
BOUND TO THE JERK

AMARYLLIS LANZA



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Anyway, this is how I got
vengaged

My worst nightmare sat on the barstool across from my dad, at the Esquina Minina on Calle Ocho, sipping on a *guarapo* and making a face like he didn't like the taste of sugarcane or he had a problem with me. That part hadn't changed in seven years. He was bulkier now, muscle-wise, and had some weird tattoos on his neck and arms that made him look like a hoodlum. No surprise. Mark Finley was anything but a clean cut good boy, even when he *was* a boy. He was always trouble. He was always a bully. Mark was the reason I cried myself to sleep every night through middle school and high school. The only mercy was that he was two years older than me and graduated before I did. Still, after he wasn't there to tease, insult, and torture me himself, the harm he'd done endured. They called me Chicken Legs even as I walked to get my diploma with my knobby knees hidden under my black graduation gown. All thanks to Mark Finley, the jerk.

“*Nena*, good you're back, *sientate*,” my father said pointing to the barstool next to Mark, with a smile that was much too generous and eyes that were far too strained.

“No thanks, *Papi*,” I said, straightening my back and looping my thumb on the navy strap of my backpack. “*Tengo mucho que hacer. Mucha tarea. Homework to grade.*”

Usually, the mention of homework was enough to get my father off my back. It both awed and intimidated him that I had become a schoolteacher. It was something my mother had always wanted for me to do. In honor of her memory, any mention of school took priority over whatever my father might want me to spend my time on. I didn’t abuse that. If he needed help at the restaurant or around our apartment upstairs, I helped. But right now the only customer in the place was Mark, and he already had a drink he evidently hated as much as I loved it.

“Give them all stars and sit down,” my father insisted, his smile stretching uncomfortably. “At their age, it will make them feel good and it does not harm.”

“Even second graders need goals, *Papi*,” I said. “And it’s not fair to those who try hard to give those who don’t try the same credit.”

Mark snorted. I shot him one of my infamous ‘Miss Sanchez does not approve’ looks, which I had inherited from my mother. They usually put even the most rowdy of my kids back in their chairs. His vicious, icy blue eyes met mine in challenge, and he did not look away. God, I hated this man.

“Sit, Katrina,” my father insisted, breaking the spell. “We have important business to discuss. This cannot wait.”

“Fine.” I sat to Mark’s left with two empty barstools between us.

My father sighed, went up to the large metal juicer and fed it two cane stalks to mash up, making an infernal noise that was also strangely soothing, and collecting the juice in a glass filled with crushed ice chips. Then he stuck in a straw and placed the guarapo in front of me on the counter. “¿*Quieres*

pastelito de carne?” he asked. “They’re fresh from the lunch delivery.”

The mention of the flaky meat pastry made my stomach rumble a bit, but I felt like this whole thing was a setup. I turned down the *pastelito* and sucked on the cool, earthy cane juice. The air conditioning was strong at the cafeteria restaurant, but I was still overheated after my long drive home from Riviera Elementary in Kendall, where I taught summer school. My Toyota was on its last legs. Hot water kept splashing on my feet from the engine. I couldn’t keep the air on unless I wanted my pedal foot to get scalded, so I coped with the windows open. In July, in Miami, that meant either being steamed to death like a lobster or getting pelted by torrential raindrops. I had to get that fixed. Soon. Eventually.

“This is Mr. Mark Finley,” my father said, as though I didn’t already know. “He has offered to cover the bank loan, and to advance me some capital to keep La Esquina open a while longer, until we get back on our feet. It’s enough to make some improvements, even, to the kitchen. New freezer, too. You know we need that.”

“Why?” I asked, keeping my eyes focused on the little ice chips in my glass, stabbing at them with my straw.

“He is an investor. That’s what he does — restaurants, cafeterias *y tiendas de barrio*. Your uncle Luis recommended him to me.”

“Your *friend*, Luis,” I corrected, markedly.

Luis was not my uncle by a long shot and was the sort of friend who brought nothing but grief. My mother had always disapproved of him, because of his shady connections. After Mama died, Luis had come around to hang out with my dad too often. My father was good to me, and I loved him, but he had always relied on my mother for strength. People who didn’t have his best interests in mind easily influenced Papa. There was the whole rooster fights thing too, which I didn’t

really want to think about. Luis organized those out on his cassava farm in Homestead. Papa had a weakness for gambling and an awful sense of whatever it took for a rooster to survive a spur knife fight. That was why there wasn't enough money to fix up the restaurant, or to repair the Toyota, or for much else, really.

My father obviously knew this was going south quick, at the mention of Luis. He kept wiping down the clean counter. I guess he was waiting for me to say more, but I wasn't about to. Not in front of Mark.

Speaking of Mark, I could feel his eyes on me, like he was waiting for me to do anything he could jump on. The thing is, it's really hard to bait a second-grade teacher. We may seem sweet, but we have gator skin and we know how to use silence as a weapon.

"Anyway, it's five-hundred-thousand dollars, so more than enough," my father said. "Much more. And we get to keep La Esquina."

I stared at my father in shock that he could be so gullible. Nobody gave out a half a million dollars for a place like this. Mark could probably start his own franchise of small Cuban cafeterias for less, and it made little sense that he would want to. Mark wasn't a Cuban cafeteria sort of guy. A strip club would make more sense for him as an investment. He must launder money, I figured.

"I don't have a say, Papa," I said, bitterly. "You own the place. If that's what you want, then do it. Leave me out of it."

"I can't, *nena*," my father said. "Mr. Finley has a requirement for his investment which affects you."

"And what would that be?" I asked, still refusing to look at Mark. "I'm not signing my name to the contract, if that's what you mean. Though knowing Luis's friends, they might still try to collect from me if you default." I made sure my father

understood what I meant. He went back to wiping a clean spot on the counter.

“You have to marry me,” Mark said, spitting out the words my father was choking on. “You marry me, I give your father all the money he needs.”

“Are you *crazy*?” I looked at Mark. “Why the hell would I do that for any amount of money?”

“*Katrina, el banco nos va a hechar a la calle,*” my father said, without looking up from whatever stain he saw on the linoleum counter. “We’ll be out on the streets at the end of the month. It’s all mortgaged. It’s all in default. Your school was expensive...”

“I paid for my school, Papa!”

“Your mother’s cancer left us with a lot of bills,” he said. “The insurance didn’t cover very much. The restaurant hasn’t been doing as well lately.”

“And you keep betting on loser *gallos*!” I couldn’t hold back. I was seeing spots. My skull felt like it was cracking. I was boiling again, even with the air conditioning, despite the *guarapo*. I was cooking from the inside out. “You know what, never mind. No. It’s as simple as that. No. We’ll close. I have a salary. I’ll get an apartment for us.”

“It would break your mother’s heart,” my father said, “to know I failed you both. I’m sorry, *mi hija*, but there’s more you don’t know.”

“More?”

“Some of the money I owe, I don’t owe to the banks.” His shame was clear, but I felt very little pity for the man.

“*Desgraciado,*” I spat. “*Imbecil.* If Mother was still alive, this would kill her. I am not a chicken or a cow. You cannot sell me.”

“I’m not *selling* you,” my father said. “You should be married, anyway. A girl your age being single isn’t right. Your mother and I married when she was eighteen. Mr. Finley

comes from an excellent family, and he can take care of you. You will have a much better life.”

“What century do you live in, *Papá*? I’m only twenty-two. I don’t have to be married until I’m ready to be married, and that might be never. It doesn’t matter. It’s none of your business. You don’t decide that. And this man is an *asshole*. I hate him. I will *never* marry him. In fact, if he was the only man left on Earth, I’d rather die single.”

“You apologize to Mr. Finley this minute!” my father barked. He had never raised his voice to me, and it shook me to the core. “We raised you better than that!”

“No,” I said. Then, I hopped off the stool and tried running to the back to go upstairs to our apartment. A firm hand grabbed my upper arm and pulled. Suddenly, I was face to face with the bully.

“What’s your problem with me?” Mark seethed. His eyes were two icicles piercing right through my head, searching for something.

“Are you *kidding*?” I asked.

“I don’t have a sense of humor,” he said in a deadpan voice that was deeper and darker than I remembered it. It sent a shiver down my spine that cooled me off right away. “What is your deal?”

“You made my life hell for long enough,” I said, pulling the courage from my toes. My heart had fallen to my feet. “I’m not letting you do it to me ever again.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked. Mark was serious. I could read it in his face. He didn’t remember me at all.

“Why would you want to marry Chicken Legs, Mark?” I asked, confident that would remind him. “Why would you want to pay half a million dollars for *that*?”

His features were painted with confusion for a moment, then they switched to something like amused contempt. He

looked me over like I was a sports car he was thinking of taking for a test drive.

“Your legs look fine to me,” he said. “You’re skinny, and your taste in clothes is awful, but I can work with what you’ve got.”

“Work *with what I’ve got?*”

“Here’s what matters,” Mark said. “Your father said you’re still a virgin. Is that true or not? I’ll have it checked, but I’ll take your word for now.”

I tried to slap him with my free arm, but he gripped my wrist tight before I could make contact with his hard cheek.

“Papa, if you make me do this, I will never forgive you,” I said, without taking my eyes off Mark. “And you, Mark, will be very sorry you ever made this cursed deal.”

“Are you still a virgin?” Mark pressed his point, hammering on every word. I guess he found his answer in my face without my having to say it. “Good, then we have a deal, Mr. Sanchez,” he said, with a twisted grin, still keeping his eyes fixed on me. “I’ll take her. You’ll have your first wire in the morning, the second payment in cash when she passes the medical and the balance after the wedding.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” I argued, but I could see from his face he wouldn’t be taking no for an answer. Mark had changed, and not for the better. If he was a bully before, he had become a killer since. I was sure of that.

“For your own sake, if nothing else, do as you are told,” Mark said.

“I’ll get my vengeance for this forced engagement, Mark Finley,” I said, speaking slowly, so he heard every word. “I am going to make you sorry you were ever born.”

“We’ll see about that,” he said. “But first, you’re going to make me a very wealthy man.”