

Love and magic change a family's fate in Pinochet's Chile.

From the Abuelas' Window

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Chapter 1

THREE SISTERS

Maribel had a song for every day. Maribel's song on this beautiful summer morning, in the garden, was about flowers dancing in the wind. She bent to pick a delicate yellow blossom and twirled it as she sang. A gentle breeze lifted her golden hair, and she knew it was the wind that whispered the song to her, hinting at autumn's coming change. She lifted her eyes to the leaves on the mango tree and noticed a tiny change of color. Through the branches she caught sight of old Wilfreda in the window of the tall house next to her home. The gentle breeze stopped, and so did her song. She was being watched. The old woman was so short she was barely visible over the sill of the window, but Maribel knew she was there, listening, again. Maribel's song was not for her; it was for her father. If only he were here to hear it.

The end of the song startled her sisters who looked up and saw the top of the old woman's head behind the curtain. Sarita ran to Maribel, and they hid behind the mango tree together in the back of their mother's garden, waiting for their audience to go away. Sarita's worship of her elder sister over the short years of their lives had created an almost electric circuit between them. She could feel Maribel's dark change of mood; it became her own. With it, she felt fear and reached for Maribel's hand, not knowing if she was offering comfort or seeking it.

Fabia paid them no mind. She was busy adding a jagged roof to the miniature houses she built among the low flowers along the center path. She was five years old with long straight black hair parted in a precise line down the middle. She had a tiny nose, round brown eyes, and a dimple—a deep one—on her left cheek when she smiled. She was a picture of her father as a

young boy. The dimple flashed now as she looked up to catch Wilfreda just pulling back from the window.

Sarita, with hair the same deep brown as Fabia's, wore a ponytail, but wisps came loose and framed her face in a halo of soft tendrils as she ran to Maribel's side.

Sarita whispered, "Maribel, why do you hide from Abuela Wilfreda?"

"She shouldn't listen so much."

"But she loves your songs," Sarita said.

Maribel answered, "But I don't sing them for her."

"How can she not hear you? Your voice travels far through the air. Mama is listening, too. From the kitchen."

Sarita followed as Maribel moved further into the shadow.

"She gossips all the time," Maribel said. "I don't want her gossiping about me."

"Mama tells the abuelas everything anyway. Why do you care so much?"

Maribel sighed. "Mama has let them trick her. She thinks it's true that they can cast spells and have your prayers answered. That's why she brings food to them all the time. Marta can cook well enough for all three of them. Papa wouldn't approve if he were here."

"Papa helped them all the time too. He fixed their gate, and patched their roof."

Maribel stretched her neck to look at their tall house. There, in the bright sun, were the patches of asbestos tile, darker in color and less worn than the rest of their roof.

"But not for the same reasons Mama does. He told me once, unless you can see something, you shouldn't believe that it exists."

"Well, we haven't seen Papa in a long time. Do you believe he exists?"

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"That's different. Believing Papa is in the world, even though he's away, is different from believing someone can shine bright lights on things and make your dreams come true."

"Is that what Mama thinks?"

"That's what they all think. All the superstitious people in Anunciata. That's why they always come and bring them things. They're making offerings. Like they're witches or something."

"Witches? But I LIKE Wilfreda. She's not a witch. And Zoraida, she looks like a witch, doesn't she?" Sarita giggled. "Mama always says don't eat what she cooks. Maybe she thinks it has potions in it or something. Like the tea she brews all the time."

"Did you ever taste it? Mama made me drink it once when I was sick. It's awful. That's why Mama never has it when she visits them. She drinks café con leche."

Maribel remembered choking on the bitter taste of the warm brown liquid, her mother tipping it so she could sip. She could still remember dribbling it down her chin after the first tiny sip, refusing the rest, not caring if her pillowcase got wet. Her mother persisted until she'd taken at least several tablespoons. And her fever did break by morning. Stubbornly, she dismissed that thought and looked again at the round wrinkled face of Wilfreda, who, once again, searched the garden for a glimpse of her. She really was so short; Maribel could barely see the old woman's eyes over the windowsill.

"Maribel," Sarita said. "Abuela Wilfreda is gone."

"No, she's still there. See?" She pointed. As she did, Wilfreda disappeared.

Maribel stepped out from behind the tree. Sarita followed her and went back immediately to her earlier project, a chalk drawing on the garden wall. Orange peonies, green leaves, a bright blue sky. Maribel poked around the garden, kicked at stones and fallen fruit from the mango tree, her song forgotten.

Papa was on her mind. Or rather, his absence was on her mind. It was Papa she sang for. He'd taught her the folk songs of their people. He had played the records of the famous folk singer, Victor Jara, and read her the poems of Pablo Nerudo. How she missed his deep smooth voice.

"Maribel," her mother had told her. "Papa went away suddenly. You mustn't be angry that he did not say goodbye. It was an emergency. In Argentina. His poor cousin hurt in an accident."

When he was gone, his songs disappeared, too.

The government had been toppled. The radio no longer played his favorite songs. There was nothing to remind her of him, only marches and sharp voices announcing names of people said to be enemies of Chile. Calls to turn them in. Maribel's mother no longer played the radio or allowed her to listen. And Maribel couldn't find the records. Papa's records. His books of poetry. Songs she'd heard before her birth. Papa said before she was born he put his face close to her mother's round middle and sang to her. Water carries sound better than air, he had said. You were floating in water. And my songs came to you. Now it is only air that carries them. But now you can sing with me.

Maribel sang to remember his voice, the words of the songwriters and poets rolling soothingly off his tongue, because Mama said he couldn't come back to Chile. Anyone who was out of the country was not returning. Not yet. Not until the General would allow it.

"Papa will write. He misses us terribly," Mama explained. "Pray and he will be home before you know it."

"Maribel, come help," called Sarita. Maribel saw she'd made her way deep into the back of the garden, where thick vines clung to the old gray stone. Sarita was usually satisfied with a small area of stone behind the hibiscus blossoms to draw her

pictures, but since it hadn't rained in weeks to wash away the old chalk, she was running out of room for new ones.

Sarita pulled vines away from the wall's stone surface. Maribel joined her, yanking at the green vines that grew so fast in the bright sunshine, trapping Sarita's drawings underneath, sometimes in a matter of days. Under these, the vines were old, gnarled, and tight against the stone. It was satisfying to pull and tear; soon the two girls had exposed a new area of the wall, giving Sarita lots more room. Mama would be pleased, Maribel thought. The battle against weeds in the garden was fought everyday, and anything the girls did to help received praise. She would be particularly happy they'd gotten this far back, where the old vines were stubborn.

Sarita stood back, but Maribel kept going. A narrow shoot of new growth stubbornly clung to the wall, and Maribel gave it a good tug before she saw it had grown into a crack, running about five feet up. Maribel's eye followed the crack from the ground all the way up above her head, where it turned suddenly at a sharp angle to the left. She tracked it, and with a gasp saw it ran the length of the wall for about three feet, then turned sharply downward again.

"Sarita," she called. "I think I found a door."

Sarita joined her, and the two worked hard to clear the thick covering. The old growth was thick and strong like the trunk of a small tree, but together they managed to separate it from the stone. In a few minutes they breathlessly stood back.

"It definitely is a door," said Sarita.

Maribel pushed against it. It didn't move. Sarita joined her, but their combined weight did nothing to move it.

"Why did we never notice this before?"

"Well, it is very far back. And the tree blocks part of it."

"Let's try pulling," suggested Maribel.

"But there is nothing to grab." Sarita said.

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Maribel dug into the dirt at the bottom. Sarita tried to slide her slim fingers into the crack along the side. It was impossible to get a hold anywhere, and they soon gave up.

"Maribel," Sarita said. "It must lead into the yard of our abuelas house."

"They are not our abuelas," Maribel reminded Sarita.

"No, but that's what Mama calls them," Sarita said.

"They are not our abuelas."

"But I'd rather call them that than have no abuela at all," Sarita suggested to her sister.

"I'd rather have Papa back," Maribel said.

"Well, we'd all like to have Papa back," Sarita answered. "But that doesn't mean Abuela Wilfreda can't be my abuela."

"They're just always here since he's been gone. Whenever Mama goes somewhere. They watch us like we're babies."

"Don't you like them?"

"I just liked it better before."

"Well, so did I."

"Let's go tell Mama about the door." Maribel went to find her mother, while Sarita's drawing distracted her once again and she picked up a piece of chalk and began to work.

Chapter 2

THREE ABUELAS

"Maribel is so very shy," said the old woman Wilfreda to her two companions as she moved away from the window. "If only the rest of the village could hear her beautiful voice."

She kept gazing out the window, careful now to keep hidden. The two friends who shared this old house with her stood in the shadows of their kitchen and peered out into the sunlight.

"You should be more careful," said old Zoraida. "Now she won't sing again for days." She was the eldest of the abuelas, long and thin and crooked like a tree bent by the wind. Sarita was right to say she looked like a witch. Her gnarled fingers were long enough without the extra length added by her jagged edged fingernails.

"She sounds so beautiful!" whispered Marta.

"And those flowers. Ines keeps the garden so beautiful," said old Wilfreda, with a sigh, referring to the girls' mother.

The children's tiny stucco cottage had white walls, shutters painted a bright red, and a narrow porch facing the dusty road leading to the village of Anunciata. Surrounding the cottage on three sides was this magnificent garden. Their mother cared for her plants and trees with the same tenderness she cared for her three daughters. A tall wall of stone enclosed the garden, so it was not visible from the road or the surrounding pine forest.

The three nosey neighbors were fortunate. Their house stood taller than the stone wall, and, from their kitchen and the upstairs rooms, they could enjoy the lovely flowers, the lush green of the vines and bushes that hung low with fruit all summer. That, of course, was nothing compared to their delight in watching the children play.

"And Sarita, what beautiful pictures she draws, but she uses only chalk. They disappear every time it rains," said Zoraida, bent over her cup of ulpa.

Wilfreda added, "And sweet Fabia, so young. She builds models more beautiful than the cathedral in the city. Maribel is just like my Therese. Singing all the time."

"Yes, and my Thomas, the great artist. He could teach little Sarita if he hadn't left to live in the city."

"The two of you," sighed Marta, busy preparing bread, listening to them quietly slip in some boasting about their own children. "You'd think you'd find something useful to do."

"I am being useful," said Zoraida. "I am keeping you company."

"Yes," said Marta. "And eating everything in sight."

"Why do you cook it if you don't want us to eat it?"

"I do want you to eat it."

"Then why are you complaining?"

Marta sighed. "I'm not. I enjoy cooking."

"And I enjoy eating," said Zoraida. "We make a good match." She turned to Wilfreda, "We could use some flour. This is almost empty."

Wilfreda stuck her nose in the sack. "There is plenty of flour. Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"She is," laughed Marta, "so she can watch the children for Ines later, and have them all to herself."

"But it's my turn to watch them," Wilfreda protested.

"You are too old," Marta sniffed.

"And you are too, Zoraida."

"I'm not," Zoraida stated.

"Yes," said Marta. "I'm afraid you are. Soon Ines will leave the girls with only Maribel watching them, and we will be out of a job, all of us."

Marta's statement started their favorite debate, held daily among the three elderly friends.

"Maribel is too young to care for the little ones," said Wilfreda. "That's why Ines has us watch them."

"She's twelve and she never leaves her Mama's garden. Ines treats her like a baby. I understand why she's so protective. But she should let her out once in a while or she will never grow up," Marta said.

She toasted two spoonfuls of flour in a small pan, then placed a teaspoon of sugar and the flour in two heavy mugs. She added boiled milk and stirred.

"I don't know why I can't have my tea," Zoraida grumbled as she started on her second cup of ulpa.

"When you make breakfast, you can brew your favorite tea. Just don't make any for me," Marta replied, with her nose turned up. She bent over the oven and pulled a tray from which she served each of her friends a hot fresh biscuit.

"Wilfreda, we are really low on flour, especially if I am to make empanadas tomorrow. Do you plan to go to the village today?"

"Yes," Wilfreda stuck her chin in the air. "If you don't think I'm too old."

Marta only laughed. "Of course you aren't."

"You are right, though," Wilfreda said. "The girls are too sheltered. They keep to themselves. Maribel will barely speak to me she is so shy." She turned to Zoraida. "You know better than all of us why their mother doesn't leave them alone."

"Poor Ines," said Zoraida. "She is so worried. I see her lips moving all the time when she thinks nobody is looking. Praying all day for Rolando."

"The army could come and take her anytime."

"They could come for any of us at any time".

"Rolando did nothing. I saw them. He was in his fields, checking the new growth on the vines. They came from the woods. Three soldiers. And put handcuffs on him. They dragged him off. It was awful. I wish I could have done something to help."

"But thank God you saw. How else could you have told Ines?"

"She still has not told the children the truth, has she?"

Wilfreda shook her head.

"Sooner or later she will have to. She cannot hide it from them forever."

"But what of Maribel? It will frighten her. She's so shy as it is, not speaking to us at all... And we've known her since she was born." Zoraida stretched her neck to look outside again. Maribel was still struggling with the door in the stone. "Oh no!"

"What?"

"I believe she and Sarita have just found our gate."

Wilfreda sipped her ulpa and said, "Don't worry, she will never be able to open it."

Marta said. "She will first have to learn it takes more than a shove. Look."

Maribel pushed her weight against the stone slab. Sarita watched. Fabia, distracted by the grunting and panting, joined them and tried to help. Soon they gave up. Fabia went back to her building, Sarita to her drawing. Maribel went inside the cottage and disappeared from sight.

"Don't you think it's time we moved things along a bit?" Zoraida asked.

"And how are you proposing we do that?" asked Marta.

"We should start with the eldest, don't you think?" Zoraida said.

"You're not suggesting we open the door?" Wilfreda was shocked.

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"Not the one in the wall. But there are other ways to open doors for your timid Maribel." Zoraida's eyes took on a mischievous glint.

"But what will Ines say about this?" Marta's eyes grew round with concern.

"She will come to see things our way." Wilfreda said, waving her walking stick in the air. "You'll see."

Chapter 3

MAMA

This morning, Mama was busy in the kitchen. Maribel came in and took a seat on the bench along the long wooden table while her mother rubbed at a few sticky spots left on the shiny surface from her chopping and stirring.

"What did you make?" Maribel asked.

"Pastel de choclo. For Señora Herrero. I heard she's ill, and thought the family could use some help."

"Why are you being nice to her?"

"Maribel, I know your feelings are hurt because of Paula. But her mother is ill."

Mama's kindness, even though Señora Herrero snubbed her and wouldn't let Paula come to play anymore, added to Maribel's bad mood this morning. "She barely speaks to us in church. Why doesn't someone else take care of her? Why does it have to be you?"

"It doesn't. It doesn't have to be anybody. I just want to, that's all."

Mama continued to clean up the kitchen. Maribel watched her. Her golden hair had been touched with grey since Papa had left. Her hands looked chapped and red. Her apron was dusty with flour and spattered with brown stains. Her face, however, reflected only the serenity Maribel had always seen there. She wanted to tell her she missed her father. She wished a letter would appear. There hadn't been any at all. Yet her mother, she knew, would never bring up the subject of Papa. It was always Maribel.

"No letters from Papa yet?"

"The post office is in chaos because of the government takeover. We'll probably get his letters all at once. Be patient."

Mama put down her washcloth and put on the hat she always wore for a walk into town.

"Did you know there is a door, a secret door in our garden wall?" Maribel asked.

Mama looked at Maribel with surprise. Her face went pale and her eyes wide. She took off her hat, dropped it on the table, and said, "A secret door? Show me where it is."

Maribel had no idea if her news was good or bad. Mama's hands shook and her eyes widened. She ran out to the yard and her mother followed her. Had she done something wrong? What would she say when Maribel showed her?

"Sarita was drawing and needed more room. So I helped her pull away the weeds." She waited for her mother to praise her for at least trying to tackle some of the weeds, but her mother didn't seem to hear. Her eyes were scanning the garden wall where Sarita stood with her yellow chalk in hand.

When they got near, Maribel could see Mama's eyes were already on the cracks, tracing their route from the ground to above their heads and back down. She put her hands on the slab and pushed. She leaned with her shoulder and threw her weight against it. Again, it didn't move.

"I never noticed this before. I guess I never got this far back in the garden with my weeding. You're right though. It looks like a door. It must be very old. And I'm sure there are vines on the abuela's side, too. Maybe that is what's keeping it from moving."

"Can we go around and see?"

"You wait here. I want you to stay in the garden. I'll go. The abuelas don't need all of us trampling their flowers."

Maribel hid her disappointment. If Papa were here, he'd bring her with him. They'd investigate their new discovery together. He'd make up a story about pirates and hidden gold and secret passageways. Mama reacted to everything with fear.

What could be frightening about a door that led to the abuelas' yard? Mama had a way of taking the fun out of everything lately. Maribel knew it was because Papa was gone. She missed him now more than before.

It took a few minutes for Mama to walk the length of the wall to the front of the yard. The only entrance and exit was near their tiny cottage through a low wooden gate just to the left of a trestle covered with tiny roses. The abuelas' tall home had no gate so she walked immediately around the stone wall and called.

"Maribel, I'm on the other side," Mama called. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Mama," she answered.

"There are so many vines. So many weeds taller than me. It's quite a mess back here."

"Can you see the cracks?"

"Actually, wait... hold a stick up high so I can see exactly where it is."

Maribel found a long stick and reached up, so her mother could see it over the wall.

"Okay, I see you." There was a pause. "Oh, that's strange."

"What, Mama?" Maribel called. "What's strange? Did you find it?"

"No. There is nothing on this side. Nothing at all. Just some weathered spots. No door, though."

"Are you sure?" Maribel felt disappointment again.

"I'm coming back."

In a few moments, Mama was by her side examining the slab of stone, the cracks, and the ground around the bottom.

"Someone must have started to cut this, but for some reason never finished it."

"Why wouldn't they finish?"

"There could be many reasons, Maribel. This is a very old house. It might have been a way to hide people during wars, or help people escape if the house was searched during the revolution. Who knows why it was never finished?"

Maribel waited for her mother to continue, but she got a dark faraway look in her eye and seemed to forget Maribel was there. "You haven't studied our country's history yet. When the schools open again, you will learn what I am talking about. It's just as well it's not finished. I wouldn't want you girls playing with it anyway. I want you safely inside where I can keep an eye on you."

Mama left her in the garden and returned to the kitchen. Maribel climbed her favorite tree and sat on a low branch. So much to study, but when the president had been killed during the government overthrow, Señor Garcia had run away. With no teacher, the new school building stood empty until the army transformed it into a prison. None of the children in Anunciata had been to school since. Even the textbooks, bought by President Allende's government, had been burned. Mama made her read and write and do some arithmetic every day, but it wasn't the same as going to school. She missed her friends, especially Paula. But Paula was not her friend anymore, she remembered through her dark mood. Not since Papa had gone away.

Stories and books were all she had. But she didn't mind. She loved them. And made up her own. Already, her imagination was busy at work. Pirates had once lived here. And to protect their looted treasure, taken from the evil king's ships, they buried it somewhere in the garden. The pirates knew the king's men might come and so began to chisel a secret passageway, so they could escape, knowing their treasure would never be found. They'd never finished the escape route. They were captured and sent to an island prison. The treasure lay buried all

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these years, and, someday, the great-grandson of the pirate king would return to claim his riches. She turned and studied the garden, drawing a mental map and looking for clues that might lead her to the treasure before he arrived.

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