

BOOK

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BAD
Princesses

PARTY CRASHERS

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For Magnus and Vito

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CHAPTER 1

Princesa Jacinta, torchlight glowing in her eyes, comes to the end of her story. “And the witch, disguised as an owl, always reveals herself with a long, lonely whistle.”

Just then, a high-pitched shriek slices through the darkness.

Everyone screams.

Everyone except Dalia and Dominga.

They have already guessed that the witch

in their midst is actually Princesa Candelaria, crouching at the edge of the campfire circle.

“I wouldn’t mind if an owl visited me at night,” Dalia whispers to Dominga. They sit just outside the circle, a little apart from the rest of the first-year princesses. “Even if it was a witch. Owls have special wings that let them fly silently to swoop down on their prey.”

A lizard pokes his head out of the top of Dalia’s black boot. He sticks his tongue out.

“Don’t worry, Don Ignacio,” Dalia says, running a finger over his head. “I’d never let an owl come for you.”

Dominga pulls her black velvet cloak tighter around her shoulders. She was hopeful when Profesora Colibrí, the head teacher, announced that their evening at the base of Mount Linda

Vista would end with scary stories around the campfire. It might even make up for the swimming in crystal waters (too refreshing), the roasting of marshmallows (too gooey), and the singing of camp songs (too chirpy) they've already been forced to endure.

"We might as well listen for a while," she had told Dalia. Scary would be a welcome relief from the Fine and Ancient Institute for the Royal's usual sticky-sweetness.

The campfire crackles. Orange-red flames dance inside a ring of stones. Violet sparks leap out and flit toward the stars. Dominga follows them with her eyes, up, up to where the ghostly towers of the Bewitched Academy for the Dreadful rise against the full moon.

That is where Dalia and Dominga truly belong.

They are not royals-in-training like the rest of these princesses. They are villains—secret villains, but villains nonetheless. Yet their hopes of getting into the B.A.D. seem as slim as one of these stories being actually creepy. The B.A.D. is notoriously selective. Only the most truly awful and desperately dangerous students are offered admission.

And so far, Dalia and Dominga have not proven themselves good enough—that is, *bad* enough—to attend. But they have not given up. Villains never do.

“Thank you, Casita Sapphire, for that wonderfully chilling tale,” Profesora Colibrí says, applauding. Jacinta and Candelaria curtsy as the rest of the princesses clap. “Ten gems for your chalice.” The clapping from Casita Sapphire

grows louder. On the first day of school, Profesora Colibrí assigned each new princesa to a cottage: Ruby, Sapphire, Emerald, or Opal. For every noble deed accomplished, a princesa can earn gems for her Casita's chalice. The house with the most gems at the end of the term will earn the privilege of venturing into the village beyond the palace's walls.

"Would Casita Opal like to terrify us next?" Profesora Colibrí asks.

"Not likely," Dominga mutters. Dalia snickers.

"What was that, Princesa?" The profesora leans her ear toward Dominga. "Will you be telling a story on behalf of your Casita?"

Before Dominga can reply, a tall princesa with coppery curls springs to her feet. "Of course not," she says, grabbing the torch from Jacinta. "I've

been preparing our story for weeks.” Princesa Inés is determined to be named the Fairest of the F.A.I.R., the most perfect of all the princesses, by the time they graduate.

“Of course,” Profesora Colibrí says, and settles back into her camp chair.

Dalia gathers up the folds of her satin gown, a green so dark it is almost black. “I think we’ve stayed long enough, don’t you agree?” she whispers.

Dominga pushes her glasses up higher on her nose. “Too long,” she whispers back. They have a plot to set afoot.

As Inés clears her throat and begins her story, Dalia and Dominga sneak away into the shadows.

Four round tents stand in a line at the edge of the campsite. Silky streamers fly from the tops of each one: red, blue, green, and white. Inside the

tents, lanterns twinkle over cushioned cots. A satin sleep mask sits atop every plumped pillow.

Dalia and Dominga scurry past to the smaller, plainer tent, where earlier, they all stored their luggage. Hiking gowns hang from racks, ready to be worn the next day. A day that will no doubt be warm and gold-tinged just like every other day at the F.A.I.R.

Or it would be, Dominga thinks, if Dalia and I weren't about to roll in like storm clouds.

The idea came to her when they arrived that afternoon. As the others began unpacking, Dominga swiped a pair of scissors from Valentina, the Ruby princesa who is always busy with some new craft. She wouldn't miss it. She'd packed two more pairs. "One for paper, one for fabric, and one for embroidery," Valentina had explained.

It reminded Dominga of the spoons in Chef

Luis-Esteban's kitchen. The wooden spoon for stirring caramel. The slotted spoon for lifting potatoes out of boiling water. The long-handled ladle for scooping up soup. Not to mention the endless spoons for eating. The kitchen will be one of the few places Dominga misses when she and Dalia finally receive their invitations to the B.A.D.

Which they surely will after this scheme. Never mind that all their others have turned out horribly, disastrously, gruesomely *nice*.

Standing in front of the rack of gowns, Dalia taps on the toe of her boot. Don Ignacio peeks out and tests the air with his tongue.

"Where shall we begin?" Dalia asks the lizard. "You can pick first."

He creeps out of the boot and scurries up one side of the rack, across the rod, and down into

the pocket of an amber gown with white choke-cherry blossoms embroidered around the neck.

Dominga can tell without looking at the tag that it belongs to Inés. “Excellent choice,” she says.

She takes the scissors out of her pocket and offers them to Dalia. “Would you like to make the first cut?”

Dalia peels off her tattered gloves. “I would be delighted.” The blades slice through the bottom of the gown as easily as a knife through lemon cream pie.

Dominga can already imagine the horrified screams when the princesses find their gowns cut in half. She winces when brambles poke their knees and thorns tear their stockings on the trail. They’ll be so miserable, they’ll turn on one another. Think of the bickering!

“Think of the chaos!” she shouts.

Dalia lowers the scissors. Her eyes widen behind a curtain of dark hair.

“Sorry,” Dominga says, clapping her hand over her mouth. “I must have gotten ahead of myself.”

“Understandable,” Dalia replies. “But we don’t want to be discovered, not when there are so many gowns to . . . *improve*.”

By which she means *destroy*. Dominga takes the scissors and turns to the next gown.

When they are finished, shimmering piles of satin and tulle, silk and velvet drift at their feet.

“Soon, we will be packing our trunks and preparing to leave for the B.A.D.,” Dalia says, putting her gloves back on. “This time, I am certain.”

She tugs on the pocket of the amber gown.

“We’re finished, Don Ignacio,” she says. “It’s time to return to the campfire before we’re missed.”

But when she sees his tail hanging out of the top, she grins. “On second thought,” she says, “stay exactly where you are.”