



### **Blurb**

Does the end justify the means?

Cyrus Johnson is rich, powerful, and used to getting his way. When his estranged wife shows up at his office demanding a divorce once and for all, he not only refuses, he makes a demand of his own.

Daniella Barrett-Johnson has little bargaining power where Cyrus is concerned, and he's already used his vast financial resources to prolong their divorce and keep her tied to him. Her only hope is to give him what he wants, but if she does, how will she ever be able to leave him for good?

# **Perfect**

by Delaney Diamond

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## Chapter One

*Three years ago...*

A million dollars. That's how much money he'd spent.

Daniella Barrett-Johnson stared at her husband in disbelief.

Cyrus Johnson sat in the cushioned chair in the sitting area of their master suite, legs spread wide, the top buttons of his shirt opened and the tie of his tux hanging loose around his neck. She'd held her questioning until after the dinner party, but the entire night she'd been wound as tight as rope, itching to ask him about what she'd been told.

She'd hoped he would tell her it wasn't true. That her ex-boyfriend, Roland DuBois, had lied when he'd said Cyrus had bought his debts for a million dollars in exchange for him breaking up with her and disappearing from her life. Not only had Cyrus not denied the story, he didn't see anything wrong with the bribe. He couldn't understand why she was upset. Had Roland not felt guilty and come clean to her, she would have never known.

*Roland* had come clean to her. Not Cyrus.

She'd seen his ruthless side before, but she hadn't considered she might become a victim of his tactics. Outside of being the CEO of Johnson Enterprises, his family's beer and restaurant empire, he had his own private investments. As recently as two weeks ago he'd outbid other investors to purchase a family-owned company. Within days he'd slashed half the workforce and installed his own people in upper and middle management. When she'd asked him how he could be so callous, he'd simply replied, *"I don't buy these companies to make friends. I buy them to make money."*

What a fool she had been to fall in love with him in the first place. She had seen some good in him once. But the more she got to know him, what good she had seen had been overshadowed by a string of behavior that demonstrated a glaring lack of conscience. Since he'd deceived her on this point, what other areas of their lives had he deceived her in? This was the last straw. He was not the man for her.

She couldn't spend the rest of her life with someone she couldn't trust, teetering back and forth between being proud to be on his arm one minute and ashamed of his behavior the next.

"I wanted you to tell me you didn't do this," she said. *Show some remorse.*

"Then I'd be a liar. I've never lied to you, and I never will."

"No, you'll just deceive me," she said.

“It was a means to an end.” He spoke calmly, as if such behavior was an everyday occurrence. For him it probably was.

“Was it worth it? Did you get your money’s worth?”

“I would have paid much more. Ten times as much to get rid of him so I could have you.” His words should have made her feel better, but they didn’t.

“Why did you have to have me? Why did you feel the need to pay someone to get them out of the way?” She waited, her stomach unsettled by the gnaw of apprehension.

“Because you have all the qualities I looked for in a wife, Dani,” he replied. “That’s why I chose you.”

His answer should have been a compliment, but it disappointed her. If he’d given another reason, she might have considered forgiving him for the breach of trust.

“I’m the perfect woman,” she said bitterly and without conceit.

She fit into the high-profile structure of his life because she’d been groomed almost from birth to marry someone of wealth.

Educated? Check. She had a masters in art history from UC Berkeley.

Poise, charm, and grace? Check. She understood business protocol and the norms for any number of social engagements.

The right background? Check. Her mother, now deceased, had been a model for a few years and her father had made a fortune in commercial real estate before selling his company and retiring to Florida. There were no embarrassing scandals in her past, and like his family, hers could trace their roots back for generations.

“Should I be flattered you chose me and were willing to spend an exorbitant amount of money to get me to marry you?”

“You could be, but I suspect that you aren’t.” He watched her closely, like the shark he was, likely trying to determine what her next move would be, but he had no idea.

She turned away so he wouldn’t see the pain in her face. Cyrus was good at reading people, and it hadn’t been easy to keep her true feelings from him for fear he would use them against her. The stress had taken its toll, and now finding out what he’d done only deepened her distrust of him.

“You’re not sorry at all for what you did, are you?” she asked.

“My only regret is trusting that snake, Roland DuBois, to keep his mouth shut. Frankly Dani, you should be thanking me for getting him out of your life. You needed someone stronger.”

She swung back around. “Someone like you, maybe? A control freak who bullies people into doing what he wants them to?” Cyrus didn’t concern himself with other people’s wants or needs. All that mattered was what he wanted.

“He didn’t deserve you,” he said, as if he hadn’t heard a word she’d said. “What did you ever see in him, anyway—a wannabe entrepreneur in off-the-rack suits.”

“For goodness’s sake, Cyrus, not everyone can afford Brioni.” Every suit and tuxedo he owned was handmade by the designer.

“True.” He looked so smug.

“You’re such an ass.”

He smiled, an unapologetic Master-of-the-Universe smile. The same one that had captured her attention from the beginning and still managed to make her abdomen contract in unwavering attraction. “Yeah, but you like it.”

A thread of acknowledgement went through her at the truth of his words. She did like the strength he exuded and the power he wielded. Perhaps too much. They were sexy traits for sure, and being with a man like him was exciting, until you saw the ugly side of his power. He manipulated people and situations. His actions made old wounds resurface—wounds she’d tried to heal for years but hadn’t been able to.

“I’m a better man than Roland DuBois—” he said the name with a curl of his lips “—could ever dream of being. I’m a man of my word, and I’ll continue to make sure you have everything you could ever want or need.”

Everything, every material possession imaginable was hers if she asked. She fingered her diamond choker. It suddenly felt like a noose, one she’d willingly slipped around her own neck. How could she continue to live with him, knowing he’d blackmailed Roland out of her life? One of his many transgressions, too many to name.

“This changes everything.”

He watched her without flinching. Emotionless. Unfeeling. “For now.”

“For good.”

He rose slowly from the chair. “You’re upset,” he said. “Once you calm down you’ll rethink what you’ve said.”

She hated the way he always made her sound so unreasonable, as if he was the only one who exemplified logic and common sense. “No, I won’t. I’m thinking clearly right now, and I won’t forget what you did. It’s over. I can’t trust you, and I never will.” She pivoted away from him.

“Divorce is not an option,” he said, halting her in her tracks. He hadn’t raised his voice a single decibel. How could he sound so calm in the middle of a monumental argument? She wanted to scream.

She whirled to face him again. “Do you really think you can hold onto me if I want to leave?” she asked, incredulous.

His eyes were as hard as steel. One would think *she* had done something wrong. “You can leave whenever you want, Dani. I won’t hold you against your will. That would be a monstrous thing to do.”

“And everyone knows you’re not a monster,” she said sarcastically.

He began to remove his gold cuff links. Slowly, he slipped each piece of jewelry between its buttonhole. She’d bought them for him, each one monogrammed with his initials, CJ. “You made me a promise, and I expect you to keep it.”

She couldn’t believe he’d brought up the conversation they’d had weeks ago. She laughed, the sound shrill and unnatural. “Don’t hold your breath.”

He didn’t react. If he’d given any indication this argument affected him nearly as much as it did her, perhaps they’d have stood a chance, but her husband rarely expressed emotion. Strict control in his life was paramount at all times, and he actually became even more detached during their arguments.

“Our marriage is over, Cyrus.” She didn’t move, temporarily paralyzed by the magnitude of her decision. Saying the words made it final. She would no longer wrestle with the decision in her head because she’d put it out there in the universe. She’d told him and fully intended to carry through with her decision, no matter how much it pained her. “One of these days someone will deceive you, too, and we’ll see how you like it.”

His silence was unbearable. Since he didn’t respond to her warning, she left him alone to enter the main area of their bedroom. He came up behind her, as stealthy as a big cat, and caught her by the arm. Pushing her back against the wall, he leaned close and barricaded her in with hands on either side of her body.

“Stay away from Roland DuBois,” he said, low and succinct. “If I ever find out he’s made contact with you again, *I will destroy him.*” He paused to let the words sink in.

Her heart tripped in her chest. Cyrus didn’t make idle threats.

His eyes lowered to the bodice of her dress, which dipped low and exposed her full cleavage. He’d bought it for her, a one-of-a-kind Alexander McQueen. The golden lamé sparkled against her

light caramel complexion and fit her figure perfectly. She'd had to admit it was a good choice, and by the look in his eyes, she knew that as much as he liked to see her in it, now Cyrus wanted her out of it as quickly as possible.

She shrank back against the wall, seeking distance between them but finding none.

"Are we done?" she asked. Unable to tolerate being in the same room with him for another minute, she had every intention of spending the night in one of the spare bedrooms on the other side of the house, as far away from him as possible.

"No, we're not done." The words dripped slowly from his lips like warm, heavy syrup. "Time to go to bed." His head dipped to hers and she immediately placed her hands against his broad shoulders to shove him away. Instead of letting her go, he scooped her up and carried her to their large bed.

Pinning her arms above her head, he kissed her the way he wanted to. Slowly, thoroughly. He loved to kiss, and he was extremely good at it. The seductive movements of his lips over hers battered her resistance.

"Don't fight me," he said against her cheek.

He ran one hand down the inside of her arm, over her breasts and down to her hip. She twisted and arched, the heat of his touch warming her skin through the material. Already he had her wanting more.

Cupping one breast, he kissed the line of her cleavage and pulled in frustration at the edge of the gown, seeking her nipple. In his impatience, he ripped the dress down the middle, a dress that had cost him thousands. Daniella gasped.

"I'll buy you another one," he said. He licked the tips of her breasts, unleashing a pool of heat in her belly. "I'll buy you a thousand more," he said to the underside of her breast. His voice was rough with hunger, and the sound of it was like an aphrodisiac.

He reached lower. The gold thong was torn from her hips like a thin layer of tissue, his fingers anxious, his chest heaving with each labored breath.

He pressed her legs apart, and when his face disappeared between her thighs, she let loose a whimper of surrender. She'd long ago recognized she couldn't refuse him. It had always been like this between them—a fiery passion that burned everything in its path and left her trembling, throbbing, and at his mercy.

As his mouth moved over her tender flesh, she closed her eyes and forgot their argument, concentrated on the caress of his lips and tongue, and temporarily shelved any thought of leaving him.

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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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