

THE INVISIBLE GUARDIAN

Dolores Redondo was born in Donostia-San Sebastián in 1969, where she studied Law and Gastronomy. *The Invisible Guardian* was published in Spain in 2013, with rights sold in twenty-seven languages. It was chosen as ‘Best Crime Novel of the Year’ by the major Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia* and over 400,000 readers turned the series (which includes the follow-up novels *The Legacy of the Bones* and *Offering to the Storm*) into one of Spain’s biggest literary successes in recent years. The film adaptation is being developed by the producer of *The Killing* and Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy. Dolores Redondo currently lives and writes in the Ribera Navarra area of Spain.



DOLORES REDONDO

The Invisible Guardian

Translated from the Spanish by Isabelle Kaufeler



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This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it,
while at times based on historical fact, are
the work of the author's imagination.

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*For Eduardo, who asked me to write this book,
and for Ricard Domingo, who saw it
when it was invisible.*

*For Rubén and Esther, for making
me cry with laughter.*



‘Forgetting is an involuntary act. The more you want to
leave something behind you, the more it follows you.’

William Jonas Barkley

‘This is no ordinary apple; it’s a magic wishing apple.’
Walt Disney’s *Snow White*

[third epigraph to come]



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Ainhoa Elizasu was the second victim of the *basajaun*, although the press were yet to coin that name for him. That came later, when it emerged that animal hairs, scraps of skin and unidentifiable tracks had been found around the bodies, along with evidence of some kind of macabre purification rite. With their torn clothes, their private parts shaved and their upturned hands, the bodies of those girls, almost still children, seemed to have been marked by a malign force, as old as the Earth.

Inspector Amaia Salazar always followed the same routine when she was called to a crime scene in the middle of the night. She would switch off the alarm clock so it wouldn't disturb James in the morning, pile up her clothes and, with her mobile balanced on top of them, go very slowly downstairs to the kitchen. She would drink a milky coffee while she dressed, leave a note for her husband and get in the car. Then she would drive, her mind blank except for the white noise that always filled her head when she woke up before dawn.

These remnants of an interrupted night of insomnia stayed with her all the way to the crime scene, even though it was over an hour's drive from Pamplona. She took a curve in the

road too sharply and the squealing of the tyres made her realise how distracted she was. After that she made herself pay attention to the motorway as it wound its way upwards, deep into the dense forest surrounding Elizondo. Five minutes later, she pulled over next to a police sign, where she recognised Dr Jorge San Martín's sports car and Judge Estébanez's off-roader. Amaia got out, walked round to the back of her car and fished out a pair of wellingtons. She sat on the edge of the boot to pull them on while Deputy Inspector Jonan Etxaide and Inspector Montes joined her.

'It's not looking good, chief, the victim's a young girl,' Jonan consulted his notes, 'twelve or thirteen years old. When she didn't arrive home by eleven last night, her parents contacted the police.'

'A bit early to report her missing,' observed Amaia.

'True. It looks like she rang her older brother on his mobile at about ten past eight to tell him she'd missed the bus from Arizkun.'

'And her brother waited until eleven before saying anything?'

'You know how it is, "*Aita* and *Ama* will kill me. Please don't tell them. I'm going to see if any of my friends' parents will give me a lift.'" So he kept quiet and played on his PlayStation. At eleven, when he realised his sister still hadn't arrived home and his mother was starting to get hysterical, he told them Ainhoa had called. The parents went down to the station in Elizondo and insisted something must have happened to their daughter. She wasn't answering her mobile and they'd already spoken to all her friends. A patrol found her. The officers spotted her shoes at the side of the road as they were coming round the bend.' Jonan shone his torch towards the edge of the tarmac where a pair of black patent high heeled shoes glistened, perfectly aligned. Amaia leaned over to look at them.

'They look like they've been arranged like this. Has anyone

touched them?’ she asked. Jonan checked his notes again. The young deputy inspector’s efficiency was a god-send in cases as difficult as this one was shaping up to be.

‘No, that’s how they found them, side by side and pointing towards the road.’

‘Tell the crime scene technicians to come and check the lining of the shoes when they’ve finished what they’re doing. Whoever arranged them like that will have had to touch the inside as well as the outside.’

Inspector Montes, who had stood silently staring at the ends of his Italian designer loafers until this point, looked up abruptly as if he had just awoken from a deep sleep.

‘Salazar,’ he acknowledged her in a murmur, then walked off towards the edge of the road without waiting for her. Amaia frowned in bewilderment and turned back to Jonan.

‘What’s up with him?’

‘I don’t know, chief, but we came in the same car from Pamplona and he didn’t open his mouth once. I think he might have had a drink or two.’

Amaia thought so too. Inspector Montes had slipped into a downward spiral since his divorce, and not just in terms of his recent penchant for Italian shoes and colourful ties. He had been particularly distracted during the last few weeks, cold and inscrutable, absorbed in his own little world, almost reluctant to engage with the people around him.

‘Where’s the girl?’

‘By the river. You have to go down that slope,’ said Jonan, pointing towards it apologetically, as if it were somehow his fault that the body was down there.

As Amaia made her way down the incline, worn out of the rock by the river over the millennia, she could see the flood-lights and police tape that marked the area where the officers were working in the distance. Judge Estébanez stood to one side, talking in a low voice with the court clerk and shooting sideways glances to where the body lay. Two photographers

from the forensics team were moving around it, raining down flashes from every angle, and a technician from the Navarra Institute of Forensic Medicine was kneeling beside it, apparently taking the temperature of the liver.

Amaia was pleased to see that everyone present was respecting the entry point that the first officers on the scene had established. Even so, as always, it seemed to her that there were just too many people. It was almost absurd, and it may have been something to do with her Catholic upbringing, but whenever she had to deal with a corpse, she always felt a pressing need for that sense of intimacy and devotion she experienced in a cemetery. It seemed as though this was violated by the distant and impersonal professional presence of the people moving around the body. It was the sole subject of a murderer's work of art, but it lay there mute and silenced, its innate horror disregarded.

She went over slowly, observing the place someone had chosen for the death. A beach of rounded grey stones, no doubt carried there by the previous spring's floods, had formed beside the river, a dry strip about nine metres wide that extended as far as she could see in the gloomy pre-dawn light. A deep wood, which got denser further in, grew right up to the other bank of the river, which was only about four metres wide. Amaia waited for a few seconds while the technician from the forensics team finished taking photographs of the corpse, then she went over to stand at the girl's feet. As was her custom, she emptied her mind of all thoughts, looked at the body lying beside the river and murmured a brief prayer. Only then did Amaia feel ready to look at the girl's body as the work of a murderer. A pretty brown colour in life, Ainhoa Elizasu's eyes now stared into endless space, frozen in an expression of surprise. Her head was tilted back slightly and it was just possible to make out part of the coarse string buried so deep in the flesh of her neck it had almost disappeared. Amaia leant over the body to look at the ligature.

‘It’s not even knotted, the killer just pulled it tight until the girl stopped breathing,’ she said softly, almost to herself.

‘It would take some strength to do that,’ observed Jonan from behind her. ‘Do you think we’re looking for a man?’

‘It seems likely, although the girl’s not that tall, only five foot one or so, and she’s very thin. It could have been a woman.’

Dr San Martín, who’d been chatting with the judge and the court clerk accompanying her until this point, bade her a rather flowery farewell and came over to the body.

‘Inspector Salazar, it’s always a pleasure to see you, even in such circumstances,’ he said jovially.

‘The pleasure’s all mine, Dr San Martín. What do you make of this?’

The pathologist gave Jonan an appraising look, weighing up his youth and likely knowledge, then took the notes offered him by the technician and flicked through them quickly whilst leaning over the body. It was a look Amaia knew well. A few years earlier it was her who’d been the young deputy inspector in need of instruction in the mysteries of death, a pleasure that, as a distinguished professor, San Martín never let pass him by.

‘Don’t be shy, Etxaide, come closer and perhaps you’ll learn something.’

Dr San Martín put on a pair of gloves he’d pulled out of a leather Gladstone bag and gently palpated the girl’s jaw, neck and arms.

‘What do you know about rigor mortis, Etxaide?’

Jonan sighed, then started to speak in a voice similar to the one he must have used when answering the teacher in his school days. ‘Rigor mortis is caused by a chemical change in the muscles. It is evident in the eyelids first and spreads through the chest, trunk and extremities, achieving maximum stiffness after around twelve hours. The body starts relaxing again in reverse order about thirty-six hours

later when the muscles start to decompose due to the effects of lactic acid.'

'Not bad. What else?' the doctor encouraged him.

'It's one of the principal indicators used to estimate the time of death.'

'And do you think you can make an estimation based solely on the degree of rigor mortis?'

'Well . . .' Jonan hesitated.

'No,' declared San Martín, 'absolutely not. The degree of rigidity can vary according to the deceased's muscular tone, the temperature of the room or, as in this case, the exterior, since extreme temperatures may give the semblance of rigor mortis, for example if a cadaver's been exposed to high temperatures, or when a body suffers a cadaveric spasm. Do you know what that is?'

'I think that's the term for when the extremities tense at the moment of death in such a way that it would be difficult to relieve them of any item they might have been holding at that precise instant.'

'Correct, which is why forensic pathologists have to shoulder a great deal of responsibility. They shouldn't establish the time of death without keeping all these factors in mind, and, of course, you can't forget hypostasis . . . you might know it as livor mortis. You must have seen those American series where the forensic pathologist kneels by the body and establishes the time of death in less than two minutes,' he said, raising an eyebrow theatrically. 'Well, take it from me, that's all lies. Analysis of the quantity of potassium present in the vitreous fluid represents a major step forward, but I'll only be able to establish the time of death with any certainty once the autopsy has been carried out. Now, based purely on what's in front of me, I can state: thirteen years of age, female. Taking into consideration the temperature of the liver, I would say she's been dead around two hours. Rigor mortis hasn't set in yet,' he confirmed, palpating the girl's jaw again.

‘That fits in more or less with the timing of her call home and her parents reporting her missing at the police station. Yes, two hours, if that.’

Amaia waited for him to stand up and then took his place kneeling next to the girl. She didn’t miss Jonan’s look of relief at being released from the forensic pathologist’s scrutiny. The girl’s eyes stared blankly into infinity and her mouth was half open in what looked like surprise, or perhaps a final attempt to inhale, giving her face an air of child-like amazement like a little girl on her birthday. All her clothing seemed to have been slit cleanly down the middle from her neck to her thighs and was pulled open to either side, like a half-unwrapped gift. The gentle breeze coming off the river moved the girl’s fringe a little and Amaia caught the scent of shampoo mixed with the more bitter aroma of tobacco. She wondered whether the girl had been a smoker.

‘She smells of tobacco. Do you know whether she was carrying a bag?’

‘Yes, she was. It hasn’t turned up yet, but I’ve got officers combing the area as far as a kilometre downstream,’ said Inspector Montes, gesturing toward the river with his arm.

‘Ask her friends where they were and who they were with.’

‘I’ll do it first thing in the morning, chief,’ said Jonan, tapping his watch. ‘Her friends will be thirteen-year-old girls, they’ll be asleep right now.’

Amaia observed the girl’s hands lying beside her body. They looked white and unblemished and their palms were turned upwards.

‘Have you noticed how her hands are positioned? They’ve been arranged like that.’

‘I agree,’ said Montes, who was still standing next to Jonan.

‘Get them to photograph and preserve them as soon as possible. She may have tried to defend herself. Her nails and hands look fairly clean, but we might be in luck,’ she said,

addressing the officer from forensics. Dr San Martín bent over the girl again, opposite Amaia.

‘We’ll have to wait for the autopsy, but I’d suggest asphyxiation as the cause of death, and, given the force with which the string’s cut into her skin, I’d say it was very quick. The cuts on the body are superficial and were only intended to slash her clothes. They were made with a very sharp object, a knife, a cutter or a scalpel. I’ll confirm this for you later, but the girl was already dead by this point. There’s barely any blood.’

‘And what about her pubic area?’ interrupted Montes.

‘I think the killer used the same blade to shave off her pubic hair.’

‘Perhaps they wanted to take some away as a trophy, chief,’ suggested Jonan.

‘No, I don’t think so. Look at how they’ve scattered it at the sides of the body,’ observed Amaia, pointing out several small piles of fine hair. ‘It seems more likely they wanted to get rid of it to replace it with this,’ she said, gesturing to a small, sticky, golden cake that had been placed on the girl’s hairless pubic mound.

‘What a bastard. Why do people do that sort of thing? As if it wasn’t enough to kill a young girl without putting that there. What on earth can they be thinking to do something like this?’ exclaimed Jonan in disgust.

‘Well, kid, it’s your job to work out what that swine was thinking,’ said Montes, going over to San Martín.

‘Was she raped?’

‘I don’t believe so, although I won’t know for certain until I examine her more thoroughly. The staging is decidedly sexual . . . cutting her clothes, leaving her chest exposed to the air, shaving her pubic area . . . and, of course, the cake . . . it looks like some kind of cupcake, or . . .’

‘It’s a *txantxigorri*,’ Amaia interrupted him. ‘It’s a local speciality made to a traditional recipe, although this one’s

smaller than normal. It's definitely a *txantxigorri* though. Jonan, get them to bag it, and please,' said Amaia, addressing the group, 'don't mention this to anybody. It's classified information, at least for now.'

They all nodded.

'We're finished here. She's all yours, San Martín. We'll see you at the Institute.'

Amaia got up and took one last look at the girl before going up the slope to her car.