



Blurb

Will her actions save her marriage or destroy it?

As a publicist for professional athletes, Antonio Vega is used to solving problems and spinning stories to the benefit of his clients. Yet he can't seem to convince his wife that he has been and always will be faithful, and her lack of trust tests the limits of his patience.

Cassidy Hawthorne-Vega grew up in a home rocked by infidelity. When she suspects her husband is hiding something from her, she takes drastic steps to uncover the truth. Her actions result in a confrontation that threatens the bond of their marriage. It's only when she reveals a painful secret from the past that Cassidy learns to accept the love her husband freely gives.

For Better or Worse

by Delaney Diamond

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Chapter One

Antonio Vega was certain that somehow Murphy's Law had managed to set the entire universe against him. There was nothing he could do but go down in the flames and hope that like the phoenix of Greek mythology, he'd rise from the ashes.

Once again he'd screwed up with his wife. Cassidy had been giving him the silent treatment ever since he missed going to the hospital with her several nights ago when she'd driven to Athens to see her newborn nephew, Roarke Hawthorne III. Her sister-in-law had given birth to her second child, but her first with Cassidy's brother. When Antonio told her he couldn't make it because he had a meeting with a client, she'd given him a look that made it clear not only did she not find his answer acceptable, she didn't believe him.

That morning she'd left for work without even looking in his direction, and all he'd caught was a whiff of her perfume as she stalked past him to the garage with her nose in the air.

Then his car wouldn't start. On the way to the office, he'd asked the cab driver to stop at the coffee shop because, as part of his punishment, Cassidy hadn't made any coffee for him this morning. Two minutes after getting the coffee, he'd spilled it on the cab floor, burning his hand in the process.

An accident on the highway caused a traffic jam and prolonged his trip to work. He thought he could use the time to make phone calls, except the phone died in the middle of a conversation because he'd forgotten to charge it. When he stepped out of the vehicle in front of his building, a kid on a skateboard bumped into him and knocked his briefcase from his hand, forcing it open as it hit the pavement and allowing documents to escape and flutter in the wind like bat's wings.

Once he'd chased down and retrieved all his papers—at least that's what he hoped—he entered the building sweaty, bedraggled, and coffee burned.

He stepped off the elevator and walked toward his suite of offices, and his sole consolation was seeing his company name and logo etched in glass—Vega PR Group. He almost smiled.

Lucinda Webb, his office manager, assistant, and practically his business partner because of all she did, fell into step beside him when he entered. She wore rimless glasses and kept her silver hair in a neat bun at all times. Except for her hair, she didn't look her sixty-odd years, and she had as much energy as the rest of the staff, all of whom were about half her age.

“Morning, Antonio.”

She started rattling off problems right away, notepad in hand, pencil poised and ready. “Still no answer from Mark in the sports section at the *LA Times*.”

“Stay on him. We need an answer today.”

“Two more calls from Gossip Police this morning about Mitchell’s DUI. What should I tell them?” Gossip Police was a publicist’s nightmare. The online magazine always managed to get the scoop on problems with celebrities before the major news outlets. They were a thorn in his side.

“Tell them what we’ve been telling them: no comment.”

“Craine’s in trouble again.”

“What for this time?”

“A hooker in Vegas.”

Antonio stopped abruptly. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“I wish I were. Gossip Police has photos, and they’re already posted on their Web site.”

He cursed and rolled his eyes heavenward. Yep, his day kept getting better and better. “Get him on the phone for me. Tell Steven to drop whatever he’s working on, because when I’m finished talking to Craine, I’ll need him to work on the press release on this one. It’s priority.” Steven was one of two full-time publicists working for Antonio. The other was Ronetta. He also had a few freelancers on speed dial.

Lucinda nodded and scribbled on her notepad. “Ventura won’t be able to make lunch with you today.”

“Why the hell not?”

A slow smile brightened Lucinda’s face. “She had the baby.”

Antonio smiled back. “Everybody okay?”

“Yes. Seven pounds, eight ounces, and they’ve named her Elizabeth.”

Finally a bit of good news. “Send the usual, flowers, a card—”

Lucinda waved her hand at him. “I know what to do.” She walked away briskly, back down the hallway, which meant she’d covered the most urgent matters. Nonurgent messages would be sitting on his desk.

Lucinda was his most dependable employee. She’d been with him when he started his company three years ago, coming on as a temp when he had very little money, and now she basically ran the place. He needed to get *her* an assistant before she burned out.

Antonio set his briefcase on the floor beside his desk and placed his jacket on the metal coat tree. He squinted his eyes against the sun’s yellow rays beaming in through the half-open blinds that

covered the entire back wall of the office. Outside, the commercial buildings of downtown Atlanta—banks, retail stores, and other office suites—rose from the pavement, casting shadows on the people and vehicles hurrying along the avenue.

The room, decorated in a minimalist design of steel and glass, only contained a few pieces of furniture: two guest chairs, a couple of four-drawer file cabinets, and a desk, which was basically a long rectangular piece of glass on steel legs. In one corner stood a tall green potted plant that Cassidy had shown up with one day because she insisted his office needed color.

Antonio's days tended toward disorder, but his office was immaculate. A photo of him and Cassidy on their wedding day, a phone, his laptop, a paper tray containing the messages Lucinda left for him, and his favorite pen were the only items on the desk. There was no clutter because everything had its place. He couldn't function in chaos.

The phone rang as he closed the blinds. When he answered, Lucinda announced Michael Craine on the line.

"What happened?" Antonio asked, lowering into the high-back chair and crossing his legs.

Michael launched into an explanation. At the same time, Lucinda quietly entered with a cup of coffee and set it on the desk. She must be clairvoyant. He eyed the cup gratefully and mouthed a thank-you before she slipped back out. He took a sip. Perfect. He really needed to get her an assistant—and a raise.

As a publicist for professional athletes, Antonio was used to them doing foolish things. That's why they needed someone like him. But even he couldn't believe what he was hearing as he listened to his client explain how a member of the paparazzi had taken photos of him leaving a Las Vegas nightclub with an *alleged* hooker on his arm—while in the middle of a custody battle with his ex-wife. As if that wasn't enough, he'd gotten into a scuffle with the cameraman, cracking his camera lens when he shoved him to the sidewalk.

"All right, listen to me," Antonio said when he'd heard enough. "I need you to stay away from nightclubs and hookers, strippers, and any other women of ill repute." Had he really said "ill repute"? He sounded like his father.

"I was just having a little fun. This case is getting to me, man." Craine was an Atlanta Falcons wide receiver. As one of their star players, he was easily recognized, which was not a good thing because of the legal battle with his ex-wife.

Antonio silently sighed. "This is the part where we lay our cards on the table. What's more important to you? Your daughter or your penis?"

“What kind of question is that?” He sounded offended.

“Answer it,” Antonio said testily.

“Man, of course you know it’s my daughter. She’s my everything.”

“Then act like it. Forget about your lower head for a minute, and use the upper one to think about what you could lose. Because if you keep this up, you might as well forget about seeing her unless your ex allows it. Which defeats the purpose of going back to court because you wanted to see your daughter more often, right? We both know how your ex feels about you since you cheated on her during your entire marriage, and this little episode isn’t going to help.”

The other end of the line was quiet. Antonio waited him out.

“You’re right. I just—”

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re a grown man. If you love your daughter and want to keep seeing her without restrictions, you need to make better choices.”

“I messed up.”

“Yeah, you did.” Antonio wasn’t letting up and needed to make sure Michael understood what was at stake, because he’d obviously forgotten.

“You’re right. You know how much I love my baby girl. I didn’t even get to see her on her fourth birthday.” His voice thickened. “How am I going to fix this?”

Antonio rubbed his forehead as he envisioned ways to spin the story and clean up this mess. “We’ll get to work on it right away and touch base with you within the hour with the press release. And Michael?”

“Yeah.”

“Get the hell out of Vegas and come home.”

“I’m on the next flight out.”

Antonio hung up and ran his hand down his face. Although they could sometimes try his patience, he loved his job working with athletes. The problem solving and last-minute scrambles caused an adrenalin rush that kept him high for hours at a time. Bad decisions notwithstanding, underneath their super talent and media persona, they were usually pretty good people—no different from anyone else.

He knew, because his father had played professional baseball. Antonio had come to know athletes and their world very well, and he realized at an early age that what the media printed was often misleading. Often, but not always.

Now that he worked closely with the journalists and gossip bloggers to craft a different perception of those same athletes, his first task when taking on a client was to find out what was most important to them and work that angle. They all had that one thing that motivated them, and contrary to what people thought, 90 percent of the time, it wasn't money.

It might be their competitive spirit. Or it could be earning a championship ring. Or the desire to take care of a wife—even the need to earn approval from an absentee parent. In Michael's case, it was being in the presence of a four-year-old little girl who was his “everything.”

Antonio took a deep breath and fired off an e-mail to Michael's attorney. Then he called Steven, gave him suggestions on how to spin the story, and told him he wanted a draft ready for his review within the hour.

He glanced at his watch. It wasn't even nine o'clock yet.

Cassidy Hawthorne-Vega dropped her notebook on the desk of her cubicle at Demming Technology, an industry leader in software development and network security. She was tired and hungry from having missed lunch because of a day filled with meetings and discussions about new corporate contracts they had won.

Janice Goss leaned over the wall dividing their desks. “What was that about?” She'd been in the last meeting and saw when the team leader pulled Cassidy aside when they adjourned.

“He wanted to make sure I take the exam and apply for my certification.”

“The exam” was the Ethical Hacking and Countermeasures Exam. If she passed, she'd receive the professional designation of Certified Ethical Hacker. It meant an increase in salary, and she'd be a candidate for promotion when another team leader position became available.

Her brother Matthew, who also worked at Demming Technology, ran his own team, having earned his certification as a network security administrator several years ago. He'd encouraged her to apply for one of the limited slots offered to take the training course, and she was glad she did. Being in charge of her own team of hackers made her nervous but excited at the same time.

“So . . . ?”

“Hell yeah I'm taking it.”

Janice squealed and came around to give her a hug. Despite the twenty-five-year difference between them, they'd become good friends over the last two years.

“Do you have any idea how huge this is? There are only two female team leaders in this company, and they're both in network security. You'll be the first one in our department.”

Cassidy grimaced. “No pressure, right?”

“You know what I mean. Our field is dominated by men, and they don’t think we can do what they do. It would be great for you to earn your certification and then become a team leader. And at the ripe old age of twenty-four.”

“I know. I’m still overwhelmed by it all.”

“You can do it, Cassidy. I have confidence in you. Stay focused. Girl power!” Janice stuck out her fist. Cassidy bumped hers against Janice’s.

Focused. Easier said than done. Lately she hadn’t been able to think about much except her not-so-perfect marriage. Hard to believe she and Antonio had only been married since last year, when she’d had her dream wedding at her family’s vacation home on St. Simons Island in the southern part of Georgia. In the short period since then, they’d gone from happily married to . . . it seemed like strangers sometimes.

Cassidy gathered up her notebook and leather satchel. “Day’s over, so I’m getting out of here.”

“Hey, I know you’re a settled married woman, but do you think you could get permission from your hubby to hang out with me one night? Like we used to?”

Janice had an active social life and enjoyed going out. She and Cassidy used to go clubbing together, but that was BMA—before marrying Antonio. Having spent so much of his young life in the media spotlight because of his famous parents, Antonio preferred quiet evenings at home. They’d learned to compromise. He indulged her desire to go out every now and again, and she satisfied his need to stay in or just spend time with friends and family.

“I’ll see if I can get the old ball and chain to let me out to play one night.”

The truth was, she didn’t really want to go clubbing because it had lost its luster even before she married Antonio. She still liked to go out, but when she did, she preferred to do it with her husband. She just wasn’t so sure he wanted to spend time with her anymore.

A couple of weeks ago, she’d waited at a restaurant for him for over an hour, and he’d never shown up. When she was finally able to reach him, he’d said that he was in a business meeting and lost track of time.

She hadn’t completely forgiven him for that one. She’d felt so foolish, sitting at the table by herself, assuring the waiter that he would arrive soon. In the end, she’d left the restaurant, too embarrassed to order and eat alone.

Cassidy slipped her satchel over her shoulder and waved good-bye. In the parking lot, her phone chimed an alert that she had a text message. It was from Antonio: *Gotta work late. Won't make it home for dinner.*

Company employees poured from the doors behind her like ants escaping a nest, but Cassidy's gaze remained fixed on the screen of her phone, as if the activity around her didn't exist. Her shoulders drooped in defeat. This was nothing new. It had been the norm more often than not lately.

She texted back: *Why?*

Walking quickly to her silver two-seater sports car, she waved to one of her coworkers and then slid behind the wheel. Antonio's text came as she snapped in her seat belt: *Meeting at the W Hotel.*

Another meeting. So he said.

She fired off an angry text before she changed her mind: *With all the meetings you have, you must be the best publicist in the whole country.*

He wouldn't respond. He never did when she made snide remarks.

She started the car and peeled out of the parking lot.

By the time Antonio arrived on his street in a rental car, he'd resigned himself to expect Cassidy's wrath. She had a temper and never hesitated to let him know when she was upset.

Her personality tended toward the extremes, whether happiness or anger. Her mood seldom managed to land anywhere in the middle. Outgoing and bubbly, she lived her life how she wanted. He'd realized he was in love with her when he acknowledged that not only did he look forward to seeing her, but when he didn't, he'd be in a funk.

Everyone loved Cassidy and indulged her whims. All she had to do was flash one of her pretty smiles, pout, or emit a cute laugh, and people fell in line to do her bidding. He knew that all too well, because he was one of her enablers.

He pulled into the driveway of their two-story Cape Cod home in a suburb north of Atlanta. Cassidy had fallen in love with the house, but thought it was too much. He had insisted they could afford it and should buy it if she wanted it. The day they moved in, they stood at the edge of the property line holding hands, and he listened to her say how she could imagine their kids learning to ride their bikes down the tree-lined street in front of the house. With its five bedrooms and six

baths, it was a lot of house for two people, but they planned to have a big family, and the test scores in the school district had cinched their decision.

He sat for a while in the three-car garage, contemplating what to do and what to say, but he came up empty. He rubbed a hand across his brow to stem the headache that had advanced the closer he got to home. Drama was the last thing he wanted to deal with tonight, but the only way to avoid a confrontation with Cassidy was to avoid going in.

“Get in the house, Antonio,” he said to himself.

With a resigned sigh, he went in and trudged upstairs to the master bedroom. The mild scent of gardenias infused the air from containers of potpourri placed around the room.

The first thing he noticed was that Cassidy wasn't in bed as he'd expected. The king bed sat in the center of the wall, neatly made with a pile of different-sized designer pillows against the tufted headboard, giving no indication a man lived there. He never could understand the purpose of all the pillows with their ruffles and flowers, but it was what she'd wanted. Candles of various sizes and colors ran along the top of the mantel of the fireplace in the sitting room off the bedroom. With a quick look, he saw she wasn't in there, either.

The second thing he noticed were the sheets and pillowcases neatly folded and stacked at the foot of the bed. Wondering why they were there, he frowned at the sight and shrugged out of his jacket. He was in the process of removing his tie when the bathroom door opened and Cassidy stepped out. Upon seeing her, he paused with his hand on the knot of his tie. They looked at each other in silence for several long seconds, neither one of them offering a greeting.

A few years ago, she'd stopped relaxing her hair and started wearing it natural. Tonight she'd neatly styled it in thick flat twists that wound from the front of her head to her nape. She often experimented by mixing different oils and creams in the bathroom. Depending on what she'd whipped up, her hair might smell like coconut oil, jojoba, or rose water. For now, he could only smell strawberry-scented bath gel.

She wore a white tank top with spaghetti straps that clung to her like a second skin. The cotton fabric was fitted across her narrow torso and brought stark attention to her small, perky breasts and nipples that stood out like headlights. The color was the perfect foil against skin the color of rich molasses. A pair of powder-blue boy short panties with a lace waistband hugged her hips.

His gaze lingered there for a moment, and his groin tightened. It had been weeks since they'd made love because every time he tried, she wasn't in the mood, or didn't feel well, or whatever other excuse she could think of on the fly.

He ached to get up inside her so bad. She had some nerve walking around like that, making him want to tear the miniscule clothing off her with his teeth. Making him want to press every inch of his hard body against her willowy frame and to hell with what she wanted.

Cassidy finally spoke. "I didn't expect you home so early."

She rested her hands on her hips, spoiling for a fight. She was tiny—a full foot shorter than his six feet two inches—and completely unintimidated by him. Despite the antagonistic stance, her lips, set in an angry moue, looked inviting. She had a full mouth; both her upper and lower lips were plump and soft. Perfect for kissing.

Antonio shifted his gaze to dispel the arousing thoughts that stole into his head and nodded toward the pile on the bed. "What's this?"

"That's for you. I was going to make the bed in one of the guest bedrooms because you're not sleeping in here tonight."

He finished removing his tie. "Like hell I'm not."

About the Author

Delaney Diamond is the USA Today Bestselling Author of sweet, sensual, passionate romance novels. Originally from the U.S. Virgin Islands, she now lives in Atlanta, Georgia. She reads romance novels, mysteries, thrillers, and a fair amount of nonfiction. When she's not busy reading or writing, she's in the kitchen trying out new recipes, dining at one of her favorite restaurants, or traveling to an interesting locale. She speaks fluent conversational French and can get by in Spanish.

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