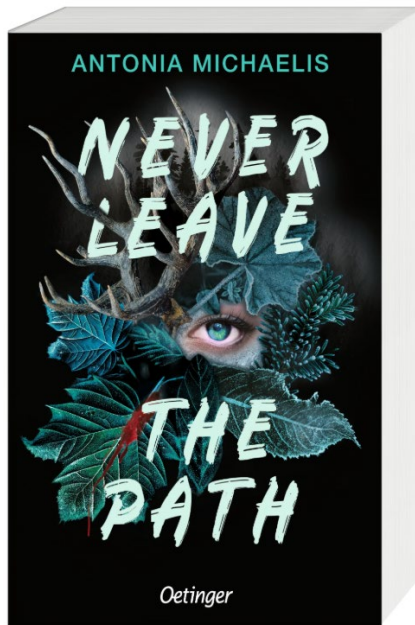




Antonia Michaelis (Author)

Never Leave the Path

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Young Adult | Recommended age: 14+ | ISBN: 978-3-7512-0703-4 | Pages: 384

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There's no such thing as the Mountain Sorcerer – seventeen-year-old Jesper is certain of that. But then who is prowling around the remote cabin at night, where he and his mother have come to escape city life? What is behind the unsettling pictures Jesper finds in the drawers, tucked alongside yellowed newspaper articles about a murder? And who is the strange girl who lives in the forest and seems to command the rain and wind? Where does she go when she disappears – and why can't Jesper stop thinking about her?

When an early onset of winter makes it impossible to leave the mountain and Jesper's mother falls ill, he no longer knows who he can trust... But finding the answer may mean the difference between life and death.

- Guilt, trust, and survival in the wild – a haunting coming-of-age thriller by bestselling author Antonia Michaelis that lingers long after the last page.

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The blood was warm.

It steamed in the cool November air, and she plunged her hands deep inside to warm them. She opened the body below the shoulder, then worked the knife downward along the side. The trees leaned over her, watching silently. Not judging.

She glanced at his face, which stared up at the sky above the clearing.

She had forgotten to close his eyes. She did so now – gently closing his eye lids with her bloody fingers. She always closed their eyes. Now he looked peaceful.

"Sleep," she whispered. "Sleep."

She wondered if he had suffered. He had almost escaped; she had given him a chance. He was fast, but not fast enough. She continued her work, removing the organs; some she would take with her, others she buried. The animals would scratch them up again – let them.

There was more to do; she needed the knife – and the glass bottle.

She bled him out, catching every drop of blood.

Later, she knelt by the stream and washed her hands for a long time in the clear water dancing over the rocks. It carried leaves along with it – yellow, brown, and red. Blood-red. She fished one out – just because – and held it up to the sunlight, letting it glow.

How lovely it was.

The summer drought had taken its toll on the trees, causing their leaves to wither and curl at the edges, yet this one remained intact. One day, he said, the drought would break the forest, strip the mountains bare; one day, none of this will exist anymore. She couldn't imagine it.

Perhaps she would take the leaf with her and press it. Just as she had done as a child.

When she stood up, she saw a tear in the knee of her weather-worn brown corduroy trousers.

That was bad. She would have to scavenge fabric from somewhere else – the pockets had long since been sacrificed, and there was nothing left with sleeves that were too long; she had grown into everything...

There was a sound. A rustling, barely perceptible. She noticed it. She was on her feet before she even realized she had jumped up, looking around. Nothing. Her imagination.

Again?

Lately, she had been imagining things too much. She was on edge – more so than usual. Perhaps it was because she was growing up. No longer a child – carefree, naive. Not anymore. Her seventeenth year was soon drawing to a close.

No, there was no one here. No one to see what she was doing, what she was hauling on her wooden sled. She knew that what she was doing was forbidden down below. The people down there had different rules. But there was no one here.

Nevertheless, the mists were now rolling up from the valley; she needed to make sure she got back. She harnessed herself to the low-slung sled and dragged its runners over the fallen leaves. She didn't get very far.

Only as far as the spot where the path skirted a steep cliff face. Below, the valley lay shrouded in mist, stretching into the infinite distance – hazy and mysterious. At the edge of the precipice, a large, intricate spiderweb spanned the tall autumn grasses; trapped inside, a butterfly fluttered, a brilliant splash of color: orange, black, and white. A final flying jewel before the onset of winter.

"Painted Lady," she whispered. "Haven't you flown south yet?" Its desperate struggles to break free were painful to watch. She reached out and loosened the web, carefully detaching its wings from the sticky strands.

The spider would go empty-handed and remain hungry. This time.

The spider had just as much right to exist as the Painted Lady; why should the butterfly deserve to survive simply because it was more beautiful to the human eye?

The Painted Lady was free; she watched it rise and flutter away into the hazy sky, half-filled with fog, above the valley.

"Now you can head south," she said. "Leave the forest and the mountains behind. I'm staying. I'm not going anywhere."

She took up her burden again and moved on, following the path into the dark shadows of the autumn woods. "I am Death," she said, listening to her words fade away amidst the other voices.

She felt herself smile. She thought of the Painted Lady. "But sometimes, I am an angel, too," she whispered.

Then she brushed back the wild, untamed hair that had fallen across her face and began the ascent with her load. She turned around a few times.

No one followed her. No one was allowed to follow her.

We live between the lines, he had said, *and no one must ever know about us*.

But sometimes she longed for the unknown, for the place down there. The world to where the Painted Lady butterfly flew. There was still blood under her fingernails; she would have to scrub them this evening. Once again.

There was a face in the leaf.

He held it up to the window, against the pale autumn light, and it was there, unmistakable: a white line, etched in with a sharp object.

The profile of a girl.

Or was it a coincidence? Had the leaf simply snapped on its own at that exact spot? The leaf was a pressed maple leaf – dry, brittle. Blood-red.

With five points, like a hand reaching out toward him. But all maple leaves have five points. And it really could be just a coincidence. Things look like other things.

Jesper shook his head and laid the leaf back on the kitchen table, next to the plate of salami sandwiches he had made for Lisa that she hadn't touched.

The leaf had fallen out of an envelope. Inside the envelope there was also a card featuring a photo of a mountain forest and a folded sheet of paper. He unfolded it.

Booking confirmation, Evening Glow Cabin, one person, 11/10 – 12/1

There was a message on the card in large, sweeping handwriting:

Dear Mrs. Arend, I look forward to your arrival. Please take bus line 13 from the station to the market square; I will meet you there and accompany you to the cabin.

Warm regards,
Kai Schwarzbuch

"Dear Mrs. Arend," Jesper whispered. The words echoed in the small kitchen, hiding in the curtains and multiplying: *Dear Mrs. Arend, dear Mrs. Arend, dear Mrs. Arend*.

The card was addressed to Lisa.

But Lisa was asleep.

She slept most of the time since returning from the clinic.

He pressed his forehead against the cool windowpane and looked out at the rain falling over the city. November rain. On the card – depicting the mountain forest – the sun was shining, and the trees were glowing in all the colors of late autumn. Here, it was already winter. Or always winter.

Even in summer. Traffic crawled through the streets five stories below; traffic lights changed, and hurried people under umbrellas battled their way through the gray afternoon. The apartment had a "panoramic view" – that was how Lisa put it; it was a valuable apartment, a good apartment, up here, in the center, in the heart of the city, in step with the times. And the internet was faster than you could even imagine. That was important for Lisa's conferences.

Although she was hardly ever here anyway; she was usually at her office or at off-site meetings – probably in other conference rooms with panoramic views, Jesper thought.

He looked at the photo hanging on the kitchen wall – the picture of the young woman in the blue blouse and the little boy. He was standing and she knelt behind him, her arms wrapped around him, smiling. The little boy had black curls just like the young woman – only his sprang out in every direction, while hers cascaded down over her shoulders, like water. And he had the same pale blue eyes.

Yes, they looked alike; everyone said so.

He was three years old in the photo; some passerby had taken it at the zoo, Lisa said. Lisa took him to the zoo back then.

Now he was seventeen. And they only saw each other at the dinner table. If at all.

The city and the frantic pace of modern life had devoured Lisa. She worked far too much. It was fine. He had plenty to keep him busy with High School, with his own life. Those damn final exams coming up next year. And until last week, Kathrine had been there to fill his life – and before that, last year, Sarah. Somehow, the girls never stayed. Right now, he was single again.

Strange, at this moment, he felt lonelier than he had in a long time.

Him, standing there at his window overlooking the city.

He didn't miss Kathrine. She had beautiful hands and was a math genius, but they never really had much to say to each other.

Lisa, over there, in her bed, he thought, was alone too.

All the people down there were alone, rushing to appointments, to their offices, talking on the phone to other people while walking down the street, who were also alone; they were all slaves to the clock, to screens, to schedules.

Everything was just going around in circles, pointless: people were born to rush to appointments, to have children – at scheduled times – and the children rushed to appointments too, but what for?

Lisa designed houses; she was an architect – a star architect, according to the the internet; she was a star at building structures that reached for the sky, with a thousand rooms, where people were alone.

A breath of wind stirred the red maple leaf on the table. It lifted gently and settled back down with a rustle. As if it had something to say.

How did a breath of wind get into a kitchen with the windows closed?

And why had this Kai Schwarzbuch etched a profile into a dried leaf?

Or had he? Had he simply pressed a leaf – along with others from the mountain forest out there – without realizing there was a profile in it?

It wasn't just any girl's profile. It was the profile of a very specific person – distinctive. Jesper wondered if this girl existed somewhere out there. And what she was doing at this moment.

Whether she was alone, like him. Whether she was searching for a purpose, like him.

"Nonsense", he said to himself.

Below him, the gray city was rushing headlong into the evening.

But yes, the city had devoured Lisa, and it wasn't okay – not at all – because a week ago she collapsed at the office. They examined her at the clinic and found nothing. She told the doctors she was suffering from constant headaches – something even Jesper hadn't known – and they ran more tests. With no results. The doctor spoke to Jesper at length.

Your mother needs a break, he said. A vacation. At the beach, maybe. Somewhere far away. Lying in the sun, doing nothing. You're seventeen – practically an adult – you know what I mean. Maybe you're more sensible than she is. Convince her to take a vacation.

He nodded. Lisa had sent a million links over the past few days – beaches with palm trees and lovely hotels. Spain, Greece, Egypt.

But apparently, Lisa had found something completely different from a beach with palm trees.

A cabin in the mountains, in the woods. Seriously.

A whole new kind of solitude.

The pressed leaf rustled again, very softly, on the table. "You can't rustle," Jesper said. "There's no wind here." He picked it up, held it against the light again. There was no girl's profile. Just irregular tears through which the gray, rainy light filtered.

He took the sheet of paper and the card and quietly entered Lisa's bedroom.

There she lay, a silent silhouette, breathing very softly. Her black hair spilled over the pillow; her face was narrow and pale, as always. She was beautiful. Men had always found her beautiful, yet she had never wanted one. She cared only about her drawings, her houses, her conferences. Now she looked as if she might soon dissolve. Spent.

Alone? In the woods, in the mountains? No chance.

Booking confirmation: Evening Glow Cabin, one person.

"Two people," Jesper said.

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Lisa blinked, opened her eyes, stared right through everything for a moment, then turned her head. Smiled – a bit of an effort. "Jesper?"

"You're planning to spend your time off in a mountain cabin in the middle of nowhere," he said.

"Sorry, I opened the envelope. I'm coming with you. You aren't well. Someone needs to look after you."

Lisa reached out, took his hand, and sat halfway up. "You don't need to do that," she said. "Stay here. Go to school. I... I meant to tell you about the mountain cabin, but then I forgot... I've been forgetting things lately. It's a bit unsettling."

"I can do my schoolwork online," Jesper said, as he sat on the edge of the bed. "It's only three weeks."

"You'll get bored. There's nothing there. Just the forest."

"I think that's exactly the point," Jesper said. "Isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm supposed to rest. I'll go for lots of walks – I need to order hiking boots – and I'll sit by the fireplace and read, and do nothing else." "We," Jesper said. "We will sit by the fireplace."

"That's sweet of you," Lisa said. "I... I don't even know what we'll eat up there. The cabin is really remote."

"We'll cook."

"I think the only thing I can do is defrost things in the microwave," Lisa said with a laugh. "Or order takeaway. I can manage pasta."

"Same here," Jesper said. "So we'll live on pasta. A fireplace and pasta. Okay."

And they both laughed. It had been a long time since they had laughed together.

But he had a strange feeling. As if sitting up there by the fireplace wouldn't just be fun. As if there were something more to it. Something inexplicable. Something a blood-red leaf had tried to tell him, but which he didn't understand.

[...]

Antonia Michaelis is one of Oetinger's most established writers and a true all-rounder. In addition to being a household name in Children's and Young Adult Fiction, she's a successful playwright and writer of Literary Fiction. Her YA novel "The Storyteller" was nominated for the prestigious German Children's Literature Award. 'Nobody Loves November', was awarded the Phantastikpreis der Stadt Wetzlar. Born in North Germany in 1979, Michaelis has spent years abroad living in India, Nepal, Peru and most recently in Madagaskar where she helped build a children's home for homeless children as well as a village school. As a result, her works are filled with a fresh sense of diversity which makes her fiction particularly suitable for international audiences. Michaelis's use of language has been acclaimed by critics for its poetic quality and innovative use of address. Her previous books for Oetinger alone have been sold to more than 22 countries including the Americas. Today she still participates in volunteer projects for children in need and lives close to the Baltic Sea together with her husband and her four daughters.