

Robert Prosser
Lost in Avalanches



A Tyrolean mountain village has fallen unbearably silent at the end of the winter season after two locals were buried under an avalanche. The girl is fighting for her life in hospital, but there is no sign of the boy. The girl's uncle Xaver scours the trackless snowy wastes, first as part of the volunteer search party, then on his own.

While he was growing up, his beloved grandfather disappeared up in the mountains. Eventually a reclusive healer called Mathoi helped Xaver and his mother to find the old man. It was too late though: his grandfather was dead.

Could Xaver have saved his life, and what can he do to dispel his own lingering guilt? He sets out in search of Mathoi, but to track down the healer he first has to find his mother, who retreated high into the mountains after their family collapsed under the pressures of alcoholism and running a guesthouse. Where is Xaver's proper place in the world? Where can he find happiness? And has this avalanche finally given him the chance to prove himself and find both?

'An outstanding stylist.'
Steffen Kopetzky

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Robert Prosser was born in 1983 in Alpbach in Tyrol, and studied comparative literature and cultural and social anthropology. A writer and a performance artist, he has received numerous awards including the 2014 Reinhard Priessnitz Prize. His 2017 novel *Phantoms* was longlisted for the German Book Prize. Robert Prosser divides his time between Alpbach and Vienna. *Lost in Avalanches* is his first novel to be published by Jung und Jung.

ROBERT PROSSER

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Translated by Simon Pare

It was only hours after the avalanche. A heron was circling in the sky; the rays of the evening sun fell obliquely through scraps of cloud. A wind was stirring the valley into motion: flurries of snow, flickering light. Xaver took the shortcut, crossing the field in little jumps. Watchful glances. Twenty per cent bird. According to the book he was reading, it was an essential acting exercise to be able to blend your own personality with an animal's. Fifty or sixty per cent, to gauge the level of alertness required for a role. The heron that had until recently been circling in the air was now hopping along a footpath. Maybe for the coming church service it was useful to imagine himself as more of a lone animal, waiting motionlessly by a stream. An impassive raider.

The initial rumour – or rather a glimpse of a mountain-rescue helicopter between two peaks, its drone barely audible from this distance – had been quickly confirmed. On a remote flank of the Greit, the highest mountain in the area, two skiers had reportedly been buried alive, two teenagers from the village, and Xaver, who was on duty at the cable-car station, eventually received the news that it was his niece and her boyfriend. *How could anyone go so recklessly off-piste*, he thought. Anger sapped all his energy and he stopped jumping. On the other hand, he told himself . . . One of the last opportunities to make fresh tracks along a slope . . . On the terrace of Hotel Tyrol a man was craning his neck inquisitively toward the church and taking photos of the people assembled on the square in front of it. On one side, a tourist sensing something unusual going on; on the other, the locals pretending the bystander wasn't there.

Xaver crossed the road and joined the crowd. It seemed as if the entire village had turned up. He saw familiar faces and some that he recognized only vaguely at best. Twelve per cent. Five. How did a heron really behave? Did it croak or cackle? Was it really a solitary animal? Would it jab its head in greeting? No, stare at a point in the distance. Xaver shook his plumage and felt that everyone was looking him up and down. A dimple chin, russet-brown hair, isn't that . . .? Then the church bell tolled. Conversations faded to a whisper.

Xaver had clocked off his shift and driven to the hospital in the nearest town. His sister was waiting there for him, pale and skinny, burnt down to a crisp, an alien look in her eyes, a new look. Fear, he realized. Thanks for coming, Marlen said, but no visitors were allowed on the ward. She mentioned a crushed lung and cerebral bruising, the neck vertebra. He gave her a hug as she whispered in his ear that having her daughter in ICU and the boy still missing was driving her nuts. It'll be all right, he'd said, it's bound to be all right. Stupid platitudes.

Stand, kneel, sit. From every mouth: Amen. The boy's parents were in the front row. The mumbling behind them and the rustling of clothing were proof of united support. Two lines formed for communion, one behind the priest, one behind the deacon. Eyes scanned Xaver again from the left and the right on his way back from the altar. He kept his eyes on the floor, flexing his tongue to detach the host from his palate. He thought of the avalanche – as a phenomenon and also what it meant. The crack pouncing like a creature from the undergrowth. The tear in the snow, developing a instantaneous force that hurtles downhill, sucking everything up, even the air to breathe.

Keep Noah and Tina in your prayers, the priest concluded, making the sign of the cross over the altar. The congregation rose and streamed out of the church. Leaning against the corner near the chapel of the dead was Flo. Their eyes met. Flo formed a pistol with his fingers and levelled it at Xaver's forehead. Xaver copied the gesture and was about to push through the people to his friend when a black-clothed group stepped outside through the sacristy. Noah's family. A boy of about ten had the same high cheekbones as the missing teenager; must be his little brother. Xaver turned back because even before at the hospital nothing sensible had come out of his mouth. Flo vanished in the crowd, and Xaver padded uncertainly across the gravel – a heron in the wrong territory.

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Xaver walked up to his sister's house on the north-facing slope above the village. On the dining table, two plates with remains of schnitzel on them, grey meat coated in dried-out breadcrumbs: the news had caught Marlen and her husband unawares as they ate lunch. He cleared the plates into the dishwasher, placed logs carefully in the big stove in the lounge and, as the flames started to dance, looked for Tina's room. A triangular sign with skull and crossbones and the

warning *Keep out* on it was stuck to a door on the second floor. This had to be it. He pressed down the handle gently. Since his visit to the hospital he'd been haunted by how little he knew about his niece. Schoolbooks and clothing were strewn all over the carpet. Framed photographs were propped up on the shelf between cacti: Tina on a mountain ridge, ski sticks raised to her helmet like antlers; Tina at her birthday party, a meringue tart with the number 16 in gold, her laughing face, surrounded by friends. The splintered halves of an exceptionally wide ski were nailed to the wall above the bed. Since last winter Tina had a sponsor, a sports brand that supplied her with clothing and gear including these nearly two-metre-long skis. Bamboo core, curved-up tips. You go through powder like a train on them, she'd raved to Xaver. Just look how light they are.

This ski had shattered during a race held not far from the cable car. Jury members judged the riskiest lines down the cliffs from the summit. Xaver was free enough in his work to watch a few descents. He was what was known as a stand-by, helping out at the lift stations or monitoring the state of the pistes, a shovel over his shoulder to clear away lumps of ice. Among the fluttering advertising banners at the finish a DJ was doing his stuff, one hand on his laptop, the other waving in time to the beat. Xaver tried to keep track of the tiny dot disappearing into a rocky gully and then reappearing again with a leap, when a wiry boy spoke to him.

'You're the actor,' he said as if ignoring Xaver's bright red-and-yellow work outfit. It was Noah, Tina's boyfriend; he'd already completed his run. Like many in the watching crowd he was wearing a baggy neon-coloured jacket and mirror sunglasses pushed up on his forehead. This getup reminded Xaver of when he used to snowboard in his teens. Even the music was more or less the same – rap jacked up with electro beats. Noah laughed at this. 'It's only old people go snowboarding now, the over-forties,' he said. 'Oh sorry, no idea how old you are.'

Xaver opened the balcony door. An icicle was hanging off one of the rafters. One touch and it fell off onto the terrace and shattered. Marlen's gaze. The way she'd looked at him when he walked into the waiting room. He dug his smartphone out of his pocket and after a few rings she picked up. She told him that they were just coming back from the seeing the doctor; Tina's condition was stable, no broken vertebrae. He shut his eyes and breathed out in relief. There was the click of a lighter, someone taking a drag and maybe, as he listened hard, some stifled sobs. He imagined her leaning against a wall, the cigarette between her fingers, focusing all her concentration on his voice as a form of support. 'The dishwasher's on,' he said. 'I lit the fire.'

He crossed the room and the hallway. Down the steps a pair of chamois horns glinted in the darkness. He could mention the trophies littering the three floors: Your husband isn't exactly a lightweight, so how in hell does it make it up onto the shooting platform? Maybe his sister would welcome a quick tease. Distract her for a moment. The sliding doors had opened at the hospital, and Paul had come out of the intensive care unit. He too looked exhausted, or rather chewed up by worry. No hint of his usual intimidating manner. He'd pulled Marlen to him and given her a kiss; Xaver was reassured that his sister had this intimacy to rely on.

Paul was a building contractor and the scion of the Veithof, one of the leading hotels in the region; Marlen, the local vet. A couple that influenced the course of village life, something that was reflected in the level of activity that usually reigned in their home. How weirdly empty it felt now. Not a sound apart from the crackling of burning logs in the lounge.

'Any news from Dad?' Marlen asked, and he told her about their most recent phone call. The bar he ran in a suburb of Munich was decked out like an alpine chalet, with karaoke on Wednesday nights and shots with names like *Bizzy Lizzy*.

'I should give him a call,' Marlen said.

'And Mum?'

'How? She doesn't have a mobile.'

'Seen her recently?'

'Let me think,' Marlen said, her voice murky from the smoke. 'I passed the hut back in the autumn but she wasn't there.'

For a second Xaver felt a pang of wounded pride or a defiant impulse, because their mother had simply cleared off and was now living somewhere remote on the Greit.

'Should I see to the patients?' he asked and received a cough of acquiescence in response.

A row of cages against the wall of the cellar, next to piled-up sacks of milk powder. Moving shapes – Xaver was greeted by expectant barking. Only two of the cages were occupied. A begging, mewling cat with its hind leg plastered whose owner wouldn't pay the bill, and a dachshund that had been abandoned in a hotel room. Xaver topped up the water and shook feed mixture out of cardboard boxes. He told Marlen about the church service while stroking the cat. He passed into the vet's surgery through a metal door. It reminded him of a theatre set: boxes of disposable gloves on the shelves, wellies in a corner with manure-blackened bits of straw stuck to their soles, posters of cuddly guineas pigs and galloping horses; a desk, a collage of many photos on the wall, in the middle of the room a stainless-steel table. He wedged the

phone between his shoulder and chin and took the white coat down from its peg. Dr House, maybe, or Dr Meredith in *Grey's Anatomy*? Rehearsals for the next play had just begun; Xaver was taking part for the fourth time. He was about to tell Marlen how happy acting made him, but she was quicker: 'I'm afraid someone's going to come round for some medicine. Do you have time? Sorry to ask so much. I forgot to cancel.'

'No problem, I'll be here.'

He looked at the painting hanging next to the TV. An ibex on a crag, its horns pointed menacingly at the stormy sky – a classic motif.

'I've never seen this picture before,' he said. 'Where did you get it?'

'Paul did it. His new hobby.'

'Nice.' He bit back on a nasty comment, but Marlen had guessed his intention from his tone. She giggled and said, 'At least there isn't a triangle.'

He'd come here once with a girlfriend. In her fascination at the view of the Greit, this German tourist asked Marlen if she could put up her easel. The unusually clear air made scree slopes and rocky outcrops visible with the naked eye. The end result was a triangle, fat black lines on the canvas that looked as if they'd been drawn with a ruler. Xaver was impressed. Not because he was in love (which he was) but because the triangle held a significance far beyond the symbolism of a mountain. The artwork illustrated the percussive power of the most immediate gesture; an inner truth reduced to what was essential, to a mysterious form like a Chinese character (in retrospect he had to admit that he really had been head over heels in love).

'Days and days of painting, and the Greit was just a triangle,' Marlen said. 'Do her pictures at least sell well?'

'I guess. So, who's coming by?'

He went into the cabinet where Marlen kept her stores. The neon tubes on the ceiling buzzed.

'I'm sure that stupid moustache of yours was her fault,' Marlen said. 'You grew it when you were with her.'

He chuckled as he opened the cupboard. Neatly piled packets of pills alongside little amber-coloured glass bottles containing dark liquids.

'The vials,' she said, 'are in the middle on the right, in the third compartment. Take the green pack. That's important – it has to be green. Syringes are in the drawer. One'll do.'

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He waited outside. The village was a nest of bright dots in the dark valley bottom. Headlights cut swathes across the sloped fields, disappeared into the woods and emerged again around the bend. A Fiat Panda drew up outside the garage. Xaver returned the smile of the old woman behind the wheel.

‘Hi there, Ms Moser.’

‘Looking smart in that doctor’s coat,’ she said, touching the flowery apron poking out under her jacket as she got out of the car. ‘Near as smart as mine.’

She rolled a cigarette and offered him the tobacco. ‘Thought so. I’ll have a look,’ she said apologetically. ‘Can’t wait any longer – one of my cattle’s still sick.’

‘No worries,’ he said and passed on Marlen’s instructions. ‘Shake the vial, fill the syringe, inject in the neck. Should help against pneumonia, but if things don’t improve, use the second vial.’

She nodded. ‘Poor Tina. But she’ll make it through.’

‘Yeah, she’ll make it through,’ Xaver said, handing her the drug and the needle.

‘Let’s hope the boy comes back.’

‘Let’s hope so.’

The two of them stood there together smoking. ‘It’s cold,’ he said, and she hummed in agreement. ‘Your grandfather,’ she said to break the silence, ‘used to like threatening to call the police on my husband. He often piped slurry into the stream. I must confess he was a bastard.’

Xaver peered out, searching for the cemetery. The red glimmer of grave lanterns down in the valley. People rested there for two decades, and when this period was over, the graves were removed to make room for the newly deceased. Konrad still had some time left. Xaver turned around and looked at the house, once known as the Guna Guesthouse after the family, and advertised for its cosy atmosphere and sunny location. Where the surgery was now had once been their grandfather’s joinery workshop. By raising the roof, extending the terrace and hollowing out the centre, Marlen had done away with everything from the past. But for Xaver the old building continued to flicker through the modern one as a ghostly apparition. Up top, their flat; the second and third floors each had a bathroom and toilet as well as three guestrooms; on the ground floor, larder, kitchen and the lounge for breakfast and the regular evening drinks; in the cellar, the workshop where Konrad continued to make small items of furniture after his retirement. Saturday was change-over day, when the previous guests said

goodbye and fresh ones arrived; this was the rhythm that had patterned Xaver's childhood. A Dutch couple knew how excited he was about dinosaurs and brought along a T-Rex figurine for him the next winter; and a German guy to whom he had gone on about the musketeer film sent a Zorro costume by post as a Carnival gift.

Anna warned him not to badger the holiday guests. He was to be quiet, invisible in fact – which was really unfair as the visitors could do as they liked. Her pre-emptive concern was particularly marked with regular guests. If one was due to arrive, Anna would Hoover the stairs, scrub the bathtub and the washbasin and clean all the windows to ensure perfect views; she would wash all the towels on sixty degrees. If the guests weren't coming by car, Vinz would wait for them at the bus stop behind the church to chauffeur them the final stretch. Konrad would come up from the workshop with his zither. There was as much excitement as at Christmas, except that the dentist from Frankfurt, whose wife wore a forest-green traditional Tyrolean jacket and a burgundy silk scarf around her neck, took Father Christmas's place.

For the welcome dinner Anna fetched several trout out of the freezer and fried them in butter. She carried the frying pan into the lounge in her apron. 'You have to prise out the cheeks with the tips of your knives, she said. It's the best part, the most tender bit. Poetry.'

Konrad promised to pluck along to dessert, and once Anna had cleared away the plates with the fishbones on them, it was Vinz's turn – 'the lord of the manor', he announced, as he balanced a bottle of brandy and engraved glasses on a silver tray. He came from a small town in Lower Bavaria and this vexed some people because it detracted from pleasure of holidaying in a Tyrolean household. Yet he would regain their sympathies with stories of the wild life he had led before falling in love with the daughter of the music-making joiner accompanying him on the zither

Ms Moser said, 'I can remember how Anna turned one of your guest's head so much that he didn't go home again.'

It was hard to interpret the look on her face with its combination of admiration and disapproval. 'The cretin wanted to muddle through as a ski instructor to be close to her. Your father had no idea, even though he was still in the guesthouse.' She took a dreamy drag on her cigarette. 'What happened to him?' she asked.

Xaver told her that Vinz had opened his own bar and would be returning soon. But people who don't make it in any other business by a bar and run that bar to the bitter end. Vinz's own words.

‘Your father never settled in here.’

‘No, sadly.’

‘Obviously didn’t like it here,’ Ms Moser said, flicking away her cigarette butt.

After she had left Xaver hung up the white coat in the surgery again. The fire in the lounge stove had burnt out, and he locked the door. A last walk around to check all the lights were off. His flat was over by the cable-car station – two rooms and a fitted kitchen. He had to go down the street, back to the church and it was a fifteen-minute walk on from there.

Behind the house, towering over the grassy slopes and the forest, was the silhouetted bulk of the Greit. Dense darkness, thrust up into the sky, and the cause of Xaver’s nervousness. He knew what Noah’s family was going through. His grandfather had disappeared too. Not in the winter but in the summer; not under the snow, but on that same mountain. Xaver thought back to the church services, the compassionate looks and the assurances that Konrad would soon return . . . He felt the same sense of powerlessness in his gut, as if it hadn’t happened many years. How good the body is at storing up memories. Doomed to wait. And to hope for news. To be released from uncertainty. It had all begun so normally. He was drinking a glass of water in the kitchen while his mates drilled a football against the garage door. The phone rang, a relative from the next valley asking after Konrad. She said he had stayed the night at hers after a wedding party and set off that morning to walk back on one of the forest path.

‘I wanted him to take the bus, but he doesn’t listen to me,’ she said. ‘Do me a favour and see if he’s made it home.’

Xaver went to the workshop, but there was no one there. That evening he caught snatches of a second phone call. She wasn’t sure, Anna said, if you were supposed to wait for seventy-two hours, but yes, he was missing, and she wanted to report it. In his mid-eighties but sprightly; maybe he’d just got stuck at some pub.

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The next morning. Fog and the smell of burnt wood. Xaver threw on his work jacket. Bright red with a shiny yellow diagonal stripe and the name of the local ski area emblazoned in silver lettering on the back.

The car stalled several times. Don’t let me down now, Xaver whispered, patting the dashboard lovingly when the Opel Kadett’s engine finally started. He turned off by the church

towards Höhenstrasse, passed Marlen's house and then on until he reached a forest track. On the other side of the valley gigantic clouds were swelling up beyond one of the peaks, forming an angry grey background against which the lift pylons and floating cable cars stood out. Amazing that each of those tiny things held up to eight winter sport enthusiasts. The white ribbon of artificial snow wound between brown patches of grass – a horrid sight. Slowly, avoiding potholes, Xaver drove through the forest. At the end of the gravel track were the alpine hut and stable. Peter was standing outside in his wellies and blue coat.

'You wouldn't believe what I've been told,' he said, pointing to the stable's moss-covered shingles. 'Eternit panels, the same kind everyone used. But now they say they have asbestos in them and I have to dispose of them without making any dust. How's that meant to work? Who's going to pay for it?' he asked.

'Got to be done. You don't want to live with poison all around you.'

Xaver dug the knife out of the glove compartment, its blade long and sharp as a razor.

'Like I'm ever ill,' Peter retorted. 'Going on sixty-four, I am. Nothing I need. Mrs Brunner brings me tincture of arnica and that's good enough.'

Xaver put the knife on the wall by the manure heap. He pushed the bolt of the cowshed door aside and there was a sudden frightened tinkling of bells from the goats. A smell of fresh sawdust, the floor shimmering through the animal-warm darkness; Peter had just mucked out. A peculiarly thick stench hit him square. A spot of dark black was visible over the wooden planks of a shed, a shape with long, curving horns. Peter pressed the switch and the naked bulb on the cobwebbed ceiling lit up. At the edge of the cone of light stood the grey animal.

'Hello Lex,' Xaver greeted the billy and scratched its forehead. It shook itself in annoyance, the shadows of its horns jagging across the walls. A free-roaming kid jumped up at Xaver, teetering playfully on its hind legs. He picked it up and stroked its brown-and-white-patterned coat.

'The little one – yeah, why not?' Peter said, grabbing one of the chained goats by the neck. 'All right, all right,' he cried, 'calm down. This one apparently ran away up in the mountains. I found her again over a year later, gone wild as a chamois. Before he let the goat go, he said with obvious pride, 'You little bastard.'

He pointed to another large, white-coated one without horns. 'Doesn't get pregnant, that one. Never has any young.' He scratched his beard. 'Let's do those two today. Mrs Brunner'll be here soon. You'll look in for a coffee afterwards, yeah?'

He glanced back from the doorway. ‘You know, if now’s not a good time, doesn’t matter. I heard the girl’s in intensive care.’

‘It’s okay,’ Xaver said. ‘I’ll just sit at home thinking too hard otherwise.’

He patted down his pockets fruitlessly and went back outside. He walked to the car through the drizzle and found the twenty-centimetre-long steel rod marked *Thunderbolt* on the back seat. He kept the kid under his arm the whole time. Setting it down by the manure heap, he held the device to the middle of its forehead. He fired – and the bolt shot out with a thud. A shudder as if from an electric shock: the young goat let out a wail that quickly died away. There was a metallic smell of cordite. Xaver swapped the stun gun for his knife. A stab in the throat with the sharp edge facing out, a quick jerk that left a dark spatter of blood on the wall. He pressed the animal to the ground and waited until the nerves had shaken their last. As life left it the back legs kicked out and the head tried to stretch upwards. Drops fell from the gaping wound into the dung.

Back inside the stable he took the bell off the large white goat. The first was always easy to lead, but the second was aware. It braced itself against him, whining and sticking out its tongue. He dragged it by its collar to the dead kid lying in a black puddle. Clamping the screaming goat between his knees, he swore: he’d forgotten to reload. Yanking on the collar till the pitch of the bleating fell, he delved into his pocket with the other hand for a cartridge. Not the one with yellow dot like the one for the kid, not a red one he had never used before because you could take down a hundred-kilo bull with that; he needed one with a green marking.

He’d learned the skills from Anna who had herself been taught by Konrad. When there were no guests, they did some slaughtering to get by. Occasionally a goat or a sheep would struggle too much and work its head loose, so the bolt only hit the cheek. Xaver crouching on the injured animal, Anna next to it: he’d hated it, the dried blood under his fingernails, that stench you couldn’t wash off even the next day.

He heaved the goat onto his shoulders. The colder an animal got after being shot, the more it weighed. As if that were its final stratagem, a wretched way of living on – making itself as heavy as possible. Cursing under his breath, he carried it to the outhouse. When you’ve grown up, I’d like to come back from the dead, Konrad had often said. Just for a few minutes, to see what you’ve made of yourself. He’d be amazed, Xaver thought.

The goat slid off his shoulders into the snow. With the tip of the knife he slit its hind legs down to the hooves and peeled the skin off the pale sinews. He opened the metal door, pressed the remote button on the wall and a double hook rattled down from the winch on the ceiling. He dragged the goat over the threshold and pierced each shinbone with a hook. The chain wound back up with a clatter. The animal hung there in mid air, its stomach bloated. Xaver cut the yellow tags from its ears. They were stamped with the official registration numbers. Marlen had called him recently after coming across a box of tags in a stable; now of course she was wondering where the animals had got to. Don't go telling me they all fell off cliffs, she'd said. I've already told you what happens if they catch someone shooting.

According to an EU directive the slaughter of an animal whose meat was destined for sale could not be done on the farm but had to be reported to the local vet and carried out at a registered abattoir near the regional capital. Farmers no longer had any control over the conditions in which their animals died. It was because they objected to this patronizing rule that Xaver offered his services. Not as a quick earner but because he was needed. Not only that – he was also valued. He saw himself as being precise with *Thunderbolt* and knife, outside the law and capable of keeping his mouth shut, even if he knew the real reason – he was one of the last people left who knew about slaughtering. The old butchers were senile or long dead, and none of the younger generation was interested. It seemed to be one of the those almost-forgotten professions, like being a baker or a shingle-maker.