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Jan Moran
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Flawless: A Hostile Beauty Novel

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Melissa Foster

FLAWLESS

A Hostile Beauty Novel

by

Jan Moran

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Beverly Hills, California

Verena heard her name called. Despite the uneasy, prickly feeling on the back of her neck, she arranged a smile on her face and made her way to the podium, past linen-draped, flower-laden tables and dazzling designer evening dresses, through clouds of expensive perfume and throngs of well-wishers.

Lifting the hem of her silvery evening gown, Verena navigated the steps up to the brightly lit stage. She greeted Robert Montreaux with a kiss on each cheek and turned on a radiant smile for the photographers. As head of her family company, Verena knew the proper protocol for such events, and she performed her job with impeccable grace and precision.

She blinked against the camera flashes that left a shower of blue sparkles in front of her eyes, momentarily blinding her. A vein pulsed in her temple, twitching her eye. Tonight was a night that her grandmother, Mia, had

dreamed of, and Verena wished she could be here, but Mia was at home resting in bed. It was supposed to have been such a happy celebration.

As her vision cleared, Verena glanced at the crowd that had gathered in the ballroom of the Beverly Hills Hotel. She spotted her friends Dahlia and Fianna, as well as Scarlett, who had just flown in from New York for the occasion. She drew a deep breath. At least her good friends were with her tonight. They'd waited patiently through a long evening of speeches from other industry professionals who were also being honored for their accomplishments. Verena was seated at a table in front for the honorees; her friends had been seated at another table farther back. She couldn't wait to speak to them, especially Scarlett, her attorney, to see if they'd heard anything.

Verena had received a voice mail just moments before she had left for the awards banquet. Her banker and good friend, Marvin Panetta, had left an urgent message for her to call him, but he didn't answer when she tried to call him back. *I have bad news*, his message said. *I need to warn you.*

"May I have your attention, please?" Robert Montreaux, the French president of Cosmetic Executives Worldwide, tapped the microphone. "We're here tonight to honor Verena Valent, who took over Valent Swiss Skincare ten years ago after the death of her parents, at the age of eighteen. Not only did she persevere through that tragedy, but she grew to become the driving force behind the company's recent innovations and expansion. Next month, Valent Swiss Skincare expands into Asia, with debuts planned in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tokyo, and

Singapore. And now, before she jets off to Asia, please join me in honoring Verena Valent, our Executive Visionary of the Year.”

Applause exploded in the room, and Verena acknowledged the audience. From the corner of her eye Verena saw Greta Hicks, the anorexic-thin, Versace-clad reporter with *Fashion News Daily* who used to date Derrick Logan, Verena’s fiancé. She knew that Greta still called Derrick, though he swore it was just business. She had to trust him; as a partner in one of California’s most prominent venture capital companies, he fielded plenty of calls from the press. Still, Greta looked especially haughty tonight, and Verena noticed that she kept glancing in Derrick’s direction.

“Thank you, Robert, *merci*, my friend,” Verena said, graciously accepting the faceted crystal award he offered to her. “It’s such a privilege to be singled out for this award when there are so many deserving people in the industry.” She went on to acknowledge the people who worked for her, as well as the department store buyers who had helped make her brand such a success. Even as she spoke, however, she couldn’t get the phone call out of her mind.

She paused to organize her final thoughts. “I’d like to thank everyone who has shared our vision and worked to grow the company my dear grandmother, Mia Valent, conceived more than sixty years ago. She founded the company in 1948, just a few blocks from here. Today, after several expansions, we continue to manage all international activities from that location on North Beverly Drive. I merely carry the torch for the next generation, as my parents did, and I look forward to the

next sixty years of continued service and innovation in skincare. In closing, I dedicate this award to The Women in Pink Foundation for cancer research.”

As applause rose across the room, Verena saw Greta’s hand shoot up. *This isn’t the place to field press questions.* She wondered what Greta was up to. Fortunately, Robert noticed Greta, and smoothly took over the microphone. “Verena is too modest to mention the rather large donation to Women in Pink from Valent Swiss Skincare, but I will. Thank you, Verena, and now, I invite everyone to join me on the dance floor.”

Having spoken earlier in the evening, the executive director from the Women in Pink Foundation returned to the stage and Verena took a few minutes to pose for a series of photographs with her.

After the photographer got all the shots required, Verena managed to avoid Greta and hurried to her friends, who were dressed in shades of summer sorbet evening wear. “Scarlett, I’m so glad you could make it,” she said, hugging her friend from New York. “I thought you had a big court case.” Originally from Spain, Escarlata Sandoval was known to her friends as Scarlett; she was a top intellectual property attorney, as smart as she was effortlessly beautiful. Tonight she was stunning in a pale coral gown that set off her olive skin and coppery blond hair.

“I did, and it was settled late yesterday, so I thought I’d surprise you. Where are your sisters and Mia?”

“Mia hasn’t been feeling well, she’s at home resting, but she insists that she’ll be well enough to take the twins to Switzerland and France for their school break. Anika

and Bella are with her—to them, this is just another boring event.”

Dahlia laughed, her vivid, dancing green eyes mirrored against her mint green dress. “I can’t blame them; I wouldn’t want to pass up a trip to Europe with my grandmother. Oh, Scarlett, you should see the twins, they’re looking just like their sister, pretty miniature versions of Verena.”

“They won’t be little for long,” Fianna said. “I grew overnight when I turned thirteen.”

“That’s when I stopped growing,” Dahlia added. “All five feet of me.”

“Five feet of dynamite, I’d say.” A tall woman, Fianna brushed back her mane of red hair, and as she did, she glanced over her shoulder. “Look out, Verena, Greta is coming your way.”

“I see her. She’s up to something, stay close.”

With a cameraman trailing her, Greta marched straight toward Verena. “Would you care to make a comment about National Western Bank? Will you go ahead with your Asian expansion or put it on hold?”

“Hello Greta,” Verena said, trying to maintain her poise. So there *was* something to Marvin’s voice mail. He’d said something about Derrick that she couldn’t make out. She’d tried to call him back before she left the house, but there was no answer. She checked her watch. She’d try him again in a moment. But Greta was staring at her, waiting for a response.

“National Western Bank has always been a good partner,” Verena said. “VSS appreciates their commitment to Asia.” She put on her armored media

face—pleasant and helpful, and kept her comments positive.

Greta raised an eyebrow, looked smug. “Are you depending on Herringbone Capital now to fund your business in Asia?” She stepped closer, shoving her microphone near Verena’s lips. “Are you counting on Derrick Logan?”

Verena ignored Greta’s last comment. Although Derrick talked to her about business and sometimes offered his advice, his venture capital group was not an investor in her company. “As I said, National Western Bank is handling our business.” *What information did Greta have?* Verena felt a chill course through her and shot a look at Scarlett, who was paying close attention to their exchange. She angled her head in a warning to Verena.

“Maybe you haven’t heard that the feds are taking over National Western.” Greta’s lips curled in satisfaction as she delivered her *coup de grâce*. “And Marvin Panetta was just found at his home. Suicide.”

Verena sucked in her breath, and she felt Scarlett place a protective hand on her arm. “That can’t be, are you sure? He just—” Verena stopped herself, unable to go on. She felt sick to her stomach. *Marvin wouldn’t do such a thing. What happened?*

“Now would you like to comment?” Greta waved the microphone, devious glee apparent in her voice.

“Leave her alone,” Scarlett said, narrowing her eyes. “Marvin was a friend. You’re through here, Greta. Move on.”

“And who are you?”

“I’m her attorney. Scarlett Sandoval.”

“Lawyering up already, huh?” Greta grinned. “And you said you didn’t know anything about this. Interesting.” She turned on her heel and left.

“I would have told her to go to hell,” Fianna said, shaking her fist after her.

“Our friend here is the master of control.” Dahlia turned to Verena, alarm in her eyes. “Did Derrick say anything to you about Marvin?”

Verena shook her head. “Maybe she’s lying. Marvin called, left a message for me just a few hours ago. How could he...?”

Dahlia pulled a cell phone from her purse. “I’ll try him.” She tapped his number and waited. She shook her head sadly. “Voice-mail.”

“We have to go to his home. Has anyone seen Derrick?”

“By the door, talking to the mayor,” Fianna said.

Verena started for the door, her friends following after her. She gulped, thinking about Marvin. She couldn’t believe he would commit suicide. He had a sweet wife and lovely children. He simply wasn’t the type to do such a thing. *Why, why?* She had to speak to Derrick.

When Derrick saw her, he excused himself. With his trim figure and air of authority, he cut through the crowd with ease. “Verena, we need to talk.” He arched his neck, compulsively straightening his formal black bow tie. Verena watched him closely. Lately Derrick was easily agitated.

She touched his shoulder in an effort to connect with him. “I just heard the news about Marvin.”

Derrick didn't acknowledge her comment. "The mayor would like to see you now."

"Wait, you knew, didn't you? When were you going to tell me about Marvin?" Verena ached for her dear friend.

From the corner of her eye, Verena saw Scarlett nod to Dahlia and Fianna to continue talking, while Scarlett listened inconspicuously to her and Derrick. Scarlett was always on the alert.

Derrick averted his dark eyes from Verena's accusatory glare. After a moment, he turned back to her. "Come on, blue eyes, I didn't want to spoil your special day," he said, his voice conciliatory, nervously smoothing his already impeccable black hair.

"Spoil my day?" Verena couldn't believe what he was saying. "I'm not ten years old. Marvin was my friend and mentor."

"We didn't expect this," he said quietly.

"Who is 'we,' Derrick?"

Before he could answer, Greta appeared behind him, her arms folded, listening. "Aren't you going to tell her?"

Verena stepped back. Greta was a tough woman, but she was a reporter, and her job was to dig up the facts. "Tell me what?" Verena asked, composing herself.

Greta put a hand on her slim hips, clearly relishing her role. "That none of the Herringbone Capital portfolio companies Derrick introduced to Marvin were paying their notes."

Derrick lifted his shoulders, let them drop. "What could we do? Times are hard. We're in a recession."

Verena inclined her head. "I thought those companies were among your most successful."

“They are,” Derrick said. “Verena, it’s complicated.”

“I’ll say,” Greta interjected with a smirk on her face.

Derrick shot Greta a look that would curl toes.

“Then why weren’t they paying their debts?” Verena had no reason to believe Greta, but something didn’t ring true.

“I’ve been investigating. Looks to me like they had instructions not to pay their notes,” Greta said. “And what did they all have in common? Herringbone Capital.”

“Butt out, Greta,” Derrick said, lowering his voice. “Verena, listen to me. Marvin was in trouble, and Herringbone merely instructed our companies not to get involved, to conserve their cash.”

Verena stepped back, confused as to why he would issue such an order. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s the economy; National Western Bank was over extended.”

Greta cut in. “But if your portfolio companies had paid their loans, they wouldn’t have been in trouble.”

“We don’t know that, Greta,” Derrick said. “But there have been rumors in the financial circles that the bank had serious problems, far beyond what we knew then. And now it seems the talk was true.” He turned to Verena. “Poor Marvin, God rest his soul.”

Scarlett moved in behind Verena, and put her arm around her friend. “If you want to go to his home, I’ll go with you. But he’s probably been taken away by now, Verena. I can check on this tomorrow.”

Verena nodded, fighting a public display of grief. Although she despaired for her friend and his family, she was aware of her duty tonight. “There’s nothing we can do for him now.” She glanced over her shoulder and

noticed the merchant buyers from Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus. “We should stay. I know a lot of people here came because of me. I’ve spoken to most of them, but—”

Derrick cleared his throat. “I have to go; I’ve got some business to attend to. A conference call with our Tokyo investor just came up.” He gave her a peck on the cheek before he turned to leave.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Perplexed and unconvinced over Derrick’s explanation, Verena was actually relieved he was leaving.

Verena plastered on a fake smile and circulated through the room, doing her duty and speaking to the people she needed to acknowledge and thank for coming.

When she managed to disentangle herself, she returned to her friends. “I need some fresh air.” She started for the door. She was feeling faint, and she didn’t know if it was because of Marvin, or due to the fact that she had barely touched her dinner.

“We’ll go with you,” Scarlett said.

Outside the ballroom, Verena started up a circular staircase with Scarlett, Fianna, and Dahlia close behind. The four friends hurried through the lobby to the rear of the hotel overlooking the pool, turning heads in their wake.

“Give me a few minutes,” Verena said to her friends, breathing in the mild evening air. She knew they meant well, but she needed to calm her nerves. “I just need to clear my mind.”

Dahlia looked at her closely. “Are you sure?”

Verena nodded. “It’s been a wild week.”

“Let’s let her relax, ladies. We can have a cocktail in the Polo Lounge inside,” Dahlia said. “Verena, join us whenever you want.”

Verena watched them go back into the hotel, glad that she had such good friends. They understood, and had always supported each other. They’d all had their share of difficulties.

She walked alone through the deserted pool area, inhaling the sweet scent of jasmine on the summer night air. Although the evening was cooled with a gentle breeze, Verena wiped beads of perspiration from her upper lip. She drew a ragged breath, her hand on her chest as she exhaled, trying to calm her breathing. Marvin had been the banker for her company ever since she had taken the reigns after her parents’ deaths a decade ago. Over the years he had become a trusted mentor and a good friend.

She still couldn’t believe he would have committed suicide. Her heart sank again and she closed her eyes as thoughts rushed through her mind. *Marvin, Derrick, National Western, the Asian expansion.* She’d probably have to arrange other financing. The debut in Asia was mere weeks away. Could she act fast enough?

She’d been depending on Marvin’s commitment. She hadn’t even thought to look elsewhere. *But why should I have?* Marvin had set up the financing for her a year ago.

At that thought, Verena remembered the first time she’d met Derrick at a cocktail party. They’d had a business discussion over candlelight, and he had questioned her on the wisdom of having a relationship with just one bank. ‘Entrepreneurs always need multiple sources of funding, just in case,’ he’d told her then, as he’d twined his fingers with hers, before leaving a

lingering kiss on her lips. Only Derrick could seduce a woman while speaking business. And plenty of women seemed to fall at his feet.

He'd certainly remind her of that comment now.

Why hadn't Derrick warned her about the bank's imminent demise? If he'd warned the other companies in Herringbone's portfolio, as Greta had asserted, why hadn't he warned her, too? She was his fiancée, after all. She drew her brows together in thought. Something didn't seem right, and she didn't like it. She would ask him tomorrow.

As she walked, watching the moonlight wavering over the faint ripples on the pool's surface, Verena thought of her grandmother, Mia, and her parents, and how hard they'd worked to build up the business. It had been a slow process, 'brick by brick,' as her father had been fond of saying. Her father, Joseph, and her mother, Angelica. How she missed them; she'd ached for them every day of her life since—

A large man in a white shirt stepped in front of her. "Excuse me, do you have a light?"

Verena jerked her head up, startled. "No," she snapped. "And you shouldn't jump out in front of people like that."

"I'm sorry, didn't mean to frighten you."

His voice was a deep, warm baritone, and he sounded genuinely apologetic. Bright pool lights behind him illuminated his broad physique.

She couldn't make out his face, but she could see a cigarette dangling from his silhouetted fingers. "Besides, you shouldn't smoke." She heard him sigh.

“I know. I quit, but I really need a cigarette right now. It’s been one of those weeks.”

“Tell me about it,” she muttered. He made no reply but remained rooted to the ground before her, blocking her way. She put up her hand to shield her eyes from the light. “I can’t see you, and you’re in my way.”

He stepped aside, and brought his face near hers. “Is that better?”

A shaft of light from the pool shone on his face. Verena caught her breath. Behind his engaging smile, his white teeth sparkled. His eyes crinkled in a nice way when he grinned, and his kind face drew her in. He looked around her age, maybe a couple of years older—about thirty, she guessed. With tanned skin and sun-streaked, chestnut brown hair, it was obvious he enjoyed the California sunshine. He also had a distinct inviting aroma about him—*garlic and rosemary*. She looked at his clothes. White jacket, thermometer in a slender pouch sewn onto the sleeve, casual cotton pants. “You’re a chef.”

He laughed and bowed. “At your service.”

“You smell wonderful.” Verena grew warm. With her fair skin, she blushed easily, and she was glad it was dark outside. She was far too old for such immature reactions.

“Hungry?”

“I had dinner, sort of, but I didn’t really eat it. Actually, I’m starving.”

He raised his eyebrows, alarmed. “What was wrong with it?”

Verena realized he thought she didn’t like the food. It must have come from his kitchen. “No, it was delicious,

but I can't eat much before I have to appear in public or give a presentation. Audiences make me nervous; it's stage fright, I guess." She laughed. "I'm always starving by the time an event like this is over. Everyone else has eaten well, and then I have to find a late night diner. Or room service."

"You'll have none of that tonight. Come with me." He took her hand and smiled at her again when she hesitated. "What's the matter?" He glanced down at her barren left hand—Derrick hadn't given her a ring yet. "Boyfriend waiting for you?"

There it was again, that warm feeling that grew along her neck. "No, not really, but my friends are waiting for me in the Polo Lounge."

"They'll be fine, but you should eat something. Look, you're so weak you're shaking. I'll call the maître'd at the Polo Lounge for you. What's your name?"

"What's yours?"

"Ah, my manners. Forgive me, too much time in the kitchen. My name is Lance, Lance Martel."

"Verena Valent."

"Beautiful name for a beautiful woman." A smile curved on his full lips. "You're going to eat well tonight, Verena. Come with me." He took her hand, letting his fingers glide to her fingertips in a causal, friendly grasp.

His fingers seemed magnetic. She was starving, and he seemed innocuous enough, though he was disarmingly attractive. Not in the powerful, intense way Derrick was, but in a charming, friendly manner. She hesitated for a moment, and then thought, *Why not?*

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