

# INVISIBLE SCARS



**SECRETS**

Gemma Pasqual i Escrivà

**bromera**

**MORE INFO**

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**Carol Borràs**

carol@bromera.com

www.bromera.com

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Av. Areners, 25 (Pol. El Pla) - 46600 Alzira

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# INVISIBLE SCARS

SECRETS

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## MY SCARS

We all have scars. Some can be seen, others can't. Some disappear with time, others remain stamped on our skin like a memory no one can see, but that you feel every day. Last year left me with lots of invisible scars, marks that couldn't be seen from the outside, but that I felt with every step I took, every memory I tried to leave behind. When the year was over, I thought that, with time, these marks would fade, that my life would become, at least a little bit, simpler. But then fate reminded me otherwise, that I was not designed for the quiet life, that chaos and I had an eternal pact and that many things could still go haywire.

Pol wasn't around anymore. After all the @HiddenFaces drama, he had disappeared. He didn't say goodbye or give any explanations, he just vanished, and no matter how much I claimed I didn't care, I did. I felt his absence. I still hoped to find him in class, I still imagined bumping into him in the playground, I still remembered how it was before everything went to pot. But he wasn't there. Full stop. Nor was Julia. In her case, at least, it had been more logical and less dramatic: her parents had changed jobs and moved to another city. Just like that, suddenly, as if she had never been part of my life. We didn't promise each other we'd call

every day, nor did we make a scene with tears and hugs like in a film. We didn't do any of that, because we knew how the world worked: when someone leaves, sooner or later you get used to their absence.

School wasn't any better. Gina was still acting like the queen as usual, but she had decided she needed another noble title and had announced she wanted to be a real influencer. As she didn't have enough with her obsession for Instagram and TikTok, now she wanted to conquer YouTube and become the latest teenage fashion guru. Naturally, Luna, always opposed to any trace of superficiality, had declared open war against her. It's not that I wanted to take sides, but Gina had already started looking for volunteers for her "style transformation" videos and I had the awful suspicion that I was one of her potential victims.

But the person who worried me the most wasn't Gina or Luna: it was Joan. Joan wasn't himself either. Since Julia had left, he had become a version of himself that I didn't recognise. He had never shown the slightest interest in sport, but now he seemed obsessed and had turned into a full-on gym rat whose only topics of conversation were his training routines, how many sets of weights he'd done and how he had improved his performance. When I tried to say I didn't understand or asked why he'd changed so much, he got mad. As if I were paranoid, as if I were imagining it. As if it wasn't obvious that, since Julia left, he was trying to cling onto something he could control. And, honestly, I didn't know how to help him.

And then there was him. The boy in the window. I didn't know who he was and I didn't know why, but when I saw him, I had the feeling he was also looking at me. The strangest thing was that he wasn't a neighbour from my building. I saw him out the window of my room that looked onto the interior courtyard. That meant he lived in another building, but, for some reason, our windows were lined up at just the right angle for me to see him.

Maybe I was just imagining it. Maybe I just needed a distraction, something to make me think about anything that wasn't how my life had changed too quickly and I still hadn't made sense of what had happened. Maybe I was just going crazy. Maybe it was something deeper.

All this had left me with scars. Invisible scars. The visible ones always arouse curiosity: when someone sees a mark on your skin, they ask, expecting a great story behind it. No one asks about the other ones. You can't see them, but they're there. The last school year had left me with lots and I didn't know yet if the new year would give me more or if, finally, some of them would start to heal.



# 1

## CUPCAKES, BOILED EGGS AND OTHER MORNING DRAMAS

As I closed the front door, the clear, fresh morning air filled my lungs, as if I had just escaped from a place without oxygen. I walked along, enjoying those peaceful minutes. I was early, but I didn't want to arrive at school with time to spare. I had learned from experience that being the first to enter the premises meant watching the *Gina vs Luna: cold war live* reality show in real time.

While I walked, I took out my phone and opened WhatsApp.

Tell me you're awake. 🥱

The reply took less than ten seconds. Obviously.

**Joan**

For ages.

Of course he was. Joan didn't sleep, he just rested long enough to keep existing.

Can I stop by yours?





**Joan**

Sure. My grandma asks if you've had breakfast. 🍞 ☕

No. 😞

**Joan**

Grandma says your breakfast is on the table.

That last message convinced me. I started walking quicker and turned towards his house. Actually, towards Maria's house; as Joan's parents were away with work, he had moved in with his grandma until they came back.

When I arrived, I rang the bell. A few seconds later, the door opened wide and there was Joan, in sports clothes, hair wet from the shower and with the look of someone who has decided that rest is an overrated concept.

'Have you already run today's marathon?' I asked, looking him up and down.

'I went out for a run at six.'

I frowned.

'At six? In the morning?'

'It's the only quiet time to train.'

I winced exaggeratedly.

'It's the only quiet time because the rest of humanity is asleep, Joan.'

He gave a short laugh, but didn't reply. Then he waved me inside, as if arguing with me wasn't part of his training plan.



In the kitchen, there was a wonderful smell of coffee and toast. I had always thought that if anywhere could be described as a sanctuary, it was this place. Everything was welcoming, warm and without a hint of chaos. Maria was already sat at the table, drinking her coffee calmly, as if she had all the time in the world. When she saw me, she raised her eyebrows animatedly.

‘Good morning, Aloma. What brings you here?’

‘Fate guided me.’

‘Fate or hunger?’

‘A bit of both.’

‘Toast or cupcakes?’

‘Cupcakes.’

I sat down and dropped my rucksack to the floor with a dramatic sigh. Maria shook her head and served me a plate of cupcakes and a mug of hot chocolate. I bit into a cupcake as if it were my first meal after a war, as if I’d just returned from a secret mission in an inhospitable desert.

‘Maria, you’re the best,’ I said with my mouth full, savouring the butter, the sugar and that hint of lemon, as if the cupcakes were bringing me back to life.

Maria smiled at me with that expression of infinite wisdom that only grandmothers have, while stirring her coffee slowly.

‘I’m just a grandma who can’t understand how people can skip breakfast.’

Then Joan appeared and sat down. I looked at his plate and let out a deep sigh.





‘Joan.’

He looked up lazily.

‘What?’

I pointed at his breakfast with my chocolatey spoon, horrified at the sight before my eyes.

‘That isn’t breakfast.’

Upon his plate sat three neatly-arranged boiled eggs, like some kind of strange nutritional ritual. No bread. No colour. No joy.

‘It’s protein,’ he replied, shrugging with an exasperating indifference.

‘It’s boring.’

‘It’s what I need.’

I rolled my eyes and turned to Maria, looking for moral support.

‘Maria, please, convince him it’s a mistake.’

She shook her head patiently, as if they’d already had that argument a thousand times and there was nothing to be done about it.

‘I’ve already tried, but he’s more stubborn than a mule.’

I took another cupcake to counterbalance the negative energy that was taking over the table.

‘Your body needs variety.’

‘My body needs what I give it.’

I raised an eyebrow, more than ready to dispute that ridiculous claim.

‘In no time you’ll turn into a muscular statue with egg shells at your feet.’



He smiled smugly and leaned back on the chair with an infuriating confidence.

‘I’ll certainly be fitter than you.’

‘I’ll certainly have a happier life than you.’

Maria’s lips trembled as she stifled a laugh, but she didn’t add anything else. She just took a sip of coffee with the self-control of someone who has already seen plenty of teenage dramas.

‘Joan’s problem is he doesn’t like to admit it when he becomes obsessed with something,’ I went on, picking a cupcake crumb off my plate with a fingertip.

He glanced at me out the corner of his eye, but didn’t say anything. Then Maria leaned her head slightly towards me and moved the conversation on.

‘You know what, Aloma? I’ve got a book I think you’d like.’

I looked up uncertainly.

‘If it’s a self-help one, I’m out of here.’

She laughed and shook her head.

‘No, no. It’s a novel.’

She rose slowly and walked towards a shelf full of old books, books that had passed through so many hands that their value wasn’t in the cover or the condition of the paper but in the stories they held.

When she came back, she was carrying a copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. As soon as I saw it, I knew this wasn’t any old book. The cover was hard and dark blue with gold letters slightly faded by the passing of time. When she put





it down on the table, I noticed the corners were worn and the spine had small cracks, a sign that it had been opened many times.

I ran my fingers over the cover, feeling its rugged texture. It gave off a scent of old book, a mix of vintage paper and the ink that had seeped into the pages over the years. I opened it carefully; there were illustrations. Not those modern, stylised illustrations, no. They were old drawings, in black ink, with detailed strokes and intricate shading. “What is the use of a book...without pictures or conversations?” I read that Alice had thought. And she was right. This book wasn’t just to be read. It was to be observed and felt.

I turned the pages and encountered the Chesire Cat, smiling unnervingly, its body half-disappearing amongst the gnarly trees of Wonderland. On another page, Alice appeared small, looking upwards with a surprised expression while the White Rabbit ran off with his pocket watch in hand. I flicked through more pages and found the Mad Hatter, with his giant brightly-decorated hat, shining eyes and a smile that was somewhere between amusing and alarming.

‘It’s an old edition,’ explained Maria. ‘My mother gave it to me as a present when I was little. And now I think it will do you good to read it.’

I raised an eyebrow.

‘Alice in Wonderland. Like the Disney film?’

Joan, who until then had been more interested in eating



his boiled eggs, looked up with an expression of genuine surprise.

‘Wait, is that a book?’

‘Please, Joan,’ I let out a long sigh. ‘Obviously it is a book.’

‘Oh, well I only know the animated film. The one with the rabbit and the blonde girl.’

Maria smiled patiently.

‘I figured.’

‘So why should I read it? I’ve already seen the film,’ I asked, intrigued.

Maria leant on the table, looking at me with that patience grandmothers have when they want to teach you something without you realising it.

‘Because it is the story of a girl who suddenly finds herself in a place she doesn’t understand.’

‘Like high school,’ I murmured and Maria smiled, pointing a finger at me as if I had answered an important question correctly.

‘Exactly. Carroll wrote this story full of absurd characters, illogical rules and impossible situations because, deep down, it is about the transition from childhood to adolescence. Alice falls into a world she finds strange, where everyone tells her how she needs to be, what she has to do, but she doesn’t stop changing, growing, finding her own voice.’

I remained silent for a moment.

‘And why does it make you think of me?’





She smiled knowingly.

‘Because you have this way of looking at the world as if everything were nonsense, but at the same time, you don’t sit still. You look for answers, you question things. And Alice, even though she is lost, never lets anyone else decide for her.’

I closed the book carefully and left it on top of my rucksack, noting its weight. Not just physically, but also the kind of intangible weight that belongs to things which have passed through many hands and hold stories beyond those on their pages.

‘Okay, I’ll give it a chance. But if I end up have nightmares about white rabbits and psychopathic queens, I’ll hold you responsible.’

‘Let me know how it goes.’

Joan looked at the time and huffed.

‘We better go or we’ll be late.’

I took another cupcake for the road while Maria bid us farewell with a smile.

‘Don’t forget to read *Alice in Wonderland*, Aloma!’

‘If I start talking to grinning cats, I’ll forward you the bill from the psychologist.’

Joan rolled his eyes as we left the house.

And I, for the first time, thought that this book might have more to do with me than I’d have liked to admit.

While I tried to understand Joan – the weights, the smoothies, that loud silence – life did what it always did: go on. Two weeks later, at home, someone rang the bell



and came in with a suitcase and a dog that answered to the name Dark. It was Carlota.



**Aloma** had imagined that, after all that drama, everything would get easier. Wrong.

Her cousin **Carlota** and her giant dog, **Dark**, have invaded her room and her life; Joan, her best friend, has changed beyond recognition; and, out the window, the world seems to be shaking without warning.

In the midst of the chaos, only Grandma Maria's croquetas keep alive the taste of home and the hope that everything can go back to normal.

Like a teenage **Alice** stuck in **Wonderland** without a map, Aloma tries to find herself amongst secrets, bumpy friendships and wounds that can't always be seen.

This is a story about growing up, making mistakes and finding out that, sometimes, the only way out is looking at yourself in the mirror.

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