

“Velvet Sting”

(An Etherlin holiday story featuring characters from ALL THAT BLEEDS)

By: Kimberly Frost

Under sparkling crystal-studded wreaths, red velvet ropes enclosed the staging area where the Etherlin muses prepared to give their speeches during an awards presentation. Inspiration Mall, already thick with holiday shoppers, overflowed with people who in some cases had traveled thousands of miles after being selected from an international lottery system to attend. Muses were inspiration made flesh; they had a magical quality to their voices that could inspire listeners to change their lives and rise to new heights that they never thought possible.

Alissa North, the muse of science and literature, had given hundreds of interviews and speeches over the years. She still had the occasional butterflies when stepping onstage before a large crowd, but at the moment she wasn't nervous. She was distracted. Passing through strands of gold garland, she moved closer to where the assistant director of Etherlin Security was talking to a man in tight jeans and a black leather jacket. The man had mentioned a name that always got Alissa's attention...Merrick.

Merrick was ventala—a human-vampire half-breed—and a syndicate enforcer whom Alissa should never have met. But the extremely handsome and charismatic Merrick had once trespassed in the Etherlin to slay a demon, and since that night when he'd saved countless lives including hers, she'd been a little obsessed with the man.

Now this weasel in a leather jacket seemed to be helping Etherlin Security lay a trap for Merrick.

“Listen, if you don't want him buying that property, you better arrest him today. He doesn't normally come here. Merrick's tailor delivers his designer suits to Merrick's penthouse personally. I don't know why the hell Merrick's coming out in the middle of the Christmas rush and this circus you guys are staging, but it's a golden opportunity for you to take him. Usually no one knows where he'll be. He's turned his building into a fortress.”

Merrick's coming here to see me, she realized.

For the past three years, he'd flirted with her by secretly sending her gifts. She'd told him she couldn't accept his presents, but she'd done so in a series of progressively longer letters that she sent him in secret—letters that held a bit of flirtation from her side. Yes, against all good judgment, one of the Etherlin muses was partaking in a clandestine correspondence with a member of the fallen. If the Etherlin Council found out, it would ruin Alissa's life.

She eavesdropped on the man in the leather jacket and with her muse sense she heard more than nervousness in his tone. She heard deceit.

"I'll testify, but after that I have to disappear. I want the money transferred to my account in advance. And you'd better be sure you've got your end set up because if he gets out, he'll kill me for ly—for helping you."

He'd almost said "for lying." She waited for the assistant director, who'd surely heard the slip too, to interrogate him, to press the man until he confessed that he was going to lie to convict Merrick so he could get paid what was likely a large sum of money.

Merrick was an infamous enforcer. She had no illusions about him, but from what she could glean, he killed creatures that needed killing, dangerous creatures that preyed upon human beings.

"We're ready to take him into custody," the assistant director said.

"I'm glad. I thought you might balk at doing it on the day of a muse event."

"We'll do it quietly. The tailor wasn't particularly cooperative, but he couldn't argue with a court order."

Alissa's heart thumped faster. They already had a warrant.

"I hope you've got enough guys. Merrick's no pushover."

"We're aware of Merrick's skills."

"I'm just saying—"

"We're Etherlin Security, Dykstra, and even Merrick's not invincible. When he enters the store, we'll take him."

Alissa licked her lips and pressed a firm hand to the front of her champagne-colored coat dress right under her ribs. The pressure achieved the desired effect; it focused her energy.

She glanced at all the personal assistants, event planners, and helpers that were assembled. Her eyes darted to the armed bodyguards standing at attention and to the throngs of people lining every area surrounding the stage. There was no way she could slip away to warn Merrick herself. And it would be insanely risky to try to get a message to him.

If he's coming today because you'll be here, then you're indirectly part of this set-up. Can you live with that if they railroad him into a guilty verdict on some trumped up charge? What if he gets a death sentence?

Her stomach knotted, and her fists clenched.

She strode to the table where her purse and presentation notes were sitting atop a gold-and-emerald tablecloth. She opened her white leather portfolio and flipped through the sheath of heavy bond paper. She wanted a sheet without the monogram of her initials at the top. If they took Merrick into custody, she couldn't afford for her stationery to be found on his person.

If they capture him... This is ill advised. How will I even get a note to him? I'm being foolish. He can take care of himself.

A memory flashed in her mind, and she saw him fighting with the eight-foot-tall demon with its dagger-sharp claws and superhuman strength. He'd defeated that monster. He'd made it look easy.

She paused for a moment. Yes, of course he could take care of himself. She'd seen with her own eyes how amazing he was at that.

But they'd laid a trap for him that he wasn't expecting. Merrick was usually as elusive as smoke, but today ES knew exactly where he would be and she was the reason he'd be in a position to be arrested.

Naturally, she couldn't know for sure that he was coming to the mall to see her, but she felt it. Her sixth sense told her so, and she trusted it.

She sat and wrote a few words on the blank sheet of snowy white paper, then sealed it in an envelope and folded it into a palm-sized square. She feigned reviewing her speech in case anyone was watching her. After a few moments, she walked to the dressing area. It was the one place she could expect privacy.

Beckoning one of the teenage errand girls who was helping her assistant, she waited. Alissa had talked to the girl, Carrie, earlier and knew she was a devoted fan.

Carrie darted forward. "Yes, Miss North? How can I help?"

Alissa bent and whispered to the girl. Alissa infused her voice with persuasive power and placed the paper into Carrie's hand, giving her explicit instructions.

"If anyone asks, you're getting me a peppermint hot cocoa," Alissa said, slipping the gold drop earrings from her lobes. "These are for you to wear when you're working on your application to Stanford."

The girl stared at her, speechless.

"This is the year you start chasing your dream. Don't hesitate. You can do it. You'll write the best essays you've ever written," Alissa said, pressing the earrings into Carrie's palm on top of the note.

"You don't have to give me anything, Miss North. It's been so great just meeting you!" Carrie gushed. "I want to help you. Whatever you need—"

Alissa squeezed the girl's arm and smiled. "We'll help each other. Go," Alissa said.

The girl nodded and with a determined expression slipped around the barrier and past the velvet rope.

All right, it's out of my hands.

* * *

It was like Times Square on New Year's Eve. Except no one was drunk and it was so bright that even his dark sunglasses couldn't completely shield Merrick's eyes.

He threaded through the crowd. ES had every entrance and exit covered, so to enter Inspiration Mall he had to pass through the metal detectors. Which was why the gun he carried wasn't made of metal and neither was the knife. Wood and plastic. Expensive and not what he preferred, but he never went anywhere unarmed. Especially not into the heart of Etherlin Security.

A crowded mall at midday? Full of men who wanted him dead or in jail? This wasn't a smart play. He glanced at the red exit sign.

You could be sitting at your desk in a room that defies daylight, drinking a scotch lime and reading letters she sent you personally.

As if on cue, he turned a corner and saw a fifteen-foot-tall poster of Alissa North's beautiful face. Yeah, he could be in his penthouse, but she wouldn't be there in the flesh and he wouldn't get to hear her muse voice. This was the place for that. And his tailor, Nardo, would have scotch for him. Merrick routinely spent fifteen-thousand dollars on a suit. If he'd allowed it, Nardo would've had him over for Christmas dinner. But there was only one person in the world whose company Merrick coveted, and she was scheduled to take the stage in thirty minutes.

Merrick cut through the crowd. Whether it was because he was tall and menacing or whether some of them recognized him, Merrick didn't know, but people parted to allow him to pass. Until a brunette with a dusting of light brown freckles which made her look twelve years old moved directly into his path.

He stared at her, waiting. He'd had his share of women over the years, and he knew when a bold one was pursuing him. This teenager in her wool sweater and slacks wasn't. She had another purpose.

Shifting nervously, she stepped forward. "Are you—can I ask your name?"

"Why would you want to do that?" he asked in a low voice. She needed to pluck up her courage and get on with things. He had places to be.

Her hair moved when she turned her head to look around, and he recognized the gold earrings dangling from her ears. He'd seen Alissa North wearing them more than once in press photos.

"Nice earrings," he said.

The girl blushed. "Yeah, I'm working the muse event. She asked me to do her a favor and insisted I take them. She's really generous."

"My name, it's Merrick," he said.

She looked around once more, stepped closer to block anyone's view of their hands, and slipped paper into his palm. "She said you should read it before you shop anywhere," she blurted in a whisper and then hurried away.

He strode to a corridor without a view, knowing it wouldn't be as crowded. With his back to the wall and shadowed by a large column wrapped in red bows, he opened the envelope. He recognized the handwriting.

Avoid Zeroga's today. It's a trap.

Take care.

He rubbed a thumb over his lower lip, pocketed the letter and glanced around. The smart move would be to walk out the nearby exit, but he'd woken before noon to hear Alissa North give a speech. Besides he didn't run from trouble. He wondered what was waiting for him in Nardo's store.

Still, he wouldn't ignore a note for her. The hand resting against his gun slid up to press the breast pocket that contained the message. Alissa North had been worried about him and had risked discovery to warn him.

She is protecting you. Merry Christmas, Merrick, he thought and smiled. Yeah, he definitely wasn't in a rush to go. When his reason for being at Inspiration Mall left, he would, too. Not before.

* * *

Days later, sitting in Hallmark, her favorite café, Alissa couldn't concentrate on the manuscript she was reviewing. Her mind kept returning to Inspiration Mall where she'd spotted Merrick leaning against a column on the third floor walkway...watching her. His handsome face and very dark eyes haunted her even now. She wished she could see him again.

That day had progressed without incident. Merrick had gotten her message and despite his delay in leaving the mall, evaded arrest. He'd actually stayed for her entire speech and as she gave out awards for best essay and best short story by a high school, college, and post-graduate student, she'd worried that ES would notice Merrick and attempt to take him into custody. So though she'd wanted to stare directly at him while she spoke, she'd done her best not to look up at the third floor.

Seven days had passed since the event, and Dykstra the informant had since disappeared. Whether he'd decided to leave to avoid potential trouble with Merrick or whether Merrick had realized that the man posed a threat and had eliminated him, Alissa would never know and, if the latter, didn't want to.

She still wasn't completely comfortable with her decision to protect Merrick from Etherlin Security, although if they were going to arrest him, the charges needed to be accurate and ES needed to capture Merrick when he wasn't coming to an event because of her. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't have felt compelled to help him; Merrick would be on his own to face any charges against him, she told herself.

She poured a second cup of Italian Roast coffee from the small French Press that rested on her table. She raised the porcelain cup and took a sip as a Pead's Florists delivery truck parked on the street outside Hallmark.

Her heartbeat thumped a bit faster. Merrick, who wasn't allowed to pass the Etherlin walls himself, often sent her anonymous gifts using Pead's. The deliveries always came when she was out of her house where she could receive them without her household staff intercepting them.

She recognized the young man. He'd made discreet deliveries before. She set down her cup and watched him amble into the restaurant. He was neatly dressed in a crisp white shirt and dark trousers, but his boots had been battered by the Colorado winter and his shaggy hair needed a trim. Though he and she were probably the same age, he looked young and earnest as he approached her table and she doubted she did. Despite being in her early twenties, she'd already spent years mentoring the brilliant and the talented. She was at the top of her rare and celebrated field. Fame and an aloofness born of harboring secrets separated her from most people. Seeing the collection of white and lavender roses in silver tissue paper, she thought, *the circumstances of my life separate me from most people, but not from Merrick who doesn't care that it's perilous for a ventala to maintain a relationship with a muse. And I shouldn't be pleased by his attitude. If we're not very careful...*

The boy waited for her to acknowledge him.

"Hello," she said, offering him a smile.

He nodded and stepped forward. He leaned down and set the flowers on the table, murmuring, "There's a note and something else wrapped inside. Have a good day."

"Just a moment," she said, reaching for her purse, but by the time she opened it he was already halfway to the door. *He never lingers for a tip.* She guessed one had been included when the order had been placed and that the young man's orders were to leave immediately after delivering the package. That was the way Merrick always did things when it came to contacting her. Careful, calculating, and devastatingly smooth.

She glanced around as she inhaled the flowers' lush fragrance. People smiled as they watched her. She set the flowers on her lap and continued drinking her coffee, glancing pointedly at the manuscript pages, signaling to everyone that she was continuing with her work and there was nothing important to see.

Eventually she slipped her fingers among the stems and felt the card and small box. She silently pried them free and unwrapped them on her lap under the cover of the linen tablecloth.

She slid the card amongst the manuscript pages and opened to it. She read the note, warmth spreading through her.

Replacements for the ones you left at Inspiration Mall. -M

The thud of her heart echoed in her ears. She flipped open the small jewelry box and after a sip of coffee leaned slightly back in her seat to look down into the box. Resting on white velvet was a pair of diamond-and-aquamarine earrings that must have cost a fortune. She fingered the sparkling gems.

You can't keep them, she thought, glancing at the ornate design. The antique earrings suited her taste perfectly. They were completely her style, closely matching a pendant she wore often.

Merrick knows what I like. And he takes the time to find it.

You still shouldn't keep them, she thought, but the fact that the exquisite gift had come from him made her want to keep it close to her. Closer than he'd ever be to her in the flesh. Wasn't maintaining a wall between them enough distance?

They would be perfect with the silver dress I'm wearing on New Year's Eve. I could wear them that night and then sell them and donate the proceeds to charity as I've done in the past with his gifts.

She closed the box and held it tight in her hands, her fingers locked around it as if she held all that she wanted from Merrick within them.

Or I could have them valued and donate an equal amount of money to charity, but keep the earrings. He saved my life once and I thanked him. Now I've protected him, and these are what he sent to thank me.

If I hold onto them, no one will ever know except me, she thought, sliding closer to danger with every passing moment. Her pulse thrummed and her skin tingled at the thought of building another small bridge between herself and Merrick.

I won't wear them out. I'll just have them as a keepsake.

She licked her lips, knowing she should absolutely give up the earrings. But also that she never would.

As is often the case, Mr. Merrick, where you dare, you win. Though I'll never admit that to anyone. Especially not to you.

Be well and Happy New Year.