



PLAIN
Fame

BOOK ONE

SARAH PRICE

Plain Fame

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New York City was as crowded as ever, and traffic was backed up for miles. Alejandro leaned his head against the plush headrest of his private limousine and shut his eyes for a few moments. After weeks of traveling, he was tired. Tired of living out of quickly packed suitcases, tired of hotels, tired of the lack of privacy. He missed the heartwarming sun, the long sandy beaches, and the quiet of his own home in beautiful Miami. He made a mental note to remind his assistant to stop scheduling these trips for a while. He just needed some time to recuperate, to take a step back, to reexamine his life, and to recharge his batteries.

“*Ay, mi madre,*” he said to himself. Then, leaning forward, he tapped on the glass that separated him from his driver. “*¿Qué está pasando? ¿Por qué hay tanto tráfico?*” He couldn’t imagine why there was so much traffic at this hour. It wasn’t even noon, but it was well past the morning rush hour. Yet the streets were packed, bumper to bumper. Even more frustrating were the pedestrians, ignoring traffic signals and crossing when they shouldn’t. That was adding to the traffic. Alejandro sighed. He was going to be late.

The driver glanced back and shrugged his shoulders in the casual manner of a typical New Yorker. “Traffic, my man. It’s just traffic.”

“*Dios mío,*” Alejandro complained under his breath. “We are going to make it in time, *si?*” His voice was deep and husky but thick with a Spanish accent. To the knowing linguist, he was Cuban. To the average American, he was just another Hispanic.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t sweat it,” the driver said.

Don’t sweat it, Alejandro repeated to himself and shook his head. Spoken by a man who drives a limousine for a living, he thought. “If I’m late . . .” he said but chose not to complete the sentence. In reality, so what if he was late? It was only a meeting with Richard Gray, the largest music producer in America. But it was Richard Gray who had contacted him, Alejandro Diaz. It was Richard Gray who had requested the meeting, a lunch meeting, and that took all of the pressure off Alejandro’s shoulders. He was in control of this one. He was being sought after by

the big man.

The stretch limousine lurched forward, and the driver started to finally regain some speed. The traffic seemed to be breaking up somewhat, permitting the driver to make up some time, and Alejandro began to relax. They'd get there on time. It was only twenty blocks from the hotel to the restaurant where the meeting was to take place. But they still had to pass through Times Square and Seventh Avenue by Madison Square Garden.

"Don't these people work?" Alejandro grumbled as he began fiddling with his cell phone. Three texts from his manager, and two from his agent. He was lucky. It was usually triple that amount. A slow day. Must be a Tuesday, he thought grimly. The only slow day of the week. And still, he had meetings and appointments and e-mails and text messages. When had life started to get so crazy? he asked himself.

He heard the crash before he actually recognized the jolt for what it was. The driver had slammed on his brakes, the car screeching to a halt, but not before the thud on the hood of the car made it apparent that something had been hit. Alejandro fell forward, despite the fact that the limo had not been driving over twenty miles an hour, if that. When he picked himself up from the floor and sat back on the black leather seat, he tried to assess what had happened.

"You all right back there?" the driver asked, his voice shaking and his face pale.

"*Sí, sí,*" Alejandro said, trying to calm himself. An accident. What were the odds of that? And why today of all days? He glanced around but didn't see another vehicle in front of the limousine. "What happened?"

"Hit someone. A jaywalker," the driver replied before picking up his cell phone and dialing 911.

The crowd was already gathering around the front of the car. People. There were always crowds of people around when he wanted them, but especially when he didn't. This was one of those moments. Alejandro exhaled loudly. Now he'd definitely be late. There was no way that he could get out of the limousine in this crowd without being recognized, and that would be the kiss of death. He could see the headlines already: "Viper Strikes Pedestrian in Manhattan."

He tried to do a quick calculation of how the next hour or two would pan out. The police would come and want to interview him. The crowd would gather, the traffic would be thick, and it would become a mob scene. He'd have no choice but to get out. Alejandro sighed, reaching into his suit pocket for his black sunglasses. If he had to get out and face the crowd, better to do it early on rather than look like he was avoiding it. And when the inevitable lawsuit happened, it would look better if he had seemed concerned. With that, the decision was made.

The driver turned around, just about to say something when he noticed Alejandro reaching for the door handle. "What are you doing, sir?" There was panic in his voice. "You can't get out, sir. They'll notice you. There will be a mob!"

Alejandro nodded. "Exactly. But if I don't, that will be even worse than if I get out now."

It would be a different headline then: "Viper Indifferent to Struck Pedestrian in Manhattan." That would never do; so, ignoring the concern of his driver, he pulled at the door handle and flung the door back, careful to not hit anyone who was standing nearby.

It took a second, maybe two, for the beginning of the murmuring to trickle through the crowd. He heard it, the gentle hum of recognition. Whispers, looks, people pointing, and then the name: Viper. They were already talking about him. Out of the corner of his eye, Alejandro could see the cell phones lifted above the crowd so that people could take photos. He knew better than to react. Instead, he ignored it and hurried to the front of the car. He pushed past several people, making certain to say, "Excuse me" as he did so. Manners, his mother had always taught him. No matter what the situation, a man had to be civilized and mannerly. He wondered where running over pedestrians in New York City ranked in Alecia's list of mannerly behavior.

When he finally made his way to the front of the limousine, he noticed two men leaning over a woman.

"Is she all right?" Alejandro asked, pulling at his pants as he knelt down beside them.

"She's hurt bad," one man said, glancing over his shoulder at Alejandro. He frowned as if recognizing him but returned his attention to the woman.

"But is she responding?" Alejandro asked. He reached out for the woman's hand. Holding it in his, he was glad to feel her fingers twitch and clutch at his hand. He looked at her quickly. Her face was rolled to the side, and her eyes were closed. The color had drained from her cheeks, so her brown hair, pulled back from her face, gave a sharp contrast to her pale skin. There was no blood, and for that, he gave a quick prayer of gratitude to God. But she was lying in a crumpled heap, one of her legs twisted in a crooked fashion underneath her light-blue dress, over which she wore a black apron. "My driver called for an ambulance. I wouldn't recommend moving her until they get here."

The driver was standing on the other side of the woman. "They said five minutes." He looked around at the traffic. It was even worse now since the limousine was blocking the intersection. "Like to see how they'll manage that."

As Alejandro continued to hold the woman's hand, he became well aware that people were beginning to take photographs. He frowned and motioned toward the driver. "Give me your jacket."

"What?"

"Your jacket! To cover her. They're starting to take photos," Alejandro snapped, trying to keep his voice down so that he was not overheard.

The driver quickly shook his black jacket off his shoulders and handed it to Alejandro. Carefully, he laid it over the woman, hiding her face from the people who were taking pictures with their cell phones.

"Is she dressed in a costume?" the driver asked.

Alejandro looked up, caught off guard by the question. "Costume?"

"She looks like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*."

"She's Amish, you idiot," someone said from the crowd that was now forming on the sidewalk.

Alejandro wanted to ask what "Amish" was but didn't want to draw further attention to himself or to the situation than what was needed. Right now, all the media could say was that his driver hit the woman and he, Alejandro Diaz, had stayed by her side until the ambulance came. The police would soon arrive, question him, and then he'd be on his merry way to his meeting with Richard Gray. The worse thing that could happen was some minor damage to his bad-boy image.

The woman fluttered her eyes, trying to make sense of what was happening as she began to awaken. The color started to return to her cheeks. Her chocolate-brown eyes tried to make sense of all the people staring at her from above. "Where am I?" she asked.

"Oz, according to that guy!" someone from the crowd quipped.

Alejandro glared over his shoulder at the man who was laughing, then looked back at the woman from behind his dark sunglasses. "You've been hit by a car," he said gently. "Don't try to move. Help is on the way, Princesa."

But she didn't listen. When she tried to lift herself, she winced and fell back down to the street. "My leg," she whimpered, collapsing against Alejandro's body. He was still holding her hand, and she clung to it, her head buried against his leg.

Alejandro lowered his voice. "You're going to be fine, but wait for the medical people. You can't move, Princesa." He stared at her face, tanned with some freckles over the tops of her cheeks. She was fresh looking, like a country girl. The driver was right. She did resemble Dorothy with her blue dress and black apron. Except she had a white heart-shaped covering for her head that had been knocked off and lay in the middle of the street, a tourist stepping on one of the strings.

When she looked at him again, her dark eyes trying to make sense of what was happening to her, he felt a jolt. For as young and fresh as she was, she was also remarkably beautiful in a natural way that completely took him by surprise. Her tan skin glowed in the sun rays that trickled through the skyscrapers. Her dark hair was pulled back from her face, a few loose strands curling down her neck. No makeup or fancy hairstyle. Just a plain beauty that caught him off guard.

"My family," she whispered, moisture at the corner of her eyes.

"May I call someone for you?" His voice was soft, almost a whisper so that the people surrounding them couldn't hear, as he tightened his grasp on her hand. He was surprised when she clasped it, her grip strong, and he found himself staring into her face, once again amazed at how beautiful she looked.

Despite the clear pain that she was in, the young woman was still stoic and dignified, hiding her discomfort. Yet when she tried to shake her head, a single tear trickled down her cheek. "We don't have a phone. They need to know," she said, her voice trailing off.

No phone? Not even a cell phone? He frowned but didn't inquire further. He could hear the sirens in the distance. He imagined the police would arrive first, and from that point on, he'd be questioned, then able to leave. Another thirty minutes, he thought. Forty-five, tops.

"What is your name, Princesa?"

"Amanda," she whispered. "Amanda Beiler."

Alejandro nodded, aware that she had a slight accent. He couldn't quite place it. It wasn't European, and it certainly wasn't from South America. But it was different from the other American accents. "If you tell me your address, I'll make certain that a message gets to your family."

She clutched his hand, and he leaned forward. "Creek Road in Lititz, Pennsylvania." She paused, shutting her eyes as tears started to well at the corners. "They think I'll be home tonight for my chores."

He laughed softly and caressed her hand with his thumb. "You won't be home for chores tonight, Amanda Beiler. But you'll be just fine." He paused before adding, "I'll make sure of it." She was the image of innocence and clearly a long way from home. While he knew nothing about Lititz, Pennsylvania, he suspected it was far from Philadelphia or Pittsburgh. And certainly not close to New York City. "I promise," he heard himself say.

He could hear the mumbling behind him. The crowd was beginning to liven up. If people hadn't recognized him before, he knew the word was now floating through the flock. He could sense the energy as more people began to peer over the heads of others, trying to see him, trying to take a photograph of him. The cell phones were in the air snapping shots of Alejandro kneeling beside the Amish woman on the streets of Manhattan. No, he corrected himself. Photos of Viper with the Amish woman. Alejandro wondered which one would wind up on the entertainment channels and the tabloids later on this evening.

The police arrived moments later, their cars making a way through the crowded streets, avoiding the pedestrians who didn't seem to care that they were breaking the law by darting across the road. Once the police had parked their cars, ignoring the other drivers who began honking their horns at being blocked and delayed, two policemen began to push the crowd back, creating a buffer so that the ambulance would be able to get through when it arrived. Another police officer approached Alejandro, quickly assessing that he was a good person to start interviewing.

"What happened here, sir?"

Alejandro glanced up, peering at the officer from behind his dark sunglasses. He tried to pick his words carefully, knowing that too many people were probably recording the scene. What

he said now would most likely be replayed over and over again, on television, on interviews, and in court when the young woman sued for having been hit by his driver.

“I’m not exactly certain,” Alejandro said. “I just know that she was hit by the limousine.”

The officer peered at him for a moment. It was the moment of recognition. “Aren’t you . . . ?”

And so it begins, he thought wistfully. Avoiding the question, Alejandro glanced at the woman. “No disrespect,” he said. “But she’s in a lot of pain, Officer. Do you have any idea when the ambulance will get here?”

To Alejandro’s relief, the officer leaned his chin over to his shoulder, speaking into his walkie-talkie. While the officer was trying to get a reading on the location of the ambulance, Alejandro turned his attention back to the young woman. “Amanda?” he asked softly. “Amanda? You hanging in there, Princesa?”

She nodded slightly. The color drained from her face again, and tears began to fall down her cheeks. “I just wanted a pair of sunglasses,” she said, her words barely audible.

“What?” Uncertain that he had heard her correctly, Alejandro leaned down, trying to hear what she was saying. “What did you say?”

She reached for his hand again, holding it tightly in her own. “While I was waiting for my train,” she whispered. “I was crossing the street for a pair of sunglasses.”

He didn’t have an opportunity to ask her about what she had said. The ambulance was pulling up behind them, the horn beeping for people to get out of the way. The officer in charge motioned for Alejandro to back away so that the paramedics could bring the gurney closer.

Respectfully, he moved back but stopped just a few feet from where she was stretched out on the road. He noticed the white cap lying on the ground a few feet away and stooped to pick it up. Clutching it to his chest, Alejandro watched as the paramedics worked, quickly taking her vital signs and asking a rapid barrage of questions. Within minutes, Amanda Beiler was gently lifted from the streets of Manhattan, placed on the crisp white sheet covering the gurney, and whisked away to a hospital.

Alejandro stared after it, too aware that his cell phone was vibrating in his pocket and the officer was asking him a question. But his mind was elsewhere. This young woman, dressed in such plain clothes and with such a pure, fresh look on her face, lingered in his memory, and he found that he could think of nothing else. She was alone in Manhattan and clearly out of her element. He knew the feeling from his own days as an immigrant with his mother in Miami. And he also knew that he wasn’t going to make that appointment with Richard Gray. Only this was now by his own choice, not because of being delayed by the accident.

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