



Private Acts

Copyright © February 2012, Delaney Diamond
Cover art by Mina Carter © February 2012

Amira Press
Charlotte, NC 28227
www.amirapress.com

ISBN: 978-1-937394-29-5

No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared by any electronic or mechanical means, including but not limited to printing, file sharing, and e-mail, without prior written permission from Amira Press.

Chapter One

It was good to be back.

Miguel Delgado inhaled deeply, appreciating the familiar sounds and smells of his birthplace in the highlands of Ecuador. After the street vendor handed him the small bag filled with *chifles*, he paid her and walked away. He popped one into his mouth, enjoying the crunch of the thinly sliced fried bananas. They were one of the things he'd missed during his last sojourn to the States. After he arrived earlier today, he took a short nap before deciding to venture out.

He turned down a side street toward the bar owned by his friend, Seth, a former military man from Texas who'd first visited Cuenca over ten years ago. He'd met and fallen in love with a Cuencaran, chucked his life in the States, and opened Seth's Bar for other transplants like himself. Expats from the English-speaking countries of the United States, Canada, and Britain frequented the spot.

Monday nights were rowdy and as busy as weekend nights because it was Karaoke Night. As a form of appreciation, customers donated cash, all of which was placed in a jar as prize money for the most popular singers.

Miguel stood inside the door for a moment and watched as another wannabe singer walked awkwardly back and forth across the small stage, singing a fifties song in the worst falsetto he'd ever heard. He couldn't understand why anyone would stand up on a stage and put the spotlight on themselves in that way. It wasn't worth the money. To think, people in bars around the world sang karaoke for *free*.

He walked up to the bar, and after he caught his friend's eye, shook his head. "How can you put up with this noise?" He gestured toward the stage.

Seth laughed, grabbing his hand over the bar and shaking it vigorously. "After ten years, I don't even hear them anymore." Before Miguel could ask, Seth opened an Ecuadorian beer and set it on the polished wood in front of him.

He tipped the bottle in thanks and took a swallow.

"So how was Miami?" Seth asked.

“The same. I’m glad to be back.”

The tension between him and his mother had mounted to an unpleasant level, but the meeting with his art agent had gone well. Several of his sculptures had sold above the asking price with buyers clamoring for more.

“Yeah, I’m glad I left that rat race. There’s no place like Cuenca, am I right?”

“No place like it,” Miguel agreed. He came to the realization a long time ago and never missed the hustle and bustle of larger cities when he was home.

“What about Miguelito?” Seth asked. He always referred to Miguel’s eleven-year-old brother as “little Miguel” because of how much they looked alike, despite having different fathers.

Miguel dropped onto one of the bar stools and raked his fingers through his hair. Aarón had sulked in his room from the moment he arrived, but any attempts he made to find out what was wrong had met with resistance. The harder he pushed, the more withdrawn his brother became. His mother hadn’t been any help, claiming nothing was wrong. But he knew she didn’t see it because she chose not to. She would rather cater to the needs of her latest lover than acknowledge any problems in the relationship between her and Aarón.

“I know he’s unhappy, but he won’t talk to me.”

“He will when he’s ready,” Seth said with confidence as he wiped down the bar. “Think of yourself at that age.”

“I barely remember it.”

In truth, he remembered eleven quite well, but he wished he didn’t. Twenty years ago he’d been a bitter, angry youth, and it hadn’t been a pleasant period in his life. He hoped his brother didn’t experience the same turmoil he had.

In addition to meeting with his art agent, the visit to Miami had been meant to get his brother to open up to him, but it seemed he’d clammed up even more. He would have to endure his brother’s stoicism until he felt ready to talk, but he would not give up.

The sound of applause and cheers from the crowd caught his attention. The first performer had left the stage, and a new performer, a woman, had taken his place. She was the reason the crowd had gone wild. She tapped the microphone to check the acoustics and smiled at the audience. With her dark skin, she stood out from the other patrons of a paler complexion. Outside of the small number of Afro-Ecuadorians in the country, it was unusual to see blacks in town.

“*Hola amigos!*” she said, resulting in an enthusiastic response of hollering and whistling from the crowd. She even received an enthusiastic greeting from the women.

“Who is she?”

“*That* is Samirah Jamison.”

Miguel glanced at his friend, who stood staring at the stage with his beefy arms crossed over his chest and a goofy smile on his face. His gaze slid back to the stage. Who was this woman that she warranted such a reception from the entire bar?

She was attractive, he admitted, with long black hair parted in the middle and allowed to tumble into waves past her shoulders, brushing each cheek to frame her face. In fact, she looked like a piece of art. His artist eyes took a slow tour of her body, taking in each line and curve. The brightly-colored fitted shirt dipped to a vee over her abundant breasts. The shirt tucked into the waistband of a pair of denim, painted-on white capris that left little to the imagination and accentuated the hourglass narrowness of her waistline.

His eyes made their way back up to her face and the brilliant smile she wielded like a weapon at her admirers. She must be a good singer to elicit such adoration. At least he thought so until she started singing her rendition of “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor.

At first he couldn’t believe how bad she was, but twenty-five seconds in the song picked up tempo, and so did she. The crowd started clapping when she pulled the mike from the stand and began to dance around the stage. She made eye contact with patrons at the first few tables, leaning forward to sing to individuals in the audience.

Silver hoops peeked between the strands of her thick hair and caught the light as she moved her body, gyrating her hips and sashaying across the stage while enthusiastically singing off key. She was obviously enjoying herself, holding her head up high and waving her hands with attitude about how she would survive.

Miguel found himself enthralled like everyone else, unable to take his eyes off of her. What she lacked in singing ability, she more than made up for in her performance. At one point, she turned her back to the audience and looked over her shoulder, crooning into the microphone with one hand on her swaying hips and a seductive smile on her lips. His body reacted to her movements. His groin muscles contracted as she teased him and every red-blooded man in the place into noticing her generous backside—and imagining doing all sorts of salacious things to it.

Miguel picked up his beer and took a sip to wet his suddenly dry tongue. As she neared the end of the song, she incorporated a shimmy, moving her body in a snakelike, provocative manner.

She stopped for a moment to lift her right hand in the air to hit a particularly difficult note—which she didn't hit. As the song ended, her arm reached for the ceiling, and her head fell back as she became lost in the music. She held the pose for long seconds as the customers jumped to their feet and clapped.

She hadn't removed an item of clothing, but her performance resulted in the same reaction as a strip tease. Miguel remained frozen, his eyes riveted on the smooth column of her throat and the tight arch of her body. An uncomfortable, tightening sensation spread across his chest, and he released his suspended breath.

"*That is Samirah,*" Seth yelled over the noise of thunderous applause he joined in with everyone else.

Samirah took a deep bow, allowing her hair to fall forward in a shiny black sheath before standing upright to descend the stairs with the help of one of the male patrons. She'd cast a spell over the entire crowd. Men and women alike gave her high fives as she made her way back to the bar. She appeared to be the kind of woman who got noticed wherever she went, and

she was the kind of woman who enjoyed being noticed. It was evident in the confident way she glided through the tables, shoulders thrown back and head held high.

She didn't acknowledge Miguel's presence when she bounced up and slapped her palms on top of the bar.

"What will it be, gorgeous?" Seth asked. Miguel noticed the unmistakable lowering of his friend's voice.

Samirah tucked her hair behind her left ear, giving Miguel a good view of her delicate features—a small ear, the roundness of her chin, and a mouth with a plump lower lip. With the soft curve of her luscious mouth, he got the impression she laughed often.

"Ginger ale, but only a little bit of ice." She reached toward the pocket of her pants.

"Hey, hey!" Seth chided her. "You know your money's no good here." He added two cubes of ice to the glass.

"Seth, you can't continue to let me drink for free." She leaned forward and whispered, "The other customers will get mad."

He set the filled glass on the counter and dropped in a straw, leaning toward her. "I've got you covered, gorgeous."

Miguel slipped another *chifle* into his mouth as he watched the exchange. His neck muscles grew taut, and he crunched down much harder than normal. Had Seth forgotten he was happily married? That was the second time he'd called her gorgeous, and Miguel felt an unnatural elevation in his temperature. His friend's flirtations irritated him. Maybe he needed to be reminded he had a damn wife at home.

"You're too good to me." She blew him a kiss and picked up the glass.

When Seth walked away to take care of another customer, she took a sip. Then she lifted her eyes to his face, and for a moment he felt like he'd been clobbered in the chest. The curiosity in her dark brown eyes played out in her next words.

"¿Te conoꝑco?"

He couldn't blame her for asking, considering he'd been staring at her since she walked up. Her Spanish pronunciation was good, but she definitely

had an accent, and he guessed her to be from either Canada or the United States. “I speak English,” he replied. “And no, you don’t know me.”

He caught a few *chiffles* between his fingers and popped them into his mouth.

* * * *

Samirah was used to getting attention. In fact, she thrived on it because, as the youngest of three, she’d sometimes felt overshadowed by the perfection of her older brother and sister. But something about this man’s attention unnerved her. He looked like he wanted to pop her in his mouth the way he had the savory snack.

She’d never seen him in the bar before, which was no surprise, since this was a gringo bar. He presented a feast for the eyes. A scar above his left eye sliced through his dark brow. The pale slice of fibrous tissue, rather than detracting from his physical appearance, served to enhance it by adding a dangerous edge to his features. The light blue pools of his eyes, almost piercing in their intensity, seemed to swallow her, a striking contrast to his dark hair and swarthy skin. It wasn’t as if she’d never seen a good-looking man before, but his European and Amerindian features blended together to create a perfect storm of masculine beauty.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s not polite to stare?” she asked.

“Can you blame me? You put on quite a show, Samirah.”

Sab-meerr-ah.

Having traveled all over the world, and with Miami as her home base, she was quite familiar with accents. Still, the sound of his voice, with his rich Spanish intonation saying her name, caused goose bumps to prickle her skin.

Samirah shrugged. “I like to have fun.”

“Have you ever won?”

“If I win tonight”—she held up three fingers—“it’ll be three weeks running.”

“After such enthusiastic applause, I can’t imagine anyone else robbing you of the title.”

“Neither can I.”

Samirah knew her singing sucked, as did most people who sang karaoke. To differentiate herself from the rest, she put on a big performance, and the audience loved it.

No one could really understand how much “I Will Survive” resonated with her after the rough six months she’d had back in Miami. After the embarrassment of getting fired from a job she loved, for months she hadn’t been able to find employment, and the tiny balance in her bank account had dwindled to zero. Her refrigerator had been so empty, if she’d yelled into it she would have heard an echo.

Ecuador’s currency was the U.S. dollar. If she managed to make as much tonight as she had the other nights, she would have over a thousand dollars to put in her savings. Not bad for five minutes a week.

“You’re very confident.”

Samirah laughed. “If I don’t believe in myself, who will?”

“True.” He picked up his bottle of beer and took a sip. “So where are you from, Samirah?”

“I like to think of myself as a citizen of the world.”

“Are you always so evasive?”

She smirked. “Daddy taught me never to talk to strangers. Consider yourself lucky I’ve carried on a conversation with you for the last few minutes.”

She took a good look at him, letting her eyes travel over his longish hair, swept back from his face to fall against the collar of his long-sleeved shirt. The white color emphasized the tan hue of his complexion. Her eyes settled below the open button where a necklace made of black cord rested against his chest. The cord supported a few colorful beads, in the middle of which hung the sharp white tooth of some predator.

His eyes narrowed to pale blue slits. “How can I get to know you better?”

“You can’t. Don’t get me wrong,” she added hastily. “You’re an attractive man, but I don’t feel like being bothered.”

One thick brow jumped in surprise. He probably wasn't used to being turned down. She couldn't believe she'd managed to do it herself, considering how attractive she found him.

"So you think I'm a bother?"

"Like I said, don't take it the wrong way, but I'm not in Ecuador for long."

"All the more reason why we should get to know each other quickly."

She cocked a brow at him. "Do you ever give up?"

"Not when I see something I want," he drawled.

Samirah had fallen for enough bad boys to know when she met one. Underneath the unassuming white shirt and jeans and the clean-shaven face lurked danger. She was certain of it.

"I'm flattered, but I'll have to pass." She feigned disinterest, even though her pulse fluttered at the thought of getting to know him better. But with the drama she'd left behind in Miami, she'd made a promise to enjoy her short stay and treat it as an extended vacation. She would remain focused, which meant no men allowed.

"Pity," he murmured.

Samirah flipped her hair over one shoulder and cast a sidelong glance in his direction. She wasn't opposed to having a fling. In fact, the number of men she'd slept with would have her pastor father dropping to his knees to pray for her soul. However, with less than two months left in her Ecuador assignment, and a vow she'd made to herself and her older sister, she didn't want to get involved with anyone at the moment—though he certainly threatened the durability of her resolve.

"It's a matter of using good common sense," she said, as if she lived by those rules every day.

"And there is nothing I can do to change your mind?"

"Nope."

"Even if I get Seth to vouch for me?"

He was nothing if not persistent. "It seems like your English is not so good. Let me spell it out for you so you can understand. N-O."

A young man, a regular who looked barely old enough to be in a bar, walked up. With an awkward glance at the Ecuadorian, he asked, “Samirah, you want to come sit with us?”

“Sure, John.” She flashed the young man her best smile and picked up her glass. “Nice to meet you,” she said to the stranger.

With a wave of her fingers, she followed behind the younger man. After a few steps, she turned to find the hunk at the bar now on his feet, watching her intently with a half-smile on his face. He eyed her backside like he wanted to bend her over right then and there, and her breath stopped somewhere in her throat.

Their eyes locked, and a shiver passed down her spine. For the space of a few seconds, she toyed with the idea of giving in. He met her standard criteria: tall, unusually so for an Ecuadorian—about six-three—and male. What her sister didn’t know...no, *no*. A promise was a promise. Her impulsive nature had gotten her into several jams over the years, and this time she would err on the side of safe and boring.

With an exaggerated sway of her hips, Samirah headed over to one of the tables to sit with the group of young men and wait for the results of the karaoke competition.

About the Author

Delaney Diamond (delaneydiamond.com) was born and raised in the U.S. Virgin Islands and has been an avid reader for as long as she can remember. She is the bestselling author of sweet and sensual romance with multicultural characters.

In her spare time she reads romance novels, mysteries, thrillers, and a fair amount of nonfiction. A diehard foodie, when her head's not buried in a book, she's in the kitchen trying out new recipes or dining at her favorite restaurants with friends. She speaks fluent conversational French and can get by in Spanish.