. So I'll see you Saturday at 2 pm for lunch?«

»Sure, let's do it. I have your number just in case. See you on Saturday. Take care.«

On Thursday evening I pack up my things and cross every item off my list that is done. The weather is supposed to be better than last year, but I still take everything with me. From clothes for high summer to deep winter. I'm not nervous yet, that always comes the day before big events. I already experienced that at school before the exams. And my heart really starts pounding at the moment of the starting signal or when the teacher used to say: »From now on, you have one and a half hours for the assignments until they are due«. Time was never enough.

Chapter 19

On Friday, I leave a day early this year. Then it's not so stressful on Saturday with rolling in, final registration at the race office and so on. On the way there I hear the song »Atomic« by BLONDIE on the radio. It became famous again when Danny Boyle made the film, »Trainspotting«, which was released in the cinemas and became a box office hit in 1996. It was based on the novel of the same name by Irvine Welsh. The film, the soundtrack, for many a masterpiece, but the story is indeed pretty broken. I like it nevertheless. The song is catchy. I can't get it out of my ears until I arrive in Bruck, at the road to Glockner. This time I was early enough and got a room right in town, which makes it easier on race day when you have to be at the start so early. The owners are super nice. The bike goes straight from the car into the ski cellar. I'm still one of the first. Let's see how crowded it gets tomorrow evening. A short dinner and small talk with the hotel owners before I fall into bed, where I watch a boring football match on the TV. Appropriately enough, Austria against Germany. But before the end, I switch it off.

The next morning I get up early, have breakfast from the generously set-up buffet, drink a cappuccino for the circulation. Then I notice that the sun is shining outside. I immediately open the weather app. It doesn't look bad. Great today, even up to 20 degrees, tomorrow on race day there's a 50 per cent chance of rain. I take the dry 50 per cent and cheerfully get ready to ride my last unit. Short sprints, just telling my legs that you're not in rest mode yet, but explaining that it's only really going to start tomorrow. Just a little bit of teasing, listening into my body. Despite all the training I've

done in the last week, I already feel a slight burning in my upper thighs. But I'm not worried about that. Tomorrow is important, not today.

After a shower I pick up the documents, the chip for the timekeeping and the promotional products. I immediately put the start number on the handlebars. I wait with the bag for the change of clothes for tomorrow, as I will check the weather forecast more often. It really depends on so many factors that cycling brings with it. It's much nicer to pedal in the sunshine than in the wet. It doesn't have to be sunny, the main thing is dry conditions. The rest is easy to do.

I'm done with everything by 2 pm, except for the bag, which you can still drop off until 8 pm. If you sleep right in Bruck, it's also easier to manage. I sit on a bench in front of the church in the centre, watching the hustle and bustle in front of the square. More and more athletes are gathering, the queue in front of the race office is growing. There are hundreds of bikes that are pushed next to the people. With an inward smile I think that there is something sectarian about it. The guru, here the mountain, is calling. The disciples are all coming to the last judgement.

Timo is a little late. We drive a few kilometres by car to satisfy our hunger, away from the crowd, and have a super view of the valley as we sit on benches set up in front of a hut up in the mountains.

»So, tell me about Mallorca, I'm curious.«

We clink our beer glasses and toast each other. It is of course non-alcoholic wheat beer that has displaced the air from the glass.

»Well. There are sport hotels where almost everything is organised. You book all-inclusive. You only have to pay for lunch and drinks during the rides. The local guides always ride ahead of the group. Never more than eight people. The different strengths of the riders are also taken into account. That works quite well. There is never anyone who feels totally out of place and holds up the whole group. It's just great, even though you don't know a soul at the beginning, it's just a lot of fun. It's like-minded people, all with the same quirk.«

»Sounds really exciting.«

»Yes, I was in the first group, and we covered a whopping 700 kilometres in five days.«

With wide eyes and an incredulous look, I check up on him. »HOW MANY kilometres? Seven hundred in just five days? That's intense!«

»It's all a matter of practice, Willy. If you keep going, you'll get there, maybe next year. It was funny once. I have to tell you all about that in a moment...«

»Who gets the noodles and who the pancakes?« the waitress asks. When everyone has the dish, they ordered placed on the table, Timo continues.

»We were on the road for a while, probably two and a half hours, and we're just coming down the Coll de Sóller, a mountain. On descents, the field often splits up because everyone rides their own line, one is faster, the other slower, or someone doesn't want to let it roll like that. This creates larger gaps. It doesn't matter. I was in the front. We always wait for the others at the bottom. We stop next to the road. On our right is a small finca. We gather at the entrance, which is only gravel and pebbles. The ground was quite overgrown with bushes, looked rather unkempt, or let's say natural. Suddenly a woman comes rushing out and shouts at us in German: "Get out of here! All the cyclists are always pissing on our plot of land. You miserable scumbags, that has to stop." We look at each other and have to suppress our laughter. The location of the plot really does give the masses of cyclists the opportunity to piss there - but we were just waiting for our colleagues and told the woman so. But she didn't believe us and kept on swearing. But you can understand their anger when they pee all over... »

I have to laugh. »The residents near Oktoberfest have the same problem ... that people relieve their bladders in the front gardens when they stagger home. That really doesn't have to be the case. It's just that when you're cycling, you have to look for a spot somewhere that's far and wide, not visible from any side and away from any civilisation. But even then it has already happened to me that in a piece of forest everything seemed free at first, but suddenly a jogger runs along with her dog. Embarrassing. But she only saw the back of me.«

We ate very fast.

»I have to go back now, I haven't picked up my race number yet. I still have to roll in,« says Timo and calls for the waitress. We settle the bill and drive back. »Well, see you tomorrow. We probably

won't see each other at the start, but good luck, come through without crashing, and maybe we'll see each other at the finish line. See you then!«

Now I have time for myself and walk through Bruck, exploring the village a little. From a bird's eye view, you'd think that everyone here is running around as if remote-controlled. The task is to get as many as possible into the smallest possible space, but no one is allowed to touch each other. All directions are allowed. So I continue to marvel at the large mass of the participants. Everyone wants to get back up there tomorrow. All the seats in the adjoining beer gardens and street cafés are occupied until the end of the day. I'm sure there are many newcomers - like me last year. But I'm sure there are also some semiprofessionals at work. After all, the race is for everyone. I stand on the bridge that crosses the river Salzach, take a selfie with my mobile phone, looking downstream, and send it to Eva. I also briefly let her know that everything is under control and that I'm ready for tomorrow. I make my way through the crowds to the hotel, where I quickly gather my bag for a change of clothes. The weather seems to be cooperating. I just put in something dry and a windbreaker so that I don't get cold afterwards. A hat and gloves don't hurt either, as we're at just under 2,700 metres altitude when the race is over. The last descent is also still well in my mind. Shivering must be avoided.

The day passes very quickly. After dinner, where I redeem the voucher for the so-called pasta party, because you eat a lot of carbohydrates from pasta, I go to my room. This night is also going to be short, very short. My phone rings next to the bed. It's Eva with the following text in response to my photo message: »It's beautiful there, apparently the best weather this year. I wish you good luck, let it rip and no pain, no gain! I'm looking forward to the results, and don't forget to warm up. Adios y hasta muy pronto.« Which I think is totally sweet. I understand Spanish a little, although I haven't told her yet that I can certainly keep my head above water in Spanish-speaking countries.

With thoughts of Eva, I try to fall asleep. I keep turning around restlessly. I don't think I'll be able to sleep because of all the excitement. Some things just keep coming back. Impossible to switch it off. But like last year, the alarm clock inevitably rings at five in the morning to pull me out of a deep sleep, which it succeeds in doing. Immediately I open the window. Lo and behold, no rain, but low-hanging wisps of mist. It is fresh, but there is no wind. The road is dry. The sun will surely fight its way through the haze within the next two hours. I keep my fingers crossed. Breakfast is provided starting at five thirty. This is always a great service from the accommodations that host all the participants. Today, too, only a bread roll with jam and a coffee go down. Nervousness and adrenaline must be fighting for dominance in my body. The music is playing at full blast outside and must be waking up all the people in the town who actually want to sleep in, as it is Sunday.

At just after six o'clock I sit on my road bike, after having laboriously dug it out of the totally overcrowded ski cellar. Of course, it was at the very back as I was one of the first to put it in. You're not allowed to knock over or scratch a bike. Even touching it can be a punishable offence if you encounter an issue.

I roll myself in. Yesterday I already chose a straight route for this, which lies right near the starting point. It's great for short sprints. The temperature shows eleven degrees, roads are absolutely dry and it doesn't look like rain. I get up to speed. After a short while I can feel the sheer force in my thighs as they try to bend the bike frame. My pulse jumps up, but quickly calms down as soon as the strain stops. It feels good, even though I have no comparison to last year, as the conditions were completely different and the warm-up was more like a cold ride in the rain, by force. But I hope that my feeling will not play tricks on me and that I will not be disappointed at the start. Of course I have a certain expectation. I slowly fight my way back through the masses towards my starting block. There are already many people around. As I'm warmed up, my cycling goggles immediately mist up when I get in line and stop. It is still very cool in the morning. The fog slowly lifts. The first rays of sunlight shyly peek out over the high mountain peaks. Just like last year, most of the athletes are wearing shorts and let their clean-shaven legs shine. A few of them have goose bumps this year, some of which look like when you beat a cutlet with a very fine meat tenderiser and the surface is full of dots, tiny dents.

My heart rate is well above normal resting pulse. The adrenalin gains the upper hand. The music is still loud back where I am standing. I drink from my bottle. The start time is getting closer, you can

tell that by the other participants as well. The pack becomes more agile, also because the moderator now reminds them every five minutes that it's about to start. Everyone is getting restless. Suddenly, movement comes into play. Further ahead, I see that the barriers that had been erected between the different groups of the starting field are being pulled out. Immediately the jostling starts. The front runners of group three immediately try to scurry forward a few centimetres so that they feel like they are starting in group two. It's funny, because the start time of each individual only begins when they cross the mat at the very front. So why the panic? The speaker calls the masses to the countdown.

10 - 9 - 8 - 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - Shot!

Chapter 20

Finally, the time has come. The familiar sound of thousands of highly motivated people clicking their shoes onto the pedal is heard. One person takes the left foot, the other the right. Everyone has their own preferences and experiences when riding with clipless pedals. I am one who always clicks my left foot in and out when I have to stop. If I wanted to use the other one, I'd have to really concentrate not to fall over - like on my very first try. Okay, now just focus on myself again as well as on the people right around me. Up to the mat at the very front, it's rather turtle-like progress with gentle stop-and-go. But when we cross the timing line, the punk really takes off. The beautiful weather makes it even more fierce. The roads are dry, you don't have to be so careful when braking. It goes quickly under the railway tracks, where the rolling field has to briefly drift apart into two parts, as an additional bridge pier has been erected in the middle. The speed is high - around forty kilometres per hour. It only goes slightly upwards. My pulse is surprisingly far from the red zone. Not to be compared with the year before. I can keep up well this year. But it's criss-cross again. Changing drivers from one side to the other without thinking. In a crowd it would be better to keep going and hold their line to avoid falling. The speed is horrendous, the houses just fly past me. Now we are on a flat hilltop. I can look over the field of riders and see the road in front of me. Images of road cyclists are processed by my retina as figures that seem to connect directly with the head and back without a neck. Viewed from behind: the typical posture when sitting on a bike.

Gaps are opening up. The reason is that the wind is now coming from the right in front. Some can no longer keep the slipstream of the man in front. It is getting more difficult. I feel good, I keep going to the front. Around me, some seem to have already overestimated themselves, because just like me last year, many are running out of steam, they can no longer maintain the power and inevitably have to take their foot off the gas. They are being passed to the back. But suddenly I'm in the wind myself. The group in front of me is already unreachable far away. Alone, I have no chance of closing the gap. I also have to slow down and wait for others to pass me so that I can take advantage of their slipstream and thus save a lot of energy. Somewhere up ahead, Timo is probably trying to stay in the pack. The current section reminds me very well of last year. We pass through the village of Fusch, where there are lane dividers that become a problem. There is shouting, braking, the peloton splits up, then I have to pedal extremely hard to keep up. But nothing compares to last year, when it rained, the road was wet and I couldn't see much through my glasses because dirt and water on the lenses blocked my view. The brakes are also much better. In general I feel safer overall. I'm getting really warm now. I have chosen a pair of thin, long trousers, a long-sleeved jersey, and underneath a baselayer, as it is called, a breathable vest that absorbs moisture from the body and transports it away at the same time. My skin stays dry at best. But maybe the long trousers are too much? We pass the Embach Chapel, which marks the entrance for hikers into the Baerenschlucht (canyon of bears) and for us cyclists the beginning of the first climb to Ferleiten, the tollgate. Shortly afterwards, I hear the resounding and seemingly endless clacking of the downshift to the small ring at the front of each bike. Already here, a few drivers are forced to stop. I have to drive around them. They have mis-shifted, or the gears are not set correctly so that their chains have jumped off. Before a race like this, which for most participants is not only about having fun but also about setting a personal best

time, you make sure that everything is in top condition mechanically. Okay, I lost my glasses last year, too, and for the first time I'm happy to say that I'm in noticeably better physical condition. Eva's training is paying off, I can keep the pressure on the pedals very well.

The racing action is repeated much clearer. The climb mercilessly shows us its power every year. The distances between the riders increase, the danger of falling is over. I breathe a sigh of relief. I see the sun in the distance, which colours the front mountain peaks golden, as the fog has also lifted. There are more spectators on the side of the road this year, cheering us on, even though most of them don't know anyone. It's a great feeling. The residents of the region support this race out of conviction. I keep my glasses on as long as they don't mist up, because there is still wind. I don't want to make the same mistake as last year and lose my glasses.

The gallery is passed through quickly. We leave the pillars on the side of the slope behind us one by one. I unzip my jacket, sweat, drink for the first time from my bottle, which I didn't fill completely this time for reasons of saving weight. Every gram you don't have to carry uphill becomes noticeable over time. At least I hope so. That's why I didn't take my phone with me. I feel really good, my pulse is at a tolerable level, my breathing is deep and calm, and my heartbeat is good. My legs have not burnt sour once so far.

The first metres of altitude come to an end. We reach the last bend for the time being. We speed up, because no one wants to lose time on the following flat stretch to the tollgate. Unfortunately, I see many empty packaging lying on the road, wrappers of gels and bars. Many of us are now getting some more energy, because in the hard and unrelenting climb up to the Fuscher Toerl, the final destination, leaves hardly any time for that. But why do they all just throw their rubbish on the road? It shouldn't be because of additional weight, because a wrapper like that doesn't really weigh much. It should be forbidden. I also take a gel, but put the wrapper back in my jersey pocket. On top of that, we're riding through a nature reserve! It's not about anything big. The prize money is low. We hobby cyclists even pay to be allowed to toil and suffer. Racing cyclists are crazy people. A quick suck on the bottle and full speed ahead through the checkout, split time measurement.

The following ramp is, as the year before, scary. What's more, I now know that from here on there will be no more flat stretches, except for the few metres further up as you go through the hairpin bends, of which there are fourteen. Last time I learned that I shouldn't overdo it now, but rather take it a bit slower. My plan is to keep a constant double-digit pace. But I quickly realise that this plan will not succeed at all. Unless I accept that I will always be in the red zone. But then I will never reach the top. I soon ignore my own guidelines and listen to my body, which Eva also strongly recommended.

The road continues to wind its way upwards. At every change of direction I can briefly look down, marvelling at the moving masses. How many crazy people there are in this sport. The whole crowd of colourful jerseys must be seen from above as if a giant is pulling a very long and colourful friendship ribbon slowly upwards from the start to the finish. A shot from a drone's point of view would be interesting now. The road spirals on and on towards the top of the pass. I pass the place where the organisers hand out cups with drinks, which I simply ignore and continue. A stop would take me out of my rhythm, besides, I don't need anything warm in my mouth today, I'm in good spirits and keep looking uphill as soon as I can make out the sections ahead. I often wish I were already further up. I am overtaken by women. I am overtaken by men. But now the time has come when people have found each other - cyclists who are on the same level in terms of strength and endurance. Sometimes one passes, but doesn't really get away, sometimes the other. It's a back-and-forth, comparable to a traffic jam on the motorway followed by stop-and-go, where you think it's faster on the right, then on the left again, and no matter what you do, over a long period of time. This constant change does not bring any time advantage.

No one is talking to anyone, everyone is just focused on their legs, looking ahead.

My upper legs are now very tired. But I still have five kilometres to go and want to drink at a bend, but I notice that my bottle is empty. Shit! On the other hand, it's getting much cooler and I hope to be able to complete the rest of the route without water. Bit by bit I close my jacket because the wind comes from the front. With every change of direction, it becomes easier or harder for a few metres, depending on whether the wind is pushing you or slowing you down. Now I'm also glad about my

long trousers, because I hate cold thighs. But most cyclists ride with bibshorts that don't keep out the cold draught. Maybe I'm a wimp.

Now the tree-free zone begins. As I have learned, we now drive through the so-called Hexenkueche, witches' kitchen, where strangely shaped stone formations can be seen in a large field. According to Salzburgwiki.at, a four-metre-long slave chain was found here at a bend during the construction of the Glockner Road, which was attached to the necks of convicts during transport and thus chained one after the other. In this way, no one could escape. They were probably forced labourers who were driven over the Alps. Then they were sent to Venice for galley punishment. And we torture ourselves up there voluntarily...

I feel that I am drying out. I'm thirsty, my lips are completely dry, on the one hand from the wind, and on the other hand the bottle has been empty for a few kilometres. Fortunately, fighting marmots in the distance take my mind off things. The animals have something cute about them. While I'm trying to curb the craving for water, I luckily come to the spot from where you can hear the finish. The last bend is approaching. This motivates me once more, I increase the power on each pedal. The cadence is higher, the speed rises to over ten kilometres per hour. Yeah! Unfortunately, my pulse explodes too.

But what's going on now? Suddenly I feel a twitch on the inner side of my right thigh, one of the adductors, it seems to me. This twitch immediately makes me slow down. »Damn it!« I scream. This is a sign of an incipient cramp, and when a cramp strikes it's all over. Then I can stop. It hurts a lot as it is. I know this from my youth when I was running. You can hardly correct it yourself and certainly not while cycling. It pulls immensely. Even without the pain I'm already at the end of my tether and could throw up. My head moves upwards, looking towards the long-awaited finish. In order not to fall over on the incline, I have to pedal out of round, i.e. keep the load on my left leg only and relieve it almost completely on the right. That is more than annoying. Just to save a bit of weight, I make the mistake of filling the bottle only half full and now my muscles are sore because of too little fluid. Oh gosh! I could slap myself. I hate myself for it, because by now I have enough experience in road cycling. The fact that I made such a grave mistake is unforgivable and annoys me deeply, but I can't change anything at the moment. Luckily it only happened now, I'm almost at the finish. In the end, I manage to successfully ward off the cramp, only I no longer trust myself to make a final spurt. It twitches every time I pull on my right leg. Until I cross the finish line, there is only a little push on the right leg. I have to really pull on the upper handlebar, the muscular disbalance I try to compensate with my upper body and trust my left leg completely. During the last three hundred metres to the finish, I pass a cyclist pushing his sports equipment. He is limping with a pain-distorted face, one leg completely stiff. He's had an extreme cramp. It could have happened to me. It will be a lesson to me.

Completely exhausted, mouth wide open, gasping for air, I cross the finish line at the Fuscher Toerl. I made it!

I have no idea what my finishing time is. I'm just overjoyed to have finished the race for the second time without crashing. The finisher's medal hangs around my neck as I push my bike to the area where the bags with the changing clothes are stored. I quickly find my number and change - wet and sweaty as I am. It's only zero degrees up here. I slip into something dry, put on my hat and gloves, because the descent will be cold again. This year I also had a gel and a drink brought up. Finally I can drink and quench my thirst. The bottle is emptied immediately, what a relief. My eyes search for Timo, but don't find him. It was probably too cold for him to wait and he has already gone down...

My rucksack, which I have stowed in the plastic bag, is hanging on my back and I move away from the crowd. Shortly before the Edelweiss Spitze, an extra peak, there is a large car park below it. The organisers hand out free of charge the Austrian speciality called »Kaiserschmarrn«. This sweet pastry is a brilliant idea. I get myself a bowl full. Then suddenly I hear Timo calling from behind.

»Hi Willy! You're here already? That can only mean a super time. I think I've also set a personal best.«

»Hi, yes, it went better than last year. It was dry, too. But I was cramping at the end, my water bottle was empty too quickly and I didn't have anything left to keep my water balance up.«

»Yes, it can happen. You'll know next time. I learn every time, too.«

»And what I'm noticing or not noticing right now is that my knees aren't causing any problems. So I'm more physically up to it than last year, the bike seems to fit perfectly.«

»Great, let's meet downstairs again for a late lunch. Same place as last year? Looking forward to my result.« We dispose of our Schmarrn cardboard bowls, roll back to the road of Glockner, and off we go down. We quickly lose sight of each other, as now it's busier and the crowds are gathering. I calmly ride my line at my own speed. The descent is nothing like last year's, although it is similarly cold up here. But when you're dry, you don't get cold. I shiver a little, but my teeth only chatter as long as the vibration alarm on my phone signals a message. Then it's downhill very quickly. Every metre I come towards the cash desk makes me feel the temperature rising. I let it run and come back to the place where drinks are served. Here I have two cups before I lie on the side of the road like a lizard in the desert, completely dehydrated. That feels very good. I continue with momentum.

Suddenly I feel a change in my bike's behaviour. Somehow spongy at the back. It goes back and forth a little. I brake and notice that air is escaping from the tyre. Oh no, a slow flat tyre. »Damn it!« I curse. I didn't need that now. I haven't reached the cash point yet. Luckily I have a small pump on my frame and a spare inner tube. Swearing is useless ... work is calling. Take out the rear wheel, lever out the tyre casing, replace the inner tube. While I'm pumping up, another rider appears next to me. He has the same problem: a flat tyre.

»Luckily not at the race, right?« he says. »Exactly,« I agree with him, »that's what I mean when I always say you can be totally upset now, or you can see it positively. I'm with you.«

The job of changing the hose is done, my arm muscles are tired from pumping. As I am adjusting the rear wheel and have installed it, another one with a flat tyre joins us.

»It's almost tragic,« he says when he sees us and also starts to change the hose, »it's no coincidence. I'm sure a glass bottle or something like that shattered on the street when they were serving drinks. They've cleaned it up, but maybe there are still tiny pieces of glass lying around.«

That may really be the explanation. Anyway, I'm done, wish the boys a safe journey home, and I'm off. Passing the checkout from the other direction is fun. I stop for a moment, it has become too warm. I take off my cap under my helmet, put it in my rucksack with my gloves, open my jacket a bit at the front of my neck to let some air in. As I swing myself back onto the saddle, I feel again that the rear tyre is losing air. I stop in disbelief. That can't be! A new tube and flat for the second time! Cursing, I also realise that I don't have a spare tube anymore and briefly think about what to do. The air is obviously coming out slowly, maybe the valve of the replacement hose is leaking. It's been in the saddle bag for over a year. So my solution is to pump it up, which is difficult with the small frame pump because the pumping distance is not very long. Ride on until the tyre is flat and pump it up again. The game goes on like this until, after five more stops, I finally arrive at the hotel in Bruck. It took me over an hour longer to get there, and I'm sure I'll get sore muscles from all the pumping. What a day.

Back in the room, I send a quick message to Eva that I'm back safe and sound. There is more later. But it still works out so that Timo and I can meet for lunch. Then we go to the race office where the times are posted. I hand in the chip first. Back at the entrance, Timo is already grinning.

»Cool thing. You beat your time from last year. One hour and forty-seven minutes, wow! Congratulations! You've been training hard, haven't you?«

»Sure. What about your time?«

»One hour and forty-two minutes. That's only a five-minute difference, but for me it means that next year I am allowed to start from the first starting group. But how did you manage to do that in one year?«

»A decisive factor is the new road bike, and I also rode a lot more than last year. After all, I knew what I was in for.«

I don't tell him about my coach just yet, nor about the training plan I've implemented so far. This time we don't skip the award ceremony in the centre of Bruck. There are many honours. Every age group, men, women, youth. The trophies look really good, but I will never take one home - when I hear the times of victory. There are worlds between them. But a trophy is neither my goal nor my motivation. My motivation is to race past Timo at the Fuschler Toerl. The gap has become much smaller. It's becoming more realistic to reach my goal. But five minutes on the mountain is half an

eternity. What would have been possible if I had had more to drink and thus prevented my cramp? In any case, it was an amazing day with great weather. The problem with the rear wheel on the way back was quickly forgotten. Everything is super, everything is good. My mobile phone vibrates. Eva contacted me and congratulated me on my success.

»Super time!« she writes. And she continues: »I can already see the finish time on the internet. I took the liberty of looking it up right away.« She placed a smiley face behind it. I'll call her as soon as I get home.

Chapter 21

After a long drive with lots of traffic, I arrive home satisfied, unload the car, eat a snack and set about repairing the rear wheel. At home I always have two more tubes in reserve in the cellar. So I take my time to lift out the casing and remove the tube. Now I want to know exactly what's going on and I pour water into the sink, pump up the broken tyre and slowly pull it through the water. Let's see where air bubbles form. It's obviously not the valve. Centimetre by centimetre I push it through the water. Suddenly, very subtly, I recognise bubbles on the opposite side of the valve. Now I've got you! That can only mean one thing: the small splinter that killed the first tube is still in the casing. I put a completely new one in the rear wheel, but before that I check the casing and remove the culprit. Not so easy, because I can't see anything. I don't want to slide my fingers through the inside of the rubber. Otherwise I'll tear my fingers open. I get myself some gloves, tight so that the glass doesn't pierce right through, slip the whole coat off all around and hope that I've got the part. I can't see anything from the outside either, the evil thing is too small. Well, I guess I'll have to give it a try. To do this, I mount the new tube over the rim, pull the jacket back, pump up the inner tube. This time, of course, with a good floor pump and not with the emergency solution from the bike. It's much quicker. So far it fits. It looks good. But that's how it was in Austria. I leave the rear wheel like that and just hang the bike in the cellar. Now all I can do is wait. With the gesture of a praying man, I fold my hands in front of my chest, just like in yoga at the end - Namaste. Shortly afterwards I open a bottle of non-alcoholic wheat beer, pour myself a glass full, sit down on the sofa, put my legs up, grab my mobile phone and tap on Eva's number in my contacts. It rings only a few times, then she answers.

»Hi Willy!« she shouts in my ear as a greeting. »I can't tell you how pleased I am that you cut so well. That's a killer time! Congratulations!«

»Hi, muchas gracias. The weather was a dream. Sure, it was cold up there, but nothing to compare with last year's conditions. My form was phenomenal, thanks to you, your training and your advice.«

You speak Spanish?« she says enthusiastically. »I didn't know that at all. You never mentioned it, wow!«

»Well, being able is something else, I get by like this. I won't starve in Spain, I would say. You wrote something in Spanish in one of the last messages. I thought you knew. But then I wondered, because how would you know? After all, I hadn't told you.« I laugh.

»But back to the race ... it was fantastic. My legs have never felt so good, so refreshed, but at the same time so agile, so powerful. And from the start it was full throttle, just like last year. Nevertheless, I was able to keep up; it was almost even easy to keep up, without scratching the red zone. Unbelievable what a difference a targeted training can make. Then, of course, it was cold at the top and ... I have to confess it now ... I only filled my bottle halfway due to weight reduction. Then I ran out of water at the top and had to slow down because I was cramping. Totally annoying. But I learned something again: don't cut corners. In general, I can still learn a lot about food and drink. «

Eva says she also still has deficits in this respect. »But that is a science in itself. It's clear that drinking should never be underestimated. Now you know.«

»Yep,« I agree with her. »And then ... on the descent I got a flat tyre. I changed the tube, but the air came out again. I had to stop several times, pump, stop, pump - until I got to the hotel. On top of

that there were the too-warm clothes down in the valley. Pumping in the sun with the small, unwieldy frame pump, sweating and nothing to drink - life could have been easier during that time. I was very frustrated.«

»Better after the race than something like this happening to you during the race, right?«

»You're right, that's what I thought. Speaking of which, I fixed the rear wheel and now I am waiting to see if the air comes out again. The valve didn't do it. I hope that I was able to remove the splinter, or whatever it was, from the coat, although I didn't notice that I had caught anything. I'm going down to the bike in the basement and I'll give you a lift.

I grab the mobile phone and walk down the stairs with Eva at my ear. I hear her sneeze in the background.

»Bless ya', salud,« I say as I examine the tyre.

»Gracias, Willy. And ... air still in?«

»Yes,« I say with great relief. »Great! Listen ... I have to ask you something... do we want to meet for dinner or in a beer garden sometime? Or maybe go for a ride together, then to the beer garden? My bike is in working order again, so am I, and you? What'd you think?«

»Good idea, Willy. Could come from me.« She laughs. »How about next weekend? I can't make it during the week. Too busy in the shop. As you know yourself, most of the customers don't come until the end of the day. That's when things get busy. Shall I keep Saturday free? And we'll meet... where?«

»Cool! Saturday sounds great, the weather should fit. I think we'll decide spontaneously on Friday how, what and where, what do you think? Of course I can go to your place, bring my bike and we'll go for a ride near you. I'm sure there are restaurants in your surroundings as well.«

»Yes, good idea, could also be mine.« She laughs again. »You just get in touch. I'm looking forward to it. I think we have a lot to talk about.«

»The pleasure is all mine. I'll be in touch. Have a good Sunday, and see you soon. Take care!«

»Take care, and until next week, adios!«

She hangs up, or rather she clicks me away. I really asked her! How cool is that? And she said yes. At the moment I am really to be envied, I think - with a mischievous smile on my face.

The next day my body actually remembers the race, because I have sore muscles. All the air pumping was too unfamiliar; too much for my arms.

The following days I give my battered body some rest and only ride once more - after work. In the meantime, two days have passed, and it's another two days until Saturday. With this day in mind, I am »on the road« again and ride rather loosely for a good two hours. A few hills stand in my way. You can ride them hard and try to smooth them out, so to speak, by hardly reducing your speed, but giving your pulse a boost, or, as I am currently doing, let the hill be a hill and not challenge your pulse.

Cycling in summer is simply fun. The sun is still high in the sky in the evening. It stays warm for a long time. I let myself be caressed by the warm wind. Some insects bounce against my helmet, others unexpectedly hit my bent-over upper body, fall onto my upper thigh, only to be kicked upwards again by the pedaling motion, where they finally leave my sphere. I hope they only shake for a moment and pick themselves up. Many bugs cross from right to left. So far, almost none of them are on me, because I avoid them as if they were dangerous glass shards.

Then suddenly I have an encounter with a bumblebee. It flies just past my face, disappears, reappears a short time later on my right side, flying directly over the right edge strip in such a way that I can see it clearly. Absolutely parallel. It is almost as if it wants to tell me something. We move forward at the same speed. I look at her, it continues to fly straight ahead, unperturbed. I look ahead again, then at my speedometer. It shows thirty kilometres per hour. I look to my right and the bumblebee is still there. This goes on for quite a while, what a crazy situation. At the last glance, it seems to me as if it is lifting its left leg to say goodbye. At the same time, the bumblebee makes a right turn, like in a jet manoeuvre, the insect turns off and is gone. So it is scientifically proven that bumblebees fly at thirty kilometres per hour and are friendly creatures.

Fifteen kilometres from home, on the last gentle descent from a hill, I let it roll, pedaling easily without putting any power on the pedals to loosen up my legs, my hands on the lower handlebars. I

feel the headwind as it first clings to my face and body and then let's go again. From behind comes a car at high speed. It's either a small lorry or a car with thick tyres. By now I can hear that from the sound. The vehicle is approaching rapidly, it is a lowered racer with correspondingly fat tyres, just before the border of legality. I recognise it immediately when I glance over, I knew it! As I turn my bespectacled eyes forward, the vehicle slows down and slows down until it reaches my speed. Out of the corner of my eye I see the passenger's window go down, the distance to me is borderline. I frown. What does this guy want from me? Have I done something wrong? Am I going to get a telling off? I am not aware of being guilty of anything. At the same moment, the young guy shouts out of the open window. Not a word or a sentence, just a scream, but at such a high decibel level that it could wake the dead. I get a terrible fright, wrench the handlebars, wobble around, but immediately have my bike back under control. I look to my left, directly into a laughing face. The driver is also having fun, as if someone had just told a good joke, he accelerates and continues, of course with squealing tyres. The passenger leans out of the window once more, looks back at me, lifts his arm out of the car and makes a movement that is probably meant to tell me that that was the best joke of his young life. What a bunch of nutcases, I think. I'm almost torn apart with shock, and I look at my computer. It shows a good forty kilometres per hour. At such a speed a crash is not healthy. Of course, I couldn't remember the car's registration number. And - what would a report have brought? Nothing but trouble with no relevant result. So let's forget it. But it's interesting what's on the roads...

Once home, I go about my usual routine. Shower, eat, drink and lie on the sofa. What would I be without my sofa? Before that, I put on another record. This time the band NEON WALTZ from Scotland. »Strange Hymns« is the name of this good piece. Super newcomer. The songs »Bring Me to Light«, »Dreamers« and »Folklore« are only a small excerpt from what is offered on the record. Unbelievable what interesting new music is being written these days.

Chapter 22

I use the next few days for grocery shopping and cleaning the flat. After that, as agreed, I call Eva. Luckily it's Friday evening and tomorrow is the date! Excitedly, I tap the number on the display. The connection is established. The tension builds. I wait. After a few rings, she answers.

»Hello Willy, great that you called. Perfect timing. I'm on a break.«

»Glad to hear it. How are you? I hope fine, because we were supposed to meet tomorrow for a ride together. Does it still work for you?«

»Sure, a deal is a deal. I would suggest you come to the restaurant »Alter Wirt« near me at twelve o'clock. It's a good place to park. I'll come straight there, we'll go for a ride and then enjoy a cool cerveza in the adjacent beer garden. What do you say?«

»Top, I can see that someone has already given it some thought. Perfect. Let's do it. I always ride past the »Alter Wirt« when I come to the Bikefit for testing. All right.«

»Exactly! And give me a chance tomorrow, too. Now I've bred you up like a show horse, I can't keep up.«

I see her broad smile right in front of my inner eye.

»Don't worry. I'll just give you slipstream if you like. You set the pace. So I'll see you tomorrow, okay? I'm looking forward to it.«

»Yes, all right, see you tomorrow. I'm looking forward too. Ciao.«

»Ciao, see you tomorrow.«

We hang up. With a good feeling I go to bed and read a book. Currently in progress is the work by JOHN NIVEN »Second Coming«. Totally crazy and funny. Jesus comes to earth again, wants to bring people to their senses.

Chapter 23

Finally Saturday is here; it's taken long enough. The excitement is rising. I slept late and had breakfast with my own mixture of various mueslis and other healthy ingredients, including blueberries. I enjoy a cappuccino with it, what more could you want? My things are packed, I changed and it's time to put the bike in the car and ride to the meeting point. After all, I want to make a good impression. I can't keep her waiting. Eva must have thought so too, because she is already standing in the car park with her road bike, ready to go.

She looks breathtaking! The sight of her tight cycling outfit leaves nothing to be desired. Top figure, flat stomach, firm buttocks, which are enhanced by the padded trousers. For the first time I notice her breasts, which certainly seem a little squashed in the jersey, but are nevertheless a feast for the eyes.

I have to be careful not to stare too much at them, her overall appearance is simply a hit. I park the car, walk over to her, we hug in greeting.

»Hello Eva, good to see you. You look stunning. Cycling clothes look very nice on you.«

»Hi Willy, everything alright? Thanks for the flowers. I really can't hide anything in this outfit.«

»Hiding would also be a sin with you, you are a woman who always looks good no matter what you slip into, sweatpants or gala dress.«

»That's for you to decide. I feel comfortable in anything if I like it.«

I quickly get ready to leave. Since Eva is the one who knows the place, she rides ahead and I ride behind her at a short distance. I must say, it's a lovely sight, I like it very, very much; the way her hips move, the way her calves form and muscle strands develop, depending on whether the movement of her feet is straight down or up. Very quickly we leave the main road and turn onto a farm road, without traffic, absolutely quiet. We are alone, now riding side by side and immediately start rattling.

»You have nice athletic calves,« I tell her, which is nothing new for her.

She laughs. »Sure, you've been able to look me up and down from behind now, and yes, I like them, too. I do a lot of sport regularly and keep myself fit. «

»You can see that from head to toe. I like what I see.« My grin hardly knows where to end. We have to be careful not to touch our bikes or hit a pothole. The road gets a little worse. Other drivers are coming towards us. That stifles our conversation for a while. I accelerate and pull on ahead of Eva. This gives me space for the oncoming traffic and can give Eva wind shade. Now she also has the opportunity to look me over from top to bottom. I feel her scrutinising eyes and hope she likes what she sees. She can look at me forever. We pass through the woods. Then the path widens, with a better surface. We take the opportunity to continue talking while we pick up speed at the same time.

»You're doing well,« I tell her, and she really is. We ride at a good pace, but we can easily talk to each other. I'm sure Eva trains more than she told me.

»Sure, it's summer, so I'm usually fit. I use every free minute for sports. Unfortunately, I don't have as much time to train as you do right now. It's still a lot of fun to be out in nature though.«

»Absolutely my opinion. I would still keep cycling even if I wasn't at that level now.«

»Willy, I have to admit that I really like your well-trained buttocks and your calves with the strands of muscle. A real feast for the eyes!«

I laugh. »Thanks, then we can both like each other at least from behind.« The joke is on. Even our grins are like a competition. We make good progress. After many turns, for me in totally unknown surroundings, we abruptly turn left. It's a super network of back roads that we get under our tyres. It gets hilly. In a very gentlemanly way, I mostly do the slipstream. Another climb begins. Suddenly I see Eva darting out of the blind spot, whizzing past me at full throttle and setting off at a sprint from the slipstream. A very nasty trick, I think, grin and chase after her. I have to do everything I can to catch her just before the crest so that we cross the imaginary finish line at the same time, like in a photo finish.

»Wow, what's going on?« I ask, completely out of breath. »You're really in a great mood!«

»Just wanted to show you where the rubber meets the road. But you reacted well.« Eva is becoming more and more likeable, with her whole manner, her humour, her accent, her look, the way she presents herself. I starting to rave about her again.

We take it easy and take turns to slipstream. After a good two hours of speeding through the suburbs, we arrive back at the car park of the »Alter Wirt«. We head for the beer garden, which is sparsely occupied despite the beautiful weather. We park our bikes within sight, hang our helmets on the handlebars and sit down on a beer bench.

»It was an amazing tour,« I say. »Great roads, hardly any traffic. You live in a beautiful area. It was really fun with you!«

»I can only return the compliment. I was a little afraid that we wouldn't harmonise when riding and that I'd just be lagging behind you. However, that way the fun was also on my side.«

As usual, the menu is already on the table. Eva grabs it and scans the menu with her eyes. A moment later, the waiter appears.

»Hello you two, what can I get you to drink?«

I give a sign that Eva should order first.

»An apple juice spritzer for me, please.«

»And a non-alcoholic wheat beer for me,« I say, and immediately to Eva: »I invite you today, if that's okay for you.«

»Thank you very much. I'm glad you said it right away, now I can choose the most expensive dish.« She almost bursts out laughing. It's so infectious that I have to laugh along with her. The waitress brings us our drinks, asks if we want something to eat, which we confirm and place our order. As soon as that's done, Eva pulls her cycling glasses up over her forehead onto her hair and lets them sit casually on her head like a model. Unconsciously, or perhaps consciously, she pulls up her tight jersey a little. I can see her cleavage more than clearly. Wicked Eva, I think with pleasure and ask:

»What kind of sports do you do? You're really fit. I don't think it's just cycling.«

»I try to do as many different things as possible. Mountain bike, road bike ... I also go to the gym regularly, but more during the winter. I do strength and core training there. I also try to do yoga once a week, either alone at home or in a group. Or run from time to time. «

»Interesting combination. I think that's awesome. I'm also trying to find a balance to road cycling, but so far it's just a little core training once a week. Maybe I'll find something else. It's definitely not Yoga, I tried that once, but it doesn't suit me.«

»Yes, you have to try a lot to find the right thing. There is lots out there to pick from.«

»I prefer to be out in nature, you know? Cyclists are nature people. They love to be outside. I even dodge bugs that crawl across the roads.« I say the latter jokingly, but I mean it. Because I'm interested in her opinion, I continue: »I've already had discussions with mountain bikers. When I brought up the subject of nature as a racing cyclist, they argued that we are constantly exposed to all the cars, motorbikes, noise and exhaust fumes. Where is nature then? The MTB riders are more in nature. I said that you could see it that way, but that MTB riders mostly destroy their beloved nature when they ride off-road and create new trails, in the forests as well as in the mountains. The downhill riders build real aisles between the trees. That is counterproductive. I'd rather ride on roads«.

»I can understand the discussion, very well,« Eva agrees. »But one could also counter-argue that the roads also destroy nature, right?«

»True, but the roads are already there and I'm not destroying any new nature, at most if I go to the edge. « I joke and laugh to lighten up the dry subject.

»You're right, of course, I didn't see it that way before. But I usually ride on hiking trails or paved paths anyway.« She grins.

»However, I am more interested in learning more about you...«, I say, »where are you originally from, how long have you been in Germany? Your German is very good. You can actually only hear the sweet accent.«

»Thank you for the compliment. I always think I speak without an accent.« She laughs. A pleasant laugh, I notice again. Not annoying or too loud, not to be ashamed like some others.

»I've been in Germany for about ten years. I had German lessons in Spain while I was studying to become a sports scientist. Then the financial crisis came. There was no possibility for us young people to find a job. So I went to Germany more out of necessity, left my family behind in Spain and tried my luck here. It wasn't easy at the beginning.«

»I can imagine, alone in a foreign country and without knowing anyone. At least you had fewer language barriers to overcome.«

»Yes, I was accepted very quickly and nicely, which really made things easier for me. But after seven years I moved from northern Germany to the south, where I got a good job offer, which really interested me. That's what I'm still doing now ... and then we met,« she says cheerfully, smiling and winking at me with the last words. I return her smile, but can't top it.

»Nice story,« I admit and ask curiously: »What region are you from? Where does your family live? I was in Cádiz once and did a language course there.«

»Really? Cadiz is super beautiful. I'm from Sevilla.«

»I know it. It's not that far away. I was even there once during my stay. It's really hot there. We had a weekend trip there once. Very nice old town. Your cathedral is huge, I've never been in such a big place of worship.«

»I can only confirm this. I try to visit my family once a year. I miss them a lot because I am a family person. However we are in touch very often.«

The food is served and we dive right into it. After the drive we are really hungry and recharge our batteries. The conversation comes to a standstill. I raise my glass, interrupt my shoveling and turn to Eva: »Cheers, salud! Thank you for the ride today. I'm really glad that we get to see each other privately and talk about things that don't necessarily have anything to do with cycling.«

»Salud. My pleasure.« The plates are licked clean, the cutlery is placed on the empty plates. The table is cleared. Suddenly it gets louder and the people to our left stand up. A cart is rolled through the beer garden. Perhaps in preparation for the summer festival that the location is advertising at the entrance? I get up, too, because my bench has to give way as well, and sit down next to Eva, very close.

»Willy, what do you actually do for a living?« she asks.

»I'm in marketing at a company that sells sportswear.«

»That sounds interesting, so we both work in the sports industry, I think that's perfect.«

»It's an interesting topic, definitely. Listen ... a stupid question ... just when I happen to compare our legs ... it occurs to me that most racing cyclists shave their legs. You women do it anyway. Look at my wool.« I deliberately slap my right outer thigh against her left. »What do you think, should I shave my legs, too? Will that do anything?«

Eva laughs and tickles my leg hair a little with her index finger. »I don't have a problem with it,« she says and winks at me again. »I even think it's sexy, even on men when they're doing sports. What's the point of shaving? For the pros, it's easier when massaging after the stages. Bare legs also dry off faster if you get caught in a rain shower. It even helps the doctors because it's easier to treat a fall. It's supposed to make you a little bit faster, although it's certainly not noticeable here.«

»Cool. I guess I'll do it then, because I'd like to know what shaved legs feel like. When we meet again, I presumptuously assume that, my legs will be as clean-shaven as yours.«

»A promise is a promise! You can let your hair grow back if you don't like it.«

The conversation stalls again. Then she takes heart, looks me so deeply in the eyes that I almost lose my breath, and asks: »What is actually the reason for the targeted training? Why am I allowed to torture you like this?«

Good question, I have to admit, and confide in her my secret. »After the first race I was very bent because I was so much slower than one of my colleagues. His name is Timo and he is three years younger than me. So I set myself the goal, no matter how long it would take ... to beat him in the »King of Glockner« race. That's why I'm so motivated to go through with it. It really pays off, as you can see.«

»That's really a goal to work towards for once. Excellent. Now I'm initiated and in the Inner Circle too, eh?« Eva smiles. I can see her white teeth clearly. »You can do it! You're on a good path. I'll help you where I can.«

»I appreciate that very much, thank you.«

When I paid the bill, we both get up and stroll to our bikes. Once there, I ask: »How long does it take for you to get home? Can I give you a lift in the car? I could easily fit your bike in.«

»Thank you, but it's not so far. I'll cycle the short distance.« We go to the car. I open the tailgate. We hug each other goodbye.

»It was very nice with you today, Eva. This calls for a repeat performance.«

»Yes, thank you for the invitation. I was very pleased as well. Of course we'll repeat it.«

With these words we say goodbye. Eva puts on her helmet, closes it and climbs gracefully onto the bike. When the road is clear, she accelerates and briefly raises her left arm in greeting.

»Adios!«

I am absolutely thrilled by Eva and watch her slowly getting smaller and smaller in the distance. A feeling that hasn't been there for ages spreads through me. I can't deny it: I like her very much. When I packed everything into the car, I also drive home.

Chapter 24

Eva and I are really busy. We only write each other a message now and then. Time passes. It takes me a little while to make good on the promise and shave my legs. Eva said she thought it was sexy.

With thoughts of her, one Sunday evening it's time. I clearly have a thick wool on both limbs, the rest of the body rather little. I hardly have any chest hair. I don't know what the best solution is to get rid of the hair, but I decide to use the electric razor and use the long hair clipper first. The razor has quite a job to do. The floor slowly turns dark until you can hardly make out the light tiles. It reminds me a little of the process of shearing sheep. After a long time of pulling the shearing head back and forth, the first layer is gone. Red spots are visible on the skin. It looks very irregular. The razor has become really hot. The hair on the floor is photographed so that I can send the photo to Eva for fun. Now I go into the bathtub and shower off my left leg first. Loose hair lands in the drain. I soap myself up, get out the wet razor because I want to get rid of the rest with it. I start, nicely from the bottom up, but very awkwardly, and have to shave off the rest while laughing at myself. What am I doing here? It pulls, it pinches. Blood is already running down my shin. My knee is extremely sensitive, I have to be really careful not to cut myself to the bone. Right after having done the job, I take another shower over my shaved leg. Residual hair and blood mix on the way to the drain. I continue on the right leg. I haven't learned much yet, because the water looks very similar afterwards: a mixture of blood and disgusting hair. But it's done. I look at myself from above and recognise the muscles much better, the skin burns a little. Funnily enough, the legs look even thinner than before. But in a special way I like them very much. After the shower I slip into a pair of jeans and ... wow, what a feeling. Cold, but a nice cold. Direct contact with the fabric. Every movement feels great. I clean the bathroom and send Eva the »hairy« photo with a smiley. It doesn't take long for her to reply.

»Hey, great. You've actually done it. I'm curious about your new look. Let's see when we can meet again.«

Exactly, it would be nice to meet again. It's been a few weeks. We have to find a date I say to myself.

When I get into bed for the first time today with shaved legs, I experience the same feeling as with jeans: first it's cold, but pleasant. Just great.

Chapter 25

The summer is slowly coming to an end. I have become accustomed to bare legs and many rides behind me. It feels wonderful, even when cycling, when there is no hair in the wind. So my decision has been made: I will leave it like this and shave once a week. It's much quicker than the first time

and has already become routine. I've also done a rainy ride, and it's true: The wind dries the legs faster after the rain has stopped.

I plan to do one of my home laps. Metres in altitude are on the agenda. There is a slight wind from the front, and suddenly an acrid smell hits my nose. I can't see anything, but I can smell it. The wind is driving the stench of liquid manure up my nose, which is really disgusting and stinks like hell. They must be fertilising here, using the most horrible material a farmer can imagine. Brutal, I think - now that I need every breath on the ascent. This is really nasty. It disgusts me, I even have to suppress a retch. Really gross.

Fortunately, the wind blows away the bad smells after a few minutes and I leave this disgusting stink behind. This can happen more often in the countryside. It's just that I've never experienced it so strongly before. I follow the route I have in my head. On the way home, I always pass through a small village with traffic lights that protect the crossing of a main road. Today I have to stop, click off and wait until the signal changes from red to green. I wait and wait. But nothing happens. I am at the stop line, far and wide no car. Is the traffic light broken? A car appears on the opposite side and a short time later the traffic lights change to green. Only now does it continue. While I'm riding, my brain is often very active. Most of the time, however, I can't remember what I was thinking about all those hours on the bike. Now I just remembered that many of these traffic lights work with induction loops embedded in the ground. When something made of metal, like a car, drives over them, it generates electricity that is conducted to the traffic lights. That's the trigger for signals recognising there's someone waiting. The only thing is that my road bike is made of plastic, carbon to be precise. The few metal parts for the technology are too small to be able to generate a voltage. No signal is triggered. That's my explanation. I don't know if it's true, but it sounds plausible to me.

Chapter 26

After what feels like endless weeks, Eva and I finally manage to arrange a second date. The meeting takes place as last time at the »Alter Wirt«, with a planned ride together. When we meet, the greeting is more than warm. We kiss each other on the cheeks and are happy to be able to be in each other's arms.

»Willy, Willy, Willy ... your legs look great, so shaved. The muscles really come show nicely; let me touch them.«

She strokes one of my thighs confidently and unabashedly. Like a slackly stretched clothesline, her mouth forms a refreshing grin on her face.

»Feels great, Eva!« I have to laugh. »Now we have something in common: shaved legs.«

We start the journey as we did the first time, but then take a different direction. For me, it's a variety of new roads. We are happy about the wonderful weather. At the end of September, the maize is really high. The road divides a field almost like Moses had divided the sea in the Bible. Eva and I roll through it when, completely unexpectedly, several swarms of flies catch us, gathering close to the plants. Really tiny flies, but in black masses.

»Ewww,« Eva screams, but immediately has to close her mouth so that a handful of insects doesn't get into her lungs. I try to duck, too, but it's no use. The little critters are everywhere. I've noticed that they always appear towards the end of September/beginning of October. Must be party time for them. At the end of the maize field we look at each other and have to laugh out loud. Hundreds of flies stick to our sweaty faces and arms. It is still twenty-five degrees. We look as if we had been chased through a poppy seed bath at a bakery, like two poppy seed rolls; also comparable to a dragon fruit cut open crosswise, with all the seeds inside, all the black dots sticking to the skin. We try desperately to get rid of the unwelcome guests and brush them off. We just try. Not a chance. At least we haven't inhaled any of these tiny animals.

Otherwise, the tour goes smoothly. We constantly take turns in the slipstream, enjoying nature with little traffic. After the ride, we only have a drink today because Eva still has to do something. We sit in the same beer garden, order the same as last time: an apple juice spritzer for her and a non-

alcoholic wheat beer for me. Our knees are knocking because we are sitting in a corner today. We just let it happen. Skin to skin, without hair in between.

»Hey, I'm in the process of reading up on a new subject,« she says.

»Yes? What subject?«

»Nutrition. It's so important, not only for athletes. You can do so much in this area. Legally improving performance, boosting recovery. It's a science in itself.«

I follow her explanations with great interest as I look into her big eyes.

»You can do a lot wrong with nutrition. In road cycling in particular, more and more attention is being paid to this. The pros have recognised this for a long time. Simple things can be implemented quickly, for example eating more protein, especially after hard training. Eat carbohydrates selectively. When to use simple sugars and when to use long-digesting sugars. Although sweets are not really a good thing, there are still situations where you definitely shouldn't do without them. «

»I agree with you, Eva. 110 per cent. That's why you always take gel with you, or a banana.«

»Exactly. You get into the details very quickly. It's all about vitamins, minerals and everything with an optimal composition. There are formulas that you can use to calculate how much of everything you should take per kilo of body weight and when, in order to be able to pedal harder for longer, or to be able to perform at the same level for a few days in a row. I'm only at the beginning, but the topic is super interesting.«

»Then you must have heard of Ayurveda too.«

»No, what is it?«

»Not easy to explain, I have only read up on the subject briefly. There are three different dosha types: Vata, Pitta and Kapha. Test questionnaires are available on the internet to find out which type you are. I find myself most with Pitta. You could be a mixture of Vata and Pitta.«

»And what does that mean?«

»Among other things, guidelines for food habits are explained, e.g. that are great for one type of person, but not so good for another, that you can bring your mind and body into balance through nutrition. If you are balanced, you will be less ill and mentally more equilibrium. The acid-base balance must be right. For me, I should avoid tomatoes and not eat spicy food. In contrast, spiciness is strongly recommended for Kapha.

»You surprise me again. Can't be a coincidence that we're also on the same wavelength here and interested in this kind of thing, can we?«

»Let's raise our glass to that, Eva! Cheers, salud! To us!«

We toast. »Imagine bringing these two topics together: Sports nutrition on a scientific basis and the subject of Ayurveda - specifically adapted to the individual types. Then there would certainly be less need for medicine. At least that's what I've experienced so far.«

»You said it, but I have to go home now because I have to finish something for work, sorry.«

»No problem!« I have the bill brought to me and of course I take over Eva's drink.

»Thank you very much, Willy. You're really easy to talk to, you listen to me and you're interested in everything. I like that.«

»You're welcome, and yes, I have remained curious.«

This time Eva also insists on her own ride home on her bike. So we say goodbye at my car in the car space in front of the restaurant. We embrace and hug each other tightly, pause for a moment. Then I kiss her on the mouth, out of reflex. I simply can't help it. She is not surprised and returns the kiss. Our lips come closer once more and remain firmly on each other for a little longer. We detach ourselves with pleasure, smile and hold each other's hands.

»Eva, something is happening to me that I haven't felt in a long time. I don't know about you, but I feel more than just friendship.«

»I feel the same way. I also get kind of agitated when we meet. That kiss just now says a lot about us. I'll say it in Spanish: Te quiero mucho!«

»Te quiero mucho tambien, Eva! That's exactly what the feeling describes.« The air literally crackles. But this moment lasts only a short time. Eva seems to be the first to wake up from our trance and says shyly:

»Okay, take care, see you. I'm sorry, but I have to go now. Always when it's at its best...«

»See you around. Don't get stressed, I'll be in touch.«

After another short kiss, she drives away and leaves me standing alone - with butterflies in my stomach.

Chapter 27

The weather continues to change. Recently, typical for autumn, it has become cold. Nevertheless, I go for another ride, dressed thickly. That's what I bought the clothes for. Without having to set any special training stimuli, I simply try to keep in shape and soak up the good, fresh air. The roads are very dirty, sometimes really muddy, because the farmers are bringing in their harvest. With their thick tyres, they usually leave the roads full of soil that falls out of the deep treads. Only the next rainy days will wash away this mess. The flower strips that were planted along the fields for insects, here especially for bees, have withered. The sunflowers are drooping their heads, which have turned brown in the meantime. It gives me the impression that they are bowing to me - because of the sporting success of the year. They stand like butlers at the side of the road, arms folded behind their backs. Birds pick out the still numerous seeds and fly up excitedly as I drive by. It's a really nice, stress-free round until I have to pass through a small village. From a distance I see a car with a smoking exhaust, on the right in a junction. I am on the main road and glimpse a very old woman at the wheel who is about to turn onto the main road. We look at each other. She looks to the right and left again. I'm almost at her level, not thinking much, because she's seen me. Then I hear her let up on the clutch with far too much gas. Although I thought we had made eye contact, she just drives off. Terrifying! Only centimetres are between my front wheel and her mudguard. I brake abruptly. My wheels lock, with my rear wheel lifting off briefly. Luckily I get out of the pedals and can avoid a fall. The lady just looks at me with her mouth open as I turn into the lane and can't turn her neck properly either. I notice this because her whole upper body is twisted, just like when I have a stiff neck. Startled, she continues, almost jumping, like a frog popping into the water. She seems surprised herself that the wheels are suddenly getting the power from the engine as she lets off the clutch. I'm glad I always have my hands on the brake levers in towns. It was really dramatic, but I already suspected something like that and reacted immediately when the wheels of the car started to turn. You always have to watch the tyres, that's safer than any eye contact. Once again, I got away without a scratch.

Eva and I keep in touch more often now, unfortunately mostly only via messaging, a few phone calls or emails. But we are also getting to know each other better in this way. I won't start with a new training plan until January this time, because my form is still okay. When my work allows, I continue to get on my bike during the week and pedal on the roller like a hamster on a wheel, without moving from the spot. With music, however, it's great. I often have my internet radio playing in the background on the big speakers in the living room. Most of the time it's the NME1 station from England, because they play very varied music. NEW MUSICAL EXPRESS used to be THE music magazine where the latest music trends and bands were constantly presented. Those were the days, analogue days. Now it's also on the radio, digitally.

Chapter 28

It is the third Advent. Eva and I met as often as possible. Sometimes for a bike ride, more often for dinner. Today we are visiting a Christmas market. It is cold and the first snow covers the ground. The scene looks very romantic, really Christmassy. Many people wander around the atmospherically lit stalls. At every corner, a different smell hits our nostrils. We can distinguish everything from sweet and greasy to alcoholic. To greet each other, we fall into each other's arms like newlyweds, kiss each other and walk glove in glove along the huts.

»Eva, what would you like first? A mulled wine or something to eat? What are you in the mood for?»

»If you ask, first a mulled wine to warm you up.« No sooner said than done. We are already standing in front of the steaming vessels that keep the alcohol nice and warm, take off our gloves, warm our hands on the cups that are still too hot and drink from them very carefully so that we don't burn our lips.

»I have to tell you something. As you know, I'm a family person, I don't see my folks often and I miss them a lot. I'm going to Sevilla over Christmas until the end of January to spend time with them.«

My reaction is no reaction for the time being. I swallow, put the cup down, take her hand, think and then say: »I totally understand. Even if we are separated for a while, I am absolutely behind you and your decision. I will miss you, but of course you have to do that. There's the internet. We'll stay in touch. «

»That's what I love about you. You are so understanding and see the negative things in a positive light. It's hard for me, too, but the fact that we found each other wasn't planned this way.« She laughs.

»What time is the flight?» I ask. »Shall I drive you to the airport?

»In three days. I've known for a while that I'm flying, but I didn't have the heart to tell you. Since the flight doesn't leave until the evening, it would be very kind of you to take me to the airport.«

»No big deal, then we can be together longer.«

»Thank you for your understanding. I definitely feel better now. Come on, let's go get some more food.«

We ignore the crowds, enjoy every moment together and let ourselves drift. Before we are really frozen through, we say goodbye with a long kiss. This evening will remain in my memory forever. Funnily enough, we haven't managed to meet in one of our flats yet, I just remembered. There is something in the air. No one wants to make the first move that would change everything. I don't want to press Eva, though. That's not my style. Even though she might be waiting for just that.

Unfortunately, the day of departure approaches far too quickly. I drive to her home for the first time and pick her up. She lets me into the flat briefly, I catch a quick glimpse and take in the furnishings of her four walls. I like what I see. Nothing at all in pink, which pleases me. Surely the pink and women thing is just a cliché, similar to the one that all boys like to play football, which I don't and never have. I was involved in bolting, but you couldn't call it a football game.

We're running out of time. I help her with the suitcase. She locks the door, we go downstairs, get into my car and drive off. But before that there is a kiss on my right cheek. She puts her hand on my thigh. I have to concentrate on driving, but somehow it works. We are both rather taciturn today, hardly speak at all. She mostly looks out of the side window at the snow-covered surfaces as they fly past us. No idea what she's thinking at the moment. We both know that it won't be long before we can't see each other for a few weeks. It's time to say goodbye, so it's easy to get melancholic. I have finally found a charming woman, only to have to adjust to a kind of long-distance relationship shortly afterwards. That's not exactly thrilling.

At the counter in the terminal, everything works like clockwork. We don't have to wait long because we are already late. The queue is short.

»Willy, I miss you already. I wish you a super Christmas, take care while I am away.« And there it is again, her addictive smile, which I will miss extremely.

»Thank you. Have a good flight, and best wishes back home, if they know anything about me yet.« I grin.

»Of course I told them about you.« She takes my hands in hers. We kiss again passionately, time seems to stand still. When we break away at some point, I hand her an envelope.

»Just a little something. No diamond ring or anything, no car either.« We separate laughing.

»Thank you. I'll open it on the plane. We actually said we wouldn't get each other anything, so I don't have anything for you.«

»Yes, a deal is a deal. It's really just something small, so you don't forget me right away.«

»Take care, te quiero mucho.«

»Te quiero mucho, Eva, take care. See you.«

After one last hug and a short, intimate kiss, she disappears behind the security area. We wave to each other until I can no longer make her out among all the other people. That's it. I am sad and feel a twinge in my heart, but realise that family comes first. After all, it's only a few weeks. With a heavy heart, I drive home, imagining her opening my present on the plane and finding the voucher for a candlelight dinner. It's nothing special. I just wanted to give her a little something, and that's all I could think of at the spur of the moment.

Chapter 29

When I get home, I see a message from Eva: »I miss you, te quiero mucho. We'll manage. We'll stay in touch. I'll call you when I get back to my family in Sevilla. Kisses, Eva.«

Sweet message sent just before take-off. There was a definite spark between us.

A short time later, the album »Absolution« by MUSE from the UK is on the turntable. It just fits my mood. Every song is a hit. Melancholic and yet inspiring. You just dive into the atmosphere of the sound, the melodies and the extremely distinctive voice of singer Matthew Bellamy, who has what feels like eight octaves. This is followed by music from ANNI B. SWEET with songs like »Nova« and »Buen Viaje«. She is from Granada, Spain. I lie on the sofa and start reading GRAEME OBREE's book »Flying Scotsman«. It's a crazy book about someone who is nuts in a positive sense in the history of cycling. Very interesting, very motivating to continue with what I have started.

Eva arrived home safely and was extraordinarily happy about my little surprise. She says in a voice message that it means a lot and that our relationship is also very important to her. She said that she finally had met a man whom she could trust one hundred percent, and that this it is not so easy to find nowadays. I am very happy to hear these words from her.

Time flies. Christmas approaches surprisingly quickly, as it does every year. I also meet with my family in accordance with tradition. We sit together at the richly decorated table. I tell them about my new girlfriend Eva and realise that I don't even have a photo of her when they ask for one. I have to request that as soon as I get back to my flat. The evening is rapidly drawing to a close. As usual, the annual get-together was very cordial. I sit in the car right after it and think about Eva - I wonder how she's doing right now? Sitting with her family. Speaking her mother tongue. Eva has never really spoken to me in Spanish before. I wonder what that sounds like. After locking the front door from the inside, I sit on the sofa for a while, listening to music by the French band JUNIORE »Un Jour Ou L'Otre«. My fingers write her a message: »Feliz Navidad, Eva. Have a nice Christmas. I hope you are having a great time with your family. Listen, maybe you haven't noticed, but we don't have any photos of each other at all. My family wanted to see you. Then I realised that I only have one beautiful picture in my head, but I can't show it very well. Could you please send me a picture sometime? That would be very kind of you. Here is a picture of me. I am dressed like a gentleman, because I always go to my family's house at Christmas in a tie and suit. We usually all dress like we're going to a big gala.«

The message is sent. Since Eva seems to be busy and did not answer the message right away, I mute my phone. More tomorrow. I go to bed. It's very late, or early, depending on how you look at it.

The next morning I wake up, sit down to breakfast, switch on my mobile phone in anticipation and go through my social media. My heart leaps immediately because I see a message from Eva in my inbox. Relieved, I open it and see two pictures. One of her big family in front of the Christmas tree and one of her alone. My eyes almost fall out of my head. For the first time, I don't see her in sportswear or casual. She's wearing a red dress, with a stunning neckline, it ends mid-thigh. Transparent black tights, mid-height pumps. What legs, I think.

For the first time I also see her with make-up. Very sweet, subtle and not overdone. Red lipstick to match the dress, eye shadow as dark as her great stockinged legs. Her green eyes form a wonderful contrast to her long blonde hair, which is once again artfully pinned up. A thin golden chain around her neck, matching long earrings that almost touch her shoulders. She certainly has good taste. What

a hell of a woman. I give her hundreds of compliments back, save the image on my phone of course, which then goes to the cloud.

But with all the love and butterflies in my stomach, I can't lose sight of my sporting goal. I start with basic training. Just easy sessions. As a change from the private messages, I ask Eva for a new training plan, starting immediately with the goal of June, when the »Glockner« race takes place once again. She promises to make one for me. Of course I pay for this plan as usual, after all it is her work. But before that, she asks me to do another performance test with her colleague on site so that we have the data of the actual state. Only on the basis of this, she says, does another plan make sense.

Chapter 30

Now the events are coming thick and fast. It's the middle of January. I'm currently on my bike in the Bikefit studio to have my form put down on paper in black and white once again. Like every time, the test is short but crisp. I finish it pretty well, but of course I have lost some power compared to the summer which doesn't make me sad. What does make me sad, however, is the message from Eva, which came to me during the test but only listen to at home in peace.

»How are you? How was the test? I hope you're doing super well. Unfortunately, there's bad news here. My grandmother has fallen seriously ill and is in intensive care. We hope she'll get better. It looks like a stroke. We are all very worried. My beloved grandma ... I have already spoken to my boss. He supports me in my difficult decision. I won't be coming home at the end of January because I want to stay with her and my family and support them. I'm doing home office, so to speak, and creating training plans for our client base. That way I can keep earning money. I'm very sorry. But these are hard times. First the best Christmas we've had in a long time, and then this. Unfortunately this means our plans to be in each other's arms very soon will not happen. But I hope that my grandma will get well soon. Te quiero mucho. I hope you understand my situation and decision. I don't want to lose you. Hasta pronto, kisses, hugs.«

Then another sad smiley with watery eyes appears. The news hits me like a slap in the face, just like when I was beaten up in a club by two guys for no apparent reason and was booted on top of it while lying on the floor. But I survived, and with only an open lip I was able to pick myself up. That's how I feel now, but I also get up again. I keep my feelings to myself. I send her words of comfort, say that everything will be all right and that we will definitely meet again. That I won't give up on us and that I believe in us and am sure that we will get through this together. That our relationship will grow in these difficult times and that we have a great future ahead. She should not worry about me.

So now I live in two worlds. In the world of cycling with the goal of finishing the race faster than Timo, and in the other world of love with worries and personal challenges. But I see both in a sporty way, because with discipline, stamina and a goal in mind, anyone can achieve almost anything. I once heard that you can't move mountains, but you can conquer them. That is also one of my credos. That's why I'm happy to be able to concentrate on training. Eva has received my last test results from her colleague and has worked out a new plan for me, which I start implementing immediately. At the beginning, basic training is again on the programme, with long, monotonous units.

The end of January, usually the time with the most snow and worst weather for us cyclists, does not make preparation easy. Today it's five hours of indoor training. That's why I'm sitting on my bike, my eyes fixed on the TV, my water bottles set up. I'm watching the famous ski race in Kitzbuehel called »Die Streif«, officially known as the »Hahnenkammrennen«. It is broadcast live. The pros ski down slopes with an average gradient of 27 percent. The skiers reach speeds of over 120 kilometres per hour. For us cyclists, this is an unbelievable value, as we really have to struggle when going uphill from 12 percent gradient, and the descents with more than 15 percent gradient are not really easy. That's why many people don't have the courage to let it go. I also start braking at 80 kilometres per hour.

Time passes slowly. The ski race is interrupted because there has been another extreme fall on one of the steepest parts. It doesn't look good for the skier who fell. The helicopter approaches. The

man is being treated. They load him in. Take off. The helicopter takes off, kicking up the snow underneath. The poor man must have imagined a different day. But this is the risk of the professionals - they have to constantly reckon with injuries. When the show is over, I switch to a channel that shows a documentary about sea turtles. It's very interesting. As I tread monotonously along, I imagine helping out with Eva on one of those turtle farms on holiday. She might like that, too. After a few more attempts to snap out of the lethargy of the training, the time is finally up and I can upload five hours onto my training portal. I am proud to have pulled it off.

Eva continues with the training plan. She's really stepping on the gas, building in several heavy days in a row, and she's also sticking to the weekly time, which we've increased by four hours compared to last year. There has to be an increase. I have time for the hard but short sessions after work.

Unfortunately, Eva's grandmother is still very ill and is in hospital. It looks like she will become a case for a nursing home. I process the harshness of the intervals and the feelings for the situation in Spain with appropriate music to get through it. I don't pay attention to the lyrics, I just have to feel the power of the songs. METALLICA cannot be missing from the playlist. A selection of songs is »The Shortest Straw«, »Master of Puppets«, »Spit Out The Bone«, »Hardwired« and »St. Anger«. I shed an incredible amount of sweat. Drops trickle down my nose, one after the other. I feel as if my olfactory organ is a stalactite in a stalactite cavern, where water is constantly dripping down. But I hope my nose doesn't grow in the process like these beautiful forms of the underworld that have been created over centuries. My legs burn enormously, I have to go into the red zone several times in a row, only briefly, but that's enough. My pulse barely has a chance to recover. I get a boost from songs by the North American band DOG PARTY, such as the instrumental »G. Diddly«. It's a sister duo, but with a rich and hard sound that is second to none. I'm not whining, because as Clint Eastwood once said: »You want to play the game, you'd better know the rules.« So I go through the last interval as if I were a cowboy on the run, who in the worst case would be shot off his horse if he didn't give it his all. The song »Blind Destruction« by the German band NECRONOMICON is playing, hard, with clear tempo changes. Old but good. To calm down, the song »Spinning Wheel« by BLACK HONEY is playing, a typical British band with front woman Izzy Baxter Phillips. The melodies are reminiscent of Tarantino's typical background music for his film scenes. The guitars have something of a spaghetti western about them. I remember an article published by Harvard Health in 2011. It says: »The human brain and nervous system are hard-wired to distinguish music from noises and to respond to rhythm and repetition, tones and tunes. Is this a biological accident, or does it serve a purpose? It's not possible to say. Still, a varied group of studies suggests that music may enhance human health and performance.« I really think that we humans are different from animals in that respect. At least it is one of the criteria.

Chapter 31

I am already looking forward to the Dolomites, which I will visit three weeks before the race. A mountainous region in northern Italy, a cycling Mecca. The training plan also includes several days of mountain training. I have already booked the hotel. However, it is still a few weeks away. So far the weather has been very bad. I could hardly ride outside because it is still wet all the time, even now in April. It rains often, even snow showers are part of it. Spring with pleasant temperatures is still a long time coming. Eva keeps me up to date with the latest news. But there is still no good news from Spain. Her mother is totally devastated and can't really cope with the situation. Her grandmother is now at home, but bedridden. She has to be cared for. Everyone helps together and is not to be pitied at the moment.

We motivate each other and claim that everything will be fine in the end. As a distraction, I concentrate more on my form building, which comes to another level through the home training. The only thing is ... out on the road it is completely different. The basic training occurs established during the winter, they often say. But the simulation on the rollers is never as good as the reality on the

road. That's why I also drive in the fresh air, even though the climate tends to say: Stay at home. Thickly wrapped, I am on my way. The air is dry and cold today, you can see all the salt spread on the tar so that the wetness doesn't freeze. The tyres turn white, absorbing the salt. The otherwise dark asphalt shines through shady sections, which can only mean that it is still partially frozen on some parts. Therefore, one should only roll over these areas, no braking or steering. And this in April! Rotten weather, I think. How nice it would be in Spain now. At least as long as you think about the climate conditions. I still manage a few nice tours at home until I can finally test my legs in the mountains. Eva has suggested a special training programme.

When I arrive in northern Italy, I have to drive my car over a pass. It is already May and my car has summer tyres on it. But in the mountains, at an altitude of about 1500 metres, snow is forecasted. The weather continues to be crazy. I have to drive very slowly to avoid slipping. It is snowing lightly, there are no mountains to be seen, only fog. I am alone on the road. How nice it would be to be able to enjoy this atmosphere with Eva next to me. But it's not meant to be. I don't let it get me down and hope for sunshine in the next few days. The clouds continue to hang low. Down at the hotel, it rains again and again at five degrees Celsius. Up on the passes, where I actually have to go, it's zero degrees according to the reception information, it could snow and maybe for the whole week. Oh no, it's the same crappy weather as the first race. Only this time I am much better equipped in terms of clothing and ride what I can. I try to follow Eva's instructions despite the adverse conditions, but arrive at the hotel wet and slightly hypothermic every day. Fortunately, there is a spa area where I can warm up and recover each time.

I'm sure I'm not the only one that goes crazy when I have to get dressed for a winter trip. Several layers, short bib shorts, long bib shorts over them, overshoes. You're finally outside and realise with shock that you haven't put on the belt to take your pulse. You spend almost more time getting dressed than you do on the actual tour. Very annoying. Unfortunately, this happens from time to time.

The evenings are lonely. I sit by myself at dinner at a table next to the wall from where I can watch the other guests, mostly couples. After finishing my espresso, I pick up my mobile phone the way many young people do: they record their voicemails while they're walking. So I hold it horizontally with the microphone near my mouth and start talking. It makes me feel years younger, but that's unusual, because for us more mature people, this kind of communication is rather strange. But now I do it with purpose: »Hello, dear Eva. I hope you and your family are well and your grandma is making progress. I think of you often and wish you were here with me in the mountains - in this bad weather.« I laugh briefly. »There's a spa area in the hotel, so it's bearable, but ... with you everything would be much more bearable. I have to tell you about today. Animals cross your path all the time when you're cycling. I'm sure you've experienced that, too. At home I've often had encounters with a hare that hops from right to left just in front of me, or a deer suddenly runs out of the maize field onto the road. Today it was also very critical. On a descent at a pass with a few serpentine, I let it roll. Despite the fog, I had good visibility. The surface of the tar was dry. I must have been doing around sixty kilometres per hour. Everything happened in seconds, like this: a startled marmot appeared in front of me and had the urge to cross the road from right to left, and we were both totally startled. I tried to brake while the furry animal tried not to run into my wheel. It came out from under the crash barrier on the right, was totally taken aback by my existence, wanted to turn around, but was already too fast with its four paws - its brain was probably nimbler than physics. It probably understood that it would be better to keep running, which confused me even more. Should I turn right or left? The well-fed animal ran across the road and I narrowly evaded it. Due to the moment of shock, it ran head-on towards a stump holding the crash barrier on the opposite side. It recognised this very late and was able to turn around in time, but I could literally hear its claws digging into the tar, like Wolverine in the films. All four paws made a running motion, but the groundhog didn't move. It really was like when Barney in the cartoon »The Flintstones« accelerates his pedal car, accompanied by clattering noises, and his feet start to spin. Yabba Dabba Doo! Just before the collision with the metal, the animal found grip under its paws and was able to turn away - without metal contact. Instead, it rolled downhill until it disappeared from my view. All

this, Eva, happened in just a few moments. My pulse is elevated even as I tell you... this could have ended badly for both of us. Glad it ended well for the rodent, too.«

I let go of the button to add a second voice message: »As you can see, it is always a matter of luck. Once again I got away without falling. That's how I see our situation. It was great luck that we both found each other. Others might think that everything was predetermined. Nevertheless, I am happy that we are together, and we will also get through this difficult time. Everything will be fine in the end. At the moment we are still moving, but like a groundhog, we are not getting any further. But time will surely show us that we can pick up speed again in our relationship. Hang in there, like the groundhog or me in the Glockner race, when I can't really do any more, but keep going anyway. I believe in you. Te quiero mucho, and I miss you. Keep your chin up! Cheers, Willy.«

I don't tell her about my inner fear that I might get sick due to the weather just before the race. Such thoughts are simply unavoidable. I can't do anything about it, even though I'm convinced that they are unfounded and nothing will happen to me. Of course, two weeks before the competition it would be a disaster.

As I don't get an immediate answer, I go to bed and continue reading my book. With my thoughts on Eva, I finally fall asleep. Suddenly, I am jolted out of my dreams by the sound of a buzz from my mobile phone. I forgot to switch it to airplane mode. Okay, never mind. I sleepily check it. It's midnight. Eva has texted me, no, it's also a voice message. »Thank you for your words,« I hear her sexy voice saying. »The story really surprised me. You can describe the situation of today very well. I could see the poor groundhog clearly in my mind. I'm glad to hear that nothing happened, neither to you nor to the rodent. Keep up the training, then go home and train only three times a week. Always with a day off in between, recovering, like in my plan. Then comes the super compensation. Unfortunately, my grandma is not doing any better. It's nerve-racking. We do our best. At least you can speak to her again. She has her eyes open. She signals with them and communicates with her eyes. Unfortunately, she can't talk any more. She'll make it, won't she? Otherwise I'm fine. I permanently think about you. What a time, eh, Willy? But we'll get through it. We're not made of soft wood, or how do you say it in German? You know what I mean. It's late and I'm in bed. When I press 'send', I put my head on my pillow and think of you. Beso, abrazos, te quiero mucho.«

I do the same to her. My left ear sinks into the far too soft pillow and I put my left hand under it and fall asleep. The next morning is the last ride out. Once again it's sleet and almost zero degrees. Today I care even less than the days before, because the block week will be successfully concluded with only one short unit. About a thousand metres of altitude only, once uphill with a steady pulse, and every ten minutes a short sprint with a high cadence without changing gear. Fresh descent, done. First real training camp completed.

I haven't heard from Timo for a long time. Maybe he's back on Mallorca? I'm sure I'll find out soon. As Eva said, the coming week will be quiet as far as training is concerned.

Unfortunately, all hell is breaking loose at work, everything has to be finished at once. Prioritising doesn't help much when everything seems very important. But I don't mind at the moment, because I have time for it. Body rests, mind doesn't. I also found out last week that Timo was actually back on Mallorca. The weather there was beautiful, sunny again, really spring-like, while I froze my butt off. Well, I think to myself, I'm better hardened for it, should it snow again at the race. It's really good to rest physically for a week, but now it's time to start again, but humanely.

Chapter 32

The race is just around the corner. The Glockner is waiting. A few short and crisp training sessions are scheduled for the previous week, the rest consists of basic sessions and chilling. My legs feel great. I couldn't do a test this year because I was too busy and stressed. So I'll let myself be surprised next Sunday.

This year I'm glad that time flies, because I'm already back in the car heading for Bruck in Austria. As in previous years, it is a Friday evening. I spend the night in the same hotel as last year, even in the

same room. I quickly check the weather app and recognise that everything is possible again, from sunshine to rain and temperatures between 7 and 13 degrees at the start. Great, at least no snow for once. At the top, however, there could be some surprises. Has winter finally come to an end?

On Saturday I wake up, read a sweet message from Eva. After breakfast, I give her a quick call.

»Hola, wassup, how are you and the others?«

»Hola, nice surprise ... to talk on the phone. Great to hear your voice live. We're fine, grandma's condition is unchanged but stable, thank you.«

»Glad to hear it. I've missed your voice. I'm well prepared for tomorrow. My legs feel great. Your training plan has more than worked so far. I'm going to get my race number now. Later I'm meeting Timo for a coffee. He was in Mallorca again and is certainly in top form. We'll see.« I laugh mischievously. Eva knows my sense of humour by now.

»Don't worry, I'm only thinking of you. Do your thing. Forget about the others. I'm already keeping my fingers crossed for you, because I may not have time to write today. My aunt from Madrid is coming to visit us. I will think of you tomorrow and be with you in spirit. Best regards to Timo, unknown. Take care. I believe in you, Willy. I am fond of you. I'll talk to you after the race.«

»Thank you for the words of encouragement. Say hello to your family from me, too, unknown. I'll be in touch tomorrow at noon. I never take my mobile phone with me, so you'll either have to search the internet for the results, or wait until I get in touch.«

I give Eva Timo's full name so that she can check who was the fastest in the end. »I miss you, Eva. One day you will be with me in Bruck, if you want to. I'd be delighted. Maybe next year, who knows. I am fond of you, too. Hasta pronto, Evita.«

She's never heard that from me before. Evita is a nickname in Spanish. Eva Perón from Argentina was also called Evita, the wife of the then president Juan Perón. She too had her hair often tied up.

»Don't cry for me, Argentina ...« is the most famous song from the musical of the same name.

After presenting myself at the race office, getting the starter pack and my race number guaranteeing a place in the second block, I walk back through the ever-growing gathering of cycling enthusiasts. The scenario is reminiscent of a sugar solution around which more and more bees gather to sip. No one wants to miss out. The sun seems to be working, as it gets warm every now and then when it comes out from between the clouds. Timo and I sit together some minutes later, drink a coffee, I eat another big piece of cake so that I can fill my carbohydrate storage a little more.

»What's new from Mallorca? Tell me!«

»Not much, it was another nice week, no one had a flat tyre. The wind was stronger this year, but it was bearable in the group. In the end, we gained more than eight thousand metres in altitude. « He brags a little about it, but I couldn't care less. I know what I trained for, and I tell him about the Dolomites.

»I also went to the mountains to train this year. Unfortunately, I was unlucky with the weather, but I stayed healthy. In the end, I only covered half the metres in altitude, which was still enough.«

I also tell him about the encounter with the animal, and after the short chat we part ways again. I change my clothes and do a few sprints to tease the muscles, let myself be photographed by tourists on the Glockner Road in front of the sign showing the toll prices for cars and motorbikes as I head towards the Glockner. I thank them and immediately send the photo to Eva. It turned out beautifully: The road passes me and the sign on the left. The word »Grossglockner Hochalpenstrasse« is clearly visible. In the background you can see the mountains with the remnants of snow on the peaks. In front of me, with my white bike and shaved legs. Through helmet and goggles, surveillance would have a hard time with facial recognition. At least you can see my smile.

Arriving at the hotel, I mount the start number with the chip on the handlebars as usual, so that it doesn't interfere with my riding. No news from Eva. She said that she was travelling with her aunt. My clothes bag is quickly packed, and before I eat dinner, I take it to one of the buses that transport the thousands of bags up to the finish area, as they do every year before the start of the race. The organisation is topnotch, as always. The day comes to an end. For the third time I notice the routine in me. Everything runs smoother. I hope the weather will be good, but it looks okay.

I go to bed in good spirits and switch my mobile phone to flight mode so that Eva can't wake me up - should she still contact me. I need every minute of sleep, as the alarm clock will mercilessly bring me back to reality at five in the morning.

I soon fall asleep, but wake up briefly due to the inner clock just before the wake-up call. As usual, the first thing I do is tear open the window to check the actual state of the weather. The clouds seem to have disappeared, clouds of mist drift along the mountain slopes, but the road is wet. It must have rained overnight. At breakfast I ask the hotel hosts once more for the final weather update. It is supposed to stay dry, with a gratifying 14 degrees. Wow! I'm not used to that at all. Today I also try to start in short cycling shorts. For the upper body I plan to wear a long-sleeved vest, with a short jersey over it, so that I can simply pull up the sleeves if it gets too warm. But the coolness gives way again this time. I feel the adrenaline rising, the nervousness coming on. How will it go today? Will the hard training help me to top last year's results? Surprisingly I can even eat a whole bowl of muesli for breakfast. Full of pride, I sit on the bike at six o'clock on the dot for the warm-up. The nervousness is gone. The experience maintains the cool. In order not to repeat last year's mistake, I set off with a full bottle in my holder. I won't run out of water today. A gel is also stowed in my jersey so I can give myself an energy boost before the tollgate. Now I just need good legs. Can I beat Timo today? Then the torture of training, all the self-castigation I've imposed on myself over the months, would finally be crowned with success. Will it work? Will Timo outrun me once more, or will I finally beat him? I can hardly wait to start. The warm-up is already very promising. Not only the feeling in my body is positive, but also the values on the computer confirm my top form. The short, high-intensity intervals go like clockwork. My heart rate goes down quickly. Now I just coast as I approach the centre of Bruck. The starting area is reached and the party is in full swing. Music is playing. The moderator is spouting motivational words. The starting blocks are separated by grids, as usual. The road is still wet, but drying up. Nevertheless, I am pretty soaked from the splashing water. My shaved legs dry quickly. The relatively pleasant temperature makes me shiver only a little as I stand at the start.

This year I'm early. I position myself just to end of the first starting block, directly in front of the barrier. For the first time I clearly see the fastest group in front of me. The announcer is conducting a few interviews. I notice a couple of actors tucking rain jackets back into their jerseys. I guess they thought the weather wouldn't hold. One of them even throws his jacket to the side of the pavement where spectators are. Maybe someone they know will grab this jacket. Otherwise it would be a waste.

Now I get goose bumps on my bare legs. Cautiously I look around and see others with the same body reaction. It's cool when you're standing. I hope I made the right choice with my shorts and that I don't cramp because of the cold at just below 2,700 metres above sea level. My pulse is also elevated this time, although for the last fifteen minutes I have done nothing but stand, wait, loosen my legs, turn my shoulders, stretch and rack my brains about what was to come. Suddenly I see Timo squeezing into the first starting block. He is standing directly in front of me.

»Hi Timo, everything okay? This is the first time we've seen each other at the start,« I call out. Surprised, he turns around, smiles and says, »Hey, cool. Good morning. I'm late, wanted to be further ahead, but no matter where you are, it gets hectic once again.«

The sun comes out, my goose bumps disappear. The road is also drying out more and more. Very good. The speaker sets the mood. The music gets louder. They play the song »Highway to Hell« by AC/DC, appropriately enough. In any case, the song line is exactly what is about to happen on the way on the Glockner Road. The dividers are removed and I can easily push forward into the gap that has opened up. Then suddenly I'm standing next to Timo in the first block.

»Good luck Timo, come through without a crash. See you at the top. Only that I finish BEFORE you this year,« I tell him.

»All the best to you, too; it'll be fine. You can forget about me following you, though!« He's almost shouting because the music is loud and the announcer is cheering the athletes on with a »Zicke zacke, hey, hey, hey!« and we all bawl after it. We will probably not become a church choir ... The first ones are already starting to push to the front and squeeze. I don't care. Now full concentration! Only on me. I try to more or less ignore my surroundings. Then the familiar countdown.

10 - 9 - 8 - 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - SHOT!

Chapter 33

We roll off. We quickly pass the timing mat. I try to keep up with Timo, but I don't have a chance. I lose sight of him before I even get to the underpass. There are too many athletes in the pack around me. Like every year, it is very hectic at the front. The speed is even higher than in previous years, but I notice that there are experienced cyclists at the start, because they are more disciplined. Most of them hold their line. But you still get mixed up. My pulse is high, but well within tolerable limits. The road has dried out so much that the rider in front hardly splashes any more. It's just a shame when you can't avoid a puddle because of the masses. For one thing, you see it too late, and for another, you don't have ten centimetres of space to drive around it. That's why I suddenly can't see much through my glasses, which hinders me a bit and takes me out of rhythm. But physically I feel very good. My upper leg muscles are tight and do what I expect them to do. What a feeling it is when the lungs open up fully again and again. Every breath of cool air is a pleasure. I survive the usual braking and the subsequent sprinting after the traffic islands without any damage. I can fit in very well in the front group. From time to time I even see the lead car, which sets the pace away from the front. I'm happy to be able to keep up here and save energy in the slipstream before the first climb. No sign of Timo. He is on his own. The houses on the edge of the road give way to meadows and nature towards the mountains. After leaving the village, the full width of the road can be used. Some pass by on the left side of the road. These are probably the firmer riders again, who pull forward from the back of the starting blocks to make up time, but whom I am sure to overtake sooner or later on the mountain. They act quite risky. If they only have to go off the road for a short time and pull the handlebars around, it will result in a mass crash.

The wind is gentle this year and comes more from behind, so that it doesn't tear the group of riders apart. We quickly gain distance and before I know it, we pass the chapel, which we leave on the right. I make a mental note to take a look at some point, should I not pass it in race mode.

All of a sudden everyone slows down. The gears are changed, and down they go. The first climb begins, which inevitably leads us to the tollgate. I get into my rhythm very well and can maintain my cadence. My speed is at the ten to twelve kilometres per hour I had hoped for. That's the way to go! Sure, my pulse is up, but not in the red zone. I drink for the first time from my full bottle. This year, the water has a carbon hydrate mixture. That promises extra energy with every sip. The sun illuminates the mountain peaks on the distant horizon. In the shade, the road is still damp. You can see a lot of snow on the mountain slopes. It reaches far down, quite different from the years before. It was a long winter, so there was less time for the snow to melt. This year, everything has shifted back a bit in terms of the seasons. Maybe most of the people are struggling with the reduced training kilometres on the road. Surprisingly, I don't feel such a big difference. The gallery obscures the scenery for a few metres. This creates a strange atmosphere. I pass some of my fellow cyclists. The pace remains stable and high. The round pedal stroke feels very good. I keep my eyes on the road ahead. Up and up. Everyone is only concerned with themselves. No one looks to the left or right. I admire the one or other thick calf of the competitors. Small, slender women pass me by. At least that's what they want, but I can keep up, pass one or two of them again, look them in the face and grin stupidly. They grin back. A battle of woman against man, whereby I am not sure whether I am doing myself any good with the macho behaviour. A motorbike from the organisation slowly pushes past us on the left, honking. Fortunately, the climb is over sooner than expected. Weaker riders are already trying to make up for lost time. This is my chance. With a short spurt I dart into their slipstream and let myself be pulled along. Two riders are hanging in mine. I notice it when I fish a gel out of my jersey, awkwardly as every year, tear it open, hold the opening towards my mouth and squeeze. The sugar juice, the taste of which is secondary, disappears immediately into my throat. The empty gel pack goes into one of my jersey pockets, of course, because I don't throw it on the road, as many riders before me have done.

I drink from the bottle and rinse the liquid after the sugar pudding. Thus supplied, I pass through Ferleiten and under the roof of the ticket office. Immediately my gaze goes to the long climb ahead of me. So far everything has gone according to plan, but I must not exaggerate. I have to acknowledge the women's performance and let one of the two cyclists go. What a pace she sets! Can she keep it up? It's still a long way to the finish. I listen to myself. It's hard, but it can be done. The pain in my legs was only felt for a short time, now they are just machines that work. It goes up metre by metre. It gets cooler. I can feel the breath, but I'm not cold at all. Fortunately, my naked thighs are not interested in the temperature so far. This year, too, I meander through the drink handout at the first and last flatter section. I don't take anything because I don't want to lose my good rhythm. Here at the front, that's what most people do. They are all keen on a good time. There is just as much fighting as among the participants who come from the back of the starting field, but you can already see the difference. The doggedness is different. Greg Lemond, the exceptional American rider who ended his professional career in 1994, once said, »It never gets easier, you just go faster.« He was right. The pain doesn't generally stop, but you get more power out of your legs onto the road if you train hard. And that makes it an addiction. This year I'm really enjoying it. My body has been longing to really push itself.

After about seventeen kilometres I reach the first bend with the sign »Piffalpe«. The air is sucked in in great gulps through my wide-open mouth. My lungs really open up. I can feel my chest expand - like an air mattress in summer at the lake when it is inflated. When I exhale, it contracts, like an out-of-control balloon when you let it fly after inflating it. Fortunately without the accompanying noise. I look around. My eyes search specifically for Timo. At every turn I look down, trying to scan the people as if with binoculars to pick him out, but I can't find him. When I turn my head forwards again, I give myself a fright and have to tear my steering wheel apart for a moment. During the short blind ride, I had driven too close to a cyclist. I only narrowly avoid falling. I pass her. With helmet and bike glasses, the long blonde hair lying on her back and the petite figure, at first she looks very much like my Eva. I must have looked very stupid, because she looks at me tensely, deep in the tunnel of effort. Almost an evil look, as if she could read my thoughts. But I have learned and now I only concentrate on my results. No matter where Timo is, what he's doing, how he feels. It's also possible that he'll be ahead of me and I won't be able to catch him.

The temperature drops as the altitude rises, but I stay within the desired heart rate range. Two thirds of the route are mostly manageable, but then the hammer hits. It's been like this every year: The head shuts down, morale drops, thoughts of quitting pop up like speech bubbles on comic characters. I take a big swig from the still well-filled bottle. There are five kilometres to go, but my body doesn't seem to want to go on. Was my heart rate too high? I hope I didn't overdo it and lose it all again. My face is also getting more and more tense. The energy seems to be dwindling. The wind comes up. Remnants of snow thaw on the hills along our route that have been piled up by the snow clearance, making the road wet. I immediately think of the coming descent and that I have to be extremely careful there. The wet spots can cause difficulties when braking.

My dead spot is inexplicably overcome after a few metres. Concentration is back, only the wind from the front is annoying. The snow at the edge increases. On the mountain flanks to our left, uphill, we now drive along metre-high piles of ice that have been cleared by snow ploughs a few weeks before. Walls as high as houses stand to one side. Meltwater slowly runs down the road. Here you can see that winter has only just given up in the mountains. It's amazing how many metres of snow fall up there. And these are the remains! Just as I'm trying to find a slipstream, a guy passes me, but stays at the same height. I look around and see Timo grinning broadly. Short of breath I say:

»Hey, what are you doing here? I thought you were far ahead. I didn't see you right after the start.«

»I don't know where you passed me. Too many people. But now I've got you again.«

The wind pushes us against the ice wall. As if the 12-percent gradient wasn't enough, we're now also fighting a strong draught from the front. Timo, the smart one, drops back and seeks shelter in the slipstream behind me or others. I couldn't care less at the moment. We are a small group with about the same physical condition. Lined up like pearls on a necklace, we pass through. The metre-high walls of old snow make us freeze, an unbelievably icy air emanates from them. It feels like the

cold that escapes when you open the freezer - your hands get cold immediately. There are thousands of open freezers lined up here. The frost goes through your spine. The wall of air masses from the front, the sudden cold and me in an unusual manner in shorts - my strength dwindling, Timo on my back. The brain becomes active. Thoughts come and go, as they did recently at my lowest point. As if I were once again in a comic strip. How much strength does Timo have left? Can I stand up to him with a final spurt? Will I cramp? And as quickly as they came, the speech bubbles burst.

There is a bend coming up. The wind is blowing from behind now. I can already hear the commotion at the finish, the spectators, the fans, the families, friends of the athletes. Timo now comes from behind, stays next to me. We continue at the same pace. No one speaks. Each of us knows that the strongest of us will win here and now. I look into his face and hardly recognise any agony, rather a smile - which makes me uneasy. Because if he were to look at my face, he could read in it like in a book that I am at the limit and have no air left. They say »never judge a book by its cover«, but at the moment the cover is blemished and the content doesn't promise much either. The road makes a turn. The wind slows us down. The high, cold snow walls on one side do the rest. Only two kilometres to go. Soon I'll be at the top. How I wish that Eva was waiting for me there, that we could fall into each other's arms. I immediately push the thought out of my mind. Full concentration! I pass the fourteenth bend, which is the last and is marked with a sign »Oberes Nassfeld«. The number 2,374 metres above sea level is only mentioned in passing, but I know that not much is missing. We're almost there. The finish line is in sight. The first riders pull up. Strangely enough, they are the ones who have been riding in the wind the whole time. I try to keep up. A hole opens up. The whole group falls apart. My pulse goes into the red zone, my mouth is wide open, but my lungs are now demanding more air than I can supply them with. The gap widens. The legs are burning. Timo must have realised that I'm riding totally at the limit. Another 400 metres. I think of the sentence by the famous writer Murakami: »Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.« I try not to suffer. But the pain is still there, spreading through my body. My legs are practically dead. My lungs have had enough. I try with the last of my strength to shake Timo off with a little spurt. I don't succeed. Another 300 metres. Suddenly Timo passes me. I stand up and try to mobilise the last of my strength. But it's not enough. I am at the end. I can't hold anything back. Timo is gone and away. I can't believe it. So close to the finish! Once again he will finish ahead of me. The disappointment causes each of my body cells to immediately change from fully functional to nonfunctional, as if by a switch. Quit inside. Total shit, goes through my head. I keep trying to give it my all so that the time difference doesn't get too big. But Timo is almost up. He also gives it his all again to show me. I try with all my might to make a final sprint while standing up, I yank on the handlebars. The upper body bobs violently. The mouth is wide open. Any dentist would be happy if he could treat me now, because he could get to the furthest part of my mouth. My lungs almost burst, I can't feel my legs any more, although they are totally undersupplied with oxygen. I cross the finish line at the Füscher Toerl. With a heart rate that I normally only reach during a performance test or during a few very hard intervals, I stand in front of the girl hanging the finisher's medal around my neck. From the outside, it looks like I'm hanging my head in disappointment and she takes advantage of the moment to slip the metal over my head. Crumpled and totally exhausted, I push my carcass towards the changing bags. My breathing only slowly begins to calm down. »Shit!« I curse over and over to myself, reinforcing the feeling with a jerky nod of my head at each yelp. A few athletes and fans look at me quizzically. Then I have to laugh. I calm down and immediately find some positive aspects. Because I didn't run out of drink, despite the cold and my bare legs I didn't even cramp. That is a success. Timo comes up to me. We congratulate each other on a great race.

»Congratulations! Seriously. That was a close one. I had problems down to the checkout. I didn't really get into the race. You must have passed me unnoticed.«

»You dickhead,« I say jokingly. »I was so fucked up. I couldn't hold anything back. Maybe I started too fast, or I should not have tried to impress the two girls on the first climb towards the cashier's office. Then I just didn't have the last bit of energy left. Congratulations, Timo!« I pat him on the back. »Then it's your turn next year.«

He grins incredulously, as if I could never beat him. But it was close. I definitely have the chance. It's just a matter of time. »We'll see,« I think to myself and am already focused on next year. I will

analyse the race with Eva to find out what I can improve. The mountain riding in the Dolomites has borne fruit. Maybe we can change something in the training. I'm a stand-up guy and remember the words of Paulo Coelho: »It's inevitable to lose from time to time. The point is: Don't get used to defeats.«

At the top it's very cold when you stop moving. Hat, gloves and jacket on. Timo and I say goodbye as usual for two o'clock in Bruck and give in to the earth's gravity, let it roll. The meltwater splashes on my back and shoes from time to time. Nevertheless, the descent is really fun this year. I don't lose sight of Timo. We stay together, chase through the tollgate at full speed, stop shortly afterwards, take off our hats, gloves and jackets, because it's now a nice 18 degrees down here. We easily chase the last kilometres to Bruck. We are overtaken quite often by faster riders, but I don't care. Because why show now that I still have strength? Then they didn't give it their all in the race. We go our separate ways after handing in the chip for timekeeping.

»See you soon, Timo.«

»See you in a minute.«

Once in the hotel room, I boot up my mobile phone. It rings immediately and displays several messages. Three from Eva. Sweaty and exhausted, I drop onto the edge of the bed and read through her first message.

»Dearest Willy. How did it go? I thought about you all the time. Well, not the whole time, because I didn't get up that early, but from breakfast on. Smiley«

Next message, sent a little later: »I miss you. Would it be possible for you to come to Sevilla for a long weekend? It would make me very happy. You could meet my family.«

Good idea, I think. I'll definitely plan for that. Then another message, but this time a voicemail: »Your time is absolutely insane. INCREIBLE! (the Spanish word for »incredible«). 01:37:32 hours! Those were the high metres of the Dolomites that were in your legs. What was the weather like in Austria this year? By the way, Timo has a time of 01:36:14 h. You've almost done it. You have to tell me later how it was. I can hardly wait to hear your voice. Te quiero, cariño. Besos.« Her voicemail message goes silent. My emotions are in chaos right now. The affection for Eva, the result at the King of The Glockner after all the training, the spent hours. I am one of the happiest people on the blue planet right now, even if I couldn't beat Timo.

After I showered, I feel like a normal human again and call Eva. After a few rings, she answers.

»Hola! It's me, Willy. How are you?«

»Hi, great, and thanks for calling. Good to hear from you and glad you're back safe and sound.«

I describe the entire race to her, what it was like when Timo came up behind me. The agony I went through and then had to give in at the absolute limit at the end.

Eva says: »I am so proud of you. I would love to hug you, hold you, feel you. Next year it will work out. I already have ideas. If I may, I'll make you a training plan again and give you tips on nutrition. Since I have time in Spain now, I started a course in this direction so that I can also work as a nutritionist in Germany. Have I even told you that yet?«

»That's a great idea. I'm thrilled! No, you haven't told me about the further education yet. I'll support you, and it's logical that only you are allowed to set up the new training plan for me. I'm already looking forward to it.«

»Then I don't want to keep you any longer. I'll talk to you later. Call me when you get home. I've got some studying to do.«

»Sure, I will, Eva. I miss you. Do you know that feeling when you suddenly feel hungry on a long tour, but you know you've eaten all the gels and bars and there's no petrol station for miles? That feeling of craving, missing some sugar ... that's kind of how I miss you, Eva. It's like it's vital. I need sugar, baby,« I confess to her, a little confused, and hope that the words get through.

»You described that very well. Yes, I want to be your sugar baby.« She laughs and I say, »Hey, I have an idea. What do you think about me going to Sevilla for a long weekend in August? A few days will do. Before that, I'm planning to go on a cycling trip. Crossing the Pyrenees with lots of cycling enthusiasts has been a dream of mine for a long time. Then we can make up for the promised candlelight dinner. When would you have time?«

»Great idea. I'll check my exam schedule and let you know. That would be really great! Your trip sounds exciting, too. If it's a dream of yours, just do it. You're fit now. Who knows what's later.«

»Okay, just write me briefly which weekend suits you best. I have to go now. I'm meeting Timo before I go home. Give my best to your family, besos. I hug you in spirit. Take care. See you.«

I notice how happy she is. She says adios. The mobile phone falls silent.

Timo is already waiting for me today. I have a well-deserved spaghetti Bolognese and a non-alcoholic wheat beer. It has become really warm. We sit outside, with a view of the centre of Bruck, exchange our experiences from the race, describe to each other the respective situations in which we had to really fight. I finally tell him about the training plans I used to improve my form so much. Of course, Eva is also in it now. He had already thought that I would get help and congratulates me on Eva. »With our super finish time, we will both be in starting block one next year. We are now among the fast ones. That's a great development.«

»I know. It was also a personal best for you, right? This race is really addictive, even though it's so hard. Every year, while you're riding, you ask yourself why you're doing this, if it's going to be the last time. But then you cross the finish line and immediately think about next year, about what you can supposedly improve. You've already forgotten the pain.«

»Exactly. It may be a bad comparison, but sometimes I think so, too. Women also forget the pain of childbirth very quickly and often want another child.«

»Well, the comparison is lame, but the direction is close enough.«

We wish each other a nice rest of Sunday and say goodbye. The car is quickly packed. Shortly afterwards I roll back towards home. I switch on the radio. By chance, my MP3 player plays the song »Love Insane« by the band DREAM CITY FILM CLUB, from London in the 90's. A drifting song, slow, exciting. It reflects my mood. As a contrast comes the song »Hula Tikula« by the Russian band MESSER CHUPS, they play cool surf rock. And so it goes on.

Chapter 34

When I get home, I hardly give myself a break, but sit down at the computer and look for a cheap flight to Sevilla. Eva has already left me a message telling me when it suits her best.

Found it. Bingo, booked. Great! I'm really looking forward to seeing Eva again. Of course I'll write to her right away. Maybe she can arrange to pick me up at the airport. Until then, however, I have a few exciting weeks ahead of me. Besides my job, cycling is the top priority. In order not to get out of shape, I continue to use my sports equipment diligently. The tours are getting longer to be prepared for the long climbs in the Pyrenees. As the circle widens, I keep finding new places to go. Right now I'm standing in front of a completely run-down little house. It looks very, very old. The roof has partly collapsed, the windows are smashed or no longer exist. The ruin is right on the road I just climbed. A nice new climb through the forest. It's much cooler there, even pleasant, because today the sun is really burning the back of my neck. Trees stand overgrown around the house. Only from the front do I catch a glimpse of the seemingly mystical building. This could easily be a backdrop in a horror movie. I take my phone out of my jersey pocket to take a photo of the dilapidated house, when an old woman approaches me from the right and asks if I want to buy the house. Puzzled, I turn around. But she immediately says that it cannot be sold, there are inheritance disputes. Many people had already asked, but the property still belonged to the Maier family. She doesn't stop talking. I have to leave, almost rudely, because I want to move on.

After another hour, I come to an uphill section that is new to me, and it's quite a climb. The computer shows up to 16 percent when I'm in the middle of it. To the left and right of the fields are small farms. My muscles have to fight hard to keep me going. Suddenly I hear a loud dog barking from behind. I turn around. A large, dark dog follows me out of a courtyard driveway, teeth bared, and runs at full speed straight at me. My pulse goes up. Adrenaline shoots into every cell of my already tired body. My escape reflex works. I summon up the last of my strength. Standing up, I try to outrun the dog, it seems to be a young Doberman. But with a 16 percent gradient, it's hopeless. I

only move slowly, but the dog comes closer all the faster. Panic sets in. I have surely invaded his territory. What should I do? Stand still? I'll fall over and won't find a foothold with my cleats. It's too steep. Somehow manoeuvring the bike as a protective shield between me and the dog? But how, on the mountain? I can't go any faster. I already have images in my head of the Doberman biting into my calf. Far and wide there is no owner to be seen who tries to call the dog back. I am alone. Dog against cyclist. The gradient drops to 12 percent. With the last of my strength I pull up. I look back. The dog finally turns off, but continues to bark furiously at me. Crassly! That was a close one. Fortunately, the Doberman lost interest in me faster than I could drive. It was my first encounter with a dog since I started riding a road bike. My pulse drops as it flattens out. I sit down on the saddle, trying to calm my entire body. I immediately think of the Glockner race. Can't I induce it artificially? So that I can make a final sprint like that next year? Without a second thought? Maybe I should imagine a situation like that? I'm sure Timo wouldn't go along with that. Hardly possible, I think. Exhausted but satisfied, I arrive home after five hours.

As training, I ride for the first time before work the following day. Something new more often. Now in summer it's light very early, but still pleasantly cool in the morning. Simply fantastic. The sun is still low, slowly coming up and starting to warm my still cold thighs. Through a stretch of forest, on an incline, I see the purest rays of sunlight fighting their way through the haze. It is a play of lights, like in a famous painting or a scene from a science fiction film, when a UFO with extremely glaring light approaches the earth. I am dazzled. Like laser beams, the sun pierces the forest and cuts through the mist without hurting it. At the edge of the path I see dewdrops hanging on grass, reminding me of picture books from my childhood. I just pedal on, flashed by the atmosphere. I enjoy every turn of the pedal. After ninety minutes, I return to my front door without much effort, because it was more of a regenerative ride. Freshly showered and with a recovery drink, I finally sit at my desk at home, in my home office for once.

Eva is making progress with her education. Unfortunately, her grandmother is not doing any better. We talk regularly and have the odd live chat so that we can look each other in the eye. Such a long-distance relationship is quite something. I hope Eva will be able to come back soon. Despite the situation, we continue to get to know each other better. I don't regret for a second that I kissed her and we got together. This could be a real thing, the way I've always wanted it to be.

The cycling trip is getting closer and closer. I continue to do my sessions before or after work.

This Saturday, my last long tour is planned. Controlled by my navigation device, I follow the route blindly, which means I'm moving in unfamiliar territory and have to trust the technology. My recovered legs are eager for the next five hours on new terrain. It's off to a very good start. Since I've allowed my body to rest for the last week, it's going really magically. It goes up, it goes down, through woods and meadows. I see a hawk sitting on a post by the side of the path, probably waiting for a mouse to dare come out of its hole. A short while later, another falcon flies skillfully in the air, but standing still, like a hummingbird in the jungle – simply fascinating for the bird's size. The mice have to watch out. I overtake many racing cyclists. One time my nav wants me to turn off, but when I do, I end up on a gravel road directly through a forest. Bad idea with the thin tyres. I just keep going in the current way and hope that I'll still get back on the original route. Fortunately, this happens after another ten minutes. Proceeding in an unfamiliar area and so far away from home would not be good. I'm always afraid of that, and also of a technical defect. You wouldn't wish that on anyone. After many kilometres I notice that my concentration is slowly fading. Maybe I haven't eaten enough? Drinking is still sufficient. I recognise that I'm getting more tired by the fact that I'm suddenly annoyed by every bump in the road. When I am jolted and torn as soon as I drive over broken pavement, which is usually created in the ruts of the cars and is sometimes brittle, with small holes and edges caused by repairs. The tyres of the cars swallow this damage without any problems, but my stiff bike doesn't swallow anything here. It passes on every impact directly to my body via the saddle and handlebars. At the beginning of the tour I didn't mind. It was good... I could even take it without recognizing it, but then it gets annoying at some point, and that is an unmistakable sign of tiredness. In parallel, experience shows that I need much more water and energy, which I try to replenish with gels. I still have to find out how I can optimise this.

Chapter 35

Finally, the long-awaited bus trip to France is upon me. The departure is very early and everything goes very well. I get on well with my seatmate in the bus right from the start. The bikes are in a specially made trailer with holders that safely transport our bikes. The journey from Germany takes a long time, but we have enough stops and there is plenty of food. Everything is perfectly organised. Seven exhausting days lie ahead of me. I am in daily contact with Eva in Sevilla. I can't do without her any more. A long-distance relationship needs this interpersonal possibility of technology. Fortunately, we live in a time when we are not dependent on snail mail letters that have to be transported from A to B for days.

The strains of the cycling trip begin on the Atlantic coast, where it is usually very foggy. Rising air from the sea gets stuck in the mountains. It goes over three passes, which are called »Cols« in France. The fog is thick, but pleasantly warm. This is a new experience, because in Germany there is only cold fog. The air is unfamiliar, the atmosphere muted, the light seems dimmed. The water vapour sticks to the hairs on my arm. Droplets form on every single hair. It looks incredible. It appears surreal, as if my arms had turned into the carnivorous plant called sundew, with sticky drops of secretion at the end of its short tentacles.

The first day ends well. I have already found a group that performs similarly to me, but does not overwhelm me. We continue towards the Mediterranean every day, the bus follows us constantly, is available when we need new drinks or food, and transports our luggage to the next accommodation. On the second day, we wake up in the middle of a green landscape. If it weren't for the mountains, you would think you were in the Highlands of Ireland, only the palm trees in the gardens don't really fit into the picture.

As we cross the mountains that run between France in the north and Spain in the south, I even briefly enter the land of bullfights, where we take a lunch break. I can use my language skills right away and actually get what I ordered.

My legs are still in good shape, even though we have between five and six hours of pure riding time every day, but we always take necessary breaks. On the third day we cross the Col D'Aubisque, and on the fourth day the famous Col de Tourmalet, which is also regularly crossed by the Tour de France. It's a special feeling to be allowed to ride on the same routes as the professionals. Surprisingly, there are hardly any cars or motorbikes on the road. In the Alps it's rush hour in weather like this. All the better for us. I enjoy the scenery as I slowly climb metre by metre towards the end of the pass. At the top, I ask a fellow passenger to take a photo of me in front of the famous sculpture of a tall racing cyclist on his bike, which I have often seen on television. The figure has its somewhat oversized head slightly raised, body bent forward, hands on the lower handlebars, gaze fixed on what lies ahead. Of course, this picture will be sent immediately to Sevilla in the evening via the Internet, with sporty greetings to Eva.

There are many more climbs worth seeing, sometimes more, sometimes less famous, but each one is worth the effort to be climbed. The Col de Peyresourde in particular will be remembered. A dream road. It was the first pass of the »Tour de France« that was crossed in 1910, all without asphalt at that time, nothing but gravel. It's hard to imagine how tough it must have been back then, with bikes that weighed more than twice as much and without gears.

Every day we continue along lonely roads; unbelievable expanses on the horizon, changing landscapes, pure nature. At lunchtime we usually enjoy something small like a baguette, an omelette or crêpes with various kinds of spreads. The French don't disappoint us. Always a nice mixture of protein, sugar and carbohydrates. So far we've been really lucky with the weather. It's always dry, with the best temperatures, as if we had booked it. On the penultimate day, we ride over the Col de Pailheres, where there are many wild horses roaming free and cross the lonely roads - like cows in the Alps.

I notice the fatigue more and more. My strength is fading. My pulse is noticeably and measurably no longer going up. I once read that this can be a sign of overtraining. This is deliberately ignored. The last day is coming up. I enjoy every single kilometre, but on the way up to the final pass, Col de Jau, I yawn unexpectedly. The exhaustion is taking its toll. At the top, we wait for slower riders and take another long break to soak up the scenery, then we roll off to our last accommodation.

You can see other competitors sitting in the foyer a little later, tired and worn out, but everyone is happy and has a grin on their face. There were no accidents, no breakdowns, which is incredible.

In the evening I chat with Eva and describe my impressions of the trip as best I can, she tells me about her progress in her studies. The next morning we take the bus home. In our luggage we have a wealth of experiences of a sporty and exciting Pyrenees cycle tour with an extremely varied, striking and challenging landscape in the south of France. Unforgettable! What did Timo say to me after his Mallorca tour, where he cycled 700 kilometres in one week? That I would be able to do the same if I kept going. He was right. In those seven days I covered 877 kilometres, with an unbelievable 18,000 metres of altitude. Of course, I am now sitting tired on the bus, where many people are falling asleep straight away.

Chapter 36

My thoughts continue to revolve around Eva, our future and the upcoming trip to Sevilla in a fortnight. I'm really looking forward to it. I can hardly wait to meet her live again. I spontaneously take a day off during the week because the weather is fantastic. Naturally I plan another long ride and use the free hours. Before that, I was able to successfully regenerate. It's been over a week since the bike trip. My body tells me, »Willy, let's go!« Here I rarely contradict myself. I am on partly unfamiliar terrain, but also encounter already well-known roads. Broadening my horizon is important, just not too much routine, just like in the training itself. Since it's during the week, I don't meet a single cyclist. They're all sitting at work earning their money, maybe for the next new road bike, who knows. Lonely country roads and deserted farm trails come under my wheels. I let myself drift, sometimes turning left, sometimes right, trying to combine new routes with old ones. I recognise the turn-off from back then, where the road goes up to the right and the dog once gave me hell. I spare myself that today, ride around the climb and come to a junction that leads me to the right over a longer, but flatter stretch of road. I am enjoying the solitude when all of a sudden, the air escapes from the front tyre. »No, not again!« But I always carry a spare inner tube in my saddle bag as well as a pump that hangs onto the bike frame. It is very warm, hardly any wind. I stop just past the entrance to a farmhouse, whose owners fortunately don't seem to have a guard dog. The tyre repair begins. Take out the front wheel, lift the tyre on one side, remove the broken tube. Check the tyre for punctures, so that I don't end up destroying the spare tube like I did on the descent from the Glockner. I'm still about an hour away from home. I can't find anything, so I mount the spare tube, press it between the rim and the tyre, pump it up slightly so that it disappears more comfortably into the tyre without being squashed. The tyre is pulled back onto the rim. At first it's easy, but the last bit is really tough, the sun is burning and I'm sweating more than when I was riding because there's no wind. Eventually I make it. When the wheel is firmly anchored in the fork of the road bike, I pump it up with the small emergency pump. I now know what I'm in for. It's a slog again. The power in my arms is fading fast. With my last ounce of strength, I yank uncontrollably on the valve with the pump, wanting to get the job over with as quickly as possible. When the tyre is almost full, I hear it hiss. »Shit! What's that now? What a mess!« The valve is almost ripped off. It sucks big time! What am I supposed to do now? In the middle of nowhere, without another spare tube, an hour away from my flat. Totally depressed, I first sit down in the grass and think about what I can do. Valve off. Even with a complete repair kit, I couldn't glue the spot now. My bag of tricks is empty. But I'm a clever guy and head for the farm to ask around. Maybe someone can help me or, in the worst case, organise a taxi. Before I reach the entrance to the farm, however, an old man, surely a pensioner, passes by on his rode bike with a noticeable belly, who also has time to enjoy the sun on a day like this. He stops and

asks if he can help me. I say yes and explain the mishap I've gotten myself into. I can hardly believe it while he tells me that this year he rode a so-called RTF (a cycling tour that is signposted and offered by various clubs, but is not a race), and was in the same situation there and had a flat tyre twice. Since then, he says, he always has three, yes THREE spare tubes with him. He converted a water bottle as a place to hide his mobile phone inside together with tools and a spare tube. In addition, he has two more in his saddle bag, which is bigger than mine. He hands me a tube. I thank him and can hardly believe my luck.

»How much do I owe you?« I ask him. We cyclists are always on first name terms, no matter who the other is or what he does. It's like an unwritten law.

»Nothing, you can have it. I don't live far from here, I've got two other hoses with me, nothing else should burn,« says the old man, who is brimming with experience and always plays it safe.

»Thank you very much,« I can only reply, »you were sent from heaven.«

And let it be said that there are definitely angels on earth who are constantly watching you, looking out for you and helping out when you have a problem. I have to pinch myself to know that I'm not just dreaming this. It's all real. Unbelievable. While my good samaritan hurries away, I immediately set about repairing my bike for the second time. It takes a similar amount of time, and the tyre starts acting up again. This time I pump more carefully, without moving the valve too much, and finally manage to inflate the tyre, completely sweaty, but happy. I still can't believe what just happened to me. Where did that man come from? I hadn't met a single cyclist today, really not a single one, then this man with a belly comes out of nowhere and has THREE spare inner tubes with him. Nobody would believe me.

When I get home, I call Eva and tell her about what happened.

»That really was an apparition, Willy. As you say, maybe the man was your angel and became visible to you for a short time, because this time it didn't work without showing himself. Then you have an angel with a belly. Age doesn't matter with angels, they don't die anymore.« Slightly amused, she doesn't go into it any further, but I notice that she's in a good mood.

»I'm coming to visit you next week. I'm really excited and can hardly wait to see you. Time goes way too slowly for me. The days go by fast, but now it's not fast enough for me. I'll pick you up at the airport, if it's all right with you, sir.«

»That suits me just fine, my lady.« I give her my current flight details, which she immediately notes down.

»We'll talk again before then, but I'm looking forward to Sevilla with you.« We both make a smacking noise that is supposed to resemble a kiss, but probably doesn't sound like one. We both understand it anyway and say goodbye. Life is too short to worry about something like that.

Until my short trip, I can't give up cycling altogether and I'm already back on the road for a short ride after work.

It looks like rain. It will hold off, I hope that it doesn't pour directly down on me. I start off in a westerly direction and after an hour I reach a small hill. I constantly look to the right and left and watch the clouds to keep an eye on the situation in the sky so that I can turn back before a thunderstorm hits me. Something is brewing, definitely. I stop and turn around, because I have to head back in an easterly direction. My eyes can't believe what they see. On the horizon, estimated to be exactly where I need to go, a thick, dark cloud, quite lonely and isolated from others, freestanding. I can already see the rain shooting out of the dark patch in the sky like a grey veil, slightly slanting. Then a flash of lightning, followed later by thunder. What a spectacle. I don't want to be under the cloud now. I watch it a little longer and take a few photos. This monster approaches rapidly. The wind comes up. I immediately cycle home by the shortest route, as fast as possible. Regeneration doesn't matter. I'll do it later. My pulse is high. I'm heading straight for the thunderstorm! Or the thunderstorm towards me? Or we're both moving towards each other at the same time, like in a film scene in an underground garage, when two cars in a gangster film head towards each other and neither wants to swerve, until one of them pulls the steering wheel round at the end. I follow the path of the cloud with my eyes. It looks as if the wind is shifting and scooping the cloud out of my direction as if with an oversized hand. I am back in a positive mood that I might come home dry. In fact, I leave the monster to the left, where it drenches other landscapes, and pass

through a zone where you are allowed to drive a maximum of thirty kilometres an hour - because of children playing or to reduce noise. I'm doing a good thirty kilometres an hour. Suddenly a car comes up behind me and passes me. That was fast, probably a good fifty kilometres. That happens to me often - that drivers just see a cyclist and think they have to overtake him without looking at the speedometer. Someday I'm sure I'll witness someone like that being flashed by the police because he mistakenly thinks that all cyclists are travelling slowly, and then are surprised when they have to hand in their driving license for four weeks. Not my problem.

Chapter 37

The day has come. Finally. I pack my small suitcase, which passes for hand luggage. No sportswear this time. Just comfortable things, but also a jacket with light fabric trousers. I want to surprise Eva with a candlelight dinner, which was my Christmas present. In Spain you have to wear something other than jeans and sneakers. I'm in a good mood, I have butterflies in my stomach. While the suitcase is getting fuller and fuller and I'm thinking about what else I should take with me, there's mood music playing in the background by the band ART BRUT from the UK, one of the funniest I know. Unfortunately, I've never been to a concert by them before. Right now I'm listening to songs like »Arizona Bay« and »She Kissed Me (And It Felt Like a Hit)«. Because my emotional state allows it, songs like »Don't Look at Me (I Don't Like It)« and »The Big Bang« also follow. »Have You Ever Heard a Digital Accordion« by THE LOVELY EGGS, who don't take their lyrics too seriously either. Sleeping once more, doing a final check with Eva and looking forward to the wonderful time ahead - that's how I spend my last night before the day of departure. I wake up excited, have breakfast, rummage through the suitcase once more to make sure I haven't forgotten anything, then I finally lock it and leave with setting my house. Off I go to the airport. Without having to spend much time in queues, I am on the plane. It is a very good feeling to have butterflies in my stomach. I send a last message to Eva that there will almost certainly be no delay. Without wanting to, I get a seat by the window in a row of two. Until almost everyone has taken their seat, the chair next to me remains unoccupied. But suddenly a man comes up who looks Spanish and is looking for his seat number. There are several seats free, but I am the lucky one. The man is huge, very corpulent. He awkwardly heaves his hand luggage into the storage compartment above us. He nods briefly at me and presses himself into the seat. His knees touch the back of the seat in front of him. The guy must be over two metres tall. A very unpleasant smell of sweat comes up my nose. Oh great, my mind starts racing, how am I supposed to keep this up for the three hours of the flight? It's really disgusting. Luckily I'm very slim and can push myself towards the window. He sweats, either because he's afraid of flying or because his body can't cope with the mass. He breathes in short, quick successions, almost like I do when I'm on the first climb of the »King of Grossglockner«. The smell of body odour is no longer perceptible at some point, at least as long as he doesn't move.

I sit almost motionless for three hours looking out of the window, close my eyes, but don't fall asleep. I think about Eva the whole time. The anticipation is enormous. The plane lands punctually in Sevilla with a gentle, short squeak of the wheels. Some clap. Why? If I do my job well, no one claps! I don't give it a second thought, because I can hardly wait until my seatmate pushes himself out of the narrow seat. When he finally does, because the people at the front are starting to leave the plane, the sweet, but acrid smell wafts around my nose. I screw up my face for a moment and turn away. As there is no connecting flight, I sit relaxed and wait until most of the people are outside. I will overtake the people anyway, as I only have hand luggage and don't have to wait for a big suitcase. I orientate myself by the signs in the arrivals area and look for the word »Salida« for Exit, briefly visit the toilet, freshen up before I leave the security area. My eyes scan the people standing at the Exit. Eva should be standing somewhere. My heart is pounding. What will she look like? Nervous, I haven't turned on my mobile phone yet. I don't see a familiar face. Suddenly I hear my name from behind on the right, then I see an outstretched hand, and a small, blonde, incredibly good-looking woman walks towards me. With an insanely natural laugh, her eyes with joy, she approaches me. I immediately

leave my small wheeled suitcase and walk towards Eva. With a smile, I sincerely hope that the smell of my seat neighbour has not passed on to me.

Eva's blonde hair is loose, she's wearing comfortable shoes, no make-up and a colourful, short dress hugs her legs. She literally jumps at me with open arms. We cling to each other like monkeys to their babies in the jungle. The momentum is enough to make me turn left. Her legs come off the ground, I spin away and fling her around me, almost like you know it from schmaltzy films. Her legs whirl through the air like a chain merry-go-round. Our cheeks touch. I gently lower her down. When she is back on the floor, we kiss intimately and fiercely. We press each other with great force, unable to believe what is happening. After such a long time of physical abstinence. Although a personal meeting couldn't take place for ages, we got to know each other even better through emails, messages and phone calls. Such a great trust has developed between us that I would never have thought possible. I had feared that we had become a little estranged and that we would have to slowly bring our feelings back to full speed. But these worries were unfounded. Without warming up to full throttle, like after the start of a bike race. I am thrilled. I don't even notice the people around me anymore.

»Oh man, how I have waited for this moment! In the end, I just stared at the arrivals display at the airport and followed your flight, counting every minute until your plane touched Spanish ground. I missed you so much!«

»I did too, Evita. After so long, to finally see you again, to hold you in my arms, to feel you ... oh ... I'm so happy ... you look simply fantastic, mi amor.«

»Thank you. You seem to have slimmed down a bit more, didn't you?« she asks - in that husky, Spanish voice. »I have to admit that I lost another two kilos without having planned it. All the cycling I do, all the calories I burn, I can't possibly replenish them.«

We take each other's hands, fingers spread apart, so that our fingers alternate between hers and mine. With my free hand, I pull the suitcase behind me. Outsiders see a newly in love, happy couple leaving the airport and walking to a small car in the car park. The luggage quickly disappears into the boot, we kiss once more before Eva goes left and I go right to the car doors. Her sat nav has already saved the address of my hotel. She must be as organised as I am. A woman's voice shows us the way in Spanish. The traffic gets heavier. Although Sevilla is a big city, we make good time. It's late afternoon, in Germany it's almost dinner time, in Spain you're the first in the restaurant when you enter it at 9 pm.

Eva drives well and parks skillfully in front of the hotel in the car park for guests. Hand in hand, we set off in the direction of the entrance. We are greeted by a large entrance hall covered with marble. It is immediately unaccustomedly cool. The air-conditioning system is running at full blast. I give my name, hand over my identity card so they can make a copy. The guy at reception looks at his screen, contorts his face a little. His eyebrows move to the base of his nose, his brow furrowed.

»Mr. Gruber Willy, you booked a single room, right?« he asks me in Spanish, looking at Eva in amazement.

»Yes, that's true,« I let him know in Spanish, but he doesn't really understand me. At least he looks at us questioningly. Whether it's my bad pronunciation or the situation overwhelms him, I don't know at that moment.

»That's right.« Eva helps me to resolve the situation. »Willy is my boyfriend and is visiting me for a few days. I'm from Sevilla and I'm staying with my parents here.« The receptionist nods, probably thinking to himself that Eva is a lady from the street. When I finally get the access card to my room on the tenth floor, we go to the lift.

»I reckon he thinks you're a prostitute! What do you think? Or why did he look so stupid?«

»Yes, I think so, too.« We both laugh out loud as the sliding doors of the lift close. We go upstairs, jump into each other's arms and kiss. The mirrors around us watch us confidently without blushing. With a bright PING, the lift stops and the doors open automatically. In a long corridor we search for number 1004, pass through many doors and finally stand in front of the room. With a short click, like when I click my racing shoes into the pedals, the door opens. It is cold. I immediately turn the air conditioner down, otherwise I'm sure to get sick. Eva immediately gets goose bumps on her arms. I hug her and alternately rub away her cold feeling with my hand so that she feels warm. The room is

spacious. A bed stands in the middle of the room, in the corner there is a chair in front of a desk with a lamp. An ordinary, clean room, and also with a balcony. We pull aside the curtains, open the sliding door, step outside and are stunned by the sight. Sevilla below us. Eva comes up behind me, puts one arm around my waist. The other arm is used to explain the city to me a little, at least the section we see in front of us. Far in the back we see the Plaza de Toros, the largest arena for bullfights in Spain, as she explains to me. We see the big river called Guadalquivir, whose name I can hardly pronounce, and the Torre del Oro, the golden tower from the 12th century.

»At the time, it was part of the Moorish city walls of Sevilla and served as a depository for gold, also as a prison, and now houses a small maritime museum,« Eva explains.

»The Moors had Spain in their grip for several centuries. A lot remains rooted in the culture,« I tell her smartly, as if I know a lot about it. We start hugging and kissing again. We can't let go of each other. Clutching each other, we go back to the now warm room. Eva starts to take off my T-shirt, strokes my upper body. We take off our shoes and fall onto the bed, entwined. We enjoy showing each other our feelings.

»This was the best thing that could have happened to me,« I say to Eva as I turn to her. I watch her as she gets dressed. She smiles back. »I'm also overjoyed that we found each other. This has been a long time coming,« she says, laughing again in her raspy voice.

When we are both dressed once again, we leave the hotel hand in hand and feel the questioning look at our backs that the man behind the reception desk throws at us. Grinning, we get into Eva's car. We drive to the Triana district, on the other side of the river, the centre of Flamenco, I am told.

»We'll look at Flamenco another time,« Eva says. »Okay? Because today I just want to sit at a table with you alone, enjoy the time and talk to you.«

»I love women who know what they want. I can't wait to see where you take me.«

It is still very warm in Sevilla. She parks in an underground car park. When we come upstairs, we are standing in the middle of a network of buildings where I would never find my way out on my own if she left me standing here. She knows that for sure. At the moment I have the feeling that she has me in the palm of her hand and I have to follow and trust her. That's not a problem for me, on the contrary. It has already become dark. The many lights shining from the windows on the buildings opposite and the music coming from the open balconies create a dreamlike scene. We are locked in embrace as we move along, we dive deeper and deeper into the three-dimensional painting. I enjoy it. We arrive at a tapas bar. Under the trees, tables are ready and waiting to be occupied by guests. I'm really hungry now and mighty thirsty. We sit down, both facing the promenade, next to each other. A quick kiss, then the waitress arrives.

»Hola Jorge«, Eva greets the man. They kiss each other on the cheeks. No need to be jealous, that's normal here between friends. They chat briefly in Spanish. I can catch a few snatches like »my boyfriend from Germany«, »Visiting for a few days«, »hungry«. Not bad, I think to myself. No one can fool me that easily. Eva introduces me to him, we shake hands, say »mucho gusto« (pleased to meet you) and take a look at the tapas menu. While I try to make sense of the descriptions of the many different tapas, Eva explains: »Don't worry. He is an old school friend. We've known each other since first grade. I know this place has the best tapas in Sevilla. That's why I brought you out here today.«

»I'm glad you're still in touch after such a long time,« I reply. »Things look bleak for me. Since I moved away, my old circle of friends has completely dissolved.« Here, there is neither a non-alcoholic wheat beer for me, nor an apple spritzer for her. Tap water is always served free of charge in Spain. That's why today we decide to drink a glass of red wine in honour of the occasion for both of us, and really just one glass. Eva still has to drive. I'm happy to leave the ordering to my girlfriend, although I'm sure I could order in Spanish so that we wouldn't go hungry. But it's quicker this way, and I'm sure there won't be anything touristy, but I'm hoping for the purest selection of typical dishes from Sevilla, Eva's home town. Jorge arrives with water, two glasses of wine and a small plate of fresh olives to start us off, so to speak.

»I think I'm in heaven, Eva. Honestly. You're such a wonderful woman, on the outside and on the inside. You're amazing. I love your raspy voice, which is so typical of Spanish women.« I grin. »I know you want to stay with your sick grandma. I don't want to put any pressure on you, okay? Don't get me wrong. It's cool. It's just, since we don't want to maintain a long-distance relationship forever -

are you coming back to Germany? I'm also asking about your flat. It's been empty for months and you're paying rent unnecessarily.«

Eva spits an olive stone into her hand and lets it fall onto the plate next to her.

»The subject has been on my mind for a long time. Unfortunately, I don't have an explicit time for you, BUT...« she emphasises, »I am already planning to return to Germany. And now I have another good reason to do it, and that's YOU, Willy.«

I place my right hand on her thigh and squeeze a little. She twitches briefly, I immediately let go again. Our heads move towards each other, our lips touch. But we are abruptly forced apart by Jorge, because he comes with many small plates full of tapas and puts them on the table with a smile.

Eva explains the individual tapas and one after the other disappears into my mouth. My hunger is enormous and must be satisfied. Eva looks at me puzzled, but eventually understands.

»Salud, Eva, to both of us and our future, which is still unknown. « With these words I raise my glass, we toast and take a sip. The red wine is delicious.

»Sounds almost dramatic, Willy. But in a way it's true. Our future is unknown, only I am sure THAT we will have a future together. Don't you think?«

»Sure, I totally agree with you. We'll find a way. Where there's a will ... you know!« I wink at her.

My stomach is slowly filling up. Jorge keeps bringing more and more different tapas. Eva is also busy helping herself.

»You're only here for three nights. Unfortunately. I'd like to introduce you to my family, but I wanted to ask you first, because I'd understand if you said no.« She looks at me with a pleading expression on her face, like a child who wants to wrap her parents around her finger in order to achieve something specific. Such a dachshund look is in front of my face right now.

»Sure,« I answer, »I've already seen them in the picture from Christmas. They all seem nice. Not like they would eat me.«

As if on cue, a winning smile appears on her sweet face, her green eyes standing out clearly as they are illuminated by a streetlight.

»They would like to take you to lunch tomorrow. But don't worry, we're going to a restaurant. A nurse will look after my grandma until then. It's more informal. What do you think?«

»Sure, that's fine, I always will accept free food,« I laugh, bring my right hand over her shoulder to her neck and gently pull her upper body towards me. We kiss as if we need confirmation of our agreement.

Then Eva insists on paying for our meal. Self-consciously and as if it were a matter of course, she settles the bill, says goodbye to Jorge, and we leave. Hip to hip, we walk closely together along the pedestrian zone, in step, back to the parking garage. The atmosphere is immense. The dim light of the street lamps, the trees that border the shopping area like an avenue. The two of us in the midst of the many people, the sky above us black, cloudless. The brightest stars look at us from a distance. Eva pays the parking ticket at the machine in front of the stairs of the underground car park. Immediately the building engulfs us as the door slams shut behind. It reminds me of the starting gun at the race. The car is quickly found. We get in, pause, turn to each other, kiss and hold deep eye contact in the dim light, and I say to Eva:

»Te amo.«

»You're only saying that now because I paid for dinner.« You have to love her humour. I laugh. »Yes, because of that, too, but just as seriously. The butterflies in my stomach have grown into a horde of pterosaurs.«

»So much for being serious.« She laughs too, then kisses me again, takes my head in both hands, looks deep into my eyes and says:

»Te amo, and I'm serious, too.«

A short kiss back. »That's finally settled,« I joke. We happily leave the underground car park before the ticket is no longer valid. Eva delivers me to the front of the hotel, but of course not before we give each other a big hug. After a sweet goodbye kiss, we part ways.

»Willy,« she calls after me before I close the door, »I'll come and pick you up for lunch tomorrow at about 1 pm. I'll study a bit more in the morning and you can sleep in. «

»Great, thanks, we'll do that. I'll check out the town in the morning ... I've been here before years ago, so I will survive. See you tomorrow, mi amor!« Waving I move away from Eva, her car, her smell and her humour. As I cross the reception hall in the direction to the lift, my gaze meets that of the gentleman at the reception from earlier. I just smile; he draws his own conclusion. Once upstairs, I go out onto the balcony and enjoy the view of Sevilla at night - a sea of dew-sending bright spots, some of them flickering wildly. Up here on the balcony, I feel like Leonardo DiCaprio on the Titanic right now. I raise my arms and shout, »I am the king of the world!« Only I'm missing Eva for the perfect illusion. Too bad.

The breakfast here is plentiful. You could easily go for a long bike ride afterwards, the selection is so varied and healthy. I treat myself to a muesli with dried fruit, an egg, a cappuccino, a glass of orange juice, a banana, then two slices of bread with butter and honey. That's usually enough for four hours of cycling. But today I don't get anything to eat until late; lunch in Spain is around 2 pm. I found out the best way to get from the hotel to the Alcázar Real de Sevilla. I've always wanted to see it, as we didn't make it back from the language course years ago. It is located in the old Jewish quarter of Santa Cruz, where you can also find one of the largest cathedrals in the world, the Catedral de Santa María de la Sede. The Alcázar Palace is a Moorish building with the typical small tiles that decorate the walls and arches in a Moorish style. The small gardens and also the vaulted ceilings are impressive. The palace was built in the 11th century onwards and was constantly enlarged in the Middle Ages. Eva writes that she will meet me shortly before 2 o'clock in front of the hotel. She waits in front of it, she stresses, otherwise we might not make it to lunch on time ... wink emoji. Next to it she puts a heart. She has a sense of humour, but is also a realist.

The time passes quickly. I can walk around and see everything and then go back to the hotel. There I freshen up, change my T-shirt and leave my hotel shortly before the agreed time, whereby the same receptionist looks at me strangely again. Probably because there is no Eva this time. She comes around the corner, honks the horn briefly, waves wildly from the car, flashes her lights as if I'm blind and can't recognise her immediately. I hurry up to her, open the passenger door, kiss her as a greeting, before we can say »Hola«. That's how it is with couples in love. Today Eva has tied her hair back in a ponytail and is once again wearing a dress that shows off her legs in the colour of blue.

»Hello, how are you? How's the learning going?« I ask.

»Very difficult, I have a lot of catching up to do. How was your morning without me? Boring, I'm sure...« she says and smiles at me seductively.

»Sure, without you everything is boring. But I was able to make good use of the time and finally see the Alcázar Palace. It's quite something, isn't it?«

»I completely agree with you. Next to the cathedral, it's the most important landmark in Sevilla.« In a good mood she accelerates, turns left and right in a totally confusing way for me, shoots through the narrowest alleys of Sevilla. I have no idea where we are right now on the imaginary map. Well, Eva is certainly not going to kidnap me. Suddenly she stops, reverses into a parking space, turns off the engine and unfastens her seatbelt. She turns to me, a kiss follows. She says: »You know, my parents are really cool. Don't worry, don't be nervous, I've already told them a lot about you, at least everything I know so far.«

»Good to know, except you already know a lot and that makes me nervous.« I smile at her. »But I'll get through it, you just have to help me with the Spanish and I'll be fine, but at least let me try... to learn and practise, okay?«

»All right, let's get in there!« We leave the car park, walk with our hands entwined to the restaurant. The area is very cosy. I'm sure hardly any tourists stray here. That's exactly the kind of thing I love. With the Christmas photo in mind, I try to recognise the family at the crowded tables, but I can't. Eva says something to the waiter that I don't understand. Immediately he leads us through the room, turns right and - bingo! - Eva's family is sitting in the back. Everyone smiles. I hope it's not just out of politeness. I smile as well and I am introduced by Eva. She introduces me to her dad, her mum and her much younger sister, who I think bears a little resemblance to Eva. We sit down. Eva takes a seat next to me. The initial pleasantries are interrupted by the delivery of drinks and food. As expected, the questioning starts, which I try to answer in Spanish. This obviously works better than thought of. Maybe it's because Eva has put her hand on my thigh. This seems to have

created a kind of knowledge interface. I put my hand over it, so that she doesn't pull it away and I lose my Spanish in one fell swoop. Fortunately, the family speaks very slowly to me, which makes things much easier. The food is great. There is a vegetable soup as a starter, called gazpacho, then many plates come at once, from which everyone is allowed to take something. Cheese, the famous Jamón Ibérico ham, anchovy fillets, spinach with chickpeas seasoned with cumin appear. »All food for sport, healthy, rich in vitamins and protein, low in carbohydrates,« I share my facts. They all know about my plan, my ambition and how we got to know each other. There are special biscuits for dessert, and Eva and I treat ourselves to another espresso, which is called Café Solo here. As we leave the restaurant with well-filled stomachs, I thank the family for the invitation, shake hands with each of them, hug her mother and sister with a kiss on the cheek. Then we part ways.

»It was a really nice lunch,« I say to Eva. »Wonderful family. Open minded, not so conservative. I get on well with them, I'd say. Did you hear how well it worked out with my language skills?«

She presses a kiss to my lips. »That was really amazing. Maybe I should just talk to you in Spanish as well.« She winks at me expertly, without moving a single facial muscle. Her eyelid drops slightly.

»What do we do now?« I ask.

»I don't know how I'm going to manage with school. You'll only be here for a short time, so I'll take the afternoon off and we'll spend the rest of the day together. In the evening, I thought we could go to a flamenco bar after dinner. What do you think?«

»Great idea, only I don't like to be blamed if you don't pass the exam. Otherwise, I'm in. I still owe you that candlelight dinner from Christmas. Let's do it today, shall we?« Now I wink at her, but my entire face slips into a grimace, which makes her laugh out loud. »You need to practise that.« She's right.

We drive back to the hotel, park. As I follow her towards the entrance, I admire her hips, which move from left to right almost like models. The sliding door opens and the familiar man behind the marble counter smiles at us again. I take Eva's hand to make it clear that she is my girlfriend rather than a lady who takes money. We snort to each other as we approach the lift. Once in the room, we sit down on the bed, side by side, very close. We take off our shoes. Eva looks at me with the sweetest smile, I suspect something serious is coming now.

»You know I have this little flat in Germany. But I can't estimate when I'll be back. That depends a lot on my grandmother. I just want to be with her as long as possible. That's why I gave notice to leave the flat. The landlord doesn't insist that it be painted or anything. I'm just supposed to clear everything out, I can leave the furniture, he's already bought it from me. Now it comes ... if I give you the key, could you please clear out my entire flat for me - to be precise, it's only thirty measly square metres - and put the stuff up at your place until I'm back in Germany?«

On the one hand, this is a wise decision, on the other hand, it means that I have to keep her things with me indefinitely and that I am responsible if I forget anything. »Basically, that's a very wise decision. I think it's great. But I have to ask you how much it will be. Because my flat is twice as big, but I don't have much space either.«

»Well, a few documents, contracts, papers, my road bike, mountain bike, clothes, shoes. You can throw away the plants. Nobody watered them anyway. A few pictures on the wall, vases and other decorative items.« She kisses me again, as if to persuade me to take over the task.

»That already sounds like a lot. I can put the bikes in the cellar. The rest I'll sell little by little on the Internet.«

What was meant as a joke does not come across as such to her. »Come on. It's really not much. I don't have a ton of shoes like many other women. And due to lack of space, I couldn't acquire too much clothing either. Look at it sportingly.« There's that smile again.

»Of course I'll do it for you. The main reason is that when you come back, you have to move in with me and we can plan our future together. That motivates me. I can't wait for the day when that happens.«

»That's how I see it, too. Maybe I'll come in a few weeks. Thank you, mi amor. It means a lot to me.« I kiss her and we drop onto the bed. We make love again.

We didn't notice that the darkness outside was trying to break into our room from the balcony. We look at the clock. »Come on, we have to go. I've booked a table and afterwards we're going to

Flamenco,« Eva startles me. When we both get out of the shower and face each other naked, Eva has to laugh heartily. I look puzzled. »What's so funny now?«

»Look at us. You look like when people take the pictures off the wall in an old house after decades and behind them everything is originally white. Your tan marks, your feet ... like you have white socks on ... the arms, the legs ...« I look down at myself and can understand the reason for her laughter. She also has such lighter spots, but more on the breasts and around her bottom. I see that she wears a very skimpy bikini. But hello! She obviously neglects cycling. We quickly get dressed, almost fleeing from the hotel. There is another man at the reception desk who hardly pays any attention to us this time. Today I'm wearing my more elegant outfit, which goes great with Eva's dress. When we arrive at the restaurant, we sit down at the table, hold hands, look into each other's eyes, which appear dark in the dimmed light. This is what true love looks like, I think to myself. We are happy, order, eat, drink a glass of wine each, toast to each other. After I have paid the bill today, we leave the cosy restaurant.

After a short walk through the small streets, I can already hear the flamenco music coming from the houses. Suddenly Eva presses me against the wall of a house, takes my head between her hands, presses her hips against mine and kisses me almost brutally. She literally falls over me. I just let her. The spectacle doesn't last long. We are sucked in by the music through the entrance next door. A dark, small shed. There are only a few tables with chairs around, a bar in the back corner and a slightly raised, wooden stage. The walls are decorated with pictures of flamenco dancers, guitar players, groups wearing the typical costumes, who have been performing in the same environment for generations. My nose picks up the typical smell of the ancient wood of the walls, which has permeated the stifling air of the endless parties, but still radiates. People used to smoke here.

»The flamenco music still comes from loudspeakers,« says Eva, »but soon a well-known group will perform here.«

»Cool, great, thanks for having me!« »Forget the invitation,« she says laughing, »that's your Christmas present handed to me, so you pay!«

We order something to drink and try to cope with the volume of the music, which works to some extent. A short time later, we applaud the protagonists of the troupe on stage. Two guitar players and a woman. The applause fades away. It begins very quietly, restrained. I can follow the swinging movements of the woman in the red flamenco dress. She skillfully turns her hands, from which sounds like rattlesnakes emerge. I learn that these are castanets. She stamps violently on the floor with her sturdy shoes. An apartment building would be out of the question for such a dance. There would always be a neighbour at the door complaining about the knocking.

The guitars get louder. Another performer comes on stage. He starts clapping rhythmically. The chants sound strange to me, they have more of an oriental touch. But there's something special about the way they get such a rhythm out of just two guitars. I like it, Eva obviously does too. We put our hands one on top of the other on her thigh, she moves her foot to the beat. The evening ends too quickly. The show is over, Eva takes us back to the hotel after the great experience.

»Willy, do you think I could stay at your place tonight? Shall we ask if that's possible?«

»That's possible, sure, let's ask. I can pay extra for breakfast tomorrow. Come on!« We politely ask if Eva's overnight stay would be possible. Luckily it is not our darling receptionist, but an understanding colleague who gives his yes behind the counter. The night is not only hot because I have switched off the air conditioning.

Eva took the whole next day off. The first breakfast together. We enjoy every minute, talk a lot. We walk through Sevilla. She shows me her city, we go to less touristy areas, but sometimes we just sit quietly next to each other by the river and let our thoughts run free. We get through the day perfectly with tapas. I can hardly believe how well we fit together. Different cultures, different countries, different languages, and yet it works incredibly. We continue to make the most of the hours, are back at the hotel and pass the time not only with kind words.

»Willy, unfortunately, I can't accompany you to the airport tomorrow. We have to say goodbye after dinner. I have an exam tomorrow. I don't know if I'll pass, but I'll try in any case. I'm not a quitter either. I'm just like you described yourself: I have to compensate for a lack of talent with diligence. Unfortunately, that was missing these days. It's your fault!«

»I know that. You'll do it. It's a shame that we have to say goodbye soon, but it was an unforgettable time with you. The flight leaves very early. What do you think about having dinner at the hotel now?»

»Great idea. I'm in.«

We get ready, go downstairs and are taken to a table. The mood changes. It tips a little. We are both sad that my short holiday is already over.

»Before I forget ... here is the key to my flat. The landlord is informed. You have a week to clear out all my stuff.« Eva slides an envelope over to me as she forms a kissy mouth. »There's also a phone number in case you need help from the landlord. It'll be fine. Thank you so much for everything!«

»No problem, Evita, I'd be happy to. But don't kill me if I add wrinkles to your collection of clothes.« I have to laugh out loud at my joke. She joins in. We hold hands and kiss. I have the bill for the meal written to the room. It's time to say goodbye. We get up, walk to her car, hug, make out like crazy, but eventually we have to let go. Eva cries.

»I miss you already. My tears are not only sadness, but also thanks for making me so very happy.«

I am deeply moved by her words. I did not expect this from Eva. She has always been a strong woman up to now.

»I love you. Everything will happen as should. We'll manage it. We'll stay in touch, you'll continue to give me instructions about my training, and who knows, maybe next year you'll be in Austria with me. I would be more than happy when that happens.«

»Sure, I'll push you to new heights, write you a tough workout plan that you'll hate me for!«

With the last shared laugh, our tears also gradually dry in the evening heat. Last hug.

»Have a good flight tomorrow. I love you, take care.«

»You too, good luck with the exam. Te amo.«

With these words she gets into the car, buckles up, starts the engine and with renewed tears she leaves the parking lot, leaving me standing in the dark. I watch her for a long time as the taillights of her car disappear in the maze of traffic and lights. She is gone. I am also close to tears and go up to the room, pack my things for the return flight tomorrow morning. What a great holiday! Almost unreal. I ask myself if I deserve this. No, not if, but what I have done to deserve it. There is no question that I have earned it. Self-confident as I am.

The next day dawns, I check out, the famous hotel clerk, who kept looking strangely at Eva and I, wishes me a safe journey home. I'm sure he's glad I'm gone. It's just a feeling.

Hours later, I am on the plane home with a wealth of impressions of the beautiful city of Sevilla and even deeper memories of Eva. This time, a middle-aged woman sits next to me, but she has headphones on from start to finish. She doesn't even greet me. So I don't have to say anything, which I prefer to then having to talk to people who talk your ear off for hours and don't give you a moment's peace. Therefore I can look back on the few days and come to the conclusion that they were very intense and unforgettable. The relationship with Eva was strengthened, which is very good. Nevertheless, I have to think about my training again. I still haven't reached my goal. This year it was already very close. I'm waiting for new instructions from Eva, and until then I'll just keep on riding with my own gusto so that I stay in shape.

Chapter 38

At noon on Saturday, when I'm back home, my hunger is immediately satisfied while I chat briefly with Eva. After days without music, I listen to the songs »Listen to CDs« and »It's A Cycle« by THE ZOLTARS from the USA. Afterwards I get a flashback to the time of the Italian Westerns. Ennio Morricone has unfortunately passed away, but the same mood is conveyed by the band from Iceland called TRABANTS, which I discovered only recently. So great, especially the songs »Last Man Standing« and »Sunset Rider«.

Autumn is already around the corner. Unfortunately, I couldn't take the warmth from Spain with me in my suitcase, so I have to get used to the freshness on my bike again. Despite the coolness, it is dry. I have to remember John F. Kennedy's saying: »Nothing compares to the simple pleasure of riding a bike«. I have to agree with him. It simply feels good. My body has digested the break well. Without any real plan, I chase through my immediate haze, feel my legs and let it rip now and then. The roads are mostly small farm tracks, there are trees on the left, wide fields pass me by on the right. I'm quickly on my way. The upcoming left-hand bend in the road demands all my attention. Suddenly I have to brake sharply. I can't believe my eyes. A tractor appears out of nowhere. The driver honks and flashes his headlights. The road is narrow, normally I would just drive past the vehicle on the right, but I have to brake because the farmer has not folded up his tractor arm as usual, but has extended it as if he were working in the fields. There is absolutely no room for me. He brakes, I also slam the brakes like hell and come to a halt in the ditch, without falling, but on the verge of a heart attack. It turns out that the man is just driving from one field to the other and wanted to save the time to bring the tractor arm in. »It's not far,« he says. Funny guy! I didn't expect that I would have to try my luck on the very first ride. But my big-bellied guardian angel was probably in the right place at the right time. Thank you!

It's Sunday. The free time is spent on my bike. There is something sepia-toned about the atmosphere with the low sun and the high maize, so yellowish beige, almost cosy. I can constantly feel spider webs on my bike, entangled in my face. I ride on open roads, yet there are many of these flying threads of young canopy spiders in the air, many insects are also on the move. A few of those animals smash into my helmet when I cut directly into its flight path. Sorry, Guys! Then all of a sudden it goes very fast. Something gets caught between the root of my nose and my cycling glasses. A stinging pain. I can't stop immediately because I'm passing a complicated spot. I pause at the side of the road far too late, take off my glasses and realise that my fingers feel a furry animal as they go to the point of pain. Crap, damn it! A wasp or bee has stung me near the eye. I awkwardly try to remove the sting, but a short time later I know that I have only increased the venom under my skin. Okay, the pain is bearable. I don't think much about it, put my glasses back on and drive home by the shortest route, which takes another hour and a half. In the bathroom I look in the mirror and see that the stinger is still in there. Now I pull it out more skillfully and only see the puncture, nothing else. That could have literally blown up in my face! Relief spreads. In the evening I mentally prepare myself for the start of work the next day, before that I talk to Eva on the phone. »I probably screwed up the exam,« she says disappointedly after we've finished our greetings.

»Don't cry, Eva. We still had very nice days together. It's not the end of the world. When can you retake the exam if you really failed?«

»I've already checked on that. It seems that it won't happen until March next year.«

»Then you will surely have to stay in Spain until March, won't you?,« I ask and have an uneasy feeling in my stomach.

»It would be important for me to finish it. But don't worry, I'm thinking every day about how and when I can come back to Germany. We'll see. Please don't put me under pressure.«

»No, you can rest assured. I'll clear out your flat first, then I'll have a bit of you near me,« I pep her up again. Depressed, the conversation continues for a while until we embrace virtually, kiss and disconnect. My thoughts circle while I try to fall asleep.

The next morning I wake up. My face feels strange. The right eye is completely closed shut. I touch my nose, my cheek, look in the mirror in the bathroom shortly afterwards and don't recognise myself. A monster is looking back at me! My whole face is distorted, the right eye is swollen shut, my nose looks as if it has no beginning, but is growing forward from the forehead without a base. I can't see any contours on the nose with my left eye opened. My face is so deformed that it is a real joy. A Hollywood monster-maker couldn't have done it better. Yesterday's bee sting has obviously triggered an allergic reaction in me. Oh, great! I take a photo of my unknown face and send it to Eva with a smiley emoji. Later, my doctor gives me a cortisone injection so that the swelling goes down. Afterwards I go to the office with the grimace, listen to all the annoying comments, according to the

motto: »Don't mock the afflicted.« I'm above that. It's only for a limited time. I'll just give up cycling for a few days. It's good that there's no race coming up, otherwise I'd be doped up on cortisone.

Three days later, the situation has fortunately changed, but not really improved. The swelling is moving from the top to the bottom. At least I can see a bit with my right eye again. When I look in the mirror, it's like painting a face with watercolours on a glass and then spraying it with water until the contours drift downwards. Of course, I send a daily update on the changes to Spain to lighten the mood. We laugh together.

One evening after work I go to Eva's flat, which is really well laid out. There's not much to do, fortunately. I talk to Eva, show her a few things with my mobile phone camera so that she can decide what to do with them. For the time being, I just take the two bikes, a stylish lamp that's close to Eva's heart, and a comfortable chair. I'll pick up the rest at the weekend, when I've got some suitable bags. I tidy up my flat to accommodate her things by decluttering my wardrobe as well. Many shirts and trousers that I haven't worn for two years are going into a donation container. This creates enough space for Eva's clothes in no time at all. After all, I don't want her clothes to stagnate in a rubbish bag. The lamp fits in seamlessly with my living room furnishings, the chair will go into the bedroom for the time being and a few days later, my clothes pile up so that you can hardly recognise this new four-legged friend. It actually really doesn't look that bad. At least I can use it that way. My face has almost regained its original shape, my eye is completely open again. Laughing is also easier. Eva had to laugh out loud when she saw the first photo, only to worry shortly afterwards about whether I was all right. In retrospect it was really funny. If that had happened to her, I would have been amused, too. It looked too funny.

Armed with rubbish bags, I went back in Eva's flat at the weekend. I packed a few books into boxes, the wardrobe is quickly emptied, the bathroom was already almost free of cosmetics and creams, because she took them with her to Spain. My car fills up. Now the drawers, where I pull out and secure important documents. In another chest of drawers, I open a slipcase, but it stupidly falls out and all her underwear spills out on the floor. Although I'm alone, I'm ashamed to mess around in it. But I am very pleased with what I see. My lady of the heart has taste. I pack everything up, then pull off the bed, call Eva and go through the almost empty room with the camera. She gives me the green light and thanks me a thousand times for this action.

»I was happy to do it for you,« I explain. »Te amo. I hope your things feel comfortable in my flat and get used to the new surroundings.«

»I'm trying everything now to pass the exam at the next deadline in March. Because I actually failed, and I miss you, too.« She holds an extra sad face up to the camera. Her flat is history. I hand over the keys to the landlord and sign a piece of paper. That's it. He has my number in case he finds anything else that doesn't belong to him.

Chapter 39

After my car is cleared out, I immediately start sorting. Her clothes almost all fit in my wardrobe. A drawer also becomes free where I can put all her underwear. »Hey, I can't wait to see you in these clothes.« To explain, I take a photo and send it to her. The whole thing took less time than I had feared. Her bikes are next to my road bike, so they get to know each other in the basement. In the evening my mobile phone rings. It's Timo.

»Hi Timo, how are things? I haven't heard from you in a while! «

»Great, all good. I just wanted to ask if we could go for a ride together at the weekend before the weather gets bad.«

»Sure, agreed, just drive, chat a bit. Where?«

We agree on a time and a place we both know. Then I get another fright because a message comes in while I'm hanging up. So you can't get it any more simultaneous than that. It's from my Eva. »You little rascal. But of course I'll play model for you and show you the parts.« Two smileys and

three hearts follow. With this anticipation, I tidy up the rest of the apartment and clean the bathroom.

The joint ride out with Timo works out great, as we are still riding at a similar level. We constantly take turns in the slipstream and achieve a solid, high average speed. The sun is low and the roads are very dirty because the farmers lose a lot of soil from the fields with their tractors. Every now and then you have to be careful and take evasive action or hold the handlebars tightly so that the wheel doesn't jump if you simply ride over it. On the way back we come to a straight part of the road, the sun is close to the horizon, but at the moment it is shining on our backs, casting a long shadow ahead. It is a narrow road, so that even two normal cars have to slow down if they want to pass each other. We are approached by a »normal« cyclist towards me. At a leisurely pace. Suddenly an old, large convertible approaches her. The cyclist doesn't notice anything at first. Then it happens very quickly. The man with a gold chain around his neck, cigarette in his mouth, left elbow on the driver's door, only one hand on the steering wheel. The scene passes as if in slow motion, as if a music video was being shot for a new rap song. The driver doesn't brake, pulls into the middle of the road, comes closer and closer, much too fast, and overtakes the woman. Timo and I have the presence of mind to drive off the road to the right and come to a stop in the ditch. Fortunately, no one fell. The woman made it, too. The convertible driver didn't react at all, didn't flinch for a moment. He must have been so dazzled by the sun that he didn't notice anything. But rapper or not, he wasn't wearing sunglasses. A rapper without sunglasses should be forbidden. It's visually unacceptable. What a yob! It's good that Timo recognised the situation at the same time as me, even though he didn't have a good view ahead in the slipstream. Back on the road, we reel off the rest easily and say good-bye to each other. I was able to tell him a little about Spain and Eva during the ride, while he described his other races to me. He doesn't seem to have a girlfriend.

Life goes on unspectacularly. Eva and I exchange stories; we are in constant contact. As agreed, I receive the first new instructions for further training by email, with the aim of finally being able to achieve my goal next year. For the first time, targeted strength training is on the agenda. I'm supposed to gradually reduce the amount of cycling I do and at the same time increase the hours I spend in the gym. She suggests leg strength and core strengthening. She sent me a few videos. I should get a fascia roller as soon as possible and use it according to her instructions, as well as stretching. She explains to me that only a stretched muscle can develop its full strength. That's actually logical. A short muscle is already contracted. How can it still contract? If, on the other hand, it is stretched, much more contraction is possible. This results in more power. I'm thrilled that I'm getting some variety in my training. Ambitious as I am, I don't wait for weeks before I start, but get a roll right away. The exercises hurt brutally. I check with Eva to see if this is normal and if I can just continue. She says yes with a derisive laugh, another typical Eva laugh, the kind I love. I understood. I have to go through it, not overdo it, but go into the pain. Both legs are the same, but there are parts of the muscles that work better than others, they cause less pain. Sometimes I can't understand why I always go through with it, why I put up with the pain and keep going. Others would have thrown in the towel long ago. But if there's a chance of success later on, I'm happy to endure it. It is definitely worth it, because after four weeks of almost daily use of the roll, it finally becomes bearable.

I sign up for six months at the gym, go twice a week. After the first few times, I get a sore butt from the squats, the likes of which I've never experienced before. Getting out of bed is extremely tedious and painful. Every step of the stairs is torture. Man, that everything always has to hurt so much. I can hardly believe it. But I guess that's how we athletes are, that's what sets us apart: We don't stop at pain.

One day later I'm back on my usual training machine. I've never cycled with sore muscles before, but I try it anyway. It's supposed to be good to loosen up the muscles. That's when you notice which muscles are pushing or pulling with which pedaling motion. My buttocks are used surprisingly a lot and the adductors, I mean the inner thighs, also show me that they have to justify one's existence while practicing high cadence.

I cycle along a bike way lined with trees. It has become very colourful. The autumnal character with its typical play of colours embellishes my ride out. The transience of the foliage creates a musty smell. Leaves lie in heaps on the road surface. The noise made when driving over them resembles the

rustling of crumpled paper. Caution is advised. It looks dry, but under the leaves I still have to reckon with wetness. When braking, I'm careful as hell, don't lean into the bends, stay vertical so as not to lose the grip of the wheels. All of a sudden, the handlebars are almost ripped out of my hands. There is a violent shock that is transferred from the bike to my body, the helmet slips a little ... I have just missed a large pothole covered by leaves. It was like one of those traps that hunters dig and cover with branches and leaves to catch animals. That was close. So pay even closer attention, mate.

After three weeks, leg strength training also becomes easier and pain is rare. I increase the weights slowly but steadily on the squats, leg press and curls. The other athletes often look at me funny because my shorts don't cover the edge of my tan. A guy with upper arm muscles as thick as my thighs asks if I'm wearing stockings. I simply ignore him with a tired smile, because he's kind of right. It already looks similar.

The upper torso training is much easier because I repeat it all the time. My body reacts well to it and is certainly relieved not to have a saddle under my bum all the time.

»That's what we're trying to do now. Strength training is also done by the pros. It is often underestimated by hobby riders. You have to train the leg muscles in total. That's why your next training plan for the bike always includes cadence and slow strength endurance units. In addition to strength building, you will get an all-round treatment of most of your muscle fibres. Additionally always loosen up with the fascia roller and stretch. And you'll become a world champion,« Eva exaggerates. But the training can really mean an increase, so I stubbornly follow her instructions. Otherwise I won't know if she's right at the end.

The days are getting shorter. The bad weather breaks over Germany. November shows what it's made of. But this year I don't mind so much because I train more indoors. I only get on my bike twice a week, without much intention. The drop in performance is rapid. I notice it in my pulse. Eva thinks that I should buy additional power pedals, i.e. pedals with force measurement. That way we could control the training much better. We would now be able to see the drop in performance in much more detail. »We can still get some more out of you,« she says casually in a chat. I've already read something about it. The search is not easy. There are many different designs. Not every pedal fits my bike computer. I decide on a light version, which only measures one side and calculates the other. It's much cheaper and is easily enough for my needs. Whether I pedal the same on the left and right side doesn't matter to me for the time being. Now I'm really prepared for what's coming in January. Strength training was only the beginning of something even bigger.

Chapter 40

At the end of December, I went to Eva's colleagues and let them prick my ear to give some blood. The performance test goes off without a hitch, except that it is again extremely strenuous. But I already know that. Hence I have a baseline that tells me where I am conditionally at the moment and how we can redefine my heart rate and performance zones in which I should train.

Christmas is fast approaching. I lie comfortably on the sofa with a hot cup of tea and talk to Eva. We miss each other just as much as we did when we left Sevilla in summer.

»Eva, one question. Your clothes in my flat are longing for you. The lamp and chair that are bored with me are also longing for you. Not to mention me. Christmas is coming. Wouldn't you like to come and visit me over the holidays? I could finally introduce you to my parents. Payback, so to speak.«

Short silence at the other end of the orbit.

»I'll just answer that question with yes. Great idea. Then I can finally spend time with you again. I'm already looking forward to it.«

That's settled.

»You don't need to bring any gifts or souvenirs with you... My family is totally relaxed. We don't give each other anything either.«

»Thank you for mentioning it. All the better! Te amo. You and I don't need to give each other anything as well, okay? Because I would not know what to give you,« she admits as a small, noisy smile slips out, almost a cute grunt.

»I love you, too. Okay, no gifts. We have each other and therefore basically everything we need to live. The most important thing is that we see each other again.«

»That's what we'll do. I'll look for a flight and let you know. My family will just have to get along without their daughter this year. They've got another one!«

Now she's back to her old self again.

»Deal!«

The days until our reunion are numbered. Finally, it's time for her to fly to Germany. Shortly before her departure, she informs me. I quickly tidy up my flat, get ready and leave for the airport. The plane is not delayed, so she is probably still waiting at the baggage claim. Half an hour pass. Then we are finally in each other's arms. Tears roll down Eva's cheeks. We hug tightly. There is no nervousness today, but the greeting is no less heartfelt. We kiss each other again.

»Oh my dear. It's about time that we are together. This distance is terrible for longer periods of time. I can't stand it anymore.«

»I feel the same way. But make sure you do your exam. You're about to graduate. Don't quit because of me.«

»I promise, Willy.«

We leave the airport holding hands. After we have kissed, the suitcase disappears into the back and we get into my car. It's like déjà vu from Sevilla with the roles reversed, and the temperatures are about thirty degrees lower. This time we go to my flat without a reception desk. Eva takes off her jacket and scarf. I lead her through my two-room flat, show her to her chair, the lamp, which she kisses. I have to grin.

»There's the torture device,« she says and points to my bike, on which I am following her prescribed intervals. Self-assured, Eva opens my wardrobe and is amazed how organized it is. She immediately discovers her clothes.

»This looks great, as if I already live here. I'm very happy about that.«

»Sure, Evita. Everything is prepared. You can come anytime.«

I lead her by the hand towards the chest of drawers. »And here, mi amor, are the hot things I found in a flat I don't know. I think they might suit you. That's why I took them.«

She laughs. »You naughty boy.«

She examines everything as if she were seeing the lingerie for the first time.

»Anything missing?« I ask with a broad grin.

»Joker.«

She is visibly satisfied. We order pizza for lunch, make ourselves comfortable and talk a lot. She takes my hand, looks me in the eye, pierces me with a deep stare and says, »It's all like a dream. I hope I don't wake up, and that the dream goes on forever.«

Touched, I tell her that I feel the same way and that I can hardly imagine life without her. We get up and disappear into the next room. Some time later we come back into the living room holding hands. She examines my record collection, full of clichés. Do you want to see my record collection, wink, wink. She looks at me, because she doesn't know much. KRAFTWERK, ART BRUT, BLUR and also the hit by PULP. »Common People« is known to her, though. We put the record on right away, turn up the volume, and I hope the neighbours aren't home right now. We dance together for the first time and really let ourselves go, have fun, sing along to the chorus: »I wanna live like common people, I wanna do whatever common people do. Wanna sleep with common people, I wanna sleep with common people like you. Well, what else could I do? I said I'll ... I'll see what I can do«. Another plus point is that Eva has the same taste in music as I do. It's like winning the lottery, because music is very important to me. To calm down, we go to the cellar, where I show her to her bikes as proof that I haven't sold them.

»It's nice here. The cellar, your flat. I like it very much.«

A short time later we sit together on the sofa and tell each other stories from our lives. Our stomachs are rumbling again. While I lovingly prepare dinner, Eva continues to browse through my

record collection. We enjoy the evening with good, loud music and two glasses of wine - according to the motto, the neighbour always hears good music, whether he wants to or not!

The next day is Christmas Eve, which we celebrate with my family. They know, of course, that I'm bringing Eva with me. She styles herself perfectly, as if she has to impress my parents with her appearance. I like it very much. I watch her enthusiastically as she gets dressed. The sexy underwear finally on the woman who bought it: thin tights, jumpsuit made of velvet fabric in a dark blue colour; a hell of a piece, tight on the legs and hips, extremely figure-hugging. It sits loosely at the top, like a blouse, but it is high-waisted. Her blonde hair is pinned up, almost like my grandmother used to wear her hair. She adds earrings, high-heeled shoes and a blazer. That's how she stands in front of me. I can't believe it! I get dressed as well, but I can't keep up with her beauty. Suit, tie, that's it. But she still thinks I'm sexy. All dressed up, we drive to my parents' house. She puts one hand in mine. I can feel her nervousness due to her slightly sweaty palm. I just grin at her. A short time later we are already sitting at my parents' richly decorated table. The question-and-answer game starts again, similar to Sevilla. I guess all mothers and fathers are the same. A short time later, my father takes me aside and whispers in my ear that Eva fits me like a glove and that I shouldn't do anything stupid.

»You belong with each other. You can see it, you can feel it,« he says. He's never spoken to me like that before. Eva seems to have impressed him not only on the outside.

We talk a lot, my siblings join us later. Dinner is delicious. Eva likes it. But every nice evening must come to an end at some point. We all hug each other, say goodbye, and Eva and I disappear into the cold car.

When we get home, we snuggle into our warm bed.

»I could get used to that, Eva,« I say. She just smiles, totally tired, turns to me - and falls asleep.

The days go by. We enjoy every moment together. Her style of dress is amazing. She can wear anything. Eva always looks great, whether elegant, casual or in sportswear. Her spirit, her nature and her humour - the whole package always inspires me anew. I show her many more grooved vinyl records. She likes many of them, however is hearing them for the first time. For example, songs by the TEMPLES like »The Beam«, »Context« or »Certainty«. My record player is running hot. I love how Eva first looks at the record covers, then carefully puts the discs on, aims the tone arm even more carefully with her beautiful hands towards the beginning of the song, sets it down, runs it and is surprised. She bobs her head, her foot. I take a photo for myself, as a souvenir. We seem to be meant for each other.

As it always is, time passes far too quickly. The day has come when I take her to the airport and we painfully have to say goodbye repeatedly. Our hearts bleed, but it has to be done once more. Tears squeeze from our moist eyes as the farewell at the airport becomes inevitable. She is gone. What a pity!

Chapter 41

It's January. The race is in six months. My strength training is reduced, the bike training eats up more time. The combination of pulse and strength is hopefully slowly, but surely improving. The fascia roller continues to be used almost every day. January is still relatively harmless in terms of intensity, but long sessions are possible. Every week, the total training time is increased by one hour. I watch a lot of television during the rides. The wealth of documentaries is endless, and I also find the biathletes' competitions very exciting every time. In the end, a single shot can make the difference between victory and defeat. Fortunately, I only ride a bicycle and don't have to go from a red pulse to a resting one within seconds in order to hold the rifle steady. They are artists...

The first month of the year drags on. The whole thing is too monotonous. It often snows outside when I'm training. The windows mist up all the time. Good ventilation is necessary, if only because of the mildew, but also to prevent mould in the flat. As the writer Paulo Coelho once said: »Training is a bitter plant, but its fruit is sweet.« That's exactly what it takes to achieve goals: being patient and

looking ahead. I am looking forward to the first varied intervals in February. As Eva has already told me, there will be nice changes between cadence and strength endurance training.

It's getting more complicated to meet her requirements in order to keep my pulse and strength in the right range, but it's great fun. I am now allowed to enter the red zone for a short time, where the pain catches me up with a grin. I wonder why I am having so much fun. A statement by the American author of management books, Kenneth Blanchard, comes to mind: »There's a difference between interest and commitment. When you're interested in doing something, you do it only when it's convenient. When you're committed to something, you accept no excuses ... only results.« And that is 100 per cent true. That's why there is no excuse. In the end, I don't want to have to reproach myself for not having tried everything legally possible. Doping is not an issue. It's all about me and what I can achieve with hard and targeted training. How far is it possible to push my body? That's all I'm interested in. And of course the goal of beating my colleague Timo at the King of Grossglockner race someday.

Chapter 42

One evening, after sweating for two hours on the bike after work, showering and preparing dinner, my mobile phone rings. It's Eva. While eating, I look at her message. It's a voicemail. I hear her crying and sobbing, saying that her grandmother died. Shit. She was so close to her. She went back to Spain because of her, to be with her grandmother as long as possible. Unfortunately, I can't hold her and comfort her. I call Evita.

»Hi, I'm sorry to hear that. My condolences.«

»Thank you. It hurts a lot. She was such a great woman, like a friend to me. Even though she wasn't really aware of her surroundings for the last few months.«

I hate to leave Eva alone in her grief, but there is not much I can do to comfort her on the phone.

»I'd love to give you a hug, and I know I can't help you much over the phone, but if there's anything I can do for you, please tell me, okay, Evita?« She cries. Quite incomprehensibly, after a long pause, she says with sobs: »Thank you for your compassion. I have to get through this myself. I know that you would be a help to me here, but the distance ... my family is with me. I'll manage it. It's just too bad, I am now in the final spurt of the exam. It makes it impossible for me to study. My head is never in the game, only with my grandma.«

»Take a break from learning. The energy will come back. Your grandmother would never have wanted you to give up everything because of her, correct?

»You're right. I hope that in a few days the worst will be over.«

»I can only give you this advice, Eva. You know the author of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, don't you? If not, it doesn't matter. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is his name, and he once said that when you're down, when the days seem darker and darker, when work seems monotonous, when it seems almost pointless to hope at all, just get on your bike and race down the road with no thought of anything but your wild ride.«

»Good idea. It really clears the head. I've almost forgotten about cycling, so I'll take your advice and go for a ride on my sister's bike. The weather is never really bad in the south of Spain. Thanks for the tip!«

After a few encouraging words, we start making little jokes again. »I wish you a lot of strength in this difficult time, mi amor. Ride your bike, take your mind off things. You'll see, in a few days it will be better. Then you can study for your exam at full speed. You'll pass with flying colours. Deal?«

»Thanks again, you're great. I love you.«

»I love you, too.«

We're hanging up. Although I never really got to know her grandmother, her death also makes me sad. I'm sure Eva will soon feel happier once again.

Chapter 43

Eva actually wanted to return to Germany in March, but unfortunately this plan didn't work out. The exam is not scheduled until the end of March. By the time she gets everything sorted out in Spain, it will probably be the end of April or the beginning of May, she told me. Okay, a few weeks more or less won't matter. I give Eva encouragement for her upcoming exam. She was able to really step on the gas with learning at the end and is finally in good spirits.

I continue to focus on training. A block week is coming up. In other words: six unrelaxed days of hard training in a row, without a day of break. »That would give me a kick to reach a new level, « says Eva. Don't forget to eat, she reminds me, lots of protein, preferably beans, eggs, lentils, broccoli. It doesn't always have to be meat. I must not skimp on carbohydrates either. I also have to drink a lot. After training, I always have a recovery drink straight away. Here we go.

The first day is short, but crisp. Indoors, into the red zone. Sweat comes out of every pore, drops run down my arms, towards my hands, like wax on a thin candle when it starts to melt at the top due to the heat of the flame. Large, wet salt lakes form on the mat, one on the left, one on the right. I give everything, try to fulfil the training plan in the best possible way. To motivate myself, I listen to short, hard songs by US boys S.O.D. (Stormtroopers of Death), who are inspired by bands like ANTHRAX, M.O.D. and NUCLEAR ASSAULT were thrown together in the 80s. A first mixture of punk and metal. Songs like »Milano Mosh«, »Speak English or Die«, »Sargent D. And The S.O.D.«, »Milk« and »Kill Yourself« were cult hits back then. The hardness and power of these short hits make my legs do what they should, even if they don't necessarily want to. »I don't want to grow up« by the RAMONES and other great songs by the band from the USA round off the workout. It's going to be fun when the first day starts like this. I'm glad that a minute is not measured metrically, i.e. it doesn't have 100 seconds, but only sixty. In the red zone it is not funny. I eat and drink as Eva advised and go to bed early, which is perfect for regeneration. The next day will also be stressful at work, but I'm still looking forward to the evening, to the following session. Today indoor, »only« up to the threshold, i.e. up to the load where I don't yet produce lactic acid. But I have to hold it for five minutes and do it several times with relaxed sections in between. That's not easy either. The sweat runs off my face and arms again, like when rain thunders on the window pane, the drops collect and run down. Recovery drink, shower, eat, sleep. Work the next day, train later, indoors. Today it's mixed. Short, high-intensity intervals with a high cadence alternate with long passages, which I have to pull through in a heavy gear, however. I jump from training zone to training zone. There is no end to the sweat. It's getting dark outside, but my mood remains bright. The rain flies horizontally from right to left past the window, as if someone had turned the shower head to 90 degrees. Fucking weather! For a long time, I am not able to push the pedal as relaxed anymore. It's a struggle to keep up the intervals. My head moves back and forth to the rhythm of the music, like a disturbed polar bear in the zoo, locked up in an enclosure that's far too small and expressing its boredom in this dull way. Poor animal! Eventually, that too will be over. Recovery drink, shower, eat, sleep. Work.

It's already the fourth day. My body can't get enough. It still feels good. My legs want more. That speaks for me. I respond well to the training, regenerate super. Today, however, I'm only going to do a relaxed hour of active recreation, indoors. I listen to songs by the US band NATION OF LANGUAGE, such as »What Ever You Want« or »In Manhattan«. Afterwards, recovery drink, shower, eat, call Eva.

»Hola, how are you? Everything good?«

»I'm glad you called. I'm fine. I'm still sad, but I can concentrate on my exam preparations. Your advice about cycling to clear my head really helped.«

»Glad to hear that, you're in good spirits again?«

»Yes, definitely. I'm already planning my return trip to Germany. A few more weeks and then it's over, Willy, fun part ends. Because I'll grip your leg like a leech.«

She can laugh at her own jokes again, in her special way that captivates me, or is it not meant as a joke at all? In any case, Eva and I are delighted as hell that the days of our long-distance relationship are numbered. I'll get more details later. First the exam.

»Your training plan is very hard. But not hard enough for me,« I joke, »so far I've been able to do everything as you've written, except for the fascia roller. I'll make up for it after the week.

»Do that, no problem. After that I've built in a week's rest for you, you'll see. Keep it up, you won't regret it. Your money is very well invested.«

After a little small talk, we end the conversation. It's getting late. I have to regenerate and go straight to bed. It's starting to get stressful. But I'm over it ... two more days. Tomorrow is already Saturday.

The day begins with a sumptuous breakfast. I spend the following endless minutes filling bottles and preparing treats. It's going to take a long time today, four hours indoors, yippee. It doesn't exactly motivate me, but it doesn't matter anyway. The weather's bad, so I'll just have to kill time indoors today. On the bike I go, turn on the TV, put a towel over the bike computer so I won't be tempted to watch the time. There are no intervals built in. Still, it's not easy mentally.

I don't know what I've been thinking about all this time, because I'm already at the cool down. Finally! Stretch, have a drink, shower, eat and relax. After shopping, I continue reading Charles Dickens' book »Oliver Twist«. A classic one. Fortunately times have changed, seeing what seems to have been commonplace back then. Sad.

My legs don't exactly crave another day, but somehow I'll get through it. Sleep. Sunday. The weather is finally better, cloudy and almost windless. I dare to go for my first ride outdoors today. Five hours of easy riding are scheduled for the end. After that I won't look at the bike for a few days. I sit discontentedly on the saddle; it takes me almost an hour to get into it and then I finally start to enjoy it. My form is okay, the speed at the base is also respectable. In a totally remote area, I first pass through a forest that sprays its typical scent. Then, not far away, there are tree trunks near the roadside. As I pass them, their blank faces on the end pieces look at me as if they want to tell me something. My nose catches a whiff of freshly cut wood. My lungs open a little more as if it were a matter of course. Images come into my consciousness like a flashback. At this exact moment, the smell reminds me of when I was a child and my father and I were working with wood in the cellar, when I was allowed to saw and file. The sawdust and the smallest dust particles gave off the same pleasant smell as these tree trunks. A little resinous. Often this aroma also filled the living room, during Advent from the wreath of fresh fir tree branches. Suddenly I feel like a puppet being led by strings. Weak-willy, I am simply diverted, drive back and pass the spot with the wood again and consciously enjoy it. I drive past very slowly, breathe in deeply several times to inhale the smell to its fullest. It feels so good. I long for the last kilometres to reach the planned time. Through the last town I follow the main road, along the kerb next to the pavement and think nothing of it. Suddenly, I am jolted out of my trance. I have to brake sharply. A bus is coming towards me from the front. A pedestrian just ahead of me simply turns left and starts to cross the road. I can't get out of the way. Is that possible? Without looking back! Is he on drugs? Is he dreaming? Fortunately, he also gets scared and stops his forward momentum as abruptly as he started, pulling his foot that was already on the road back onto the pavement. Something like this has happened to me several times. Are these people only relying on their hearing, or what? If I don't hear anything coming from behind, I don't have to look around? Great logic. Not only are they risking their own lives by doing this, they are risking the lives of others. Why doesn't that get into people's heads? No ill feeling, once again nothing happened. My Guardian Angel with his beer belly must have grabbed the guy by the shoulder and pulled him back to save me from a fall. Thanks a million!

This week was really hard. Physically, I'm at the end of my tether. Now I'm looking forward to a few quiet days. I'm going to finish reading Dickens' book, tidy up and only sit on the trestle twice after work; roll out my legs for an hour each time, regenerate. Now and then the roller will be used to get the fascia supple. Stretching is not forgotten either. Eat well, laze around. I've finally allowed myself to do that for a long time.

Two weeks after the training block, I am tested by Eva's colleagues. The lactate test is extremely good, the values are better than last time. Eva has her exam this week. I keep my fingers crossed that she will make it this time. I can't imagine if she doesn't. I pass the time until the results come in with fast workouts before work: I'm supposed to pedal loosely for an hour right after getting up, with only

water. This stimulates the burning of fat to an extreme degree. The sugar level is all the way down, and the body now tries to draw energy from the fats. As if I still had to lose a lot of weight ... But this is also a training effect that ensures that you can ride longer. The body is forced to adapt. When it needs energy later, it doesn't immediately nibble on the valuable carbohydrates when I'm rolling along in the basic range.

Chapter 44

Finally: the long-awaited call from Eva. It is Friday evening.

»I got the results! And yes, you were right, I can do it if I believe in myself, and I did. Maybe my grandma in heaven helped me too. I was only a few points short of the top mark. A dream. I am so happy. It's a huge weight off my shoulders, if you can imagine that.«

»I congratulate you. You did a great job. It doesn't matter if your grandma had a hand in it or not. I love you. Listen, if you're interested,« I laugh, » I also have something positive to tell you. My last lactate test came out great. Better than ever before. That gives me so much hope.«

»That's good news, Willy. Things are looking up again, see? After pain comes a permanent grin.«

»When are you coming back to Germany? I'm asking because I want to go to the mountains this year at the beginning of May to prepare my legs for the altitude. The race is already approaching. I'd like to go to the Alps with you. What do you think?«

»Unfortunately, I still have a lot to do here. I would also like to take part in the graduation ceremony and say goodbye to all my friends. Don't be angry. Next year then, okay? But this time I'll be sure to come with you to Bruck in Austria and cheer your tired ass to the top so that you finally arrive at the Glockner race before Timo.«

»That sounds great. No issue. Take your time. I'll still train for the five days in the mountains. You tell me the best way to go about it. We'll be in touch. I miss you. Soon we will not be so far away from each other, yeah!«

»Thank you for your understanding. Everything will be fine. I love you and I can't wait for us to plan our future together.«

I have mixed feelings after the call, but I can deal with it. I've waited for her for so long, it doesn't matter if it's a few days more. I book my accommodation in the Alps, unfortunately only single rooms, but with the hope that it won't snow this time. How will my legs feel? Before I go there, Eva asked me to try out the super compensation before the following training block and not just before a race, without knowing whether my body will tolerate it. She explains it to me and echoes the words of Jens Voigt, an ex-professional cyclist who has used the effect for a long time. In an interview, he answered the question of whether it is really effective to fill up on three plates of spaghetti bolognese, i.e. a lot of calories, before a race: »There is the principle of super compensation. For example, when the race is on Sunday, you start a week beforehand to cut out all carbohydrates. You eat whole meal bread with cottage cheese, fats and proteins. This goes on until the middle of the week. Then you do a longer workout so that your body is as empty as a wrung-out sponge. Your storage should be empty. After that you eat almost exclusively carbohydrates. This is called carbo-loading.« He used to do that too and it worked for him, Eva says. »But you need discipline.«

Exciting stuff. I'll give that a try before I hit the mountains.

I haven't heard from Timo for a long time. Perhaps he has also been very busy with work. However, I am sure that he has trained hard and is focusing on the race in three weeks. The reduction in carbohydrates is quite easy to implement, because at the same time I'm also reducing my training so that I can go up the inclines later refreshed. But feeding afterwards is much easier. Thus prepared, I set off for my own training camp without Eva. According to the forecast, the weather is not supposed to be bad. Very nice. When it goes, it goes.

Chapter 45

After checking into the hotel, I have some more food. The car ride was long. Half an hour later I leave the hotel, changed and with my bike on my shoulders. To acclimatise, I start today without much effort to climb the first metres. So I roll in and ride the first thousand metres altitude in basic level. It sounds crazy, but it actually works. Just take your time, in low gear. That really keeps the pulse down. When I think about how I snorted on the first small climbs at the very beginning, this is really a quantum leap. It is spring. I notice the pleasant temperatures, the power of the sun. Down in the valley it's nice and warm, up there it's ten degrees less. I don't need to rush down without a windbreaker. I always get warm on the way up. No matter how cold it actually is. It's only when I'm rolling down that the wind pulls all the warmth out of my body.

On the next day, it is time for the mountain sprints and that with 1,500 metres in total altitude. It's hard on the upper legs, but I like it. My shape, my condition is at a very good level. There are a few other racing cyclists on the road. They usually only see me from behind, while I pass them in the sprints. After that I calm down. Then they come up to me again, probably thinking I'm done. They overtake me with broad grins. But the next sprint is already coming. And so it goes back and forth until they understand that I'm training and not just enjoying the landscape.

The mountain is ridden twice. After that, my short muscle fibres, which are responsible for the high-speed power, are in for twenty hard attacks. In the evening I'm more than satisfied with my performance, but I really miss Eva. We meet online almost every day to chat. I tell her that the carbo-loading is working well. At least that's what my gut tells me. The next day I sit at a table in the corner for breakfast. I enjoy my concentrated food, the cappuccino, fruit and slowly finish my glass of water and in my mind I'm already back on the bike. Suddenly there is a loud noise. A middle-aged woman is standing at the buffet, wearing pink sports leggings, a casual but low-cut T-shirt over them and obviously looking for a piece of cake from the selection in front of her, but she can't decide which one to take. Her outfit is very charming, and she certainly wears it with the intention of showing everyone what a figure she has. Still, she can't compare to Eva. Then a guy comes up behind her, takes both hands and slams them down on the woman's trained buttocks. She cries out in shock and turns around. He continues to grab and massage both her buttocks. This all happens as if they were alone in the room, which they definitely are not. Everyone looks over at the couple. Some shake their heads. I just think to myself, newly in love, certainly. I even saw Eva and myself for a short while. But I would never do that to her in front of everyone. It's kind of embarrassing. It doesn't matter. It was funny in any case, and I thought of Eva again.

I go up to my room and get ready for the third tour. Today, too, an increase in altitude metres is on the cards, meaning that 2,000 metres of »climbing« are ahead. This time at the threshold, not going into the red zone.

»Your legs must get heavy, high gear, Willy,« Eva explained to me last night.

It rained overnight, the road is wet, the mountainsides are shrouded in mist, but the temperature is supposed to rise. I'll see if it stays dry. In any case, I set off in shorts. I zip up my jacket before the ascent starts. It's still very fresh. I'd rather freeze for a short while at the beginning than die later because of overheating. I can hardly wait until the climb begins. But before that I take off my jacket. I'll soon get warmer on the climb. I know that by now. It's probably only about ten degrees at the top. At the beginning I am dressed just right. It goes well, the pace is surprisingly high. Bend by bend, I climb higher through the fog. The mist is cool and gives off an enormously fresh forest air. My lungs open up completely. The road is still wet, because the sun hardly comes through between the trees, the fog makes it difficult today. Halfway along the route I approach a racing cyclist who is visibly struggling from a distance. As I ride up, I see why. He certainly hasn't been cycling that long and wanted to do super well. He too must have looked at the weather forecasts, but then overdid it. He wears a long, much too warm jacket, which others wear in winter, plus long warm trousers and thick neoprene overshoes. The sweat from his helmet runs down his face like a waterfall and drips onto the top tube of his bike. I don't want to know what his outerwear feels like right now. They must be completely soaked, really disgusting and I'm sure already smelling strong. He's totally overheating.

Will he last another 30 minutes? But everyone has to gain experience. A short time later I overtake another rider, then another who seems to be waiting for the other guys. First he greets me as if I were an old acquaintance, then he notices the confusion. He just smiles it away, looks back down towards the road from where I came, probably waiting for the right mate. Up here I can feel the cool air gripping my thighs and arms. Soon I reach the top of the pass, but notice that despite the cool temperature I am also sweating through. Jacket over, down I go. At the bottom, jacket off, U-turn and back up the same mountain, at the same temperature. The fog lifts, the landscape changes its appearance. Although I was there a short time ago, it looks completely different. The sun bathes the scene in a new light. The fog has evaporated.

Arriving at the apex again, I let it roll towards the valley on the other side this time. I loosen my legs as often as I can. The road becomes a path, the path becomes a lane. I hear cowbells ringing in the distance. It's very idyllic here. I really must come here with Eva. I'm sure she'll like it as well. I continue downhill and let it go. Suddenly, and much too late, I notice cattle grids running across the road. The cows simply refuse to cross them. This way, the farmers are sure that no cow will get lost. If you see such grids in front of you, you can be prepared for it to get bumpy now and you have to watch out for rough edges. It could also be slippery if it rains. When driving downhill, the grids are even more treacherous, which I am unfortunately experiencing first hand. Everything goes too fast. I try to brake, which only works to a certain extent when going downhill. The rear wheel locks up! The cattle blockade is coming towards me far too quickly. The first rough edge makes my front wheel jump upwards. Normally the grids are flush with the road, but here it must be a construction error or winter has made sure that everything is warped. I can only hold the handlebars with difficulty and have to pay really close attention. There is big shaking as both wheels rush over the individual bars. This is what the pros must feel like when they ride over the big cobblestones in the classic race »Paris-Roubaix«. The vibration causes my bottle to fly out of the bottle cage and roll in the direction of the slope. I just manage to avoid a fall - not only because of the grille, but also because of the bottle that rolls in my direction and I almost run over it. The speed is still too high, but I am able to catch up with the bottle and even save it from a surely fatal slope. Finally I manage to stop. Take a breath! What a ride! Slowly I gather myself and pick up the scratched bottle from the ground. Every training ride is a lesson. Fortunately, this one ended well once again. What have I learned? Cattle grids are usually not flat. You have to ride slowly or be so fast that you can jump over them, but very few people can do that because the grid is too long. It is important to drive with foresight.

Arriving safely at the hotel, I clean my chain and lubricate it again with oil. A complete wheel cleaning is unnecessary. The penultimate day starts. Today it is much cloudier. It looks like rain. The weather forecast says there is a high chance of precipitation in the afternoon. But I already knew that last night, so I get up early.

After the morning routine, including breakfast, my bike happily accompanies me out of the hotel's bike cellar into the air, like dogs with wagging tails following their owners for a walk. The bike computer is started and off I go. It is still dry and warm. My legs are noticeably less fit compared to the first day. Today, only a thousand metres of altitude are on the agenda, and with as high as possible cadence. The red heart rate zone may also be tickled from time to time. Very good if you are rested. But I'm no longer rested, so it's a struggle, both mentally and physically. But training is not a walk in the park. What did the ex-professional Jean de Gribaldy say? »Cycling is not a game. Cycling is a sport. Hard, unyielding and relentless. You have to give up a lot of things. You play football or tennis or hockey. But you don't play cycling.« With the thought of my goal in mind, crossing the line in front of Timo that marks the end of the race, imagining the feeling of what it will be like, I get over the dead stop. Unfortunately, it does start to rain lightly now. The roads are already wet. Up here it has rained all night. There is not a trace of sunlight to be seen. The plants look sad with their drooping branches and twigs. It is only the weight of the water on them that they want to get rid of with their mourning posture.

At the top, I see two e-bikers coming up the incline at a hellish pace. They are not even out of breath. That has nothing to do with sport, I think to myself. Meanwhile, I release the brakes and start rolling. So distracted, I don't notice that bushes are encroaching on the road. It must have rained too much here before. Suddenly I feel a branch in my face. It even has thorns on it. I get tangled up, get

stuck with the thorns, which draw a trail along my mouth. It hurts. I brake. The branch gets caught in my upper lip, pulls a little, and only when I turn my head to the right does this stupid plant let go of me again. I stop, check my lip, the skin on my face, to make sure I'm not bleeding. Luckily nothing is torn open. It felt like it, though. Coming back with the corners of your mouth torn open - how do you explain that to the doctor? Strange things happen while you are cycling.

Back at the hotel, after a shower, I sit at the table and enjoy the 3-course meal. Eva and I write messages to each other.

»How's your training going?«

»Great, Eva. I'm tired.« Smiley.

I tell her about the strange encounter with the branch.

»Then you would have had a grimace like the 'JOKER'« Smiley.

I can't get the image out of my mind for a while. But she's right, that's exactly how it felt.

»What are you doing on the Sunday before the week of the King of Grossglockner?« Wink smiley.

»Not much. Gotta regenerate, why?« After-thought smiley.

»That would be the day I finally come back from Spain.« Smiley, smiley.

»SUPER, EVA! That would be great! That wouldn't just be great, that would be incredible! The flat needs to be filled up with life again.« Smiley, heart, smiley.

»I'll give you the flight details. Then it's finally fixed. I'm so looking forward to eventually starting a new chapter in my life with you.« Heart, heart, heart, smiley.

So it goes on, with emoticons I've never seen before. Eva is coming back. Our long-distance relationship is coming to an end. We end the chat with kiss-throwing smileys and wish each other a good night.

On the next and last day of the self-imposed training camp, only coasting is planned. My legs are looking forward to resting before I leave the following morning after breakfast and sit in the car for hours until I park it in front of my garage with a very good feeling and the anticipation of Eva.

Chapter 46

This week will be quiet. Regeneration is on the agenda. But I can't just lie around either, so I go for a walk more often to take advantage of the summer weather. Twice I take my bike out again, just loosely, enjoying the scents of late spring. The smell of freshly mown grass, the smell of just hung laundry in the gardens, the smell of lunch on the grill in front of the terraces. It's so varied that I completely forget to watch the clouds, because a thunderstorm is coming. It is getting dark. Today I see no chance of being able to finish the tour dry, and half an hour later it starts. The wind picks up and I get a heavy shower from above. Too bad for those who are enjoying a barbecue or still have the laundry hanging, I think, without worrying too much about myself.

The scent turns abruptly. It smells like fresh rain. The air changes and becomes a good ten degrees cooler. I am soaking wet. The surface of the road is steaming. A short time later, however, the road is dusty again. Like when someone turns on a heater, it gets back warm in one fell swoop. The sun dries me out on the way home, only my shoes and socks stay wet until the end. My wheels are quickly cleaned.

Two days later, my legs are tested on a final ride out. The wind keeps gusting up. I roll in and do a few short, hard sprints. As I roll out, I notice a whirlwind forming to the right of the direction of travel, not very big. But it kicked up a lot of dust and dirt from the road. The interesting natural spectacle comes in my direction and closer much too quickly ... right towards me! It is impossible to avoid it. The would-be dust storm surrounds me completely, catches me full on. In the middle of it I am shaken violently, dust flies everywhere, even into my eyes. My glasses have no way of protecting them. Fortunately, the spook is over quickly. From the outside, it must have looked as if Scotty from Star Trek had beamed me to his spaceship when I disappeared in the vortex. At no point was it dangerous. It's just that the probability of being hit by one of those things is certainly lower than winning the lottery.

I get nervous, which doesn't happen that often to me. It's not the approaching race. Eva is to blame. The nervousness increases as Sunday approaches. I can't wait until she and I move in together. How much my life has changed since I took the first step almost four years ago and gave myself a kick in the arse to escape my lethargy, idleness, being bored all the time by taking up road cycling. Everything has turned for the better. This is such a good feeling. I heard from Timo that he has been preparing for the Glocknerkoenig on Mallorca as every year. He is eager for our duel, he said in a telephone conversation, but he continues to assume that he won't give me a chance to win.

I let him believe that, but I don't put too much pressure on myself. If it doesn't work out this time, it will work out next year. I know I will make it at some point. It would be nice this year, though, because Eva will be there for the first time.

Chapter 47

With great anticipation, I feel like a little child on the eve of Christmas, I drive by car to the airport. The day has come. The long-distance relationship ends today. A new era is ahead of us. What could be better? The plane is delayed. I wait patiently, counting the minutes and lost in my thoughts, until the glass sliding door opens and my enchanting Eva, grinning from ear to ear, passes through with elegance, almost floating. This time she is rolling two suitcases behind her. Her hair is loose, her green eyes shine out of her tanned face like laser beams. My heart does somersaults. Finally we are in each other's arms. Eva starts to cry with joy. Tears roll down my shoulder and wet my T-shirt. Our lips touch. The long wait is over. Overjoyed, we almost hug each other to death. We were so distracted and preoccupied with ourselves that anyone could have easily stolen our suitcases. No one would have noticed. I lift Eva up briefly, my hands clasped under her buttocks. Slowly I lower her back to the floor.

»Te amo, Willy!«

»Te amo, Eva!«

That is all we say. Each of us takes a suitcase; hand in hand we walk to the exit. Today we are probably the happiest people on earth. Her luggage is quickly stowed in the car. We both look at each other wordlessly. This moment will remain in our memories forever. We continue on to our shared home, as Eva puts it.

When we arrive at my flat, we plop down on the sofa, cuddle, snuggle and enjoy the moment. Eva gets up, goes to one of her suitcases. She pulls her dress over her head. I watch in amazement. I have no idea what's coming next. She pulls a T-shirt over her head, turns around and laughs. I have to laugh out loud too, because it says in big letters: »Estamos juntos«, which means »We are together«. Then she takes another shirt out of the suitcase and throws it to me. »I had this made quickly in Sevilla. A T-shirt for each of us with the same saying. As a souvenir and small surprise.«

I put it on right away. We sit on the sofa where it all began and look at each other. Overjoyed, we kiss. Our hands explore each other's bodies under our T-shirts. It has been too long since we saw each other. We just let it happen.

After lunch we go for a short ride on the road bikes. The difference is big. She hasn't trained for months and I'm fit as an army of trainers. The forced casual ride fits super into my training programme. I'm not supposed to do much in the last week before the race. I am happy to give her drafting, but I tear at the down tube a few times in a sprint. So I call on my muscles for a short while, and of course always wait for Eva to catch up again. We talk a lot when the road and the situation allow it.

»How I have missed this. Cycling, and then with you. I will definitely do more sport again. It's almost like you told me once, that you didn't do any sports because of your studies and other valid reasons, but then you started. It's in our genes.«

»That's right, although it took me a long time to manage to rediscover sport for myself.«

Back in the flat, we shower together, get dressed, eat something. Eva empties the suitcases and tidies up. I order a table at my favourite Italian restaurant for the evening. Everyone has a favourite Italian restaurant.

We go there on foot, dressed up. Closely embraced, we reach the city centre. We are politely welcomed by the waiter and shown to our table. The candle in the middle is lit, the ambient light is dimmed. A romantic would go into raptures. Eva and I hold hands, order a drink.

»Finally apple juice spritzer again,« Eva cheers. I grin. »One more week, Evita. Then it's over, at least for me, for a certain period of time. The race Glocknerkoenig is close.«

»And this is the first time I'll be there live. You've been training like an ox and probably don't know where to go with your power,« Eva quips. We toast to our future together.

»Next week I'll reintroduce myself at the Bikefit,« she says. »They want me back on the team. I will also continue to do training plans and performance tests there. I don't want to just live off of you, but I also want to contribute something to your livelihood.«

»Good idea, you can take my car. I'll cycle to work.«

»Great, sounds good. That's how we do it. With the degree in nutritional counselling, I want to try to get a foothold in this regard here as well. It'll be fine.«

We wind down for the evening, go home and listen to some music. Just like me, she thinks the band ACTORS from Vancouver, Canada, is amazing. The style of this music has something of the former band ULTRAVOX from the 80's. Super melodies. THE DEAD 60s from Liverpool follow immediately with the Ska song »Ghostfaced Killer«. Our mood is happy. We lie side by side on the floor, holding hands, enjoying the time and forgetting all around us. We go to bed much too late. After a short night we go back to work. The days come and go. Eva and I have settled in.

It's Friday. I was able to do the carbo-loading successfully after having driven the carbohydrate intake close to zero the week before, as planned. The last few days followed the same pattern: eat, eat, eat.

Chapter 48

While the song »Discotraxx« and others by the band LADYTRON from England are playing in the car, Eva's hand lingers on my right thigh until her arm falls asleep. We finally drive together towards Austria, to Bruck at the Road to Glockner. This year it will be the fourth time for me and the first time with company. Eva will drive up with the shuttle bus before my start and wait for me at the top. There is no better motivation to give everything. The first weather check looks promising. I'm curious to see how it will be on Sunday.

When we arrive at the hotel, we just have something to eat and then fall into bed, dead tired. Wrapped in the blankets, we fall asleep happily. On Saturday, the sun wakes us up and breakfast once again leaves nothing to be desired. Other participants appear in the room. As a joke, I say to Eva: »No chance!« and point with my head in the direction of the boys.

»Never!« she agrees with me.

The air warms up quickly. Eva brought the great weather with her from Spain. This year I can go to the race office in a T-shirt to get the documents. We sit down on the bench in front of the church, where I already sat last year, but alone, to watch the hustle and bustle in the village square. While I mount the start number to the handlebars, Eva watches me do it. After that is done, I take her by the hand and we walk to the café where Timo is waiting for us. He is sitting at the table with a wheat beer in front of him, no doubt without alcohol. We greet each other and I introduce him to my girlfriend. Our drinks are brought to us. I tell Timo about Eva, how it began, how she is helping me. Everything in a nutshell.

»Timo, I'll be up at the finish line tomorrow cheering you on. Of course, Willy more than you,« Eva jokes and looks Timo in the eye. »What are you wearing tomorrow? So I can recognise you. With glasses and helmet it will be very difficult otherwise. I can also try to take a few photos.«

»Rather dark, black or dark blue top, nothing flashy. Photos would be great, even if there are always photographers along the route who take pictures of us fighting our way up. We can then buy the photos online.«

»That's right,« I say. »But I've never done it before. I should really check it out.«

»Are you both well prepared for tomorrow?« asks Eva.

»As far as I'm concerned,« answers Timo, »I've got more kilometres in my legs this year, I've got less weight and I can't wait to duel it out.«

»And as for my form, all I can say is that thanks to you, mi amor, I feel super prepared, I haven't checked weight at all.«

»You look very thin, you're not heavy,« she says laughing.

Timo looks relaxed on the outside. But he certainly puts more pressure on himself than I do. He has more to lose, so to speak.

We say goodbye. »See you tomorrow morning at the start in start block one, Willy.«

»Yes, see you tomorrow, the main thing is that we both get through without crashing and that I get through the Füscher Törl before you,« I say. All three grin. Eva reminds me that I have to retract my legs. I leave her alone for an hour, checking my thigh muscles. In the meantime, she paints the village red. What can I say - the thighs feel tight, ready, my pulse goes up and quickly back to the lower range where it should be. That's something to be proud of.

Back at the hotel, Eva is still out. I shower, pack my bag with my change of clothes. Eva could also take it with her tomorrow, but I have it brought up with the service bus. I don't know any other way, pure routine. On the way, I meet Eva as she roams around alone and takes photos. We kiss and walk together to the drop-off point for those bags. Now she has seen that, too. I take her with me in the car and show her the route to the checkout so that she has an idea of what's in store for me tomorrow.

»The flat part drags quite a bit,« she says, »and then the first climb. It comes across easy in the car, but it's different on the bike.«

I agree with her. Here in Ferleiten we sit outside at a table in a restaurant, let the sun shine on our heads, while Eva sips a coffee and I eat some carbohydrates in the form of a large piece of cheesecake.

»I feel like trying to conquer the Glockner next year. I'll take a look tomorrow and decide,« she says and winks.

The day comes to an end; the tension rises. Dinner is at the hotel, which has now filled up. With each person who enters the dining room, I jokingly say to Eva while pointing my head in their direction, »No chance!« She confirms it every time. A so-called running gag. Eva is nervous, too. She has to get to the bus that will take her up tomorrow before I do. The weather is showing itself from its best side. It's going to be bombastic. We try to fall asleep with a feeling of security. She seems to be better at it than I am. I try to free myself from her grasp without wanting to wake her up. I succeed, only falling asleep is difficult again.

Suddenly the alarm clock rings, at some point sleep overcame me. I go to the window and open it. Eva approaches me from behind and snuggles up to me. The weather app says thirteen degrees and dry. The breakfast room is full, many athletes are already sitting at the tables, enjoying their coffee with slurping noises. I only take water. Today I am even able to eat more. Muesli and two rolls with jam. A new record. Eva has to hurry to catch the bus.

»I'm keeping my fingers crossed for you, give it everything! Warm up, centre yourself. Fill up the bottle. A lot of sweat will flow today. It's best to take a gel before the checkout and try to pull one again before the top third.«

»Thank you for the advice. You are the best coach I can imagine.«

»You're only saying that because you love me.«

We both laugh. A short, intimate kiss, a last lascivious look from her. This is where we part ways. I change my clothes, easily make my way to the flat road where I had been able to warm up the last few times. Many people are on the road. The loudspeaker is being tested. The moderator is doing speech tests. Then it gets quieter as I move away from the centre. Rolling in, high cadence. After ten minutes there are five short sprints. I get my pulse rate up, shake it out of its sleep. It also goes down

quickly right after each effort. I couldn't feel any better today. A short time later, I'm standing at the start with perfectly shaved legs, shorts and jersey, next to Timo.

»Good morning. How are you feeling?«

»It's all good, I'm in great spirits. Watch your back!«

We both smile in victory and are standing in the middle of block one, but we can clearly see the pace car, which sets the speed right from the start. It is not allowed to overtake the pace car. The fastest drivers of the last years talk into the microphone and tell stories. Then a call for a spare inner tube. One of them punctured during the roll-in. Well, he's got stress now, so close to the start. Hopefully he will still manage to repair his bike in time.

My pulse is only slightly elevated. Where is my adrenaline? I need it. Has too much routine crept in by now? Hopefully it will change. We push and shove, as if we were sardines in a can. I visualise the route to be prepared like bobsledders or skiers before the downhill run. They imaginarily go through every curve, move their heads and mime every change of direction. I just think of the bridge right after the start. Watch out! Then the road dividers on the way to the Embach Chapel. Watch out! The first climb - listen to myself, find the rhythm. Keep going. Don't forget to drink. Don't want to look for Timo. Ride YOUR race, I tell myself. My eyes are closed for a moment. The music gets louder. My bike computer is ready to go. I reconnect it to the pedals. The starting signal must follow at any moment. The participants are getting restless. At the back, the dividers between the different blocks are removed. I take the first gel of three. I only take a sip out of my bottle. Suddenly the music stops.

»Good luck, Timo, stay crash-free!«

»You, too!«

10 - 9 - 8 - 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - SHOT!

Chapter 49

With the quote from an author I don't know, »Real fun starts after leaving the comfort zone«, I mentally prepare myself for the pain in my thighs. Like when the can of sardines was closed under pressure and now the lid is suddenly pulled open with a jerk, we all shoot forward all at once.

Only a few moments later, Timo and I cross the timing mat at the same time. That can only mean that whoever arrives earlier at the top was the faster of the two of us. The pace car accelerates, many spectators at the roadside shout and clap us out of Bruck, as if they wanted to get rid of us, as if they were angry because we were the reason they couldn't sleep in on Sunday. The field of riders splits at the underpass. Timo got the better start. I can make him out as he passes the bridge pillar on the right and takes the convex shaped road with momentum. They push me off to the left. He's gone. Is that supposed to be it? So soon? Like the start of a Formula 1 race? Start screwed up, race screwed up? I can't make up time with a quick pit stop. I shouldn't care. I return my thoughts to myself. Timo has disappeared from my field of vision, has been swallowed up by the crowd in front of me. Now I just have to set a great time, that is better than last year. For Eva's sake. Shortly after we all pass a blocked intersection, the first commotion arises in the field. Hard braking is necessary. And immediately I have to sprint at full speed so that I don't break off from the first block. The cause was cars parked on the side.

It's too hectic to read my pulse on the bike computer. I follow my feeling, which tells me that I don't have to be afraid of overdoing it yet. Keep going! Look straight ahead. Out of the corner of my eye I watch my competitors coming closer to me, sometimes too close. I can hardly avoid them because we are all caught between the two kerbs of the road. I let some of them go, but then I try to take advantage of their slipstream. The sound of hundreds of wheels rolling over the asphalt is gigantic. I can hardly describe it. For spectators it sounds different than when you are in the middle of it. For us participants, who are just giving it our all, the noise is comparable to the sound of the sea. But for the fans lining the roadside, it's more like a wave breaking right in front of them as we rush past. Wham! The pace is high. The lead car feels like it's stepping on the gas more today than the last few years. Perhaps the organisation would like to see more personal best times from the

many participants. Anyway, suddenly my fingers are squeezing the brake levers rapidly. The first road divider in Fusch is reached. One of the brake discs next to me squeaks. I hiss past the poor man who is frantically blowing into a whistle, trilling and waving a neon-coloured flag from left to right. So far, everything has gone well. I'm still right at the front, haven't been pushed to the back yet. That gives me courage. People are riding with more brains today, at least that's how I feel. Only a few think that they can make up time by crossing the line of others.

Suddenly shouts from the front are heard. Again I see a man making noise in the middle of the street. Again a bright flag goes violently from left to right and back. I manage to brake, but this time I have to squeeze past him on the right. Without meaning to, I am driven to the other side by the law of swarm formation. You know how it is when there are too many people at once at the Christmas market and the masses tell you where to go. You drift through it almost without a chance. It takes a lot of effort to get to the hut you want, but then you're always the one who brings trouble into the swing of things.

I let myself drift. I only avoid being pushed right up against the kerb. There are often small stones or splinters lying around. These twenty centimetres are the most dangerous, because they carry the risk of a flat tyre. My breath goes, my lungs open and close, my upper legs swing up and down. With a great feeling, we move forward quickly and pass the sign indicating the price of the toll passage. From here we have another five kilometres to go at a blistering pace to the toll booth in Ferleiten. The worst of the first section has been completed, the biggest dangers have been overcome and the road is free of crashes. The road winds incessantly towards the mountain. We follow the changes in direction like water in a riverbed. Eva has surely reached the top. I hope she is not cold. She comes from the heat of Sevilla. The drop in temperature is quite intense. My thoughts drift away. Back to the race. It's getting shady. I pass the Embach Chapel. Briefly follow the long road on the left before the chains are subjected to a hundredfold pain when everyone downshifts from the big to the small blade at the front. We pass through wooded areas, ride along the »Fuscher Ache« stream, which flows into the river Salzach in Bruck. It continues to be fun. I have forgotten Timo. No idea whether he is in front or behind me. On the one hand that's a pity, so I don't know my turn, but on the other hand it can also be an advantage. Otherwise I might chase him too fast too soon and have to push at the end.

The gallery appears in front of me. The passage briefly changes the sound of the ride, on the right the pillars as in Greece, above the roof that has already protected me from the rain for sixty metres. On the left is only concrete, which makes the sound echo. I continue to have a really good pull. I proudly note that I have always been able to keep up over ten kilometres per hour. My right hand reaches for the bottle, I pull it out of the holder and allow myself a sip of the sugar mixture. The small green sign with the word FERLEITEN announces the flatter part. The speed increases. In front of us I recognise an incredible panorama in the distance today, with the peaks Fuscherkarkopf, to the left of it the Sonnenwelleck, in the middle the Pfandelscharte. A dream! The last few times they were still covered in snow. Today, only a little powdered sugar can be seen at the top. I don't have time to really appreciate the view. Powerful riders are pulling hard on the horn, accelerating. I try to keep up in the slipstream, straighten my upper body, stretch briefly, balance freehand while I awkwardly tear open a gel. Even more awkwardly, I try to roll up the wrapper from the bottom to the top with both hands to get the last drop of sugar paste into my mouth. Now there must be no braking at the front, otherwise I have no chance to react. I put the empty bag in the back pocket of my jersey. Everything went well, who's going to brake here anyway after all, every second counts. One more sip of liquid and I'm rolling through the open cashpoint. That was quick today. But it's just a feeling. What will Eva be doing at the top? In forty minutes, the first rider will certainly be finished. Groups of similarly strong riders form. Everyone tries to shake off one or the other. I am satisfied with my cadence. My pulse is stable and I can keep it just below my threshold. In front of me, a cyclist is trying to pass a female rider on the left. It's similar to the situation you often experience on motorways, when a slow lorry wants to overtake an even slower one, but it takes far too long and it's too slow and they even have to abandon the overtaking attempt at the end - like this cyclist is doing now. The woman is strong. I slowly approach the two-man team without putting more pressure on the pedals than before. My lungs take a deep breath. The short outfit is just perfect. I am getting warm. With my

right hand I pull the zip of the jersey up to the chest strap and immediately pull out the almost full bottle to drink something. Overcoming the downhill-force doesn't seem to bother me as much today. Metre by metre I pull myself up. I'm not at my limit yet, but it's still not easy.

I give it my all, but always with my wits about me, so that I can reach the top. The refreshment station is approaching the athletes. I can see a number of them catching a cup with unknown contents from the volunteers. Unfortunately, many of them miss. I prefer to trust in my drink and make my way through the crowd in serpentine lines. A right turn follows. My gaze goes up. Where is Timo? I immediately dismiss the thought. Concentrate only on what you are feeling at the moment, I tell myself. The pressure point of both balls of my feet in the cycling shoes brings the power perfectly onto the pedals. My calves are intensely tense with every step. I transfer the power of the entire musculoskeletal system from the clearly visible, three-part thigh muscles to the road. The chest strap tightens sometimes more, sometimes less. Breathing is deep. The wheels turn evenly, revolution for revolution. I push, pull, repeat countless more times. My buttocks slide back and forth on the saddle again and again, like bears on a tree trunk when they have an itch. My hands have a firm grip on the top handlebar. My torso remains still, my eyes are forward, my neck is firm but only tense from my overall posture. I am not stiff. Nothing hurts. This body scan does me good. It calms me. It goes higher. The view today is simply fantastic. There is no end to the summit madness. After another two kilometres I see the first bend, the »Piffalpe«. Every bend is now at least briefly flat enough for a drink, which I immediately take advantage of. I know that from now on there are still ten thousand metres ahead of me, but already seventeen thousand metres lay behind me. Think positive!

Suddenly I see Timo a long way ahead of me. His legs are still pedalling smoothly, his upper body is very still. About 250 metres separate us. That doesn't sound like much. But it's a lot of work to make up this distance on the mountain. I slowly increase my speed. Never try to catch someone with a sprint on the mountain! We are not professionals. I wouldn't be able to keep it up. My pulse would surely explode. Just purposefully push a little harder, observe how the body reacts. The tree line is reached. Turn number six. I leave it behind, but not before taking my last gel as well as a big gulp from my still half-full bottle. It's getting tough. The borderline between »just fine to ride« and »hardly possible anymore« strikes again surprisingly every time. Like a switch - light on, light off. I hope that my »Lights« do not go out. I keep pushing on the pedals. My speed is about one kilometre per hour more than in previous years, which is a lot on the mountain. I continue to fight my way towards Timo. My legs are hurting badly now. Hang in there, Willy!, I say to myself. It doesn't get any cooler this year, despite the altitude I've reached. Sweat drips down my frame, but not nearly as much as many others I've been able to overtake. I have enough to drink. Nevertheless, my energy is dwindling. My head closes down. Always in the same place, my mind and body want to give up. I ask myself, why am I doing this? Why do I keep putting myself through this pain? Just before stopping, the words of Chris McCormack, an Australian triathlete, come to me like a flash: »When your legs beg you to stop and your lungs threaten to explode, that's when it really starts. That's the ocean of pain. Winners really get caught up in it.« I follow this, forgetting the discomfort. The negative thoughts have faded. Fortunately. I have to cross the finish line before Timo this year! Now it's a MUST, self-imposed by me just now.

That's how close I am to Timo, so I look at my bike computer to check how I'm doing. Shit! The display is black. What's wrong now? That can't be. »I've never had anything like this before!« I curse to myself. »Oh my gosh, it's always something.« Panic-stricken, I try to get the computer back on, I get out of rhythm. »What the fuck!« I shout. No one heard me. The song »Relax, Baby! Be cool« by the Berlin band STEREO TOTAL springs to mind. Punk meets synthpop, with the typical French accent of singer Françoise Cactus. Unfortunately, she passed away far too early. An ear worm! An animal without extra weight in me. It can stay there. Focus on Timo in front of you, and let's go, Willy! I motivate myself once more, forget the computer! I can't say whether I've lost time now. I listen to myself even more and make up centimetre by centimetre on Timo.

Despite my doggedness, every now and then I take a look into the distance, with its incredible panorama of mountain peaks. Every view is a postcard motif. My legs are burning, my mouth is wide open. A long, straight stretch later, I recognise the destination in the distance with the typical, angular tower of the Fuscher Toerl, which also marks the top of the pass.

More curves follow. Still without being able to hear any noise, the sight comes and goes, depending on the direction of the road. Timo is almost reached. My lungs are screaming, my legs are about to burst, like white sausages in a pot that's too hot. Just don't overheat! My face tenses. My mouth is wide open. There is not enough air. It has become thin at an altitude of over 2,300 metres. At the »Oberes Nassfeld«, about five hundred metres before the finish line, the music is clearly audible. The speaker announces the times of the finishers in a chord, but I can't understand him very well yet. Now I've reached Timo, and I swing out from behind, pass him and look to my right. Startled, I recognise a face distorted with pain, but it doesn't match Timo's. I have to look twice and am totally confused. It's not Timo! He's just wearing similar clothes and a helmet. Embarrassed, I have to grin despite the strain. I drink again. The almost empty bottle goes back into the bottle holder. Now I don't care about anything. Computer dead, the guy is not Timo. I pretend it is and give it my last. I can't really describe the next four hundred metres. As if in a tunnel of pain, in a flow, my head unable to grasp concrete thoughts, I stand up, grab the handlebars at the bottom of the horn, pull on the pedals with my lower extremities, push, and accelerate again. I get everything out of me. More and more people are standing on the edge. They cheer us on, including me. Where is Eva? Is she standing here? At the last bend? Is she waiting at the top of the finish line waiting for me? I don't look left or right. My mouth opens extremely, my jaw feels unhinged, like a snake when it wants to swallow an animal that is far too big. The thin air makes me breathe faster. My lungs will soon have no more desire to support my endeavour. I have pushed my body to the limit. On the one hand a good feeling, on the other hand I could really puke right now. Only a few metres are left to cross the finish line. Then I hear a female, raspy voice screaming my name with all its might: »Wiiiiiiillyyy! WIIIIIIIIYYY! VAMOS, hombre!«

Not twenty seconds later it's over. The agony has come to an end. I've reached the finish line! I'm more exhausted than ever, but I still praise myself. I didn't cramp, I had enough to drink, I planned the race very well. The computer? Doesn't matter. That's tomorrow's problem. I'm not interested in it now. I'm satisfied. The finisher's medal is hung around my neck. I can hardly thank them as I am still gasping for breath. I almost fall over trying to get off the bike, but can just about catch myself. Hectically I push it out of the line of fire to make room for the pack pushing into the finish after me. Eva comes running. Camera in hand, jacket slightly open. She definitely wasn't freezing. She laughs and shouts something I can't understand. Too many gather at the finish line and are overjoyed to have made it. Eva almost jumps on me, is very happy. She kisses me on my salty cheek, on my slimy, disgusting mouth. She knows no revulsion. I must smell good too, I think to myself and laugh inwardly. Slowly I come down, compose myself.

»That was so cool today. I was able to give everything for the first time, really everything. I mixed Timo up with another guy I was chasing. But I didn't overtake him. After the start we were together for a short while, then he was passed by the front. He was gone. At the top, the display of my bike computer suddenly gave up. What was it like up here? Did you have to wait long? «

»I'll tell you later. In any case, I liked it a lot. I haven't seen Timo yet.«

»Really? Is it possible? That would mean that I have finally reached my goal. After a good four years!« I cheer, throw up my arms, laugh and hug Eva. But I'm not quite sure yet. After finding my clothes bag, I hurriedly change, fill the drink into my bottle and eat a bar. Eva takes the rucksack and hangs it over her left shoulder. Then I hear my name called for the second time. A male, exhausted voice. Timo pats me on the right shoulder: »Shut up jerk, you really did it this year! « He's not really happy for me yet. It's more like he's lost face, or it's exhaustion.

»I saw you at the top third, Willy, and I came closer and closer. My plan was to surprise you from behind like last year and pass you. But then you pulled away, as if someone had made you shy, like a horse that then takes off. What got into you?«

»Great story, Timo. I mistook the guy in front of me for you and chased after him. When I realised the mistake, I didn't care. From then on, I just wanted to set a great time for Eva. I didn't know that I was outrunning you in the process.«

He congratulates me, we slap each other's hands behind our backs in a hug.

»Hi Eva. How have you found it so far, the race? Did you like it?« asks Timo.

»You'll laugh. I'm really planning to go next year.«

»Super«, I say, before Timo also says »super« to her. Timo doesn't change clothes today. He leaves the two of us alone and drives right down. The disappointment is written all over his face. We arrange the obligatory meeting down in Bruck at 2 pm.

»Have a good trip down,« we wish him. »See you later.«

Eva takes my medal from my neck, squeezes me once more, kisses me.

»Thank you, for everything!« I say. »I would never have done it without you. You always believed in me, you tailored an unbelievable training plan. I love you, mi amor!«

A second kiss follows and she says: »Even with the training plan, not everyone can get as far as you. You are very ambitious and can take a lot. The whole package is right. Your body weight also helps. «

We want to take another winner's photo and move away from the now completely crowded finish area, away from the masses. I raise my bike above my head with both arms, a winner's smile on my face, my legs at about the same angle as my arms are spread, so it looks like an X. The mountain panorama is in the background. Eva takes the photo that won't be deleted any time soon. Then we ask a participant who is approaching to take a photo of the two of us with Eva's camera. A few tears almost squeeze out of my eyes. The joy really comes through now. I remember the old days well. The first computer games, with only five lives, you had to beat rough pixelated monsters with a figure, overcome obstacles, fight your way through countless levels, until at the end, after endless attempts at the game, you were allowed to kiss the princess at some point. My princess is called Eva, standing in front of me in Ultra HD, very high-resolution, so to speak, not pixelated. My game of life has reached a new level. A programmer must now think up new adventures for both of us so that it continues, so that the game does not end. Eva and I say goodbye. The buses don't go back until much later, when almost the last one has arrived and the roadblock is lifted. Before I cool down, I enjoy the descent. It is a dream. It rolls great. I don't freeze. Wearing shorts, my upper body protected only by a wind waistcoat, I bang through the serpentine. At a small parking bay I stop once and straighten up. With my arms folded, I consciously soak up the atmosphere, the view, the mountains in the distance, and let the years pass in review. What a lucky person I am to have been able to experience all this, to have met and fallen in love with Eva. I never want to forget this moment. I was completely absorbed in myself.

When I arrive at the hotel, I take a shower and provisionally pack both suitcases so that we can check out quickly as soon as Eva arrives. The hotel needs the room for new guests. My bike is quickly stowed in the car. I go to hand in the chip and curiously look at the results list, which is already posted. I can't find myself at first. Unexpectedly my eyes catch sight of my name very high up, at a time of 1:32:55 h. Timo is actually far below me. The difference is a full five minutes! Full of joy, I send Eva the results, although I don't know if she has any connection up there. Maybe she's waiting at the inn at the top of the pass, where there's Wi-Fi.

I wait for Eva's return, enjoy the sun at the village square in Bruck. More and more cyclists arrive. It is filling up again. I walk towards the bus stop where Eva will arrive, while I can't believe my happiness. Then I see her getting off the last bus and running towards me with my backpack, beaming with joy.

»I am so proud of you. I was also able to take a few photos of you with my digital camera. Your face looks incredibly funny,« she says, shows me the photos and hugs me. We both laugh, walk hand in hand to the hotel, pack our things and stuff our bags into the car. Afterwards we meet up with Timo. He is smiling again. Wonderful! The pasta tastes especially good today. The non-alcoholic wheat beer goes smoothly down my throat. Timo looks at me and says: »I lost you shortly after the start. «

»You were in front of me, Timo.«

»Okay, then we missed each other when you passed me. I think it was already in the uphill to Ferleiten. I didn't feel so good. Must have been a bad day. Or the training was a bit too much before, or not enough recovery, or...«

»It could be anything, Timo. Next year you can race against Eva,« I joke, which Timo doesn't think is so great.

»Anyone can have a bad day. You got up and down without falling and in good health. That's the only thing that counts, isn't it boys?« Eva conciliates.

»You're right,« I reply to her wise words, while Timo gives me a thumbs up.

»It's all good. Next year we'll have a rematch, promise?«

I promise him. What worries me more is the bike computer, which was the loser today on an otherwise perfect day.

Chapter 50

Back on the motorway, Eva plays DJ and selects music from my playlist. There are old classics, like »The Sweetness Lies Within« by the indie rock band HEFNER, newer songs by the IDLES, »GREAT«, music by the band FAT EARTHERS »Life Is Political«, FAT WHITE FAMILY »It Is Raining in Your Mouth«, all very British. We enjoy the drive home to no end, it's fantastic, although we get into a traffic jam.

At home, clothes already all tidied up, we enjoy the remaining sun with its warming rays on the balcony. Eva sits on my lap, one arm wrapped around my neck, one of my hands resting on her thighs. Happily we watch the birds and look forward to our future together.

END

Afterword

After a long time of writing down every event, every experience and the natural spectacles that happened to me during the many training rides on the bike, I had the idea of compiling these often incredible experiences into a notebook.

A lot has come together. You will find most of it built into the story. It was often pure luck that I wasn't involved in a really bad accident. The incidents described should be a hint for the cycling reader to take good care of yourselves and the situations. If I can save just one cyclist from the hospital with this book, it will be a great success.

For a long time I didn't have a clue how to put my idea into an interesting story. But then my experience of the Glocknerkoenig came to me, the race I have chosen for myself as an annual highlight - with the arduous path of creating a good finishing time. Much is true, the colleague actually exists, but in reality it took seven years until I was able to beat him. The preparations according to structured training plans, the development from a simple cyclist to a racing enthusiast at a level I could never have dreamed of, turned my life upside down. So the basic idea was born. When I started writing, one thing led to another. It became a story. The number of pages grew. Then out of nowhere came the idea of Eva as Willy's coach.

Besides cycling, listening to music is my second passion. I was able to incorporate this topic as well - and the basic structure of the manuscript was ready, the familiar red thread. All of a sudden, the ideas just bubbled away. Even when I fell asleep, something kept coming to my mind and I wrote it down immediately. Also during my indoor sessions, I kept coming up with new ideas and writing them down, but the scribbles on the sweat-soaked paper were often difficult to decipher afterwards. But it was obviously enough. I just had to channel the thoughts through a funnel.

The different seasons that I describe in the book are certainly different in every country, but if you consciously surrender to them, what nature gives you, is the only true thing to be grateful for, apart from your own health. Smells, temperatures, weather, colours, wind - all this makes cycling in the open air.

The book is meant to encourage you to do the same as Willy. Find your own passion. It doesn't have to be road bikes. Jay Shetty, a former Hindu monk who became famous through his video channel, writes in his book »The Think Like a Monk Principle«: »You cannot become anything you want. But you can become everything you are.« That means that I am a racing cyclist, but I will never

become a ballet dancer. Do you understand? Only when you find your passion and have goals in mind will you be able to achieve incredible things. You grow into it. Everyone has different dispositions. It doesn't always have to be about winning or losing. It has to be about a personal goal, observing yourself on the way there, enjoying what happens, being absorbed in it. Mahatma Gandhi is said to have stated: »Your future depends on what you do today. « In other words, Max Depree summed it up in his book »Leadership Is an Art«: »We cannot achieve what we want by remaining what we are. «

So, find your thing, set a goal you want to achieve and be excited about what will happen to you along the way. You will be surprised. But you have to take the first step. Get off the sofa - and stay curious!

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And not to forget my two real initiators, who pushed my racing cycling further: Michael, who first made the Glocknerkoenig cycling race palatable to me, and Geli. She put me in touch with the owner of the bike shop, who in turn put me in touch with the real coach Hugo. It was thanks to them that I was able to find, deepen and live out my passion, and still can.

And it looks like I have discovered a new hobby, writing. A second book is in progress.