

# 1

It was a few minutes to six when the street began coming to life.

The refuse lorries collected the rubbish from the bins that stood in line like toy soldiers outside the houses. Then it was the turn of the street-sweeping vehicle that cleaned the asphalt with revolving brushes. The gardeners' mini-vans soon followed. The lawns and drives were cleared of leaves and weeds, and the hedges pruned to their ideal height. Their task accomplished, they went away, leaving behind a neat, silent, motionless world.

This happy place was ready to greet its happy inhabitants, Mila thought.

It had been a quiet night. Every night was quiet here. At about seven a.m., the houses began languidly to awaken. Behind the windows, fathers, mothers and children could be seen cheerfully preparing for the new day ahead of them.

Another day in a happy life.

Mila sat watching them in her Hyundai at the end of the block. She felt no envy. She knew that if you scratched the gilded surface, something else always emerged. Sometimes the true picture, made up of light and shade, as was only to be expected. At other times, though, there was a black hole. You were overcome

by the foul breath of a hungry abyss and, from its depths, you thought you heard someone whispering your name.

Mila Vasquez knew the appeal of darkness only too well. She had been dancing with shadows since the day she was born.

She clicked her fingers, putting pressure on her left index. The fleeting pain gave her the kick she needed to keep concentrating. Soon afterwards, the front doors of the houses started opening, and the occupants began leaving home to face the challenges of the world – which would always be too easy for them, Mila thought.

She saw the Conners leave their house. The father, an attorney, was a slim man of about forty, with slightly greying hair that emphasised his tanned face. He was dressed in an impeccable grey suit. The mother was blonde, and still had the body and face of a young woman. Time would never have any effect on her, Mila was sure of that. Then came the girls. The elder one was already in middle school, the younger one – a cascade of curls – still in kindergarten. They were the image of their parents. If anyone still doubted the theory of evolution, Mila could have dispelled those doubts by showing them the Conners. They were beautiful and perfect and obviously could only live in a happy place like this.

After kissing his wife and daughters goodbye, Attorney Conner got into a blue Audi A6 and drove off to pursue his brilliant career. The woman set off in a green Nissan SUV to drop the girls off at their schools. Once they were gone, Mila got out of her old car, ready to enter the Conners' villa – and their lives. In spite of the heat, she had chosen a tracksuit as a disguise. It was only the first day of autumn, but if she had worn a T-shirt and shorts, her scars would have attracted far more attention. According to the calculations she had made since beginning this surveillance a few days earlier, she only had about forty minutes before Mrs Conner returned home.

Forty minutes to discover if this happy place was hiding a ghost.

The Conners had been her object of study for a few weeks now. It had all started by chance.

Police officers working on missing persons cases can't just sit at their desks and wait for reports to come in. Sometimes those who disappear have no family to report anything at all. Either because they are foreigners, or because they have cut off all their ties, or simply because they don't have anyone in the world.

Mila called them 'the predestined'. People who had a void around them and never imagined they would one day be swallowed up by it. That meant she first had to look for the opportunity, and only then the missing person. She would walk the streets, combing through places of hopelessness, where the shadows dog your every step and never leave you alone. But people could also disappear from a healthy, protected emotional environment.

For example, a child.

Sometimes – in fact, far too often – parents, distracted by their well-trying routine, failed to notice a small but vital change. Someone outside the home might approach their children and they would never know about it. Children tended to feel guilty when they were the object of an adult's attention, because they were torn between two pieces of advice most parents gave their offspring and which were hard to reconcile: to be polite to grown-ups and not to talk to strangers. Whichever they chose, there was always going to be something to hide. But Mila had discovered an excellent way to find out what was going on in a child's life.

Every month she paid a visit to a different school.

She would ask permission to walk around the classrooms when the pupils were not there, and would linger over the drawings on the walls. Their imaginary worlds often concealed elements of

real life. They condensed the secret and often unconscious emotions which the child absorbed like a sponge and then poured out again. Mila liked visiting schools. She particularly liked the smell – wax crayons, paper paste, new books, chewing gum. It gave her an odd sense of calm, and made her feel as if nothing could happen to her.

Because for an adult, the safest places are where there are children.

It was during one of these visits that, among dozens of drawings displayed on a wall, Mila had discovered one by the Conners' younger daughter. She had chosen that kindergarten at random at the beginning of the school year, and had gone there during playtime, while the children were all outside. She had lingered in their tiny world, enjoying the sound of their joyous cries in the background.

What had struck her about the Conner girl's drawing was the happy family it depicted. Her mummy, her daddy, her sister and the girl herself on the front lawn of their house on a beautiful sunny day. The four of them were holding hands. Standing apart from the main group, though, was an incongruous element. A fifth character. It immediately gave her an odd pang of anxiety. It seemed to float and had no face.

*A ghost*, was Mila's first thought.

She was about to let it go, but then searched the wall for more drawings by the girl, and in every one of them there was the same shadowy presence.

It was too specific to be mere chance. Her instinct told her to dig deeper.

She asked the little girl's teacher, who was very helpful and confirmed that this thing with the ghosts had been going on for a while now. In her experience, she said, there was nothing to worry about – that kind of thing was common after a relative or

acquaintance had died, it was the youngster's way of coming to terms with their grief. Just to be on the safe side, the teacher had asked Mrs Conner. Although there had been no deaths in the family recently, the little girl had had a nightmare not so long ago, which might have been the cause of everything.

But Mila had learnt from child psychologists that children often depict real people as imaginary characters, and not always negative ones. So although a stranger could become a vampire, he could just as easily be a friendly clown or even Spiderman. Nevertheless, there was always a detail that revealed the figure as human. She recalled the case of Samantha Hernandez, who had drawn the white-bearded man who approached her every day in the park as Father Christmas. Except that in the drawing, as in real life, he had a tattoo on his forearm. But nobody had noticed. And so all that the pervert who would abduct and kill her had needed to do was promise her a present.

In the case of the Conners' little girl, the tell-tale element was repetition.

Mila was convinced that the little girl was scared of something. She had to find out if a real person was involved and, above all, if he or she was harmless.

Following her usual procedure, she hadn't informed the parents. There was no point in scaring them unnecessarily just because of a vague suspicion. She had begun to watch the little Conner girl, to see who she was in contact with outside the house or during the few times when she was out of her parents' sight, at nursery for example, or at dance classes.

She hadn't seen any stranger taking a particular interest in the girl.

Her suspicions were unfounded. That was expected sometimes, and she didn't mind wasting twenty days' work if it ended with her heaving a sigh of relief.

Just to be on the safe side, though, she had also decided to visit the Conners' elder daughter's school. There were no disturbing features in her drawings. In her case, the anomaly was concealed in a composition the teacher had set as homework.

The girl had chosen to write a horror story with a ghost as the main character.

It was quite possible that it was just a figment of the elder girl's imagination, which had then had an effect on the younger sister. Or else it might be proof that it wasn't an imaginary person after all. Maybe the very fact that Mila hadn't seen any suspicious strangers meant that the threat was closer than she had originally thought.

In other words, the threat wasn't a stranger, but someone in the house.

That was why she had decided to go further and have a look inside the Conners' home. She, too, would have to change.

From a hunter of children to a hunter of ghosts.

It was almost eight in the morning. Mila put on a pair of ear-phones attached to an MP3 player that wasn't even switched on and, trying to look like a jogger, quickly covered the stretch of pavement that separated her from the Conners' drive. Just before she got to the house, she turned right and continued along the side of the building until she reached the back. She tried the back door, then the windows. They were all closed. If she had found anything open, and someone had caught her breaking in, she could have said she had gone in because she had suspected that a burglary was in process. It still wouldn't have looked good, and she would probably have been reprimanded for it, but at least she would have had a better chance of getting away with it. But now, if she forced a lock, she'd be taking a pointless and stupid risk.

She thought again about her reason for being here. You

couldn't explain a gut feeling, all police officers knew that. But in her case, there was always an irresistible urge to cross the line. Even so, she could hardly knock on the Conners' door and say, 'Hi. Something tells me your daughters are in danger because of a ghost that might be a real person.' So, as usual, her feeling of unease got the better of her common sense: she returned to the back door and forced it open.

The air conditioning hit her like a wall. In the kitchen, the breakfast dishes remained unwashed. On the fridge were holiday snaps and school exercises that had received good marks.

Mila took a black plastic case from the pocket of her tracksuit. It contained a miniature camera the size of a button, from which protruded a lead that served as a transmitter. Thanks to WiFi, she would be able to watch what was happening in the house from a distance. She just had to find the best place to put it. She checked her watch, then set off to search the rest of the house. As she didn't have much time, she decided to focus on the room where most of the family activities took place.

In the living room, along with the sofas and the television set, there was a bookcase inlaid with briar. Instead of books, it contained the certificates Conner had received in the course of his legal career or had earned in recognition of his services to the community. He was a highly respected man, a model citizen. On one of the shelves was an ice-skating trophy, awarded to their elder daughter. It struck Mila as a nice idea to share this space for distinctions with another member of the family.

On the mantelpiece was a photograph of the Conners smiling happily, all wearing identical comfy red Christmas sweaters. It was clearly a family tradition. Mila could never have posed for such a picture. Her life was too different. She was too different. She quickly looked away, finding the sight unbearable.

She decided to look upstairs.

In the bedrooms, the beds were unmade, waiting for the return of Mrs Conner, who had given up her own career to devote herself to looking after the house and bringing up her daughters. Mila merely glanced into the girls' rooms. In the parents' room, the wardrobe stood open. She lingered over Mrs Conner's clothes. The life of a happy mother aroused her curiosity. Mila's feelings, her emotions, were blocked inside her, so she was incapable of knowing what it felt like. But she could certainly imagine it.

A husband, two daughters, a house as comfortable and protective as a nest.

Momentarily forgetting the reason for her search, Mila noticed that some of the clothes on the hangers were of different sizes. It was reassuring to think that even beautiful women put on weight. That never happened to her. She was skinny. To judge by the loose-fitting clothes Mrs Conner had used to conceal her extra pounds, she must have found it hard to get her perfect figure back.

Suddenly, Mila realised what she was doing. She had lost control. Instead of hunting for dangers, she herself had become a danger to this family.

The stranger who invades your living space.

She had also lost track of time: Mrs Conner might already be on her way back. So she decided quickly that the ideal place for the miniature camera was the living room.

She found the best location inside the bookcase with the family trophies. Using double-sided tape, she placed the device in such a way that it would be as well hidden as possible among the ornaments. As she was doing this, though, she became aware of a red spot on the right-hand edge of her field of vision, like a flashing light on the wall just above the mantelpiece.

Mila stopped what she was doing, turned, and found herself



looking again at the photograph of the family wearing Christmas sweaters, which she had hurriedly passed over earlier because it had made her feel absurdly jealous. Looking at it more closely now, she realised that there were cracks in the idyllic picture. In particular, there was the silence in Mrs Conner's eyes, like the windows of an uninhabited house. Mr Conner gave the impression that he was forcing himself to look radiant, but the embrace in which he held his wife and daughters didn't convey a sense of security, but rather one of ownership. And there was something else in the picture, although Mila couldn't figure out what it was. Something wrong, hidden in that false happiness of the Conners'. Then she saw it.

The girls were right. There was a ghost among them.

In the background of the photograph, instead of the bookcase filled with awards, there was a door.

## 2

Where does a ghost normally hide?

In a dark place where it won't be disturbed. An attic. Or, in this case, a cellar. *The thankless task of summoning it has fallen to me*, Mila thought.

She looked down at the wooden floor and only now noticed the scratches, a sign that the bookcase was frequently moved. She moved to the side of the bookcase and looked behind it. There was the door. She slid her fingers into the gap and pulled. The family mementoes jingled, and the bookcase tilted forward dangerously, but Mila finally managed to make an opening wide enough to get through.

As she opened the door, daylight flooded the hidden cave. But Mila had the impression that the darkness inside was attacking her. The door had been lined with soundproofing material, either to keep the noise out, or to keep it in.

Beneath her, a staircase between two rough concrete walls led down to the cellar.

She took her torch from the pocket of her tracksuit and began to descend, her senses alert, her muscles taut and ready for action.

Towards the bottom, the stairs veered to the right, presumably into the main body of the cellar. Reaching the foot of the stairs, Mila found herself in a single large space shrouded in darkness. She trained the torchlight on furniture and other objects that shouldn't have been down here. A changing table, a cot, a playpen. From the latter came a regular, rhythmical sound.

A living sound.

She moved closer, very slowly so as not to wake the creature from its sleep. As befitted a ghost, it was wrapped in a sheet, and had its back to her. There was a little leg sticking out. It showed signs of malnutrition. The lack of light had not helped its growth. The skin was pale. A year old, more or less.

She had to touch it, to make sure it was real.

There was a link between this small creature, Mrs Conner's eating disorders, and her fake smile. She hadn't just put on weight. She had been pregnant.

The little bundle stirred, awakened by the torchlight. The creature turned towards her, hugging a rag doll. Mila thought it was going to burst into tears. But it just looked at her. Then it smiled.

The ghost had huge eyes.

It stretched out its little hands, wanting to be picked up. Mila did just that. The little thing immediately clung to her neck with all its might. It must have sensed she was here to save it. Mila noticed that, even in its deteriorated state, it was clean. It had been cared for: a contradiction between love and hate – between good and evil.

'She likes being picked up.'

The little girl recognised the voice and clapped her hands with joy. Mila turned. Mrs Conner was standing at the foot of the stairs.

'He isn't like other people. He always likes to be in control, and

I try not to let him down. When he found out I was pregnant, he didn't go crazy.' She was talking about her husband, but avoided calling him by his name. 'He never asked me who the father was. Our lives were supposed to be perfect, but I went and spoilt his plans. That's what really bothered him, not the cheating.'

Mila stood there staring at her, not saying a word. She didn't know how to judge her. The woman didn't seem angry, or even surprised to find a stranger here. It was as if she had been expecting it for a long time. Maybe she, too, wanted to be set free.

'I begged him to let me have an abortion, but he wouldn't. He made me keep the pregnancy secret from everyone, and for nine months I assumed he wanted to keep the child. Then one day he showed me how he had converted this cellar, and that's when I understood. Contempt wasn't enough for him. No, he had to punish me.'

Mila felt a knot of anger in her throat.

'He forced me to give birth in the cellar and leave her here. I keep telling him, even now, that we could leave her outside a police station or a hospital – nobody would know. But he won't even answer me any more.'

The little girl was smiling in Mila's arms. Nothing seemed to upset her.

'Sometimes, at night, when he's not here, I take her upstairs and show her her sisters as they sleep. I think they may have been aware of our presence but they probably think it's a dream.'

Or a nightmare, Mila said to herself, remembering the ghost in the drawings and the fairy tale. She decided she had heard enough. She turned to the playpen to grab the rag doll and get out of there as quickly as possible.

'Her name is Na,' the woman said. 'At least that's what she calls her.' She paused. 'What kind of mother would I be if I didn't know the name of my daughter's favourite doll?'

And did you give your daughter a name? Furious as she was, Mila didn't ask. The world outside knew nothing about this little girl. Mila could imagine how things would have ended up if she hadn't arrived.

Nobody looks for a girl who doesn't exist.

The woman saw the disgust in Mila's eyes. 'I know what you're thinking, but we're not murderers. We didn't kill her.'

'That's true,' Mila said. 'You would have waited for her to die.'