

A CURSED PLACE
A COLD CASE
A KILLER WHO LEFT NO TRACE

THE MOUNTAIN

LUCA D'ANDREA



THE BREATHTAKING ITALIAN BESTSELLER

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THE MOUNTAIN

*Translated from the Italian by
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That's how it always is. In the ice, first you hear the voice of the Beast, then you die.

There were seracs and chasms identical to those in which I now found myself, full of mountaineers and rock climbers who had lost their strength, their reason, and finally their lives, because of that voice.

Part of my mind, the animal part that knew what terror was because it had lived in terror for millions of years, understood what the Beast was hissing.

Two words: "Get out."

I wasn't prepared for the voice of the Beast.

I needed something familiar, something human, to tear me from the stark solitude of the ice. I raised my eyes beyond the edges of the crevasse, searching for the red outline of Dolomite Mountain Rescue's EC135. But the sky was empty, wide open, the blue of it blinding.

That's what made me fall apart.

I started rocking back and forth, my breathing rapid, my blood drained of any energy. Like Jonah in the belly of the whale, I was alone in the presence of God.

And God was roaring: "Get out."

At two nineteen p.m. on that damned September 15, a voice emerged from the ice, and it wasn't the voice of the Beast. It was Manny's voice. His red uniform stood out in all that white, and he was repeating my name, over and over, as the pulley slowly lowered him towards me.

Five metres.

Two.

His hands and eyes searched for injuries that would explain my

behaviour. His questions: a hundred whats and a thousand whys I couldn't answer. The voice of the Beast was too loud. It was devouring me.

"Don't you hear it?" I murmured. "The Beast, the . . ."

The Beast, I'd have liked to tell him, that ancient thing of ice, couldn't stand the idea of a warm heart buried in its depths. My warm heart. And his.

And now it was two twenty-two.

The expression of surprise on Manny's face turning to pure terror. The pulley cable lifting him like a puppet. Manny being jerked upwards. The rumble of the helicopter's turbines becoming a strangled cry.

At last.

God's scream. The avalanche wiping out the sky.

Get out!

That was when I saw. When I was alone again, beyond time and space, I saw.

The darkness.

Total darkness. But I didn't die. Oh, no. The Beast mocked me. It let me live. The Beast that was now whispering, "You will stay with me forever, forever . . ."

It wasn't lying.

Part of me is still there.

But, as my daughter Clara would have said with a smile, that wasn't the z at the end of the rainbow. It wasn't the end of my story. On the contrary.

It was only the beginning.

One word, nine letters: "beginning". Five letters: "Beast".

Six letters: "horror".

(We Are) the Road Crew

In life, as in art, there's only one thing that matters: the facts. To know all the facts about Evi, Kurt, Markus and the night of April 28, 1985, you have to know everything there is to know about me. Because this isn't just about 1985 and the Bletterbach killings, it isn't just about Evi, Kurt and Markus, it's also about Salinger, Annelise and Clara.

Everything's connected.

* * *

Up until two twenty-two p.m. on September 15, 2013, in other words, up until the moment when the Beast almost killed me, I'd been defined as 50 per cent of a rising star in a field, documentary film-making, that tends to produce not so much stars as tiny meteors and a lot of hot air.

Mike McMellan, the other 50 per cent of the star in question, liked to say that if we'd been shooting stars on a collision course with the planet called Total Failure, we'd have had the privilege of disappearing in the kind of burst of heat reserved for heroes. After the third beer, I declared myself in agreement with him. If nothing else, it was a good excuse for a toast.

Mike wasn't just my partner. He was also the best friend you could possibly have the luck to meet. He was an irritating smartass, as ego-centric as – or even more than – a black hole, obsessive to an unbearable degree, and gifted with the ability to focus on a single subject like a

canary on amphetamines. But he was also the one true artist I had ever known.

It was Mike who realised, when we were still only the semi-talented, least cool pair in the whole of the New York Film Academy (the directors' course for Mike, the screenwriters' course for yours truly), that if we pursued our Hollywood ambitions, we'd get our asses kicked and end up as embittered and verbose as the dreaded Professor ("Call me Gerry") Calhoun, the ex-hippie who'd taken more pleasure than anyone else in pulling our first timid creations to pieces.

It was truly a magic moment – a flash of enlightenment that would modify the course of our lives, maybe a bit less epic than a Sam Peckinpah movie ("Let's go," William Holden says in "The Wild Bunch", to which Ernest Borgnine replies, "Why not?"), given that when it happened, we were nibbling on French fries in a McDonald's with our morale below our feet – but unrepeatable all the same. Believe me.

"Fuck Hollywood, Salinger," Mike had said. "People are hungry for reality, not C.G.I. The only way we can surf this fucking *Zeitgeist* is to forget fiction and devote ourselves to good old-fashioned reality. Satisfaction guaranteed."

I raised an eyebrow. "*Zeitgeist*?"

"You're the Kraut, partner."

My mother was of German descent, but don't worry, I really didn't feel picked on by Mike. After all, I'd grown up in Brooklyn, whereas he was from the fucking Midwest.

Genealogical considerations apart, what Mike was trying to say on that damp November day so many years ago was that I should throw away my (seriously bad) screenplays and join him in making documentaries. Taking moments and enlarging and transforming them into a narrative that goes smoothly from point *a* to point *z* according to the gospel of the late Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp (who was to stories what Jim Morrison was to paranoia).

What a mess.

"Mike," I snorted, "there's only one category of people worse than

those who want to make it big in movies: documentary-makers. They own collections of *National Geographic* going back to 1800. Many of them have ancestors who died looking for the source of the Nile. They have cashmere scarves and tattoos. They're assholes, but liberal assholes, and that's why they feel absolved of every sin. Last, but by no means least, they have families rolling in money who subsidise their world safaris."

"Salingar, sometimes you're really . . ." Mike shook his head. "Just stop right there and listen to me. We need a subject. A strong subject for a documentary that'll break the bank. Something that people already know, something familiar, but that the two of us will show in a new way, different than how they've ever seen it. Rack your brains, think and . . ."

Believe it or not, it was at that moment that two losers discovered they could transform even the weirdest of pumpkins into a golden coach. Because yes. I had it.

I don't know how and I don't know why, while Mike was staring at me with that serial killer mug of his, while a million reasons to reject his suggestion were crowding in on me, I felt a gigantic explosion in my brain. An absurd idea. Mad. Incandescent. An idea so stupid, it might just work.

What was more electrifying, powerful and sexy than rock 'n' roll?

It was a religion for millions of people. A blast of energy that brought the generations together. Who hadn't heard of Elvis, Hendrix, the Rolling Stones, Nirvana, Metallica and the whole glittering caravan of the one true revolution of the twentieth century?

Easy, wasn't it?

No.

Because rock was also big, tall, black-clad bodybuilders who looked like double-door wardrobes, had the eyes of pitbull terriers, and were paid to get rid of cuties like us. Something they would gladly have done even for free.

The first time we tried to put our idea into practice (Bruce Springsteen

in a pre-tour warm-up gig at a venue down in the Village) I got off lightly with a few shoves and a couple of bruises. Mike not so lightly. Half of his face resembled the Scottish flag. The cherry on the cake was that we almost got ourselves arrested. Springsteen was followed by concerts by the White Stripes, Michael Stipe, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Neil Young and the Black Eyed Peas, who were at the height of their fame at the time.

We collected a fair number of bruises, but not much material. There was a strong temptation to drop the whole thing.

It was at this point that the God of Rock looked down on us, saw our pathetic efforts to pay tribute to him, and with a benevolent eye showed us the way to success.

* * *

In mid-April I managed to get us both hired setting up a stage in Battery Park. Not for just any band, but for the most controversial, diabolical and reviled band of all time. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Kiss.

We worked like brave, conscientious little ants, and then, as the workforce was leaving, we hid in a heap of refuse. As silent as snipers. When the first dark sedan cars arrived, Mike pressed the *record* button. We were in seventh heaven. This was our big opportunity. And naturally, everything happened very fast.

Gene Simmons emerged from a limousine as long as an ocean liner, stretched and gave orders to his lackeys to drop the leash of his beloved four-legged friend. No sooner was it free than the demonic-looking snow-white poodle started to bark in our direction like one of Robert Johnson's hounds of hell ("And the day keeps on reminding me, there's a hellhound on my trail. / Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail"). In two bounds, the dog was on me. It was aiming for the jugular, the bastard. That ball of fur wanted to kill me.

I screamed.

And something like twelve thousand brutes who wouldn't have

looked out of place in a Hall of Fame for cutthroats grabbed us, kicked us and dragged us towards the exit, threatening to throw us in the ocean. But they didn't do so. They left us black and blue, beaten and tired on a bench surrounded by trash, reflecting on how we'd been reduced to a Wile E. Coyote condition. We stayed there, unable to accept defeat, listening to the echo of the concert as it wound down. Once the encores had finished, we watched as the crowd dispersed and, just as we were about to go back to our mouse hole, while four big guys with Hell's Angels beards and faces like convicts started loading crates and amplifiers onto the band's Peterbilts, at that precise moment, the God of Rock winked down from Valhalla and showed me the way.

"Mike," I whispered. "We got it wrong. If we want to make a documentary about rock, the real rock, we have to aim our cameras on the other side of the stage. The other side, partner. Those guys are the real rock." And I added with a grin, "There's no copyright on them."

Those guys.

The roadies. The ones who do the dirty work. The ones who load the trucks, drive them from one side of the country to the other, unload them, set up the stage, prepare the equipment, wait for the end of the show with their arms folded and then once more, as the poem says, "Miles to go before I sleep."

Oh, yes.

Mike, I have to say, was *incredible*. With a lot of flattery, holding out prospects of money and free publicity, he persuaded a very bored tour manager to give us permission to do a bit of filming. The roadies, not at all used to so much attention, took us under their wing. Not only that: it was those bearded guys who persuaded the managers and lawyers to let us follow them around (them, not the band – that was the trump card that convinced them) for the rest of the tour.

That's how "Born to Sweat: Road Crew, the Hidden Side of Rock 'n' Roll" was born.

We worked our asses off, believe me. Six weeks of madness, migraines, terrible hangovers and sweat, at the end of which we had destroyed two

cameras, developed various food addictions and a twisted calf (I had clambered onto the roof of a trailer that turned out to be as crumbly as a tea biscuit – and I was sober, I swear) and learned twelve different ways of saying “fuck you”.

The editing lasted a summer of sweltering heat without air conditioning, spent endlessly arguing in front of a monitor that was melting, and by the beginning of September 2003 (a magical year if ever there was one), not only had we finished our documentary, we were actually pleased with it. We showed it to a producer named Smith who had reluctantly granted us five – and only five – minutes. Believe it or not, it only took three.

“A factual series,” ruled Mr Smith, supreme emperor of the network. “Twelve episodes. Twenty-five minutes each. I want it for the beginning of November. Can you do it?”

Smiles and handshakes. Finally, a stinking bus took us back home. Stunned and a little dazed, we checked on Wikipedia what the hell a factual series was. The answer: a mixture of drama and documentary. In other words, we had less than two months to re-edit everything from scratch and create our factual series. Impossible?

No joke.

December 1 that year, “Road Crew” went on the air. It was a ratings smash.

Suddenly our names were on everyone’s lips. Professor Calhoun had a photograph taken awarding us what looked like an abomination created by Dalí, but which was in fact a prize to honour deserving students. I emphasise: deserving. The blogs were talking about “Road Crew”, the press was talking about “Road Crew”.

It wasn’t all roses, though.

Maddie Grady of the *New Yorker* cut us down to size with a blunt axe. A 5,000-word article that had me beating my brains out for months. According to *G.Q.*, we were misogynists. According to *Life*, we were misanthropists. According to *Vogue*, we embodied the redemption of Generation X. And that really got us down.

Some internet nerds started targeting us, with close readings of our work that in terms of prolixity and pedantry could have given the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* a run for its money.

Rumours started circulating, also on the internet, the cradle of fucking virtual democracy, rumours that were a mixture of the ridiculous and the disturbing. According to those in the know, Mike and I did heroin, speedball, cocaine, amphetamines. The roadies had taught us all of the hundred and one sins of Sodom. During the shooting one of us had died (“Mike, it says here you’re dead.” “No, it says one of us is dead, why should it be me?” “Have you taken a look at your face, partner?”).

My favourite, though, was this one: we had gotten a groupie named Pam pregnant (have you noticed that groupies are always called Pam?) and had made her miscarry during a satanic ritual taught to us by Jimmy Page.

In March of the following year, 2004, Mr Smith got us to sign a contract for a second season of “Road Crew”. We had the whole world in our hands. Then, just before leaving for the shoot, something happened that surprised everyone, me most of all.

I fell in love.

* * *

And, strange to say, it was all thanks to “Call me Gerry” Calhoun. He had arranged a special screening of the first episode of “Road Crew” followed by an unmissable debate for his students. “Debate” reeked of an ambush, but Mike (who may have hoped to get his revenge on our old teacher and the world at large) had insisted on accepting, and I’d meekly followed suit, as I always did when Mike got something into his head.

The girl who found her way into my heart was sitting in the third row, half hidden by a guy who looked like Mark Chapman and weighed around three hundred pounds (a fan from the blogosphere, I

immediately assumed), in Calhoun's fearsome Lecture Room 13, the one that some students of the New York Film Academy called the Fight Club.

At the end of the screening, the fat guy was the first to have his say. What he said in a speech lasting thirty-five minutes can be summed up as: "What a crock of shit!" Then, satisfied, he wiped away a thread of foam, sat down and crossed his arms, with an expression of defiance on his pizza face.

I was about to retaliate with a long (very long) series of not very P.C. remarks about smartass fat guys, when the impossible happened. The blonde girl asked permission to speak and Calhoun, relieved, granted it to her. She stood up (she was really shapely) and said, in a very strong German accent, "I'd like to ask you. What's the exact word for *Neid*?"

I burst out laughing and mentally thanked my dear *Mutti* for her obstinacy in teaching me her mother tongue. Suddenly, I saw those hours spent flagellating my tongue against my teeth, aspirating vowels and rounding my *rs* as if I had a cracked fan in my mouth, in a completely different light.

"*Mein liebes Fräulein*", I began, bathing in the sound of eyes popping like champagne corks among that mass of horny students (including the fat guy). "*Sie sollten nicht fragen, wie wir 'Neid' sagen, sondern wie wir 'Idiot' sagen.*"

My dear young lady, you shouldn't ask how we say "envy", but how we say "idiot".

Her name was Annelise.

She was nineteen years old and she'd been in the United States for little more than a month, on a course. Annelise was neither German nor Austrian nor even Swiss. She came from a tiny province in the north of Italy where most of the population spoke German. The name of that strange place was Alto Adige, or Südtirol.

The night before I left for the tour, we made love to Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska", which reconciled me at least a little with the Boss. The next morning was tough. I didn't think I would ever see her again.

I was wrong. My sweet Annelise, born amid the Alps eight thousand kilometres from the Big Apple, transformed her short course into a study permit. I know it seems crazy, but you have to believe me. She loved me, and I loved her. In 2007, in a little restaurant in Hell's Kitchen, as Mike and I were preparing to shoot the third (and, we had vowed, last) season of "Road Crew", I asked Annelise to marry me. She accepted with such joy that I did a not very manly thing and burst into tears.

What more could I have wanted?

2008.

Because in 2008, while Mike and I, exhausted, were taking a break after the broadcast of the third season of our *fuck-tual* series, on a mild May day, in a clinic in New Jersey immersed in greenery, my daughter Clara was born. And then: fragrant mountains of diapers, baby food decorating clothes and walls, but above all hours and hours spent watching Clara learning to get to know the world. And how to forget Mike's visits with his current girlfriend (they lasted from two to four weeks, the longest being a month and a half, but then she had been Miss July), during which he tried every which way to teach my daughter his name before Clara could even utter the word "Mamma"?

In the summer of 2009, I met Annelise's parents, Werner and Herta Mair. We didn't know then that the "tiredness" that Herta gave as an excuse for her dizziness and pallor was an advanced stage of cancer. She died a few months later, at the end of the year. Annelise didn't want me to go with her to the funeral.

2010 and 2011 were beautiful and frustrating years. Beautiful: Clara climbing everywhere, Clara asking "what's this?" in three different languages (the third, Italian, Annelise was teaching me, too, and I liked it a lot, I was a student motivated by a teacher I found very sexy), Clara simply growing. Frustrating? Of course. Because at the end of 2011, after presenting Mr Smith with something like a hundred thousand different projects (all rejected), we began shooting the fourth season of "Road Crew". The one we had sworn we would never make.

Nothing went right. The magic was gone and we knew it. The fourth season of “Road Crew” is a long, unhappy threnody to the end of an era. But the public, as generations of copywriters know, love feeling sad. Our ratings were better than for the three previous seasons. Even the *New Yorker* praised us, calling it “the story of a waking dream that crumbles”.

So Mike and I once again found ourselves exhausted and apathetic. Depressed. The work we considered the worst in our career was being praised to the skies even by those who only a little while earlier had treated us like lepers. That was why, in December 2012, I accepted Annelise’s suggestion to spend a few months in her native village, a little place called Siebenhoch in Alto Adige/Südtirol, Italy. Far from everything and everybody.

A good idea.