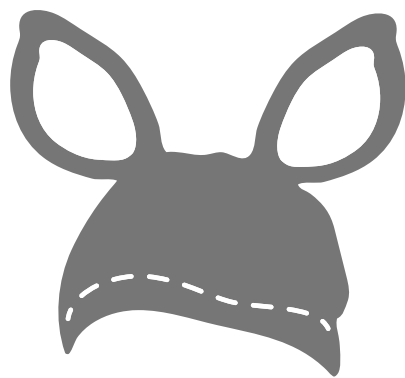


# Lucky Luna



**Diana López**



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## La prima

My cousin Mirasol is having a quinceañera, a celebration for her fifteenth birthday. All of my primas on Dad's side are here, and *most* of them are dancing in beautiful purple dresses because they're damas, which is the same thing as saying "ladies in a royal court." I'm *not* a dama, so I don't get to wear a purple dress. I'm not dancing, and neither is Mabel, the most loyal friend in the world.

Mabel and I sit right by the dance floor. Everybody else is twirling and doing fancy steps in front of us. I can't help tapping my feet, and when I glance over, Mabel's tapping her feet, too. Then my parents pass right in front of us.

"Come on, Lucky Luna!" Mom says. "You can't sit there all night." My dad lifts his arm, and she spins under it, three times. I'm dizzy just watching.

“Why don’t you want to dance?” Mabel asks.

I cross my arms. “I’m protesting because I’m not in the royal court. I have too many primas, and they took all the spots.”

“How many cousins do you have anyway?”

I shrug. Then I get a great idea. “Maybe I should count them.”

We stand on our chairs to see the entire dance floor. *One, two, three*—I’m pointing as I count—*four, five . . .*

Oh no! Some of my primas moved.

I start over. *One, two, three, four, five, six . . .*

Wait a minute. I can’t remember which cousins I’ve already counted.

*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven . . .*

It’s impossible. Even if I could count the primas here tonight, it wouldn’t cover everyone. I’m here with my dad’s side of the family, but I have a whole other group from my mom’s side. I’m never with *all* my primas in the same place at the same time because we’d have to rent a football stadium to make that happen.

“I give up!” I say to Mabel. “My cousins keep moving, and lots of them are wearing purple dresses. It’s like counting goldfish in a pond. Have you ever tried to count goldfish in a pond?”

Mabel shakes her head. “No, but I *did* try counting the stars one night. I had to give up because there are just so many of them. At first, I felt sad, but then I

realized that every star is a wish. Can you imagine it? A sky of countless wishes?”

“No,” I answer. “But I *can* imagine a sky of countless primas.” As I say this, I picture all of my cousins’ faces peering down at me and I shudder.

“I wish *I* had a bunch of girl cousins,” Mabel says. “I have a few, but they’re in the Philippines. This is how many times I’ve seen them.” She curls her fingers and makes a zero.

“Better than seeing them every day.”

“Why?”

“Because every time I’m in trouble, a cousin is involved.”

Mabel scratches her head, which means she’s thinking. Then she says, “But—and before I say anything else, promise you won’t get mad?”

I put my hand over my heart. “I promise.”

“Well,” Mabel continues, “you get in trouble at school—not *all* the time but sometimes—and your cousins aren’t even there.”

She has a good point but only because she doesn’t have all the facts. “It’s still their fault,” I explain. “When I forget my homework, it’s because a prima came over to my house and distracted me. When I *don’t* forget my homework but get the answers wrong, it’s because a prima helped me. And when I get in trouble for other stuff, it’s because a prima planted a bad idea in my head.”

Mabel laughs.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing. I just imagined a bunch of leaves coming out of your ears when you said ‘planted.’”

I laugh, too, but then I get back to the topic. “So there you have it. Too many primas is a bad-luck thing, especially when your cousin is having a quinceañera and she doesn’t ask you to be in her royal court.”

This is the first time Mabel’s been to a quinceañera, so I tell her that only fourteen girls (one for each year of the birthday girl’s life) get to be damas. First, Mirasol asked a few friends. The rest of the slots went to primas, but *I* didn’t get picked. My dad has six siblings, and his oldest sister, Tía Margo, has five daughters, one after the other. We call them the “quins,” short for “quintuplets.” Two are already twentysomething, but the others are still teenagers. And that’s not counting my dad’s other siblings and all of *their* daughters. Most are older than me, so they get to have all the fun.

The worst part is not being in the official photograph! A few weeks ago, Mirasol and her damas wore their fancy dresses and went to the fountains in front of the art museum for a photo shoot with a professional photographer. When they gave a copy of the picture to my abuela, she framed and hung it in her hallway next to other photos of fancy events. I’m not in a single one, so it’s like I don’t exist at all.

I moped around after seeing that picture, and no one could cheer me up. Then Mirasol invited me to her house a few days later. She apologized and explained that she chose by age, starting with the oldest, because she didn't want to pick favorites. Then she painted my fingernails. She even drew little palm trees on my ring fingers with a glittery dot for the coconut. It was hard to be sad after that. Still, she should have picked the *niciest* cousins instead of oldest because *that* would have been *me* for sure.

I glance around the dance hall and search for Mirasol. She's posing for pictures beneath un arco covered in purple flowers. Her beautiful white dress has lots of ruffles and lace, and she has a tiara sparkling in her blond hair. Her hair's not *really* blond, but she bleaches it. My other primas surround her—Estrella, who runs all the time, Nancy, who does weird science experiments in her garage, and even Kimberly, whose favorite class is shop. They're all wearing the same purple gown because you're supposed to match when you're part of a royal court.

Mabel puts a hand on my shoulder. "I just thought of a good-luck thing," she says.

"Really? Something better than standing in my cousin's quinceañera, wearing a beautiful purple dress, and being in the official picture?"

"Yes." She points at my head. "At least you get to wear a cowboy hat, and you love hats more than anything in the world."

I glance up and smile. I've got a beautiful cowboy hat. It's white like my cowboy boots, and it has a yellow band to match my yellow dress. "That's right," I say. "Damas can't wear cowboy hats."

Just then, my parents pass us again. "Start dancing!" Mom orders.

I can only sigh.

"What's wrong?" Mabel asks.

"How can I go out there with a cowboy hat when they aren't playing country music?"

Now it's Mabel's turn to sigh.

Next they play "Bésame," a Spanish love song, and my parents dance real slow. Then they play an oldie but goodie song, "Rockin' Robin" by Michael Jackson. For this song, Abuela carries my brother, Alex, to the floor. He's two. She swings him around, and his laughter is louder than the music. Then they play pop tunes—for over twenty minutes!

I start to think that my night can't get any worse, but then I see *her*—Claudia—my prima with the giant nose. She's in the fifth grade just like me. I hate how she bosses me around and always brags about stuff—like getting a ribbon for perfect attendance or winning a poster contest or being in the photo on Abuela's wall. She's one month older than me, so she got to be in the royal court even though *I* don't show off or boss people around.



Here comes Claudia with her mean, angry face. She marches right up to Mabel and me, and then she points at my boots. “This is a dance, *not* a rodeo. You’re supposed to wear cowboy boots with jeans, not with dresses.”

“I can wear whatever I want, *whenever* I want,” I say.

“Would you wear a bathing suit to church?” she asks. “Would you wear pajamas to school?”

I want to say that I would happily do both of those things, but then I imagine the nuns scolding me and my teachers sending me to the principal’s office.

“I thought not,” Claudia says, because she knows I’m stumped. “It’s a dumb idea to wear cowboy boots with dresses.” She marches away before I can talk back.

I narrow my eyes as I watch her leave. I’m just so mad!

Claudia sits at a table with her mother and Abuela. They start talking, probably in Spanish and probably about me. When Claudia turns and glances back at me, my aunt and abuela glance back, too. They are *definitely* talking about me! One thing I hate is gossip, and in my family, there’s a lot. You can’t say or do anything without everybody else knowing. I can only hope that Abuela is scolding Claudia for saying mean things. But wait! She doesn’t look mad. She looks concerned. She’s taking Claudia’s hand!

“I feel so betrayed,” I say.

“Why?” Mabel asks.

I shrug, too frustrated to explain.

A few minutes later, Claudia leaves the table, weaves her way through the dancers on the floor, and then flings open a swing door to the dance hall's foyer.

"Let's follow my cousin," I tell Mabel.

When we get to the foyer, Claudia is nowhere around. There are only four places she could be—the parking lot, the men's restroom, the ladies' restroom, or the bridal room.

"Logic dictates that Claudia is in the ladies' restroom," I say, pointing to the door.

My dad's a Trekkie, which means he loves to watch *Star Trek*, so he's always saying things like "Make it so," "Beam me up, Scotty," and "Logic dictates." I can't help it. I've got these phrases in my head, too.

Mabel and I step inside, but Claudia's not there. So Mabel stoops over and peeks beneath the bathroom stalls. "Looks empty," she says.

"Claudia?" I call out. "Claudia, I know you're in here." Nothing but silence. Maybe she's standing on a toilet. "Are you standing on a toilet?" More silence, but to make sure she isn't hiding, I open every single stall. All empty.

"I bet she went outside," Mabel offers.

"Or the dressing room," I say. "And if she went to the dressing room, she's in big, big trouble. My aunt Sandra told us to stay out because she doesn't want us touching Mirasol's beauty products."

We head to the dressing room, which is really *three* rooms: first a small room with a sofa; then a room with a giant mirror, a vanity full of makeup, and a counter with a straightening iron and almost ten different hair products; and then the last door, another restroom. I had peeked in earlier. It's fancy, with lavender air freshener, a picture of flowers, and extra space for when brides wear puffy dresses. The restroom door is closed, but I can hear someone inside. Aha!

I signal to Mabel, putting a finger to my lips so she'll be quiet. Then we tiptoe back to the room with the sofa.

"I'm going to lock Claudia in the restroom," I tell Mabel.

"Why? You're just going to make her mad."

"That's the point," I say. "She makes *me* mad, so I should make *her* mad, too."

"Or we could forget about it and go back to the dance hall instead," Mabel suggests.

"Claudia thinks she's too good for the ladies' room," I go on. "If she wants the fancy restroom all to herself, then she can have it. Besides, there's no end to how mean she can be. If you ask me, leaving her in a fancy restroom for a few minutes is letting her off too easy."

I tiptoe back to the dressing room, but Mabel doesn't follow. When I give her a questioning look, she says, "I'll wait here." So I go in alone, and as soon as I enter, I hear the toilet flushing. I need to be quick or I'll miss my

moment. Luckily, there's a wooden chair nearby. I grab it and anchor it beneath the doorknob.

Almost immediately, I see the doorknob turning, but of course, the door doesn't budge.

"Hey," Claudia calls out. "Who's out there?"

I hear Claudia push against the door, and I imagine her shoulder slamming into it. I can't help giggling.

"Is that you, Luna?" Claudia says. "You better open the door right now!"

Instead of opening the door, I run out before I'm caught. This time Mabel follows me, all the way to the dance hall.

"You're going to get in trouble," she warns.

She's probably right. I think about turning back, but then I remember the time Claudia put a dead roach in my underwear drawer and how she said that if I ate snacks in my room, I was going to have a lot more roaches, *live* ones, because of the crumbs.

So I might get in trouble for locking her in the restroom, but at least I'll get even, too.