

Vivid and uncanny . . . Makes the most of Trussoni's signature blend
of science, myth, and mystery. —DEBORAH HARKNESS

THE ANCESTOR

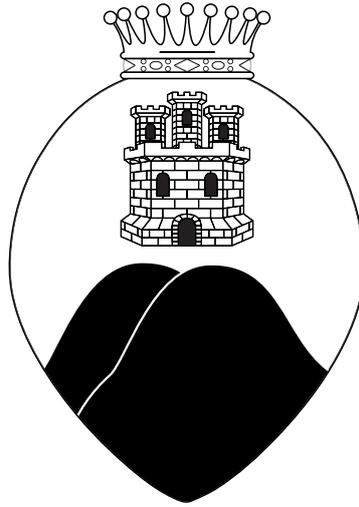
a novel



DANIELLE TRUSSONI

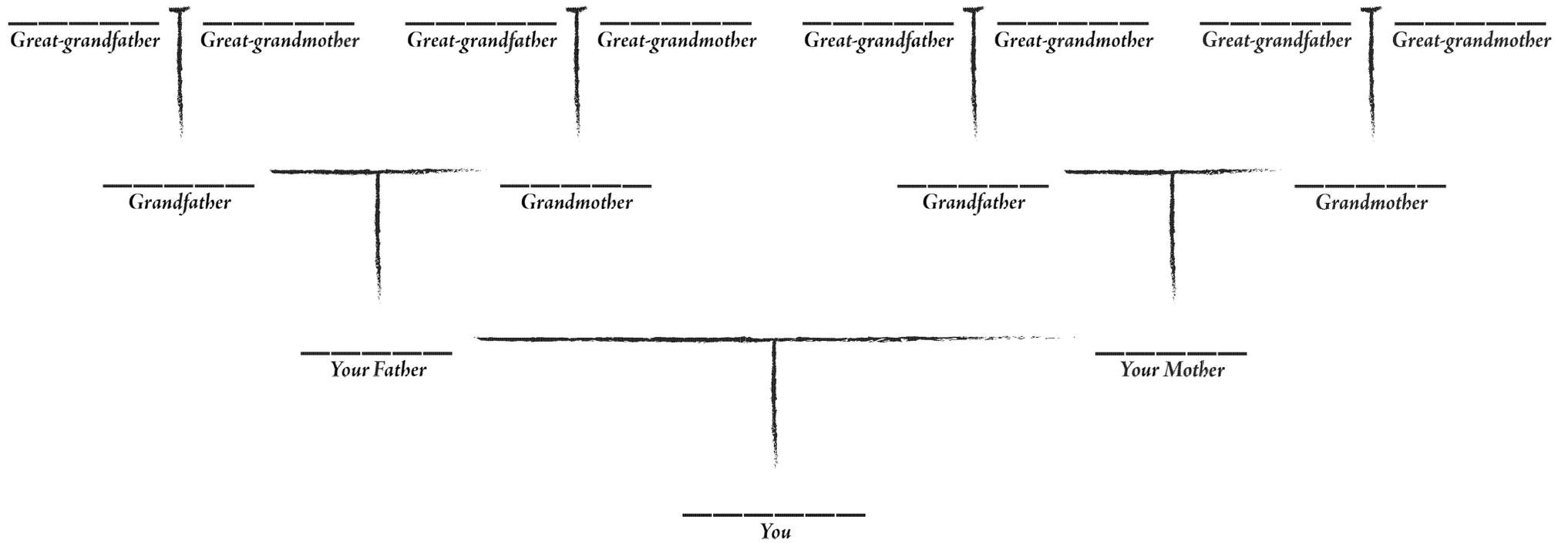
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Book club discussion questions:

1. have you, or anyone in your family, ever taken a DNA test?
2. What does your DNA and family heritage mean to you? Do you identify with the culture of your ancestors? What does that mean to you?
3. Alberta learns that she has inherited a title and an estate in the Italian Alps, and that her family is utterly different from what she believed it to be. How much does honesty around inheritance (both genetic and financial) matter to you? Have you had conflicts or surprises around this issue?
4. What's the strangest thing you've learned about an ancestor? What would surprise you about your ancestry?
5. Do you have any famous/well known ancestors?
6. What would you do if you learned you had different DNA than your parents? Would it matter to you? Do you believe that how we are 'nurtured' matters more than 'nature' (ie genetic relationships)?
7. Did the book or any of its themes remind you of any other literary works or films?
8. Were there any parts of the story you would like to know more about? What would your ideal sequel or spinoff story look like?
9. Were you surprised by Bert's ancestors? What would you have done in her position?
10. How does the cover art reflect the themes in the book? If you were to design an alternate cover, what would it look like?



1. What are the names of your mother's parents / father's parents?
2. When and where were they born? Where did they live?
3. What did they do for a living?
4. Did you have any personal memories of them?
5. Did your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents come from another country?
6. Do you have any relatives in foreign countries?
7. What traditions are still practiced in your family?

Wine and food recommendations from the Valley of Aosta

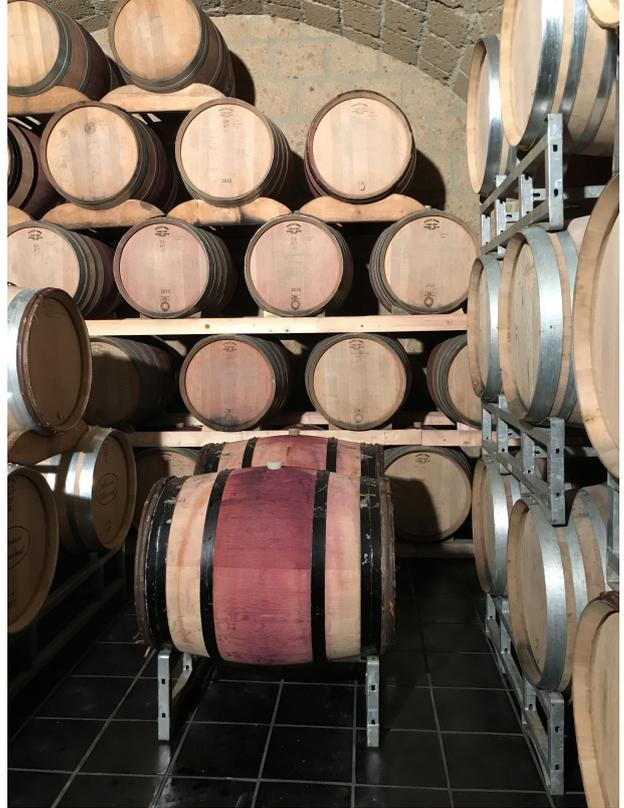
The wine-making region of the Valle d'Aosta is generally divided into three areas. In the northwest, the Valdigne area south of the commune of Courmayeur is home to the highest elevated vineyards in Europe at 1,200 metres (3,900 ft) above sea level. The white grape **Prié Blanc** (also known as Blanc de Morgex) accounts for almost all of the vineyard area and is used to produce **Blanc de Morgex et de la Salle** in both a still and sparkling wine style. **Roussin de Morgex**, a rare teinturier variety endemic to only a small area around the town of Morgex, has been rescued from extinction to make an unusual pink sparkling wine. Due to its high elevations, the area has never been affected by phylloxera louse, which has allowed the vineyards of this area to remain with ungrafted rootstock.

The Central Valley is the region's most productive area and is further sub-divided into four areas-Enfer d'Arvier, Torrette, Nus and Chambave. The Enfer d'Arvier is a red wine-producing area around the village of Arvier. The wines from this area are blends made primarily from the **Petit Rouge** grape with lesser amounts of **Dolcetto**, **Gamay**, **Neyret**, **Pinot noir**, and/or **Vien de Nus**.

The area of the Torrette sub-zone is located east of Arvier and produces a drier wine made with at least 70% Petit Rouge and smaller quantities of Dolcetto, **Fumin**, Gamay, Neyret, Pinot noir and/or Vien de Nus. The village of Nus, located east of Aosta, produces a wine made with at least 50% Vien de Nus and at least 40% Petit Rouge. White wines are made in this area from a Pinot gris clone known as **Mal-voisie** including a sweet passito straw wine. East of Nus is the sub-zone of Chambave which includes the communities of Chambave, Châtillon and Saint-Vin-cent. The red wines made here are composed of at least 60% Petit Rouge with some Dolcetto, Gamay and/or Pinot noir. The white wines made here are from the **Moscato Bianco** grape.

The Lower Valley is known primarily for two styles of wine. The Arnad-Montjovet area produces a medium-bodied dry red wine made from at least 70% **Nebbiolo** with some Dolcetto, **Freisa**, Neyret, Pinot noir, and/or Vien de Nus. The area near the commune of Donnaz (or Donnass) produces wine made from at least 85% Nebbiolo with some Freisa, Neyret, Pinot noir and Vien de Nus. Like Enfer d'Arvier, Donnass at one point had its own DOC designation.

(Source: Wikipedia, License CC BY-SA)



Top:
Barrels of Aostan wine from Danielle's research trip in the Alps.

Bottom:
Don't forget to pair your wine with some exciting Italian cheese! The local region is famous for its Vale d'Aosta Fromadzo, as well as its Salignon, Toma Piemontese and Fontina, a semi-cooked cheese produced in the area since the 1100s, which is typically used to make the Valdostana style fondue.



AUTHOR BIO

Danielle Trussoni is the New York Times, USA Today, and Sunday Times (UK) top ten bestselling author of the supernatural thrillers *Angelology* and *Angelopolis*. She is the co-creator with Hadrien Royo of the *Crypto-Z* audio series podcast, a companion to *The Ancestor*. She writes the horror column for the New York Times Book Review and has recently served as a jurist for the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction.

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This is an exclusive excerpt that I am sharing with my friends, family and readers. I would so appreciate it if you could take the time to [click here](#) and add The Ancestor to your "To Read" shelf on Goodreads. It just takes one minute and it helps other readers find my book!

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THE
ANCESTOR

ALSO BY DANIELLE TRUSSONI

Fiction

Angelology

Angelopolis

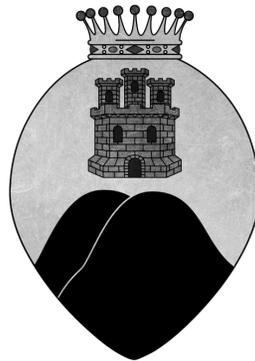
Nonfiction

Falling Through the Earth

The Fortress

Danielle Trussoni

THE
ANCESTOR



A NOVEL

wm

WILLIAM MORROW

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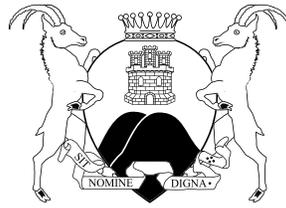
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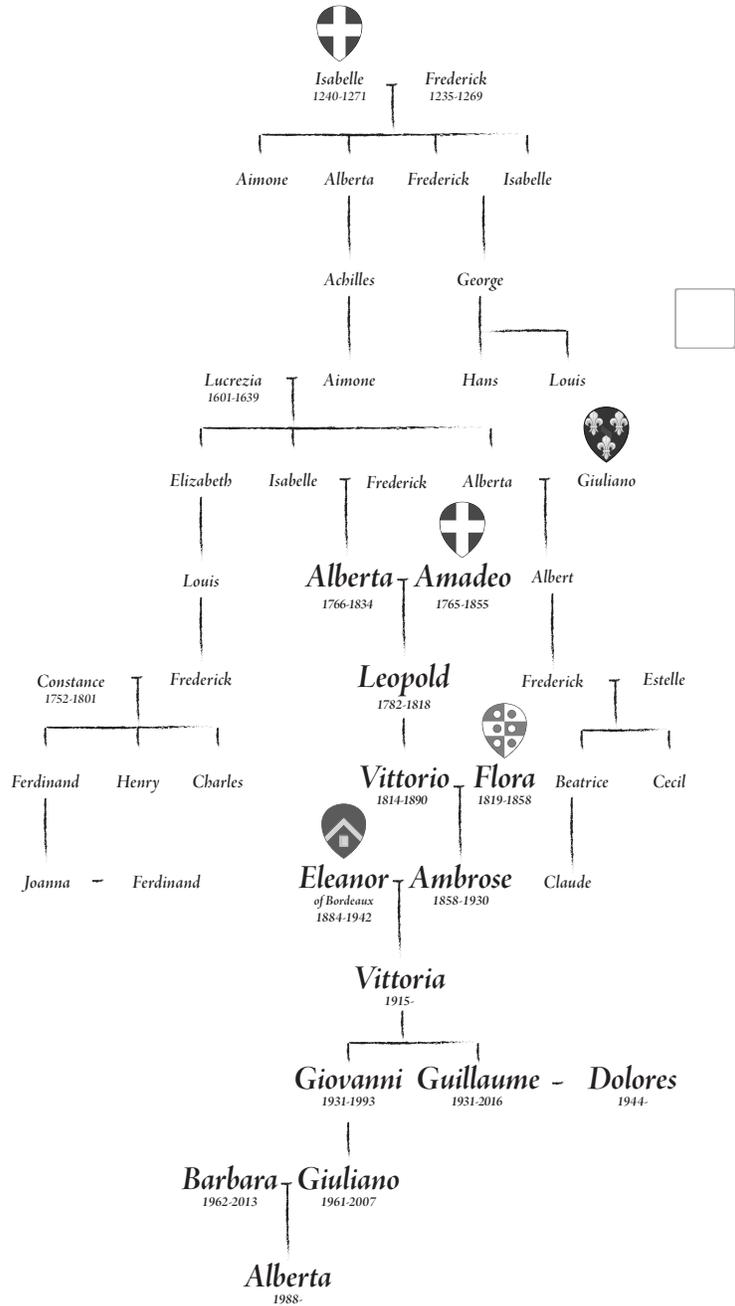
To my ancestors, whose lives made mine possible.

And to Hadrien, for the future.



THE
MONTEBIANCO
FAMILY TREE





THE
ANCESTOR

ONE



TO DISCOVER YOU are the heir to a noble title in the twenty-first century is like winning a fortune in the lottery, the Mega Millions or a Powerball jackpot, only to find your prize will be paid out in francs or liras: suddenly you are rich, but rich in a currency that has no value in the modern world.

Or so it seemed to me upon learning that I was the last living descendant of the ancient house of Montebianco, a family whose power, from the Middle Ages to the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century, was immense; whose sons—because only sons mattered in those unenlightened times—had fought religious wars and married minor princesses and sired noble children, but whose fortunes (and fertility) had diminished as the modern world rose, leaving me, Bert Monte, a twenty-eight-year-old American woman with few social graces and zero knowledge of European history, the sole blood heir to an ancestral domain in the mountains of northern Italy.

It all began early one Saturday morning just before Christmas. I was living alone, although Luca's things were still at the house. He'd been taking clothes to his new apartment slowly, week by week, a pair of jeans here, a T-shirt there, in an effort to keep our lives intertwined. His plan was working: we saw each other often, and had even gone out for dinner and

a movie the month before. While we'd been separated for six months, and it had been my idea for him to move out, I found it comforting to have my husband around. We'd been together for nearly ten years, and despite the problems—which were mostly my problems, as we both would agree—it was hard to imagine life without him. My parents were both gone, and I had no brothers or sisters, aunts or uncles or cousins. Luca was the only family I had.

Until, that is, the letter arrived from Italy. A knock came at the door, and I left off decorating the Christmas tree—a three-foot fir festooned with tinsel and blinking lights—to answer. It was a cold, sunny December morning, the sky so bright that the envelope glinted like a mirror in my hand. I signed my name on an electronic pad, wished the delivery man “happy holidays,” and was back inside before I saw that the envelope was addressed not to me, Bert Monte, but to someone named Alberta Isabelle Eleanor Vittoria Montebianco.

I sat down at the kitchen table, pushing aside tinsel and glass bulbs, so that I could get a better look. The return address was from Torino, Italia. A parade of bright Italian stamps floated at the top right corner of the glossy envelope. The words “Alberta Isabelle Eleanor Vittoria Montebianco” scrolled across the center. Although everyone called me Bert, my given name was Alberta, so that part made sense.

I was hesitant to open something that might not belong to me, but Alberta was my name, after all, and the address was my address, and so without further debate, I ripped the envelope open. A sheaf of thick, A4-sized pages fell into my hand. The top page was covered in calligraphy, and in the bottom right corner, gleaming like a first-place medal, shone a golden seal of a castle floating above two mountains. The paper alone

was something to behold—heavy bond linen stock, creamy and thick, with an ink signature pressed into the fiber by the nib of a fountain pen. The text was dense and entirely foreign. Turning the pages, I tried to find something I could understand, but aside from the name Montebianco, which appeared about every other line, it was entirely incomprehensible. Holding up the envelope, I said the name out loud, “Alberta Isabelle Eleanor Vittoria Montebianco,” fumbling over the syllables as if I were a child learning to read.

My first thought was to call Luca. He always knew what to do. Logical, reliable, sane—these were the qualities I loved about him, and the qualities that bound us still, even after all the rough times we’d been through. I’d known Luca most of my life—we had attended the same schools; we had practically grown up together—and he knew me better than anyone. He had grieved with me after the last miscarriage, and he was the one who suggested we go to therapy, volunteering to join me, even when it was clear that I needed it more than he did. Luca had always believed that with a little work and preparation, we could survive anything. But one thing was certain: neither of us could have prepared for a letter like the one from the Estate of the Montebianco family.

I remember sitting there, in my kitchen, turning the envelope over in my hands. A strange feeling came over me then, clear as a voice in my ear. It was a warning, a premonition of danger. I wonder now, after all that I’ve learned about the Montebianco family, and all that has happened since that snowy December day, what my life would be like had I tossed the envelope into the recycling bin with the junk mail and old newspapers. But I did not throw out the letter, and I did not pay attention to the creeping sense of danger slithering up my spine. I simply slipped the papers back into the envelope,

grabbed my jacket, and went out into the cold, bright morning to find Luca.

MY HUSBAND OWNED a bar called the Miltonian, a local hangout on Main Street in the hamlet of Milton, New York, a river town of about two thousand people two hours north of Manhattan. I'd made the drive to Luca's bar a thousand times at least, marking the way by the rolling hills and apple orchards, the pumpkin patches and cornfields, the nail salons and roadside fruit stands. Milton had not been hit with the great Brooklyn migration that had revitalized Hudson or Kingston or Beacon in recent years. It was small, the population static, which was fine with those of us who grew up there, but difficult for business owners like Luca, who needed city traffic.

I parked on Main Street, in front of the Miltonian. My husband's bar was a short, squat brick saloon with a neon beer sign in the window. Inside stretched a long, polished nineteenth-century bar, an antique pool table with gryphon claws gripping the hardwood, a jukebox full of old jazz standards, and a series of low-hanging Depression glass light fixtures that cast a soupy glow everywhere.

I went inside and sat on my favorite barstool. Bob, my soon-to-be ex-father-in-law, had just finished eating lunch. He slipped into his coat and gave me a quick smile. "He's in the back."

"Thanks, Bob," I said, giving him a kiss on the cheek on his way out. Luca's mother had died when Luca was in fifth grade, leaving him and his father to fend for themselves. Bob felt Luca's disappointment about the state of our marriage as much as Luca did, and I loved him for it.

"Hey," Luca said, returning from the backroom with an

armful of bottles—Hudson Baby Bourbon, Catskill Curious Gin, and others I couldn't name.

He was surprised to see me there; I hadn't been to the bar since our separation.

"Want some lunch?" He hadn't shaved in a while, and a thin blond scruff covered his chin and cheeks, giving him a disheveled look I'd always found sexy.

"A drink," I said, sliding the envelope onto the bar. "Gin and tonic, extra lime."

In the past, I wouldn't have had to tell him. Luca knew what I liked to drink and usually had it ready before I could order. But lately, this man I had known most of my life looked at me as though I had become a different person and all the things I used to like—black coffee, and long walks by the river, and suspense novels, and a strong gin and tonic with extra lime—might change as easily as my mood.

As he mixed my drink, I spread the pages out on the bar, smoothing down the edges, trying (and failing) to understand a word or two of Italian. They looked like official documents to me—at least the top one did, with its large golden seal and colorful calligraphy.

"Are you back in school?" Luca asked, placing the gin and tonic and a bowl of peanuts on the bar.

I had been working toward a degree in early childhood education, and had even completed two semesters of a program at Marist, but everything had unraveled when I lost another baby, this one five months along, older than the others, developed enough that we knew he'd been a little boy. I couldn't bear to read about the physical milestones during the first year of a child's life or the development of language in toddlers when it was becoming more and more clear that I would never have a child of my own. So far, no one, not even

Luca, knew how to help me get over that.

“It’s not for school,” I said, meeting his eyes. He poured a pint of IPA for himself, which was unusual: Luca didn’t drink at work. He had realized I needed company and broke with habit to join me. I tipped my glass at him—*cheers*—and drank the gin down. It felt good, the slow, sure rush of alcohol, the inevitable flood of blood to my brain.

“What is it, then?” Luca asked, looking down at the documents spread over the bar.

“I’m not exactly sure,” I said, taking another long sip of my drink. “It came to the house today.”

“Looks like Italian.” He picked up the envelope and read the flowery Italian names aloud, each one like blossoms on a branch: “*Alberta Isabelle Eleanor Vittoria Montebianco*. Who the hell is that?”

I shrugged. “I know as much as you do.”

He looked at the return address. “Torino?”

Something surfaced in my mind, a memory rising from an obscure depth. “Didn’t our grandparents come from Turin?”

“They were farther north,” Luca said. “Up in the Alps.”

Our grandparents had been born in the same small village in northern Italy. They had immigrated to New York City after the Second World War, lived in a tight community in Little Italy, and then moved to Milton in the fifties, drawn by backyards and good public schools. Luca and I had grown up in the shadows of this migration—the elaborate Sunday lunches that went on all afternoon, the Catholic school education, the way we looked as though we were part of the same clan. Our heritage was northern Italian, our skin washed pale as a snowdrift, our hair white-blond, and our eyes watered down to the lightest shade of blue. Our ancestry held fast in our genes like the clasp of a fob to a chain, even as our grand-

parents, then our parents, became Americans.

Despite my shared heritage with Luca, our families had not been close. In fact, I always felt that they had disliked each other, especially the older generation, although I had nothing concrete to back this feeling up. Luca's paternal grandmother, Nonna Sophia, had never been particularly warm to me, not even at our wedding. When Luca and I took her to church on Sundays, as we used to do before the separation, she never sat near me on the pew, but between her son and grandson, as if I might rub off on her.

"How is Nonna doing, anyway?" I asked, fingering the documents on the bar. Nonna had been born in Italy, and it struck me that she might help me understand the letter.

"Eighty-six and healthy as a horse," he said, taking a handful of peanuts.

"That woman will outlive all of us," I said, feeling both admiration and dread.

"She hasn't been doing very well since the move, actually," he said. "My dad says her mood is worse than ever."

Bob and Luca had moved Nonna to a condo at the Monastery, a retirement community on the river, earlier in the year. It had been a big production. Nonna hadn't wanted to leave her house, but Bob had insisted.

"She doesn't like it there?"

"Not really. It's hard to get used to a new environment." Something in his voice told me he was talking more about himself than his grandmother. "She misses her old life, but she'll be okay. She's resilient."

He met my eyes, and I knew that he was waiting for me to discuss his move back home. He wanted to let everything bad that had happened between us slide away. He wanted to start over.

"I'm working on things," I said, an edge creeping into my voice that I hadn't meant to be there. "You know that."

"I know, I know," he said, giving me a sweet smile. "But it might be easier with a little help, don't you think?"

I pushed the papers toward Luca to shift his attention to the problem at hand. "Do you think Nonna would take a look at these for me? Maybe she can tell me what this is all about?"

"She might," Luca said, glancing again at the papers. He seemed as intrigued as I was about them. "Why don't you stop by the Monastery and see what she says?"

I bit my lip, wondering if I would regret bringing Nonna into the situation. Things were hard enough between Luca and me without getting his whole family involved. Maybe it was time I solved my own problems, especially now that we were living apart.

"Do you think she'll be able to understand this?" I asked, but I knew perfectly well that she would understand all of it. The older generation had spoken Italian all the time. My grandparents had been dead for years, but I still remembered the melody of their voices when they spoke their native language.

"I'll give her a call," he said. "Let her know you're coming."

TWO



THE MONASTERY RETIREMENT community sat high on a riverbank, an immense brick structure with copper drainpipes, dark windows, and a moss-covered slate roof. Built in the mid-nineteenth century, it had housed Catholic priests until the eighties, when a developer cut it into twenty-two independent living condos, some with river views, others giving onto the woods.

I parked near the entrance and then sat in my car, a wave of anxiety running through me. Nonna was a formidable woman, and I was a little afraid of her, especially because I hadn't seen her since I'd asked Luca to move out. She hadn't been crazy about me before—she had always seemed to look down on my family—but now she would have a real reason to hate me.

Bracing myself, I tucked the envelope under my arm and walked up to the reception desk, where a bearded nursing assistant took my name and then led me to Nonna's apartment.

"There's someone to see you, Sophia," he said. He showed me into the room before slipping back into the hallway, leaving me alone with Luca's tiny, fierce grandmother.

When the battle to relocate Nonna had begun, Bob argued that Nonna would be more comfortable at the Monastery, that it wasn't as antiseptic or medicalized as the other retirement homes, and it was true: Nonna's apartment was warm

and comfortable, with art on the walls and books piled everywhere. There was a small kitchen, a private bathroom, and a stunning view of the river, its snowy banks blanketed by a thick gray mist. A Christmas tree blinked in the corner, a few presents tucked underneath, and I remembered, suddenly, that it was nearly Christmas. I should have brought a gift. It would have cast this whole thing in a better light.

“Nonna,” I said. She didn’t seem to hear or see me, so I took another step closer. “Is this a good time?”

Nonna, small and frail, a jet-black wig perched on her head like a nest, sat on a sectional sofa near the window, a magnifying glass in one hand, a paperback in the other.

She turned the glass in my direction, and a single blue eye expanded under the thick lens, as hard and bright as a blown-glass marble. “Come, sit down,” she said. Her English was heavily accented, her voice clear and direct, forceful, not at all the voice one would expect from an eighty-six-year-old woman.

I sat across from Nonna on a wobbly recliner. Up close, her skin was mottled with moles and freckles. A few hairs grew from her chin and ears, and her hands were dappled with liver spots. She looked me over, skeptical, and I wondered if she if she’d forgotten me.

“It’s Bert,” I said, feeling my cheeks go warm. “Luca’s wife.”

“I know who you are, child,” she said, glancing back to the door, looking for her grandson. “Is Luca here, too?”

“He’s working,” I said. “He told me to tell you he’ll be here Sunday, with Bob, to take you to church.”

“Oh,” she said. She focused on me with a strange intensity, as if trying to understand why I had come without Luca. “So remind me: Who do you belong to?”

The older generation always asked who your parents and

grandparents were, as if you were nothing more than a weak reflection of an ancestral original.

“My parents were Giuliano and Barb. I’m the grandchild of Giovanni and Marta Monte.”

“Giovanni’s granddaughter,” she said darkly, her brows settling into a furrow. “Of course, I see the resemblance. You look just like your grandfather when he was young. Around the eyes. Attractive, your grandfather. *Nessus dubbio a riguardo.*”

I barely remembered my grandfather. He had died when I was five years old, and only fragments of him remained with me: the smell of his cigarettes, the glimmer in his blue eyes as he laughed, the shiny leather shoes he wore, the tassels flopping. I was about to ask what other similarities she found between us when Nonna pulled herself up off the couch and walked to the kitchen.

“Coffee?” she asked. “Milk or sugar?”

“Black,” I said, eyeing the paperback she had been reading: *Amore proibito*. A bare-chested hulk of a man held a redheaded pixie in his bulging arms on the cover.

Nonna returned with the coffee. She had trouble managing, so I took the cups, set them on the coffee table, and helped her sit. When she had settled in, I pulled out the envelope from Turin.

“I was hoping you could help me with something, Nonna,” I said, slipping the papers from the envelope and giving them to her. “This came in the mail, but I don’t know what it says.”

Nonna spread out the pages over the table and picked up her magnifying glass. The lens tracked over the lines, the words popping into view. She paused at the golden seal and a blaze of foil exploded at the center of the glass.

“My goodness, I never thought I would see this again,” she said.

I leaned across the coffee table to get a closer look. She angled the magnifying glass over the seal and I saw it again: the castle above two mountain peaks.

“This was everywhere in Nevenero,” she said. “All over town. In the post office, on street signs, on the door of the café. Everywhere.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“The Montebianco coat of arms.” She put down the magnifying glass. Her face had gone ashen. She lifted her eyes to meet mine. “Where did you get this letter?”

“It came this morning,” I said, sipping my coffee. “Registered mail.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised, I suppose.” She sighed a deep and resigned sigh. “It was only a matter of time before they found you.”

I considered this a moment. *Before they found you.* The way she said it, her voice accusatory, her eyes filled with a sudden wariness, made it seem as though this was my fault and that I had been hoping to be found.

“Who is *they*?”

“The House of Montebianco.”

The name on the letter flashed in my mind. *Alberta Isabelle Eleanor Vittoria Montebianco.*

“According to this letter, the Count of Montebianco died six months ago.” She tapped her magnifying glass against the edge of the coffee table, as if the rhythm helped her think. “The lawyers representing the family estate looked for his heir.” *Tap, tap.* “They have come to the conclusion that there is not one Montebianco left in the world.” *Tap, tap, tap.* “Except you.”

I must have appeared utterly baffled, because Nonna said it again, only more slowly.

“This letter is from the legal team representing the House of Montebianco. They claim that you, Alberta, are the last of the Montebianco family line. They want you to come to Turin for an interview regarding your inheritance, which is explained”—Nonna shifted through the papers and pulled out the fancy-looking one with the golden seal—“here, in the Count of Montebianco’s last will and testament.”

“What else does it say?” I asked, a mixture of wariness and wonder bubbling up in me, the same restrained hope I felt when a pregnancy test came back positive: a new possibility was forming in my life.

Nonna bent over the pages with her magnifying glass. “I can hardly read this, there is so much legal language here, but this page outlines what you could inherit if you are proven to be the heir. There is the title and a property.” She bit her lip, her expression going somber. “Montebianco Castle,” she said, her voice little more than a whisper. “A death trap, to be sure.”

“But there is obviously some kind of mistake,” I said. “My name is Alberta Monte, not Montebianco.”

She leveled her gaze at me. “You are Giovanni’s granddaughter, yes?”

“Yes,” I said. “I am.”

“Then you belong to the House of Montebianco as sure as that seal does.”

Although I had heard everything she said, I could not process what was happening. Pieces of information were coming to me, but they didn’t make sense. There was the Montebianco name, an inheritance, my grandfather, a golden seal. The facts collected in my mind, but I couldn’t read them.

“You knew about this before?” A shade of an accusation slipped into my voice.

“Of course we knew,” she said, dismissing my question

with a shrug. “Your grandfather Giovanni was born a Montebianco. He shortened his name when he naturalized as a citizen. Many of us did that, you know, to fit in. Jews. Eastern Europeans. Italians. But he had a more specific reason, of course. Oh, he was a proud man, your grandfather, not one to speak badly about his family, but we knew he’d run away from them. Who were we to blame him for trying to bury the past? We were all doing the same thing.”

As she spoke, I felt more and more confused. Who had he run away from? And why would he speak badly about his family? “But what was there to bury?”

A shadow passed over her features. “It has been almost seventy years since I left,” she said at last, her voice trembling. “And nearly that long since I have spoken of it.”

“Of what, Nonna?”

“*Nevenero*,” she said, emphasizing each syllable. “The village we left behind. Do you know what it means?”

I shook my head. I had no idea.

“Black snow.” She gave me a dark look, as if the words pained her. “*Neve*, snow; *nero*, black. Such a cruel place, *Nevenero*. An ice village, so cold, so brutal you froze to death if you wandered too far from home. We ate what we killed—ibex and rabbit. We wore goatskin trousers and marmot furs. Our houses were made of simple materials—wood and slabs of granite—with high, wedge-shaped roofs that kept off the snow. Simple but strong. And always, no matter the position of the sun, the village was trapped in the shadow of the mountains. Day and night, it was dark. But the castle, built higher than the village, built right into the rock of the mountain, was even darker still.

Nonna leaned forward, her eyes filled with emotion. “The village was so dominated by the mountains that roads were

nearly impassable, so narrow that trucks jammed the sheer, glacial passages. It is a miracle we were able to leave at all. But we did leave: brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, friends and rivals—we all fled. We all came here to start over. And that is why we all forgave Giovanni. Despite his name, we forgave him. Forgiveness, however, is not the same as trust.”

I sat back in the recliner, trying to understand why so many people had fled Nevenero and what my grandfather had done to require forgiveness.

“Does Luca know about this?” I asked at last. “Or Bob?”

“We came here to start over,” she said. “We didn’t want the children to know.”

Nonna pushed her glasses up her nose and adjusted her wig. “I have photos somewhere around here,” she said. She pointed to a cabinet near her bed. “Look in there.”

I went to the cabinet, found an album in a drawer, and brought it to Nonna. She flipped through the pages, and I saw a series of black-and-white images of stone houses, miserable-looking children, goats knee-deep in snow. There was a family portrait of people whose features were a half rhyme to Luca’s—Nonna’s brothers and sisters, I guessed. Her parents. Her grandparents. Nonna pulled out a photo of a narrow valley carved between two snowcapped mountains. At the center of the valley, lifting like a sinister wedding cake, was a castle. It stood dark and solitary, surrounded by sharp peaks. All else was ice and shadow.

“That is Montebianco Castle,” she said, her expression filled with fear. “I never saw it up close. We were not allowed to go anywhere near it.”

I took the album and looked at the picture. “My grandfather lived *there*?” I asked, astonished.

“They didn’t mix with the villagers,” she said. “I didn’t

meet your grandfather until we made the crossing.”

She turned the pages until she came to a yellowed newspaper clipping. “Here it is,” she said, pulling a photo from a page and giving it to me. A young man stood before a steamer, the words “S.S. *Saturnia*” painted on the side. The quality of the photo was degraded, so grainy that Giovanni seemed little more than a stain of sepia bleeding through the page, but I could see that he was packed for a voyage. There was a suitcase in his hand and a steamer trunk sat at his side. An expression of wonder colored his features, a reckless readiness, the kind of expression that accompanies an act of faith. I could see that Sophia had been right about our resemblance: my grandfather was tall and broad-shouldered, with a wide forehead, large hands, and a deep cleft in the chin. Like me.

“That was the ship that took us from Genoa to New York,” she said, running a yellow fingernail over the picture. “I didn’t have the same class berth as your grandfather—I was down below—but we played cards up on the deck. Look here.” She glided the magnifying glass over the photo, so that it hovered about the steamer trunk. There, in tiny gold letters stamped into the leather, was the name: MONTEBIANCO. “It was July 1949,” she said, her voice sad suddenly. “We didn’t want to go, but we had no choice. After they took my younger brother, Gregor, all of us left.”

“Wait,” I said, thinking I had misheard her. “Who took your brother?”

Nonna closed the album. “The beast. It watched from the mountains and took the most vulnerable.” There was a tremor in her voice. “The smallest children. The ones left alone to play in the village. Gregor was playing in the trees near the mountains when it happened. That’s where they hid, where the trees grew thick. They killed our goats, ate them right

there and left nothing but bones. We never found the bones of our children, though. The children just disappeared.”

“What was it?” I asked, trying to imagine what kind of wild animal would attack goats and kids. “A wolf?”

“I encountered it only once, but it was enough to understand that it was not like anything I had ever seen before,” Nonna said. “I was fourteen years old when I saw it.” She rubbed her eyes, as if massaging away a headache. “The beast took Gregor a few years later. After that, we left. Our homes, our belongings, the graves of our ancestors, everything. We didn’t look back, ever. Even your grandfather Giovanni, who had so much more to lose, gave up everything. He knew what was happening in those mountains. He knew!”

Nonna’s eyes had become large and wild. I picked up the letter and shoved it back into the envelope.

“There’s no need to get upset, Nonna,” I said. “It happened a long time ago.”

“Yes, a long time ago,” she said, leaning back into the sofa, exhausted. “A very long time ago. But tell me, child, do we ever escape the evils of the past?”

A chill fell over me, and although I had no clear idea of the evils to which Nonna referred, I felt the same premonition I had felt earlier that day, a premonition of the past bleeding into the future, dark and deadly, a warning to leave it be and go on as if I had never heard the name Montebianco.

“Do not go to them,” she said, meeting my eyes. “Your family has had such trouble. Such tragedy and pain. Let the past die. Look ahead, to the future here with Luca.”

I stared at her, wondering what on earth she was talking about. Could she possibly know about the troubles Luca and I had had over the years? We hadn’t told anyone about our struggles to have a child. The pregnancies, the miscarriages,

my infertility treatments, the specialists—we had tried to spare them disappointment.

“Everything is fine, Nonna,” I said. “Don’t worry. It will all be okay.”

“This is our fault,” she said, her voice anguished, her eyes enormous behind her glasses. “We didn’t tell our children what happened in Nevenero. We didn’t tell our grandchildren. We wanted to forget. We wanted you to be innocent. We thought we had escaped.”

Nonna trembled as she spoke. She didn’t look well. I felt for my phone. I would call Luca and ask him to come over and help.

“This is nothing to get worked up about, Nonna,” I said. “Please. Don’t worry. It’s just a letter.”

“*Just a letter?*” she said, her eyes growing large. “Don’t you understand? They want you back. The Montebianco family has come for you. They *need* you back. I am sure this is not the first time they’ve tried. Giovanni must have known they would come. He couldn’t bear the thought of it. That is why he killed himself.”

“My grandfather killed himself?” I asked, astonished. I leaned back into the recliner for support. “He committed suicide? Are you sure?”

“Don’t be fooled,” she said, narrowing her eyes. “Whatever that family gives you is nothing compared to what you will lose.”

It couldn’t be true that my grandfather had killed himself. I would have known. My parents would have told me. But suddenly, it struck me how little I knew about my grandparents. My parents had no photos of them, no family heirlooms, nothing at all of our Italian heritage. My parents had never spoken of the past. Could they have been hiding something?

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Nonna tried to stand, but fell back into the sofa, wheezing and gasping. I was afraid she would collapse right there and die, on the floor of her living room.

“Nonna,” I said, going to her side. “Please, Nonna, calm down. I’m getting Luca. Don’t worry.”

Nonna grabbed my sleeve and pulled me close. Reaching for my hand, she took it between her cold fingers and brought it to her heart. She looked me in the eye and, her voice shaking with emotion, said, “Listen to me, child. I saw it. The beast came for me on the mountain pass. Its teeth were sharp as razors, its eyes devilish. But worst of all, it was so like us. Monstrous and yet so human. The legends were true.”

THREE



*D*EVIL. MONSTER. BEAST. *Suicide.* These words circled my mind as I walked through the parking lot. *Devil. Monster. Beast. Suicide.* Nonna Sophia had left Italy nearly seventy years ago, and yet her fear remained hard and tactile, so solid I could feel it there beside me as I kicked through the snow to my car. What on earth had she seen that had scared her like that? An animal? A person? What did she mean by “the legends were true”?

Try as I might, I couldn’t put her words out of my mind. The way she held my hand to her heart and the beseeching look in her eyes—she had been terrified. *Don’t be fooled. Whatever that family gives you is nothing compared to what you will lose.*

At my car, I looked out over the vast grounds of the Monastery. It was three thirty in the afternoon, snowing heavily, the sky a fog of indigo against the river. The days were at their shortest, and dusk had fallen, darkness rising from the river to the heavens like watercolors seeping into paper. I brushed a layer of snow from the windshield, wishing that Luca had come with me. Surely, he would have known what to say to calm Nonna. He was always better at these things than I was.

Yet, even Luca would have found Nonna’s reaction to the letter extreme. I leaned against my car, feeling unbalanced, dizzy. Had my grandfather really committed suicide? Why would my parents have kept that from me? Had they, like

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Nonna Sophia and the older generation, tried to protect me from the truth?

As I got into my Honda, I heard something behind me. I turned, expecting to find a visitor, maybe even Luca. There was nothing but the empty parking lot, the wash of darkening light, the snow swirling in the wind. And yet, I felt a presence, an eerie human presence, close as breath on the back of my neck. Something wasn't right.

I locked the car door, turned on the heater, and called Luca, telling him everything. After he promised to come to the Monastery to check on Nonna, I threw the car into reverse, did a U-turn, and headed back toward Milton. It was three forty-five. The town hall closed at five.

MRS. THOMAS, HEAD of the Vital Records office, was my friend Tina's mother. In high school, there had been weeks when I had slept at the Thomases' house more often than my own, partially because Tina and I played softball together, but also because, being an only child, I loved Tina's brothers and sisters, the big chaotic family dinners, and the sense that there was always something exciting happening at the Thomases' place. I'd compared her house with mine and, finding life quiet and dull with my parents, chosen to be with Tina.

The Vital Records counter was abandoned, but I could smell coffee from somewhere beyond the rows of metal filing cabinets, so I knew someone must be back there. I rang the bell and waited. Office hours were 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, but even if Mrs. Thomas had left early, someone would help me.

"Well, hello there, Bert Monte!" Mrs. Thomas said, stepping out from behind a cabinet. She was a tall black woman in her fifties with an abundance of gold rings stacked on her

fingers. “You looking for Tina?”

I was glad to see Mrs. Thomas. She had a way of putting me at ease. Maybe Tina had told her about my troubles at school, or my crippling shyness, because Mrs. Thomas always made me feel welcome. “Isn’t Tina in the city?” I asked.

“Brooklyn,” she said, shaking her head. “That girl left the day she graduated and is never coming back.”

“I heard you’re a grandma,” I said, aware, suddenly, how much time had passed since high school. I could hardly believe Tina and I had graduated ten years ago.

“Blessed many times over,” Mrs. Thomas said. “Three grandbabies. Two boys and a girl.”

Mrs. Thomas reached for a framed photograph on her desk, but I was too preoccupied to see her grandchildren. “I know you’re closing soon, but I was hoping to take a look at the Monte family records before you leave for the night,” I said. “Birth and death certificates. I’m doing some research.”

“Not you too,” she said, flipping up a square of countertop and letting me pass into her domain.

“You’ve had other requests for Monte family records?” I asked.

“No, silly,” she said, swatting my arm. “We are totally overrun with genealogy requests. I have been photocopying and mailing records all over the place. Just last week I priority-mailed twenty-three birth records to a lady in Florida. She took a genetic test and realized her dad—the man she grew up with and whose name she carries—wasn’t actually her biological father. Her mother told her the name of her real father is Joe Johnson, from Marlborough, New York, so I went through every one of these cabinets hunting down that name. There were twenty-three Joseph Johnsons born between 1899 and 1935.” Mrs. Thomas gave me a look of exhaustion. “I

know I shouldn't complain. Vital Records revenue is up by about a million percent."

She walked back into the maze of filing cabinets. "Are you making a family tree? Everyone I know has one going on ancestry.com. Or they're doing genetic tests from that other site. What's it called? Two-three something. I just did a spit test and found out I'm not even African!"

"What are you, then?" I asked, surprised by this. Her skin was a dark caramel brown.

"If you ask me, I'll tell you I'm African American. But according to my test, I'm thirty-nine percent Hispanic, forty-one percent Middle Eastern, eight percent Irish, and four percent African! I'm more *Irish* than African? I couldn't believe it, so I took it again. I paid another hundred dollars to get the same result!"

"That is crazy," I said. Maybe I wasn't the only one with family secrets. "What a surprise."

"It changes everything and nothing," she said, shaking her head, as if she were ready for whatever life might throw at her. "I mean, I am still *me*, but jeez, it's hard to get your mind around something like that." She went to her desk and pulled out a piece of paper. "Here it is, all official."

The words "Genetic Profile" were written across the top. Below this, there was a sequence of ancestral groups—Northwestern European, Middle Eastern, North African, Southern European, East Asian, Sub-Saharan African, Native American, and so on, with percentages next to them. There were "Maternal and Paternal Haplogroups," a section titled "DNA Family," and another column called "Neanderthal Variants." A chart outlined the ancestral group results Mrs. Thomas had described.

I knew exactly what kind of test this was. Some months

before, I had bought a genetic testing kit from the online company Mrs. Thomas had mentioned. The site promised to give a complete profile of my ancestry, including the countries of origin and the ethnicity of my ancestors, all for ninety-nine dollars. I had spit into a plastic tube, mailed it to a lab, and awaited my results.

That had been many months before, in the wake of the last miscarriage, when I'd been desperate to find something, anything, that might explain why I couldn't have a child. I had seen specialists, none of whom had answers for me. The idea struck me, as I watched Mrs. Thomas search through the *M* filing cabinet, that it wasn't a coincidence that I had taken a genetic test when I did. I had been in mourning. My marriage, the baby, my parents, my studies—I had lost so much in the previous years. Sadness and disappointment had subsumed me, ripping out the seams of every part of my life, even the parts I thought were tightly bound. Without Luca, I was alone in a way I had never been before. There were moments—late at night, after drinking too much—when I felt that the universe, with all its billions of life-forms, its bacteria and protozoa, its plants and animals, was broken somehow. How could the world be teeming with life when I felt so utterly alone? I wasn't going to get into it with Mrs. Thomas, but I had needed that test. I needed to believe that a scientific breakdown of my genetic composition—a clean, color-coded pie graph that demonstrated my family heritage scientifically—would tell me something profound about who I was and why I was floating untethered, no family to steady me.

As it turned out, my test results never came back. I guessed they had been lost in the mail, and sent an email to the site's customer service address, asking for information. But then things came to a head with Luca, and I forgot all about the

genetic test.

“Here we are,” Mrs. Thomas said, pulling out some certificates and bringing them to her desk. “I didn’t know you had an uncle,” she added, fanning the papers out so I could see them.

“He died before I was born,” I said.

There weren’t many Monte birth certificates. Just three: my father, Giuliano, who had been born January 17, 1961; his brother, Frank, born March 22, 1966; and me, Alberta, born March 20, 1988. My grandfather Giovanni had been born in Italy, so there would be no birth certificate for him on file. My mother was born in Dutchess County, and her certificate would be there, filed under her maiden name.

Before I could ask her to photocopy them, Mrs. Thomas was off on the other side of the room, hunting through the filing cabinet holding death certificates. While I waited, I pulled my birth certificate from the pile. My Social Security card had the initial “T” as my middle name, as did my driver’s license. I read the birth certificate. Family name: Monte. First name: Alberta. Between those names were three others: Isabelle Eleanor Vittoria.

“Hmm,” Mrs. Thomas said, her head bent over the cabinet. From the sound of her voice, something wasn’t right.

“There should be five death certificates,” I said. “My grandparents, my parents, and my dad’s brother.”

“Come here a sec, hon,” she said, lifting the file from the cabinet and carrying it to the back of the office. “Take a look at this.”

Mrs. Thomas spread the death certificates out under the light of a lamp. I could see there were more than five. Significantly more. She arranged them into two piles on her desk. The left pile had the five certificates I had expected to find.

On the right, there were ten others.

“What are those?” I said, taking the pile on the right. I sorted through them, one by one. The first eight certificates were dated between 1942 and 1969. The parents were listed as Marta Monte and Giovanni Monte, my grandparents. On the line where the names should have been typed, there was an abbreviation: N/A. Not applicable. The last two certificates were from the eighties, and the parents were listed as my mother and father. Each of those two certificates had a name: Rebecca Monte and John Monte. At the top of each document were the words “Certificate of Death.”

I sat down in the chair at Mrs. Thomas’s desk, stunned, and looked at them all again.

“Names weren’t mandatory with these older ones,” she said, pointing to the eight nameless certificates. She picked up the newer certificates. “But these two came after new regulations were put in place. Names were required on all certificates in this county after 1978.”

I stared at the death certificates, the typed words and official signatures, my heart heavy. “What does that mean?”

She looked at me, suddenly cautious. “You see here,” she said, pointing to the dates. “The day of birth and death is the same. These are all stillbirths.”

A heavy, suffocating weight pressed on me. *Stillbirths*. That was what the last miscarriage had been, technically. The first three had happened early, before the eighth week, nothing but blood and some cramping. But the last pregnancy had been twenty weeks along, a boy, fully formed and small as a kitten. I’d held him for a moment, looking at him, knowing it would be the last time. I wrapped him in a cotton swaddle blanket and kissed his forehead. When they took him away, it was as if they took a part of me, too. Luca had taken care of

everything at the hospital, and I never saw any of the paperwork. Our baby—our son—must have a certificate there, under Luca’s family name. I wondered what name Luca had given him.

“You all right there?” Mrs. Thomas asked.

“I just don’t understand how there can be so many . . .” I couldn’t say it, the word “stillbirth”; it stuck in my throat like chewing gum. “So many of *these* in my family.”

“You didn’t know about any of this?”

I shook my head. “I knew that I was an only child, and that my father had a brother who died young. But I didn’t know about . . .” I glanced at the papers. “Them.”

Your family has had such trouble. Such tragedy.

“Well, sometimes when you start digging into family history, this shit just comes out of the woodwork,” Mrs. Thomas said. She patted my hand and gave it a squeeze. “Let me make you some copies.”

“Thanks,” I said. As she walked back to the copy machine, I remembered why I had come there in the first place. “Hold on a sec,” I said, pulling my grandfather’s Certificate of Death from the pile and taking it back to her desk. Giovanni Monte, born 1931 in Nevenero, Italy. Died July 1993 in Milton, New York. Running my finger down the page I found what I was looking for. Cause of death: suicide.

RESEARCH NOTES

The Ancestor is the story of a woman whose life is upended by a DNA test. After taking a genetic test, Alberta 'Bert' Monte is shocked to discover that she is the last living member of an aristocratic dynasty whose estate – a castle dating from the 12th century in the Aosta Valley of the Italian Alps—now belongs to her. But it is only when she travels to Italy, and uncovers the terrible truth about her ancestry, that she understands that her personal secrets are as much a part of her inheritance as the castle.

The inception of this story began when I took a DNA test and had the surprise of my life. I was raised in a tight Italian American family, one where Catholic school and long Sunday lunches with stories of my great grandfather's life in the Italian Alps were the hallmarks of our identity. I even have an Italian passport, and am a dual US-Italian citizen, because my grandparents never denounced their Italian citizenship. Therefore, I was astonished to discover, after taking a 23andMe test, that I am exactly 1.7% Italian. My sister took the test and her results were the same. We are more Irish and Norwegian than Italian, more British and German than Italian, a fact that shatters the cultural identity that was so very powerful in our childhood.

This surprise made me wonder: What could be the most shocking discovery to be found in one's ancestry? We've all heard stories of a rich uncle dying and leaving an unsuspecting heir a fortune, but what about the windfalls (and pitfalls) of genetic inheritance? What does it mean for us that the genetic makeup of all human beings is 99.95% identical, and that only .05% accounts for all the differences of sex, race, health, disease and so on? As a fiction writer, I was interested in what could happen when a character's genetic inheritance proved that her origins were outside of these percentages. What would it mean for Alberta? What would it mean for humanity? As Alberta discovers, everything that she believed about herself --- and her species—can be turned on its head with one test.

My great grandparents had been born in Italian Alps, and I decided that this romantic and foreboding setting would be perfect for *The Ancestor*. I went to the Aosta Valley, rented a car, and drove through the Alps near Mount Blanc. The novel is set in the fictional village of Nevenera, which means "Black Snow" for its position in the shadows below Mont Blanc. When Alberta goes to the castle, she has the same view of Mont Blanc that I had from the window of my hotel room, where I took this picture.

During my time in the Alps, I learned about the ibex, a variety of goat that had been hunted by the noble families of the region and mounted in their enormous trophy rooms. I took this picture in a castle once belonging to The House of Savoy. Killing an ibex used to be considered a sign of masculinity. There were 2000 ibex mounted in this particular trophy room.

I slept at a medieval castle with a tower that inspired the northeast tower where Vita, the

eponymous ancestor of my novel, resides.

And, of course, I tried all the local food and wine (hardships undertaken in the name of research!) from the aged goat milk cheeses to the strangely delicious red wines that embody the drama of the landscape.

The Ancestor is about family secrets, and the ways in which families transmit and hide their particular histories. And while I may not be as Italian as I was raised to believe, I feel liberated rather than disappointed by the revelation. My conception of our ancestry as human beings has changed, and I now see that labels such as Italian or even Caucasian are insignificant compared to my history as a homo sapiens. I hope that the advent of genetic testing, and the bigger view of our history as a species, helps us see that we are not limited to a tribe, but rather gives us membership to the human family.



This is an exclusive excerpt that I am sharing with my friends, family and readers. I would so appreciate it if you could take the time to [click here](#) and add The Ancestor to your "To Read" shelf on Goodreads. It just takes one minute and it helps other readers find my book!

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