

✧ THE ✧
MEANS
✧ ✧ *of*
KEEPING ✧

✧ ✧
A novel by
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*May I be a guard for those who need protection,
A guide for those on the path,
A boat, a raft, a bridge for those who wish to cross the flood.
May I be a lamp in darkness,
A resting place for the weary,
A healing medicine for all who are sick,
A vase of plenty, a tree of miracles.
And for the boundless multitudes of living beings,
May I bring sustenance and awakening.
Enduring like the earth and sky
Until all beings are freed from sorrow
And all are awakened.
--Shantideva*

PRELUDE

In the seventeen years after the 2015 Paris Climate Accords, the United States made modest progress in reducing its carbon emissions. The federal government, preaching incrementalism, committed to transition to clean energy by 2050, a positive development, but their implementation turned out to be spotty at best and subject to change by follow-on administrations. Beyond the administrations, more and more citizens took the crisis seriously, especially young people. Millions of electric cars were purchased. A few utility companies produced all their electricity cleanly, and many others generated a significant percentage from wind, solar, hydro, and nuclear sources. Solar panel farms popped up nationwide, especially in small rural towns and cities, and wind farms dotted the Midwest and the waters off the east coast. Investments in clean energy startups skyrocketed, and many larger companies committed to generating zero CO₂ emissions well before 2050. Despite the positive movement, carbon emissions remained almost flat, primarily because of America's ever-increasing need for power. As a result, the crisis continued to worsen.

The Twenties produced eight of the hottest years on record, with temperatures in the summer regularly hitting one hundred and ten degrees in much of the country. In the western states, droughts and wildfires became the norm, and reservoirs dried up, causing many families to migrate to northern states like Maine, seeking safer homes and relatively abundant water. In the eastern and southern states, storms increased in frequency and especially in size. It was no longer unusual to have a severe thunderstorm or a category five hurricane hit the eastern seaboard, often causing extensive power outages, flooding, property damage, and loss of life.

The patterns and trends in the United States weren't unique. The whole world was in crisis. Island nations were abandoned. Greenland's ice was melting, and the territory was forcefully taken over by the United

States, many feared for the untapped oil reserves. Annual heat-related deaths skyrocketed to ten million in 2031 alone, and severe drought turned once arable land into desert. Millions of refugees from six continents fled their homes and land in search of more moderate environments. Often, their search ended in violence or death.

Worldwide, scientists had long ago reached a consensus on the crisis--time was running out. If humanity didn't choose a different trajectory, it would run its course in a century or two and bring The Anthropocene Epoch to an unceremonious close. To avoid extinction, the world had to move away from fossil fuels by 2050. Even so, only a few affluent energy-consuming countries in the global north had taken meaningful action. Plus, in the global south, many still struggled with inadequate access to electricity and clean water. As their governments scrambled to meet their basic needs, energy consumption, often reliant on coal or oil, continued to rise.

PART I

The Great Absence
2032

THE MONARCH BUTTERFLY

Thirty-four years after Tereza Allard and David Luca became the best of friends, Tereza found herself preparing at the cliffs, their sanctuary. From her perch a hundred feet above, she watched storm waves pound the rocks below, unleashing their rage and grief, only to recede into the far depths to begin the cycle again. She would not be one of them anymore.

Methodically, Tereza disrobed, shedding her running shoes, sodden sweatpants, bloodstained t-shirt, and sports bra. She carefully folded each article of clothing, placing them in a neat pile beside her shoes and marking the spot with a stone. She glanced back at her electric SUV, where she had stashed the failed knife, the photograph, and the golden sculpture. What good had the SUV done? From the damp, almost frozen earth, she collected enough mud to paint her face.

A step closer to the edge, she caressed the diamond pendant gifted to her by her children on her forty-fifth birthday and, from the salty ocean mist, conjured their images: Robert, her eldest at eighteen, plunging off the diving board and cannonballing into the backyard pool; Elsa, at sixteen, blushing crimson when caught behind the front yard bushes making out with the boy next door; and Mary, at twelve, surrounded by a gaggle of young girls at her birthday party, gazing up at Tereza with admiring eyes no parent could count on forever. In a six-year whirlwind, all three had come into an uncertain world and recast Tereza for the better.

Twisting her wedding band on her finger, she rotated it to the right and left, its diamonds radiating a new significance. The ring felt looser than it had when she and Luke had wed twenty-three years prior. Not long ago, the latter half of their marriage still brimmed with potential. They would finish raising their children. They would protect all they'd built and offer aid to those less fortunate. They would grow old together. They were the lucky ones, living in Maine far enough north to have escaped the worst ravages of the climate crisis, at least temporarily. With diligence and a smattering of luck, they would weather the heat, the storms, and the floods. They would emerge even stronger and more united. They weren't like all those propelled by inertia and convention, or denial and the whisper-whisper of more. Similar to the monarch butterfly, humanity was endangered, but the Allards would find a way to survive, even flourish.

Then, eighteen months ago, the microburst came and took her family.

In the center of a U-shaped clump of boulders below, an eddy formed. It felt like a portal to before, a time machine, a reprieve. David, sweet David, the only one left who would understand her decision, the only one who'd seen her clearly for decades--though not as much since the microburst. Still, he would find and act on the signposts she'd left for him. He would know how much she loved him despite the last eighteen months. He would know what to do.

WE KEEP THE PAST

David raced toward the forest listening to Tereza's favorite Alanis Morissette song, "Thank You," one hand tapping the steering wheel on the downbeat, the other holding a bagged and opened bottle of vodka. As he drew closer to the woods, something round in the middle of the road caught his attention. Was it moving? He slowed to a stop and only then recognized an upside-down snapping turtle trying to right itself. Teenagers, he guessed. He hopped out of his car, turned the turtle over, and carried it to what he hoped was the right side of the road.

At the mouth of the forest, the road narrowed to one lane, splitting the woods in two as it wound its way toward his week-old home, a tiny, recently uninhabited cape worth almost nothing and inherited years ago from his father. A week earlier, he'd sold his family home in Augusta, the one he'd vowed he would never leave, the one where he'd adored his wife, Anna, and kept his child, Gaby, safe. Though emotionally, he'd checked out of 21 Broad Street eighteen months earlier when the microburst unexpectedly killed his family, and life dropped him.

As he approached the house, he remembered:

--His father whittling bluebirds on the front porch, the Ruger Commander at his side.

--Gaby dribbling down the wing of an ice rink before all the troubles.

--Anna, the air around her re-excitably, the bedsheets thick with sex.

--Tereza at the send-off party, whispering, "There's something I need to tell you."

Soon, everything would change again, this time on his terms.

* * *

In the mottled sunlight, the cape had a balance to it he hadn't noticed before, as if it had been waiting to restore or destroy him. Fresh, muddy tire tracks led up to the house, and three boxes of supplies, ordered from the general store a day earlier, graced the front porch. On the way out of The General, he'd slipped the owner a hundred for delivery. He'd never been so generous with money in the past.

He unlocked the front door with three keys, one for each new lock, and took the boxes inside one at a time. He would unpack later. The house was as he'd left it: three rooms total, all beyond cluttered, the living room/kitchen the size of the den in his former family home, the two bedrooms on either side even smaller. In the living room, stacks of nineties CDs, old DVDs, and worn paperbacks crowded out all else, some of the piles toppled, others precipitously high. Framed family photos covered the walls, a few of their glass frames cracked, the result of David throwing DVDs at the photos after a few too many drinks. Two leather chairs faced an ancient sofa, a coffee table between them, and a woodstove waited in the corner with cut and stacked red oak next to it. On the end table between the chairs, empty vodka bottles formed a line, and yellow stickies, often linked together to create larger writing surfaces, contained un-acted-upon lists. He picked up one of the lists and read: *1. Repair the back window. 2. Fix the leak in the roof. 3. Send my letter to Tereza.*

In his bedroom, a red down comforter called to him. He plopped down on his bed, pulled the comforter over his head, and turned on his phone light.

A decade earlier in their Augusta family home, Gaby came down for breakfast wearing red

pants, a red T-shirt with *Love* stenciled across it, and the red down comforter wrapped around her like a cape. Excited, she announced she was going to paint her room ruby red after school.

Later that day, David skipped out of work early and purchased red paint, brushes, and rollers. He picked Gaby up from school an hour early, to her delight, and once they were in the car, he showed her his stash. She shrieked with joy. Then she turned up the stereo on their way home, and she and David sang along to Elliott Smith's "Say Yes." She'd memorized all the lyrics.

Once home, they rushed to her room and, while listening to a dance album, brushed and rolled the walls, talking and laughing over the music. When they were done, both splattered with red paint, they made chocolate chip cookies instead of cleaning up. They mixed the batter, and Gaby shaped the cookies like hearts. Once the cookies were baked, they devoured half of them while they were still warm and gulped down almost a quart of milk. When Anna, his love, came home from work, the three of them ate some more.

More books, albums, and toys filled the second bedroom: a stack of Steven King novels, every Elliott Smith CD, too many Erector and LEGO sets. Hanging over the bed, a mobile of wooden bluebirds waited, each bird with a tiny bell around its neck. He tapped a few birds, sending them into flight and song. Gaby had loved the mobile when she was a baby, often reaching for it and laughing from her crib.

She came to him and stood at his side. Then she gently interlaced her fingers with his, and together they took in the *Star Wars Ultimate Light Saber Duel* set.

I miss building with you, Daddy.

Me, too.

We could build now.

Okay, honey.

They built for a good hour, meticulously following instructions memorized long ago, laughing and talking often, trying to remember how many times they'd built the set before. They settled on fourteen, though David was sure it was higher. Soon after they built the fifteenth version of the *Duel* set, Gaby promised to come back the next day and left him once again.

After he displayed the *Duel* set prominently on the coffee table, he went outside and sat on the porch, a glass of vodka in hand. Two large pine trees had snapped and fallen during the most recent storm, one much too close to the house. He took a mental note to cut them up soon. Beyond the perimeter of the two-acre clearing, the thick and tangled woods buffered the cape from civilization for ten miles in any direction. His father had built the house to get away from almost everyone he knew in Augusta--in retrospect, one of his few good decisions, especially in light of the decade-long trend of families migrating north. David raised his glass and toasted him.

Something rustled at the edge of the woods, and soon after, a black bear approached an upside-down garbage can lid resting on a tree stump. The bear knocked the lid off the stump, dumping sunflower seeds on the ground. As she ate the seeds, David slowly took steps toward her. One. Then another. The third caused her to stop eating and stare him still, but not for long. He would put more seeds out for her in the morning.

Back in the cabin and on his third drink, he waited for the rusty brown water from the kitchen faucet to clear. Then he filled a kettle for coffee and warmed it on the stove. From the first box of new supplies, he freed three boxes of Kraft macaroni and cheese, four cans of tuna, dark roast coffee, paper towels, and toilet paper; from the second, a bundle of fatwood, two cases of Samuel Adams, and a twenty-pack of AA batteries; and from the third, six bottles of vodka, enough eggs and vegetables for a week, and a blank journal.

In the living room, he sat in one of the chairs, poured himself a cup of coffee and a fourth glass

of vodka, and opened his almost-full, current journal to an end page. He'd been writing every day since moving in, mostly family memories, the outpouring of words a surprise given he'd never written a word until he came to the cape. His last entry was about the brutality of his final conversation with Tereza. The things she'd said to him. The words he'd spewed at her, as if they were mortal enemies instead of lifelong friends, as if each of them thrived on causing pain. He clicked on his handmade, engraved pen--a gift from Anna--and tapped it on the page as he sipped his drink.

