

Mortal fear is as crucial a thing to our lives as love. It cuts to the core of our being and shows us what we are. Will you step back and cover your eyes? Or will you have the strength to walk to the precipice and look out? Do you want to know what is there or live in the dark delusion that this commercial world insists we remain sealed inside like blind caterpillars in an eternal cocoon? Will you curl up with your eyes closed and die? Or can you fight your way out of it and fly?

—**STANISLAS CORDOVA**

Rolling Stone, December 29, 1977

PROLOGUE

New York City 2:32 A.M.

EVERYONE HAS A CORDOVA STORY, whether they like it or not.

Maybe your next-door neighbor found one of his movies in an old box in her attic and never entered a dark room alone again. Or your boyfriend bragged he'd discovered a contraband copy of *At Night All Birds Are Black* on the Internet and after watching refused to speak of it, as if it were a horrific ordeal he'd barely survived.

Whatever your opinion of Cordova, however obsessed with his work or indifferent—he's there to react against. He's a crevice, a black hole, an unspecified danger, a relentless outbreak of the unknown in our overexposed world. He's underground, looming unseen in the corners of the dark. He's down under the railway bridge in the river with all the missing evidence, and the answers that will never see the light of day.

He's a myth, a monster, a mortal man.

And yet I can't help but believe when you need him the most, Cordova has a way of heading straight toward you, like a mysterious guest you notice across the room at a crowded party. In the blink of an eye, he's *right beside* you by the fruit punch, staring back at you when you turn and casually ask the time.

My Cordova tale began for the second time on a rainy October night, when I was just another man running in circles, going nowhere as fast as I could. I was jogging around Central Park's Reservoir after two A.M.—a risky habit I'd adopted during the past year when I was too strung out to sleep, hounded by an inertia I couldn't explain, except for the vague understanding that the best part of my life was behind me, and the sense of possibility I'd once had so innately as a young man was now gone.

It was cold and I was soaked. The gravel track was rutted with puddles, the black waters of the Reservoir cloaked in mist. It clogged the reeds along the bank and erased the outskirts of the park as if it were nothing but paper, the edges torn away. All I could see of the grand buildings along Fifth Avenue were a few gold lights burning through the gloom, reflecting on the water's edge like dull coins tossed in. Every time I sprinted past one of the iron lampposts, my shadow surged past me, quickly grew faint, and then peeled off—as if it didn't have the nerve to stay.

I was bypassing the South Gatehouse, starting my sixth lap, when I glanced over my shoulder and saw someone was behind me.

A woman was standing in front of a lamppost, her face in shadow, her red coat catching the light behind her, making a vivid red slice in the night.

A young woman out here alone? Was she crazy?

I turned back, faintly irritated by the girl's naïveté—or recklessness, whatever it was that brought her out here. Women of Manhattan, magnificent as they were, they forgot sometimes they weren't immortal. They could throw themselves like confetti into a fun-filled Friday night, with no thought as to what *crack* they fell into by Saturday.

The track straightened north, rain needling my face, the branches hanging low, forming a crude tunnel overhead. I veered past rows of benches and the curved bridge, mud splattering my shins.

The woman—whoever she was—appeared to have disappeared.

But then—far ahead, a flicker of *red*. It vanished as soon as I saw it, then seconds later, I could make out a thin, dark silhouette walking slowly in front of me along the iron railing. She was wearing black boots, her dark hair hanging halfway down her back. I picked up my

pace, deciding to pass her exactly when she was beside a lamppost so I could take a closer look and make sure she was all right.

As I neared, however, I had the marked feeling she *wasn't*.

It was the sound of her footsteps, too heavy for such a slight person, the way she walked so stiffly, as if waiting for me. I suddenly had the feeling that as I passed she'd turn and I'd see her face was not young as I'd assumed, but *old*. The ravaged face of an old woman would stare back at me with hollowed eyes, a mouth like an ax gash in a tree.

She was just a few feet ahead now.

She was going to reach out, seize my arm, and her grip would be strong as a man's, *ice cold*—

I ran past, but her head was lowered, hidden by her hair. When I turned again, she'd already stepped beyond the light and was little more than a faceless form cut out of the dark, her shoulders outlined in red.

I took off, taking a shortcut as the path twisted through the dense shrubbery, branches whipping my arms. *I'll stop and say something when I pass her again—tell her to go home.*

But I logged another lap and there was no sign of her. I checked the hill leading down to the bridle paths.

Nothing.

Within minutes, I was approaching the North Gatehouse—a stone building beyond the reach of the lamps, soaked in darkness. I couldn't make out much more than a flight of narrow stairs leading up to a rusted set of double doors, which were chained and locked, a sign posted beside them: KEEP OUT PROPERTY OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

As I neared, I realized in alarm, glancing up, that she was *there*, standing on the landing, staring down at me. *Or was she looking through me?*

By the time her presence fully registered I'd already run blindly on. Yet what I'd glimpsed in that split second drifted in front of my eyes as if someone had taken a flash picture: tangled hair, that blood red coat decayed brown in the dark, a face so entirely in shadow it seemed possible it wasn't even there.

Clearly I should've held off on that fourth scotch.

There was a time not *too* long ago when it took a little more to rattle me. *Scott McGrath, a journalist who'd go to hell just to get Lucifer on the*

record, some blogger had once written. I'd taken it as a compliment. Prison inmates who'd tattooed their faces with shoe polish and their own piss, armed teenagers from Vigário Geral strung out on *pedra*, Medellín heavies who vacationed yearly at Rikers—none of it made me flinch. It was all just part of the scenery.

Now a woman in the dark was unnerving me.

She had to be drunk. Or she'd popped too many Xanax. Or maybe this was some sick teenage dare—an Upper East Side mean girl had put her up to this. Unless it was all a calculated setup and her street-rat boyfriend was somewhere here, waiting to jump me.

If *that* was the idea, they'd be disappointed. I had no valuables on me except my keys, a switchblade, and my MetroCard, worth about eight bucks.

All right, maybe I was going through a *rough patch*, *dry spell*—whatever the hell you wanted to call it. Maybe I hadn't defended myself since—well, *technically* the late nineties. But you never forgot how to fight for your life. And it was never too late to remember, unless you were dead.

The night felt unnaturally silent, *still*. That mist—it had moved beyond the water into the trees, overtaken the track like a sickness, an exhaust off something in the air here, something malignant.

Another minute and I was approaching the North Gatehouse. I shot past it, expecting to see her on the landing.

It was deserted. There was no sign of her anywhere.

Yet the longer I ran, the path unspooling like an underpass to some dark new dimension in front of me, the more I found the encounter unfinished, a song that had cut out on an expectant note, a film projector sputtering to a halt seconds before a pivotal chase scene, the screen going white. I couldn't shake the powerful feeling that she was very much *here*, hiding somewhere, watching me.

I swore I caught a whiff of perfume embroidered into the damp smells of mud and rain. I squinted into the shadows along the hill, expecting, at any moment, the bright red cut of her coat. Maybe she'd be sitting on a bench or standing on the bridge. *Had she come here to harm herself?* What if she climbed up onto the railing, waiting, staring at me with a face drained of hope, before stepping off, falling to the road far below like a bag of stones?

Maybe I'd had a *fifth* scotch without realizing. Or *this damned city had finally gotten to me*. I took off down the steps, heading down East Drive and out onto Fifth Avenue, rounding the corner onto East Eighty-sixth Street, the rain turning into a downpour. I jogged three blocks, past the shuttered restaurants, bright lobbies with a couple of bored doormen staring out.

At the Lexington entrance to the subway, I heard the rumble of an approaching train. I sprinted down the next flight, swiping my Metro-Card through the turnstiles. A few people were waiting on the platform—a couple of teenagers, an elderly woman with a Bloomingdale's bag.

The train careened into the station, screeching to a halt, and I stepped into an empty car.

"This is a Brooklyn-bound four express train. The next stop is Fifty-ninth Street."

Shaking off the rain, I stared out at the deserted benches, an ad for a sci-fi action movie covered in graffiti. Someone had blinded the sprinting man on the poster, scribbling out his eyes with black marker.

The doors pounded closed. With a moan of brakes, the train began to pull away.

And then, suddenly, I was aware, coming slowly down the steps in the far corner—shiny black boots and *red*, a red coat. I realized, as she stepped lower and lower, soaked black hair like ink seeping over her shoulders, that it was she, the girl from the Reservoir, the ghost—*whatever the hell she was*. But before I could comprehend this impossibility, before my mind could shout, *She was coming for me*, the train whipped into the tunnel, the windows went black, and I was left staring only at myself.

1 | A LARGE CHANDELIER showered golden light on the crowd as I surveyed the party in the bronze mirror over the mantel. I was startled to spot someone I barely recognized: myself. Blue button-down, sports jacket, third or fourth drink—I was losing count—leaning against the wall like I was holding it up. I looked like I wasn't at a cocktail party but an airport, waiting for my life to take off.

Infinitely delayed.

Every time I planted myself at these charity soirees, lost scenes from my married life, I wondered why I kept coming.

Maybe I liked facing a firing squad.

“Scott McGrath, great to see you!”

Wish I could say the same, I thought.

“Working on anything cool these days?”

My abs.

“Still teaching that journalism class at the New School?”

They suggested I take a sabbatical. In other words? Cutbacks.

“Didn't know you were still in the city.”

I never knew what to say to *that one*. Did they think I'd been exiled to Saint Helena, like Napoleon after Waterloo?

I was at this party thanks to one of my ex-wife Cynthia's friends, a woman named Birdie. I found it both amusing and flattering that, long after my wife had divorced me, swimming on to bluer seas, a dense school of her girlfriends swirled around me as if I were an interesting shipwreck, looking for a piece of rubble to salvage and take home. Birdie was blond, forties, and hadn't left my side for the better part of two hours. Every now and then, her hand squeezed my arm—a signal that her husband, some hedge-fund guy (*hedge fungi*) was out of town and her three kids Guantánamoed with a nanny. Only a summons from the hostess to show Birdie her newly renovated kitchen had pried the woman from my side.

“Don't go anywhere,” Birdie had said.

I'd done *precisely* that. *This wreckage wanted to stay submerged.*

I drained the rest of my scotch, was about to head back to the bar, when I felt my BlackBerry buzzing.

I slipped through the door behind me onto the second-floor landing. It was a text from my old attorney, Stu Loughton. I hadn't heard from Stu in at least six months.

Cordova's daughter found dead.

Call me.

I closed the message and Googled *Cordova*, scrolling the returns.

It was true. And there was *my* goddamn name in quite a few articles.

“Disgraced journalist Scott McGrath . . .”

I'd be a marked man, peppered with questions, the moment this latest news circulated the party.

Suddenly, I was sober. I slipped through the crowd, down the spiral marble stairs. No one said a word as I grabbed my coat, walked past the bronze bust of the hostess (which, in a shameless use of artistic license, made her resemble Elizabeth Taylor), out the front door, and down the townhouse steps onto East Ninety-fourth Street. I headed to Fifth, breathing in the damp October night. I hailed a taxi and climbed in.

“West Fourth and Perry.”

As we took off, I unrolled the window and felt my stomach tighten

as the reality of it settled in: *Cordova's daughter found dead*. What was the unfiltered sound-bite I'd blurted on national television?

Cordova's a predator—in the same league as Manson, Jim Jones, Colonel Kurtz. I have an inside source who worked for the family for years. Someone needs to terminate this guy with extreme prejudice.

That inspired tidbit cost me my career, my reputation—not to mention a quarter of a million dollars—but that didn't make it any less true. *Though I probably should have stopped talking after Charles Manson.*

I couldn't help but laugh at myself for feeling like a fugitive—or maybe the more apt comparison was a *Most Wanted* radical. Yet I had to admit there was something electrifying about seeing that name again—*Cordova*—in the possibility that maybe, *just maybe*, it was time to start running for my life again.

2 | TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I let myself into my apartment at 30 Perry Street.

“I said I had to be out of here by *nine*,” a voice announced behind me as I closed the door. “It's after one. What the *hell*?”

Her name was Jeannie, but no sane man would ever dream of her.

Two weekends a month when I had legal visitation with my five-year-old daughter, Samantha, my ex-wife, in an eighteen-year two-for-one promotion, decreed it compulsory I also take custody of Jeannie, the nanny. She was a twenty-four-year-old Yale graduate studying education at Columbia and clearly relished her powerful position as the designated bodyguard, the private escort, the *Blackwater detail* for Sam whenever she ventured into my dangerous custody. In this equation, I was the unstable Third World nation with a corrupt government, substandard infrastructure, rebel unrest, and an economy in free-fall.

“I'm sorry,” I said, throwing my jacket over the chair. “I lost track of time. Where's Sam?”

“Asleep.”

“Did you find her cloud pajamas?”

“No. I was supposed to be at a study group *four hours ago*.”

“I'll pay you double, so you can hire a tutor.” I took out my wallet, handed Jeannie about five hundred bucks, which she happily zipped

into her backpack, and then I moved deliberately around her, heading down the hall.

“Oh, and Mr. McGrath? Cynthia wanted to know if she could switch weekends with you next weekend.”

I stopped outside the closed door at the end, turning back.

“Why?”

“She and Bruce are going to Santa Barbara.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I made plans. We’ll stick to the schedule.”

“But they already made the arrangements.”

“They can unmake them.”

Jeannie opened her mouth to protest, but clamped it shut—sensing, quite rightly, that the territory between two people who were *once* soul mates but were *no longer* was akin to wandering into Pakistan’s tribal region.

“She’s gonna call you about it,” she noted quietly.

“Good night, Jeannie.”

With a dubious sigh, she let herself out. I entered my office, switched on the desk lamp, and nudged the door closed behind me.

Santa Barbara, my ass.

3 | MY OFFICE WAS a small, neglected, green-walled room of filing cabinets, photographs, magazines, and piles of books.

There was a framed picture on my desk of Samantha, taken on the day she was born, her face ancient and elflike. Hanging on the wall was a movie poster of a debonair but exhausted-looking Alain Delon in *Le Samourai*. The print had been a gift from my old editor at *Insider*. He’d told me that I reminded him of the main character—a lonely French existentialist hit man—which wasn’t a compliment. Across the room, left over from my Phi Psi frat-house days at the University of Michigan, was a sagging brown leather couch (on which I’d both lost my virginity and pounded out every one of my best stories). Hanging above that were framed covers of my books—*MasterCard Nation*, *Hunting Captain Hook: Pirating on the Open Seas*, *Crud: Dirty Secrets*

of the Oil Industry, Cocaine Carnivals. They looked faded, the dust jacket designs *very* late-nineties. There were also a few copies of my more famous *Esquire*, *Time*, and *Insider* articles: “In Search of El Dorado.” “Black Snow Inferno.” “Surviving a Siberian Prison.” Two giant windows opposite the door overlooked Perry Street and a banged-up poplar tree, though it was too dark to see it now.

I walked to the bookshelf in the corner, beside the photograph of me in Manaus with my arm around a *hecatao* river trader, looking irritatingly *happy* and *tan*—*snapshot from a past life*—and poured myself a scotch.

I’d bought six cases of the Macallan Cask Strength during my 2007 three-week road trip through Scotland. The trip had been taken at the inspired suggestion of my shrink, Dr. Weaver, after Cynthia had informed me that she and my nine-month-old daughter were leaving me for Bruce—a venture capitalist with whom she’d been having an affair.

It was just months after Cordova slapped me with the slander lawsuit. You’d think out of mercy Cynthia would have rationed the bad news, told me first that I traveled too much, *then* that she’d been unfaithful, *then* that she was madly in love, and finally, that they were each divorcing their respective spouses to be together. Instead, it all came on the same day—like a quiet coastal town *already* hit by famine, further hit by a mudslide, a tsunami, a meteorite, and, to top it all off, a little alien invasion.

But then, maybe it was better that way: Rather early in the chain of disasters, there was nothing left standing to destroy.

The purpose of my trip to Scotland had been to start anew, turn the page—get in touch with my heritage and hence *myself*, by visiting the locale where four generations of McGraths had been born and flourished: a tiny town in Moray, Scotland, called Fogwatt. I should have known simply from the *name* it’d be no Brigadoon. Dr. Weaver’s suggestion turned out to be akin to learning my ancestors had arisen from the criminally insane ward at Bellevue. Fogwatt comprised a few crooked white buildings clinging to a gray hill like a couple of teeth left in an old mouth. Women trudged through town with the hardened faces of those who’d survived a plague. Silent red fat men blistered every bar in town. I thought things were looking up when I’d ended up in bed with an attractive bartender named Maisie—until it occurred to

me she could feasibly be my distant cousin. Just when you think you've hit rock bottom, you realize you're standing on another trapdoor.

I downed the scotch—instantly feeling a little more *alive*—poured another, and moved to the closet behind my desk.

It'd been at least a year since I'd ventured in there.

The door was jammed, and I had to force it open, kicking aside old sneakers and blueprints of the Amagansett beach house I'd considered buying Cynthia in an eleventh-hour attempt to "work things out." *The million-dollar marital Band-Aid, never a wise idea.* I pried loose what was obstructing the door, a framed photo of Cynthia and me, taken when we were touring Brazil on a Ducati, searching for illegal gold mines, so in love, it was impossible to fathom a day it might not be the case. *God, she was gorgeous.* I chucked the picture aside, pushed back piles of *National Geographics*, and found what I was looking for—a cardboard box.

I pulled it out, hauled it over to my desk, and sat back in my chair, staring down at it.

The duct tape I'd sealed it with was unsticking.

Cordova.

The decision, five years ago, to take the man on as a subject had been accidental. I'd just come back from an exhausting six-week sojourn in Freetown, a Sierra Leone slum. At about three in the morning, wide awake, jet-lagged, I found myself clicking onto an article about Amy's Light, the nonprofit dedicated to scouring the Internet for Cordova's *black tapes*, buying them, and destroying them. A mother whose daughter had been brutally killed by a copycat murderer founded the organization. Like the central murder in *Wait for Me Here*, Hugh Thistleton had kidnapped her daughter, Amy, from a street corner, where she was waiting for her brother to return from a 7-Eleven, took her to an abandoned mill, and fed her through the machinery.

An organization dedicated to keep Cordova from infecting our youth, declared the website. This mandate I found to be poignant for its sheer impossibility—trying to rid the Internet of Cordova was like trying to rid the Amazon of insects. Yet I didn't agree with it. As a journalist, freedom of speech and expression were cornerstones—principles so deeply embedded in America's bedrock that to surrender even an inch

would be our country's undoing. I was also staunchly anticensorship—Cordova could no more be held responsible for Amy Andrews's gruesome death than the beef industry for giving Americans fatal heart attacks. As much as some people would like to believe, for their own peace of mind, that the appearance of evil in this world had a clean cause, the truth was never that simple.

Until that night, I'd hardly given Cordova a second thought beyond enjoying (and getting creeped out by) some of his early films. Wondering about the motives of a reclusive director was not my professional aim or my specialty. I tackled stories with stakes, where life and death were on the line. The most hopeless of all hopeless causes was where my heart tended to go when on the lookout for a new subject.

Somehow, at *some* point that night, my heart got into it.

Maybe it was because Sam had been born just a few months before and, suddenly faced with fatherhood, I was more susceptible than usual to the idea of protecting this beautiful clean slate—protecting any child—from the destabilizing horrors that Cordova represented. Whatever the reason, the longer I clicked through the hundreds of Cordova blogs and fansites and anonymous message boards, many of the postings by kids as young as nine and ten—the more insistent my sense that *something* was wrong with Cordova.

In hindsight, the experience reminded me of an alcoholic South African reporter whose path I'd crossed at the Hilton in Nairobi when I was there in 2003 working on a story about the ivory trade. He was on his way to a remote village in the southwest where a Taita tribe, close to the Tanzanian border, was dying out and was considered *walaani*—*cursed*—because no child born there could live longer than eleven days. We'd met at the hotel bar and after commiserating over the fact that both of us had recently been carjacked (validating the city's nickname, *Nairobbery*), the man told me he was thinking about missing his bus the following morning, abandoning the story altogether, because of what had befallen the three reporters who'd gone before him to the village. One had apparently gone mad, wandering the streets stuttering nonsense. Another had quit and a week later had hanged himself in a Mombasa hotel room. The third had vanished into thin air, abandoning his family and a post at the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.

"It's infected," the man mumbled. "*The story*. Some are, you know."

I'd chuckled, assuming such dramatics were a side effect of the Chivas Regal we'd been guzzling all night. Yet he went on.

"It's a *lintwurm*." He squinted at me, his bloodshot eyes searching my face for understanding. "A tapeworm that's eaten its own tail. No use going after it. Because there's no end. All it will do is wrap around your heart and squeeze all the blood out." He held up a tightened fist. "*Dit suig jou droog*. Some stories you should run from while you still have legs."

I never *did* find out if he made it to that village.

Cordova's daughter found dead. The thought pulled me back to the present, and I opened the old box, grabbed a stack of papers, and started through it.

First: a typed list of all the actors who'd worked with Cordova. Then a list of shooting locations from his first film, *Figures Bathed in Light*. Pauline Kael's review of *Distortion*, "Unraveling Innocence." A film still of Marlowe Hughes in bed in the closing shot of *Lovechild*. Typed transcripts of my notes from Crowthorpe Falls. A photo I'd snapped of the fencing surrounding Cordova's property, The Peak. Wolfgang Beckman's syllabus for his Cordova class, taught a few years ago at Columbia film school, though he was forced to cancel it after only three classes due to outcry from parents. ("Special Topics in Cordova: Darkly Alive and Totally Petrifying," he'd impishly called the class.) A DVD of the PBS documentary on Cordova from 2003, *Dark's Warden*. And then a transcript from an anonymous phone call.

John. The mysterious caller who proved to be my undoing.

I pulled the three pages out of the pile.

Every time I read through them, transcribed within minutes of hanging up—I tried and failed to find the moment in the conversation where I'd lost my head. *What*, exactly, had prompted me to disregard twenty years' experience and *jump the shark* during a television appearance not twenty-four hours later?