

**EL LLENGUATGE SECRET**  
**(The Secret Language)**

By Anna Manso

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## Chapter One

They say that getting older means you stop believing in magic but that's not true. I'm nearly eleven and, only quite recently, thanks to magic, I could understand the language of animals. Until now, I've always been more interested in technology than magic, which isn't surprising because I'm a cyborg girl.

I was born deaf, and I mean deaf, so deaf that I wouldn't have heard the explosion of a volcano even if I was inside the crater. I had two operations when I was small, one for each ear, and they installed chips and wires inside me. Since then, and with the help of two little devices, implants behind each ear, I've been able to hear and I learned how to talk. Though there are a few things I find difficult—studying languages, for example (but I do get good grades in English) or understanding some words and phrases that people have to repeat because I can't hear them very well—I lead a normal life. When my parents hear me saying the word *cyborg*, they get annoyed and say that I'm not being precise, but I think I am because, if I have chips in my head, it means I'm a cyborg. Anyway, I like saying it and watching how people try to hide their surprise, looking as if they're about to choke on some chewing gum they're trying to swallow. Everyone except our neighbour Antònia, whose flat is on the same landing as ours. She's ninety years old and has always been easy-going about my implants, as if they were like the braces that half the kids at school have on their teeth. And my family too, of course, but my family doesn't count. And now there's Selma, my first ever best friend. She doesn't care about me being deaf, or the fact that I have an old lady's name.

My name's Maria Teresa and, at first, I wasn't sure if I liked it. I thought it was strange and old-fashioned—"vintage", as my cousin Carla says—until my godfather Alfred, whose name's just as old-fashioned as mine and who's read more than five thousand books, told me that our names are in danger of extinction and that girls like me have a mission: we have to save them.

Mum says my name's very practical, that when I was little and she lost sight of me in a shopping centre or at the beach, she only had to let out a screech, "Maria Teresa-a-a-a!" And, with all those *a-a-as*, so many that the shriek lasted about thirty seconds, and a voice that was so powerful it could almost paralyse me, I could hear her and knew I was the one being called because I was the only Maria Teresa within three hundred kilometres.

My dad also said it's very practical because, until last year, it was his job to put my name on all my clothes and he did it with permanent felt-tip pens even if it looked a bit crappy. He said that ironing on a name tag was too much work and he burnt his fingers and, anyway, he only needed to write "Maria Teresa" because I was the only girl in the school with that name. Almost the whole planet too.

The afternoon the whole thing began, I wasn't thinking about my name, or about implants, or about anything except what my parents had just told me: I couldn't go and spend the weekend with Selma, or go camping in her father's van, sleep on the mountain, pee in the pines, have salmon rolls for dinner, and learn how to tell one bird from another (because Nils, Selma's father, knows all the birds in Sweden, which is where he's from, and the birds from Catalonia too, where some are the same as in Sweden and others aren't).

Instead of spending the weekend with Selma and Nils I had to go to grandpa Luís's birthday lunch with my little brother and sister, and small and big cousins. I don't have brothers, sisters, or cousins of my age so family get-togethers are boring. We were supposed to have the birthday celebration next week and I was resigned to the idea. I'd go, I'd be bored, and grandad's birthday would then be over. But, because one of my older cousins had a very important business trip, they'd decided to have the party early and I had to grin and bear it.

It was horrible. Selma and I had been talking about this getaway for weeks. Her dad's a pilot and isn't in Barcelona very often but, when he is, he takes her away in the van and they go to lots of places. Selma's parents are divorced and she stays with both of them, with one and then with the other. And she doesn't have brothers or sisters. Older or younger. I know I shouldn't wish for this, because they say that divorce is an awful thing and you're lucky if you have brothers and sisters but, that day, I thought that Selma's life seemed wonderful. Not like mine. That's why, when my parents said I couldn't even mention the van, or Selma, or Nils, I felt as if a bomb was about to go off in my head and, to stop it exploding, I said the first thing that occurred to me, "I'll be back in a minute!"

I went out, slamming the door like a crack of thunder because I was so angry. Then, once outside, I just stood there on the landing not knowing where to go. I realised that my eyes had turned into two running taps. I instinctively went upstairs and sat down on the top landing, the last one, where the door to the roof terrace is, but it's always locked. I started sobbing without making any noise, or I tried not to, but I must

have made some sound because Antònia heard me when she came out of the lift. Instead of going inside her flat, she came upstairs, very slowly (because she's ninety, but she can walk upstairs because she's thin and as light as a feather) and found me. "What are you doing here, wee spuggy?"

Maybe it was because Antònia took me by surprise, or because what she said was so strange, or because I'd always liked her, or because I was feeling much worse than sad, the thing is, I told her everything about what had just happened to me. She held out her hand for me to take. "Come on, now. This is no place to talk. I'm old and I need to rest."

I stood up and followed her downstairs. Her hand was warm, with skin as soft as silk, and bones as fine as those of the birds that Selma's father studied. And, for the first time in my life, she invited me into her flat. We sat down in the dining room and she offered me some cherries as a snack. I looked around while I was eating them because I was curious. There were photos everywhere, of her with her son, her grandchildren, and with Daisy, who looks after her and stays with her till after lunch. I know them all to say hello and goodbye to, even if I'd never been inside her flat until that day. But I was so sad I didn't really think about it. I felt so good there, with the nice smell of lavender cologne, that I relaxed and confessed that I felt jealous of Selma's life. Antònia didn't tell me off. On the contrary. She seemed really concerned about me.

"So, how come you're so upset? Well, I know it's a pain having to go out with your family instead of being with your friend. But you could go away with her some other time."

When I tried to tell her, I couldn't. This time my eyes went dry, like turned-off taps and my throat felt like a freezer packed with frozen words. Antònia took my hand again. Hers was still warm like a fresh baked biscuit and the ice slowly melted. In a tiny voice I told her about it. "It's been very difficult for me to have a friend like Selma. A real friend. Not just one that you play with or do homework with. I mean a friend who invites you to her place and you can tell your secrets to."

"And the other boys and girls?"

I shrugged. I told her that the other kids like me, but they never invite me for sleepovers. Only sometimes for a snack, after school. Maybe it's because I'm shy. Or because sometimes they have to repeat what they say to me when I haven't heard them properly and that's a bore for them. Or maybe because they're worried that I'll lose my

implants, which cost a fortune, and perhaps they or their parents don't want to take the risk. Whatever. But not Selma. She and her mum Natàlia invited me over at once, and sometimes I've slept there too. And Nils promised he'd take me to different places in the van. Selma hasn't been at my school for very long. They moved here three months ago and we became friends, so they got her to sit at my desk. And, for once in my life, I had an incredible, amazing, special plan, a plan with my very first bestie, and now the plan had come to nothing.

Antònia didn't say anything as I told her all the stuff that was burning inside me. Suddenly she began to laugh quietly, her white curls wiggling as if they were being tickled.

"Ah, so you'll need to get up early."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know? Oh, goodness gracious me, what a wee spuggy you are."

"What's a spuggy?"

"It's a little sparrow. We call them spuggies in my village. And, if you want, I'll tell you what you have to do."

And I was astounded by what she told me. In fact, I thought she was off her rocker, that she was telling me some old wives' tale, some crazy old lady stuff, but I went along with it.

"You don't know what sometimes happens in the sky over Barcelona?"

"No ..."

"Sometimes, early in the morning, the sun comes up when the moon still hasn't gone. Then a crack opens up for magic to happen, and you can make a wish."

"Does it come true?"

"Sometimes yes, and sometimes no. But you have to try, don't you think?"

"Can I ask not to be deaf?"

"No. When it comes to health, it's best to trust science. And you mustn't ask for someone to love you. People have to do what they want in love and friendship. But you can ask for things to happen. Think about what you'd like to happen to you, and you can tell me about it later."

I knew exactly what I'd wish. I wanted to go away for a weekend with Selma and Nils. But all this stuff Antònia was telling me didn't make sense. All of a sudden, the whole scene seemed very strange. What was I doing there, telling the story of my life to my ninety-year-old neighbour? Until then, we hadn't spoken much, except on the

landing, at the street door, or in the lift. Well, yes, we got on well, liked each other, and I thought she was really nice and different, even if she looked like all the other old ladies. Except her eyes shone like the moon and when she smiled my heart was warmed as if by the sun. And now, as if she'd been able to read my thoughts, she'd come out with the moon and the sun, and this nonsense about early morning spells. "What a load of rubbish", I said to myself.

I said goodbye to Antònia and went back home. My parents didn't ask where I'd been and didn't say anything about the fact that my eyes were red from crying but, at dinner time, they told Tomàs and Neus, my brother and sister who are seven and five, to stop hassling me and leave me alone.

When I went to bed, I thought again about what Antònia had said and how badly I wanted to spend the weekend with Selma. I don't believe in magic but I was so desperate that I decided to set the alarm early and give it a try.

## Chapter Two

I've always told myself that being deaf is no big deal. Well, of course, I'd love to be like everyone else and hear properly. And not have to keep explaining what I've got behind my ears ("impla-a-ants"), or to go for speech therapy with Sara, who's a bit pathetic ("Wow, what cute little plaits you're wearing toda-a-ay ..."), or to ask if I can sit in the front row of the classroom because, apart from using the implants to hear, I also read lips because I miss things sometimes. Sound doesn't come to me like it does with people who can hear. It's different. I can't explain why it's different because I've got no idea what it's like to hear without implants. I only know that, right now, I'm an imperfect cyborg and lipreading helps me. Next year, I'll be in sixth grade and I'll have to think about high school. For a while now, Sara the speech therapist has been warning me that I'll be more sensitive about having implants when I'm a teenager. And that will be normal ("super-duper-extra no-o-o-o-ormal ..."). I've always told Sara and my mum and dad that I don't care. But, since Selma appeared, I realise that I do care. Because she immediately started asking me how those things work and, when I told her, she looked at me astonished and said, with a grin from ear to ear, "I'm bowled over!"

It was Selma who made me realise that I'm a cyborg girl. And we had an attack of the giggles. And we were together in the playground in the morning and lunchtime breaks, and after school, chatting about how they work, what it's like being deaf, if it bothers me or if I don't care, and she was surprised by details that are normal for me, like how the implants work with batteries that have to be changed every two days, and that my mum and dad have to pay for the batteries, which cost a lot. No other girl or boy had ever asked so many questions, or such direct questions. And when Selma asked, I could feel that a knot I never knew I had was loosening. But I still had another knot. Because, for her, it was all very normal, but only for her. As I said, it's normal with my family too, and Antònia but, with Selma, I realised that it wasn't like that with the other kids in my class, and the ones at after-school activities, and holiday courses and camps. That they never talked about it. That they acted as if I wasn't deaf. But I am deaf, and if I can hear them, it's because of the implants. And that's that. But I was so happy that Selma and I were friends!

Even though it was silly to try Antònia's spell, to set the alarm to go off at twenty to seven, it was worth trying. Before going to sleep, I'd gone to get the key to the terrace door from the little cupboard next to the front door, and I put it in a little bag where I keep my copies of the keys to our flat. Mum and dad gave them to me at the beginning of the school year so I'd feel grownup. "In case you want to get in one day and we're not at home. Or if you come home from school by yourself."

I rarely come home by myself because Tomàs, Neus, and I go to the same school and we come back together when mum, dad, or both of them come to get us. Sometimes, though, they know I have homework and Tomàs and Neus want to go and play in the square. Then they tell me to go home alone, have something to eat without anyone bothering me, and then get to work without all the racket of my little brother and sister.

Having my own house keys was lucky because I only had to take the keys for the terrace door but not mum's or dad's house keys to get back in again.

When the alarm clock woke me as it usually did with flashes of light, I nearly decided to forget about the whole thing and keep sleeping. But then I remembered Selma's dad's van and how badly I wanted to sleep with my friend in the middle of the forest. I put my slippers on, swish, got the keys, click, and left without making a noise, ssh-ssh. I was a bit worried about opening and closing the door. I was scared it would creak or bang too loudly when I closed it. But I did it so carefully that it didn't even go

errc, squee, or grac. I know because I'd connected my implants again. I disconnect them when I go to bed and then I don't hear a thing. It's super practical.

I rushed upstairs, bouncing up on tiptoes like a sparrow, or a spuggy, as Antònia says. I opened the door with the key and went out onto the roof terrace. It was June and though it was before seven, it was already quite light. My heart jumped to see the moon, up there in the sky, big and cut in half, very neatly, right down the middle. I looked towards the sunlight that was already shining behind the buildings around the Sagrada Família.

The roof terrace of our house is very high. We live on what's called the third floor but it's actually the fifth because there's a mezzanine, and a floor above that called the *principal* or "main floor". So, the roof terrace is the sixth floor. The views are so beautiful, I don't know why I don't go up there more often. That morning I was really happy letting my eyes roam over the buildings of Barcelona, spread out like a sheet before me, with a strip of sea in the background, as the sun rose, strong, determined, fat, and fiery. My heart was racing at a thousand miles per hour and, before it could go any faster, I closed my eyes and wished, "Please, please, please, I want to go away for the weekend with Selma and her father."

I asked ten times, just in case. Then I opened my eyes. The sun was halfway up, round and powerful, while the moon was starting to fade, elegant and silent. I couldn't do anything more but wasn't sure. That was all? I hadn't been struck by lightning, the ground wasn't trembling beneath my feet, and I hadn't seen any cloud of energy coming towards me ... Nothing. As far as I knew, you only had to ask and that was enough. It was getting late, and I didn't want mum to catch me. She always gets up early.

I had one more quick look at the view of the city, now brighter and more sharply outlined, locked the terrace door, opened our front door like a stealthy thief, and slipped into bed. Safe and sound.

I could lie in and be a lazybones for quite a while, but then everyday life began: get up, have breakfast, go to school ... And everything was so normal, so routine that, as the hours went by, my mood was getting worse and worse. My rage grew inside me like a toxic cloud, and the anger bomb was there, and in the danger of exploding, too. If it did, I'd say and do a lot of stupid things.

That afternoon I exploded. My parents wanted me to go with them to grandad's house, two streets away from ours, and I threw a wobbly. On top of that, I'd carried on like an idiot getting up an hour early. On top of that, I'd been such a nitwit believing



that magic exists. On top of that, I'd realised that the whole thing was just Antònia's nonsense, and I'd made a great big fool of myself. And, on top of that, I had to waste the afternoon going to see granddad when I was already going to see him on Saturday. The thing is, I love granddad. But lately he's been losing his memory and it's boring to talk with him because he repeats things five times and asks you the same questions over and over again. I told my parents I wanted to stay at home by myself but they didn't want me to.

"You haven't got any homework and it's good for granddad to see you kids. There'll be so many of us on Saturday, he won't have much time for you."

"And so what. I couldn't care less!"

Mum and dad insisted, and I got even more upset. In the end I did what I usually do when I'm angry: I disconnected my implants and locked myself in my room.

Just when I thought I was settled into my burrow of silence, I heard voices. I looked around. Nothing. No one. Then I saw them, two pigeons cooing away on the windowsill. But, actually, they weren't cooing, they were talking! And I could understand them!

"I saw it, you pain in the neck. I saw it with my own eyes."

"With your eyes? With your eyes? With your eyes? What did you see?"

"Granddad. He took five or six pills. Gobbled them down like chocolates."

"And how come, come, come?"

"No idea."

"Ah, well, well, well. So he gets sick. Let him deal with it. After all that shooting at us with his airgun!"

"Yeah, having such a hang-up about us!"

"Hang-up, hang-up, hang-up."

"If he'd been nicer to us, I would have tipped over his pill bottle to save him from getting sick. Or I'd tell this girl, who's his granddaughter, what he did."

"Right, right, right."

I was amazed. I was listening to a conversation of two pigeons ... and they were talking about grandpa! Grandpa Lluís, who's hated pigeons for a while now. He says he can't stand them. A week ago, some of his neighbours reported him because he'd used an airgun to scare them off his roof terrace. Mum and dad took his airgun and told him off. It should have been a big shock, being able to understand those two pigeons. But what they said worried me so much that I didn't have time to get flustered about it. My

parents have been very worried lately because grandpa's doing weird stuff. That's why they want us to go and see him more often. I'd just said no but now, all of a sudden, I was in a huge hurry to get there. I connected up my implants again and, with the usual normal sounds, the pigeons' voices disappeared. I burst into the dining room in a big panic.

"We have to go and see grandad! Right now."

My parents looked at me, very surprised.

"OK, I'm not cross any more. Come on, let's go. It's getting late."

I opened out front door and called the lift. Mum and dad called Neus and Tomàs who were playing in their room and told them we were going. That "pair", as grandad calls them, took less than two seconds to appear. Grandad always gives them a euro each when he sees them, to keep them happy. Not to me, though, because he thinks I'm too old. My parents don't want grandad to give money to the kids (they call it a "bribe") but whatever they say to grandad goes in one ear and out the other. And today, well, it was really great for me because Tomàs and Neus, took no time at all in getting ready to go out.

When we got to grandad's place, I could see that he didn't look well.

"Grandad, are you feeling sick?"

"I ate too fast and now I've got a stomach ache."

Grandad eats at supersonic speed and I'm fascinated watching him. Occasionally I time him to see if he beats his record of three minutes and forty seconds to eat whatever lunch or dinner it is.

"Papa, it would be a good thing if you could learn to eat more slowly", my mum scolded him.

But, oh dear, this wasn't going well. I had to find the pill bottle. My parents wouldn't believe me if I told them I'd heard two pigeons talking and had discovered that grandad had taken six or more pills instead of just one. I slipped into the kitchen but couldn't see anything there. Nothing in the drawers either. I had to get into his bedroom. It wouldn't be easy because Neus and Tomàs were clinging to me like leeches. I decided to recruit them for my expedition.

"Shall we go and check out grandad's room? You, Tomàs, make sure that mum and dad don't see us. Come on, Neus. I need to find something."

"What thing?"

"Something I left here one day."

“If you don’t tell me what it is, I’m going to tell mum and dad that you’re spying.”

“Damn kid”, I said to myself. Then I told her. “A sketchbook.”

“Ah, cool. I’ll look for it.”

Neus went into grandad’s room and I followed her. There was no pill bottle on the bedside table. Or in the bathroom next to his bedroom. It would have to be in the medicine cabinet, but how would I know which tablets he’d taken too many of? Suddenly, Neus appeared with a pill bottle in her hand.

“I looked under grandad’s bed but I only found this empty bottle.

I could have covered her with kisses. I took the bottle and went to mum. I told her I’d found it and thought it was strange. And grandad looked really sick. Mum looked at me and looked at grandad. She took the bottle and went to talk with dad. Then with grandad. They believed me! Dad took us home and mum took grandad to the hospital. After a while she phoned. Grandad had had a stomach pump to get rid of the pills. But when they examined him, they found he had some other thing in his belly, but I don’t know what, and they had to operate. It was lucky we’d taken him to hospital because he would have gradually got worse, and then the operation would have been very complicated. But, now, he’d recover fast and well. He had to stay in hospital and they were going to operate the next day. The birthday party was cancelled and I ... I could go away with Selma and her father!