

Mending Hearts

by Becky

Year: 1980

Place: Cassadine Island

Prologue

Laura Cassadine stared into the calm sea, the afternoon sunlight pouring onto her, trying to regain an inner peace that was eluding her. Really, it had been eluding her for almost a year now. Or maybe even all her life.

She looked down at her wedding ring; she had almost grown to like it. She had told him it wasn't her style, but he had insisted she wear it, once again bringing up Cassadine traditions that didn't interest her in the least.

She didn't care about all that, she just cared about him. She smiled. It had been a beautiful wedding. Having her family there would've made it better, but she had thought it best not to tell them until after the fact. Her parents had been furious, telling her she was being reckless and acting out of pain. Even Amy had been less than supportive. The same never-ending psychobabble.

They didn't understand.

She was determined to prove them all wrong. It wasn't a mistake; she would make this last.

So what if he lost his temper every once in a while? Everyone did, and he always apologized afterwards.

Her hand went to her cheek, pressing lightly on it. It was still sore, but it would heal. It always did.

She heard steps coming behind her, knowing who it was. They had done this so many times before.

He will come and kneel in front of her, placing his head in her lap.

"I'm so sorry, Lasha," he will say. "I never wanted to hurt you. I promise, it will never happen again."

And she will stroke his hair and whisper, "It's okay."

And he will say he loves her.

"I love you, too, Stavros," she will sigh, and they will make love.

Chapter One

"Good morning," Laura greeted her in-laws courteously as she went to sit in her usual spot.

Mikkos barely acknowledged her, raising his eyes briefly from his work and nodding in her direction.

Helena flashed that false, sugary smile that Laura had grown to detest. "Good morning, Lasha. Are you feeling better? You're entirely too clumsy, my child. One of these days you could seriously harm yourself."

Laura smiled through clenched teeth. "Your concern touches me." She nodded to the servant at her side, letting her know she was ready to be served.

"Your welfare is very important to me. You will be giving us an heir. Soon, I hope."

Laura took a bite of her breakfast, chewing slowly. After swallowing, she replied, "It's really not up to me, is it?"

"I would just hate for Stavros to be disappointed. He so does want a child."

"We both do. We'll love our child as much as we love each other." Laura hid her smirk taking a drink from her glass, as Helena's own smile faded.

"I'm sure you will," Helena grounded out. "If you'll excuse me, I have many things to do."

"Have a nice day," Laura flashed her own fake smile. Helena left without responding. Almost feeling like shouting in victory, Laura settled into her chair comfortably, taking another bite of her breakfast. It tasted even better now.

"Father," a male voice interrupted her triumphant thoughts. She swiveled her head to look at the man who wasn't her husband. This had to be Stefan, Stavros' brother.

"I'll be staying here for a few days," he informed Mikkos.

Mikkos looked disinterestedly at his younger son. "Very well." He went back to the paperwork in front of him.

The younger man walked away, seeming not to have noticed the woman who followed him with her gaze until he disappeared from sight.

Laura sat back in her chair, dejected. He hadn't even glanced at her. Snob. She looked down at her food. It didn't look so appetizing anymore. She got up and excused herself, more out of habit than for Mikkos' benefit.

She stood for a while, not knowing what to do. There was nothing to do here. But Stavros got so angry when she left without him. A bubble of resentment formed in her stomach. She was his wife, not his prisoner! Trying to calm herself, she walked back to the room she and her husband shared, but couldn't bear to go in. She had woken up alone again. Angry tears sprang in her eyes.

She felt a pair of curious eyes upon her. She turned her head. Another servant. This place was crawling with eyes. And they all worked for Helena. She knew where she needed to go.

Her pace became quicker as she neared the garden. She stopped suddenly when she saw that someone was already there. Her shoulders slumped in disappointment. He probably wouldn't appreciate her barging in on him. She turned to leave, but froze as he spoke.

"Hello."

She turned back, seeing his whole face for the first time, and feeling her pulse starting to quicken. She could see the resemblance with Stavros, but this man's face was... softer, somehow. And his eyes, nothing like Stavros'. It took her a while to realize she was staring. She licked her dry lips. "I'm sorry, I didn't know anyone was here. I'll leave."

He took a step forward and reached out a hand as if to stop her. "You don't have to go, I think the garden will occupy the both of us."

Laura smiled then. "Thank you. It's nice to meet you, Stefan."

"Likewise, Lasha," Stefan said.

Her smile faded as she heard the name. "Laura, the name's Laura," she snapped.

"My apologies... Laura," he said. "I will be sure to refer to you as such in the future."

Laura's eyes widened in sudden fear. "No, no you can call me Lasha," she said. "It was just a silly outburst." She paused, trying to take the panic out of her voice. "Please don't tell Stavros."

The pleading in her eyes stirred up a powerful feeling of compassion in Stefan. "My brother and I are not close, you needn't worry," he promised.

Laura let go of the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "Thank you." She walked to her favorite spot and sat down. Stefan followed her and sat a few feet from where she was. "So you're Stavros' brother. I can't believe I've never met you. He doesn't... I mean, he hasn't spoken much about you," Laura said. "But we've only been married for a few months," she quickly added.

"I'm not surprised, Stavros can sometimes be a little self-involved."

"No, he's not!" Laura defended her husband. "We are still newlyweds, you know. It's natural for us to be focused on each other."

Stefan nodded and kept quiet, not wanting to upset her further. He knew they actually spent little time together. He also knew where Stavros spent much of the time he was gone from the house. Why Stavros would rather spend time in a brothel than with his wife, Stefan didn't know. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"Lasha!"

Stavros' bellow brought Stefan back from the dangerous path his thoughts were taking.

Laura was suddenly on her feet. "Hi, honey." She took in the appearance of her husband and cringed inwardly. He was hung-over.

Stavros glanced briefly at her, then focused his gaze at Stefan. "What are you doing here?" The "with her" was left unsaid, but they all heard the suspicion in his voice.

"It is good to see you, too, Stavros," Stefan answered, his tone a mixture of disappointment and sarcasm.

"We were just talking, Stav," Laura said softly.

Stavros glanced sharply at her, and Laura flinched involuntarily. Stavros voice softened as he walked over to his wife, gripping her arm. The softness in his voice belied the growing tension in his hold on her.

"I was worried about you."

Laura couldn't help it. "I'm not a child, I can go where I please," she retorted. She winced as his grip became painful. That would leave a mark.

Stefan sat absolutely still. His eyes caught every movement they made. Now he knew where the deep purple bruise on her face had come from.

Stavros lowered his voice. "I'm going back to the house. I'll be waiting for you, don't be long." His tone was meant to soothe, but it came out more like a threat.

Laura nodded and watched him leave. She ignored the throbbing in her arm. She could feel Stefan's presence behind her, and tears of shame welled up in her eyes. Why did he have to see that?

"Are you okay?" Stefan asked gently.

"Yeah." Her voice had an upbeat tone to it, but he could sense that it was forced. "It's my fault, I say things without thinking sometimes," she explained. "You've already seen that," her laugh came out flat.

Stefan was silent. He was furious. The thought of Stavros hurting her made his blood boil. "You can tell me anything, I won't judge you." He cringed at his own words, that had to be the most idiotic, unhelpful thing to say. But he had meant it.

Laura turned to face him. She saw the sincerity in his eyes. The temptation to unburden herself to this man was overwhelming. And that scared the Hell out of her. She looked down, not wanting to lie to his face. "I have my husband for that. It was nice meeting you. I'll see you around."

Stefan watched her go, unsettled by his growing desire to protect this stranger. He had overheard her and Helena and couldn't help but admire the way she had succeeded in rendering his mother speechless. There was a fire within her, there even when she tried to hide it by acting meek. He had never met anyone who laid themselves so open.

It was a dangerous trait to have among his family.

Chapter Two

"Good evening, Mother." Stefan stared in the icy depths of his mother's blue eyes, the irises filled now with detached surprise.

"What are you doing here?" were the first words out of her mouth.

Stefan settled himself in. He hadn't done this in a long time. He finally focused his attention back on Helena. He, of course, couldn't tell her the truth. That he had come on the chance that he might see his brother's wife. He avoided the question instead. "I see Father failed to inform you of my arrival."

"Apparently," Helena said, looking at Mikkos, who had the same impassive look on his face.

"It's a shame you didn't announce yourself earlier, you could have met Stavros'... wife," Helena nearly choked on the word.

"We've met," Stefan said. "Briefly. It would have been nice to have known about my brother's wedding firsthand and not from the international news section."

"If you spent more time in serious matters, like the family business, you would be more informed," Mikkos decided to join in the conversation.

"My presence nor absence seems to have mattered, in either case."

Helena smiled coldly. "My dear boy, it never has."

Stefan felt the hot sting of her words, but said nothing. He had learned long ago not to let his mother know how her words still affected him. "Where is the happy couple?"

Helena's face was filled with disgust. "Stavros decided to take Lasha out for the evening."

"As he should," Stefan said.

Clearly, that was not what Helena wanted to hear.

The rest of the evening was spent in silence.

Laura woke up, a frown marring her face as it took her a second to remember where she was. She had been living there for months now, but it still didn't quite feel like home. She wondered if it ever would. She kept her eyes closed, not wanting to face what she already knew. Her hand slowly made its way to the place her husband should be.

But there was nothing there but empty space. He was gone. She rolled to the side, sinking her head into the pillow,

waiting for sleep to find her again.

But a single thought came racing through her mind, keeping her from the sweet escape. This was her life?

She sat up, wiping the tears from her face. Her eyes took a minute to adjust to the dim light. She squinted to make out the time. Four o'clock in the morning.

She got out of bed, slipping on her robe. She walked over to the balcony, a gust of wind refreshing her as she opened the doors that led to it. She breathed in the cool breeze, as her bare feet walked on the gravel surface.

The view was breathtaking, there was no denying that. It was like the fairy tales she had heard when she was a little girl with the Vinings. She smiled ruefully. Almost. She had married a Prince, dashing and handsome. And here they were, living in his castle.

Only this Cinderella was alone.

She had a sudden need to get out of the house, to feel the soft grass under her feet. She walked through the barely-lit halls and stairways, feeling as though she were sneaking out.

As the first blades of cool grass tickled her feet, she wondered why she'd never done this before.

She walked slowly, taking in every inch of sensation. Stavros had shown her around their first day here, their first day as husband and wife. Tears once again welled in her eyes, and she could do nothing to stop them.

"I miss you," she whispered, tightening her robe around her figure, suddenly cold.

There was a soft rustling of leaves behind her, not the kind of sound made by the wind. She turned around, seeing the figure of a man, the soft light of the coming sunrise catching the color in his hair.

Stefan.

He was reading, she noticed. In a few seconds he would walk past her, never knowing she was there. For some reason, the thought bothered her. "There's barely any light," Laura called out.

Stefan stopped, looking up. Was he hearing things? He looked around until finally his eyes fell upon a bemused Laura.

"Enough," Stefan replied. Even with her face shadowed, he could still see the streaks from her crying. He focused on his book, trying to ignore the feelings she was once again eliciting in him.

It was hard to do when she was walking closer to him, subtly demanding his attention. "Do you do this often?"

"Walk?" He responded to Laura's nod with his own. "Ever since I can remember."

"Did you and Stavros take walks together when you were kids?"

"Stavros... and I never spent that much time together. But I am sure he would be glad to do so with his wife," Stefan answered diplomatically.

Laura looked away, her face distorting for a second. "He's not here." She looked back at him, a fake smile in place. "He must be very busy working," Stefan said, glancing at her before again staring intently at the opened pages. "I heard my father and him discussing important business earlier."

Laura almost smiled. Another difference from Stavros. He couldn't lie worth a damn. "I know he cheats on me," she said quietly.

Stefan closed his book. So she knew. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"Why do you stay with him?" Stefan had to know.

Laura's short laugh was hollow. "And do what instead, exactly? Go back home and face my family and friends? Tell them that my husband cheated on me not even a week after we got married? A WEEK," her voice trembled. "What did I do wrong?" Her eyes pleaded with him to give her an answer.

He wouldn't let her go down that road. He let the book fall to the ground in a muted thud. Closing the space between them, he took her by the arms gently, making sure to avoid the place where Stavros had grabbed her. He looked at her intently, forcing her to look at him. "Listen to me. Stavros is my brother, but he is the one in the wrong here, not you. Laura," he took a deep breath. "You deserve better."

She looked at him with disbelieving eyes. "No, I don't," she whispered. "You don't know me. You don't know what I've done. I'm not innocent."

"None of us are. Including--."

"Please, don't," Laura said, pushing his arms away from her. "I know he's not perfect. But I do... I do love him. He's my husband, and I'm going to make this marriage work." She paused. "And I'm sorry I keep dragging you into this, dumping all my problems on you. It's not fair to you."

"We're family now," Stefan answered. "And I'd like for us to be friends, Laura."

Laura smiled. "I'd like that, too, Stefan." She impulsively hugged him. "Thank you."

He knew he shouldn't, but he returned her embrace. "You're welcome."

"I should go back to my room and get ready. I must look a mess." She smoothed back her hair, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"You look beautiful," Stefan murmured, before he realized how that sounded.

A light blush tinted Laura's cheeks. "See you at breakfast?"

Stefan nodded, "I'll be there."

A tiny voice inside him told him the logical thing to do would be to leave the Island, as planned. To put as much distance between himself and his brother's wife, and forget about what he felt when he was with her. But he ignored it.

He would stay.

Chapter Three

Laura was seated at the breakfast table, trying not to be too obvious as her view darted occasionally to the entrance to the room. She laid her nervous hands in her lap. She kept telling herself the only reason she was anxious to see him was because he was a friendly face, nothing more than that.

A few minutes later, she spotted him.

Helena's mouth curved slightly as she saw that Laura's eyes lit up when Stefan came in the room. Could she be this lucky? She glanced over to Stefan, very curious to see if she would see the same spark in his usually dull eyes.

But Stefan hid his pleasure better than Laura, only inclining his head slightly, and saying, "Good morning."

"Good morning," Laura replied, forcing her mouth to only spread into a polite smile.

Once they had all been seated, they were served. Mikkos and Stavros were absent, so it was just the three of them. Helena tried to find another trace of what she had perceived in Laura earlier, but she and Stefan only made the required polite conversation that grew tiresome quickly.

After eating her small portions, she motioned to a servant to help her out of her chair. There was only so much banality a woman could stand. "I have a social engagement I must attend to," she said. "If you will excuse me."

Stefan courteously stood from his chair and nodded, thankful to see her go.

Laura felt the same way. She allowed herself a broader smile, relaxing her posture. She always had to be on guard with her mother-in-law. It was mentally and physically exhausting.

They didn't exchange more than the bare minimum of words, even after Helena left. Both were aware that even when she was gone, her presence remained in every room of the house.

But still they enjoyed each other's company. Maybe because of that silence, and the freedom it brought with it. Neither had to pretend to tolerate Helena's icy and cutting remarks or Mikkos' apathetic response.

Or Stavros' sometimes tiresome presence. Laura had learned his charm would only go so far, and then the excuses grew weak. And when she thought of how she would be spending the rest of her life with him...

Well, she'd rather not think about it.

Stefan took the last sip of his drink and rose from his chair, reluctant to break the comfortable quiet they had strangely created. "It seems the day must begin."

"Busy day?" Laura asked, picking at her food. Usually she enjoyed most of it, but it was making her queasy today.

Stefan shook his head. "No, I'm merely going into town to purchase a few items."

Laura looked wistful. "Have a good time."

"Thank you." Stefan refrained from asking her if she would like to go, knowing it would just serve to make her unhappier, as she would feel compelled to decline his offer. Because of Stavros.

"Enjoy the day," he said.

"Thanks," Laura smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes. She watched Stefan go and marveled at how different he seemed from all of them. And she thought of how unfair life could be.

But she had learned that lesson before.

"Will you be buying the nice clip? For your girlfriend, perhaps?"

Stefan stared at the silver hairclip in his hand. It was simple, but elegant at the same time. It would look lovely against her golden hair.

What was he doing?

"No, thank you," Stefan replied in flawless Greek, dropping the clip, and walking away from the stand before the man offered a cheaper price.

He had been walking through the downtown market for the last few hours, and there had been several things that had reminded him of her.

Which was ridiculous, given that he'd spent a total of an hour with her, if that. He knew nothing of her tastes, and little else about her.

As he continued his leisurely stroll, a display of ribbons caught his attention. Invariably, he looked and found one that nearly matched the color of her eyes. He toyed with the blue ribbon, mentally debating whether to buy it or not.

It was an innocent gift, he finally decided. Purchasing the small strip of silk, he kept walking. He still had to buy what he had come here for.

Chapter Four

Laura took a lungful of air as she stepped outside the next afternoon, and smiled. The day had started out better than most. Her steps had a certain expectation to them as she walked to the garden.

She wasn't disappointed as she came upon the place where Stefan was. She stayed where she was, unaware that her mouth was now hanging slightly open.

Robed in only a loosely fitted white pair of pants, Laura got a thorough view of Stefan's upper body, the hard lines of his well-defined muscles and the smooth, slightly bronzed skin.

Her eyes followed the movements of his arms almost hypnotically, noting the way his muscles stretched with every turn.

She frowned slightly as the movements ceased, not realizing he was now looking directly at her until he called her name.

"What was that you were doing?" she asked, as she walked closer to him. Maybe she could pretend simply curiosity was the reason she had been ogling him just now.

"Tai Chi," he replied.

"It looks very relaxing... and complicated," Laura added. "Do you do it every day?"

"Most days, yes," he nodded. "I do find it relaxing, and it is easily learned with a degree of focus and patience."

Laura laughed. "Two qualities that I do not possess, let me tell you. But it does look interes--" She suddenly lost the ability to speak as she saw Stefan's hand inch closer and closer to her face.

Her senses were overwhelming her. She could feel her face burning as his fingers touched her hair; his smell was filling her nostrils so that she could almost taste him on her lips. Their eyes locked for a moment, and Laura thought she might go deaf from the steady pounding in her ears.

She felt a slight tugging at her hair, and nearly laughed when he showed her the small leaf he had liberated from her blonde tresses. "Thank you," she stammered, feeling very foolish. She took a step back, and waved slightly, which only made her feel more like an idiot. She turned and quickly walked away.

Stefan's fingers were still burning from where they had touched the silky locks of her hair. He looked at the leaf still in his hand, and briefly considered keeping it. Then he shook his head at the thought.

Dropping the leaf on the ground, he focused once again on his exercises. And for the first time, Stefan Cassadine couldn't remember the next step.

Laura shifted the book and tried to get lost in the story, but her eyes kept blurring. She'd been reading practically all day. She finally gave up, placed the book on the nightstand, and laid back on the pillows.

She glanced over at the clock. 8 o'clock. "Another day gone," she sighed heavily. Now what was she going to do? Dinner wasn't for another hour.

The door to the bedroom opened, and she threw her legs over the bed and stood up. "Stavros?"

Her husband walked in, greeting her with a seductive smile. He gallantly offered the roses he had brought her.

"They're beautiful, Stav," she murmured as she inhaled the sweet scent. She put them down on top of the book, and turned back to him, smiling.

"Not as beautiful as you," he told her, walking up to her so they were mere inches apart. He bent down and kissed her.

The familiar feeling of guilt swept through her, but she closed her eyes, trying to get lost in the soft teasing of his mouth on hers.

Stavros reached over and turned off the light.

She preferred making love in the dark. It was easier to imagine that it was someone else with her, and any pleasure she received wasn't overwhelmed by her sense of betrayal. But unlike the countless other time, the face that formed in her mind that night wasn't Scotty's.

It was Stefan's.

Chapter Five

Stefan followed the path that led to the cove. It was a fairly long walk, which was one of its more pleasant aspects. As far as he knew, no member of his family would waste the time or energy by going there. He smiled dryly. It would be too taxing for them.

As he neared the place where he usually sat to contemplate, he saw that he was going to have company.

It had been two days since he'd last seen her, that time in the garden. Stavros had become more attentive. He was happy for her. Helena had informed them at every meal that Stavros had taken her out. Except breakfast, when she kept perfectly quiet, practically seething in her seat.

He avoided that train of thought as a stirring of jealousy bit at him. He was happy for her, he repeated to himself.

He walked the last few meters, standing at one side of the bench. "Hello, Laura."

"I've always been tempted to throw myself off one of those cliffs, and feel the wind against my face. To fly for just a few moments, you know?"

He couldn't help but stare as she tried to explain her feelings, her voiced filled with such passion.

She finally turned to look at him. "You must think I'm a complete weirdo," she laughed, trying to ignore the effect his gaze had on her.

"Not at all," he smiled, as he sat down, keeping a respectable distance between them.

They fell into silence for a few minutes, enjoying the soft whistling in the air, the distant echo of the waves crashing upon the shore.

"Can I ask you something?" Laura asked.

"Yes," he answered.

Laura shifted her position on the bench so that she was facing Stefan. "Why didn't you come to my wedding?"

"Honestly?" he asked.

Laura nodded, her curiosity piqued even more.

Stefan thought on how to best phrase it. "I assumed that whatever wife my brother had managed to find was... not someone I would care to meet," he finished.

"Oh, I see. You ARE a snob," she smiled.

"You had made this assessment before?" Stefan asked, finding her smile contagious.

"Yep. When you came in and talked to Mikkos during breakfast, the first day you got here. You didn't even look at me. I decided you were a snob," Laura stated matter-of-factly.

Stefan felt an unfamiliar feeling well up in his stomach. A slight tickling that increased until a full-throated laugh escaped his mouth, taking them both by surprise.

Laura joined him in laughing, her eyes sparkling, enjoying her first full view of his dimples. "You can laugh, I was beginning to wonder." It had been a while since she'd laughed like that herself. It felt good.

"So was I," he admitted. The air grew serious again, though each was left with a pleasant feeling of complicity with the other. As if they had somehow broken an unnamed rule in this humorless place.

"Maybe I'll show you the wedding pictures sometime," Laura said.

"I'd like that," he replied. The image of her in a wedding gown came to his mind. And just as quickly, his brother's image appeared next to her, bringing him back to reality and a feeling of guilt.

Laura noticed his change in mood, and wondered what he was thinking.

Before she had the chance to ask, he stood up. "But now I must take my leave."

She rose to her feet, but was forced to sit again as a wave of dizziness hit her.

"Are you all right?" Stefan asked, concern lacing every word.

Laura nodded, taking a deep breath to regain her equilibrium. "I must've stood up too quickly, I'm fine now." At his unconvinced look, she smiled. "Really."

"I can escort you to the main house," he offered.

"No," Laura said quickly. "But thank you. We can walk together until we have to take different turns?"

"Excellent idea," he smiled.

They walked in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, and both thinking about each other.

Chapter Six

"Lasha, I have no desire to spend hours sitting in a woman's clothing store while you decide what to buy. Remember, I have an appointment that I must go to after taking you back home."

Laura smiled, batting her eyelashes. "I know, but you want me to look pretty, don't you? I heard Lady Giles spent a small fortune for next week's society ball, and you know she's always so snotty to me."

That was enough to convince him. "You may go, then," Stavros agreed. "Alone. I will return at noon, exactly. Do not be late."

"I won't," Laura assured him. She gave him a quick good-bye kiss, then watched him get into the escorted car, and waved until it was out of sight. She breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that it had been so easy.

Waiting a few minutes, just in case he returned unexpectedly, Laura crossed the street and entered the doctor's office.

Stefan sat on the empty bench. He had known she wouldn't be here, but he found he felt disappointed, nonetheless. He missed her, he realized. And he was thinking of her far too often for his peace of mind. He ran his hands through his hair. He had grown too attached to this woman he barely knew.

Your brother's wife.

It had almost become his mantra, though it was only partially successful in keeping unwanted thoughts at bay. He knew he couldn't postpone it any longer; he had to leave the Island.

"Boo," came a laughing voice behind him, startling him out of his thoughts.

"Laura!" He stood to meet her, his mood lifted considerably. He looked at her carefully; there was something different about her. There was a certain sparkle in her eyes that he had never seen before.

"Can you keep a secret, Stefan?" she asked, smiling.

"Of course."

Laura bit her lip, but couldn't help but laugh giddily. "I'm pregnant," her smile grew as she said the words.

Stefan felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him. "Congratulations," he said, still in shock. "Stavros must be very happy."

"Oh, I haven't told him yet. I'm going to surprise him tonight. I've got the whole evening planned."

Stefan had to smile at her obvious joy. "I believe you'll be an excellent mother," he told her sincerely.

"Thank you!" Laura said, tears brightening her eyes. "Look at me, I'm already hormonal," she laughed. She breathed in, and exhaled. "I should go get everything ready. I can't wait to tell him!" She planted a kiss on Stefan's cheek, and gave him one last grin.

Stefan sighed as she left. Yes, it was definitely time for him to go. Things seemed to be falling into place, and for the better. He hoped Stavros' reaction to the news would live up to her expectations. But then, he knew Stavros wanted to have a child, if only for the continuation of the family line.

So why would it not?

Helena gripped the receiver in her hand. "Thank you for informing me, Dr. Lastiris. I will make sure you are appropriately compensated for your information. I would appreciate it if you would not discuss this with anyone else."

Helena hung up the phone, steadying her hand. The nerve of that intruder! To think that she would give them their first grandchild.

But it didn't mean she would be raising the child.

It seemed she was going to have to take action sooner than planned. She looked at the photographs in her hand. They couldn't have arrived at a better time.

"I'll get you out of my home, yet," she declared. She settled into a seat, and waited for Stavros to arrive.

Chapter Seven

"Mother," Stavros sighed, rubbing his temples. "I have growing tired of your constant criticism and slandering of Lasha. With whom is she having this supposed affair? She has neither reason nor opportunity. She leaves the house only with me, and is quite content being my wife."

"Not even you can know her whereabouts at every moment," Helena pointed out. "You are gone frequently.

Stavros' irritation rose. "Who?" he asked, in clipped tone.

"Your brother," Helena answered.

The first creep of doubt entered Stavros' ego, but he tried to laugh it off. "Stefan? Please. The gardener would be a likelier story."

"If you don't believe me, maybe you'll believe your own eyes."

Stavros gave her a questioning look, and was answered when she handed him what looked like a photograph.

Stavros' cocky smile faded immediately.

His eyes burned as he memorized every centimeter of the picture. There was his brother, unclothed as far as he could see, caressing his wife's face. But it wasn't so much the touch, as the looks in their eyes. She had never looked at him that way.

The last trace of doubt was erased from his mind; they were clearly lovers. Stavros' jaw clenched, as he crumpled the photograph in his hand.

"I can arrange--" Helena started.

"No," Stavros cut her off. "I will handle this myself. But thank you, Mother, for opening my eyes."

Laura looked around the bedroom, mentally arranging where everything would go, and humming a lullaby. She had the matches for the candles, and had ordered a special dinner to be served here. She wanted this night to be perfect. It would be a new beginning. She laid her hands on her flat belly. One wish had come true, and it was all she needed.

"Caught you."

Laura spun around at the sound, nearly crashing into her husband. "Stavros," she smiled disappointedly. "You're early. I wanted to surprise you."

"Oh?" Stavros said. He was the perfect image of husbandly curiosity. The clenched hands holding the photograph hidden from Laura's view were the only sign of his rage. "I love surprises. Do tell."

Laura's eyes regained some of their shine, as she took a deep breath. "I'm going to have a baby." Stavros took a step closer, so that she could feel his breath on her face. She happily noted he hadn't been drinking.

"A baby," he repeated. "And tell me, Lasha..." His sweet voice grew cold and sneering. "Who's the father?"

Laura was speechless for a few moments, her smile fading, not sure if she had heard him right. "What?"

"Yes, my dear wife. Am I the lucky man, or has my brother," he spat the word, "managed to plant his seed in your willing body before I?"

Laura's reaction to the insult was immediate, and she raised her hand to slap her husband, but he grabbed it tightly with one of his own. She winced, but glared at him. "How can you say that? I'm your wife! I took a vow and I've NEVER broken it. That's you, remember?"

Having his affairs thrown in his face was not what Stavros wanted to hear, and he pushed her against the wall. Laura let out a painful grunt, the anger beginning to give way to fear as her free hand instinctively went to her abdomen. "Don't lie to me, Lasha," he warned.

She tried to make her voice soothing. "I'm not--"

He backslapped her across the face, drawing blood. "And what is this, then?" He showed her the incriminating picture, nearly shoving it in her face.

Laura's eyes widened as they focused on the image, instantly recognizing the scene. "I can explain--" She looked into the violent eyes of the man she had pledged her life to, and as his hand came down on her again, she knew this time, he might just take it.

Chapter Eight

Stefan placed the last article of clothing in his luggage, trying to remember if he had forgotten anything. He didn't have that much to take with him.

Satisfied that he had packed everything he needed, he zipped up the bag. Now he just had to say his goodbyes.

He was headed towards the door, when an urgent knock rattled it.

He quickened his pace, and opened it. "Mrs. Lansbury?" Stefan felt a sense of dread. She rarely came here, only when there was an emergency.

Mrs. Lansbury didn't waste any time with formalities or lengthy explanations. "Come with me, Mr. Cassadine. We don't have much time. It's Laura." She turned and headed out.

Stefan followed, trying to keep his mind from falling into worst-case scenarios. The older woman's fast stride told him plenty, but he wouldn't help anyone by becoming overly agitated.

They arrived at Laura and Stavros' bedroom, and Mrs. Lansbury stopped outside the door. "I haven't been in to see her. I only saw Stavros walking out the door, slamming it shut." She shuddered at the memory. "He was bleeding... or had blood on him. He looked possessed."

Stefan needed no further prompting and he walked into the room, Mrs. Lansbury two steps behind him.

His heart nearly stopped as he saw her.

"Dear God," Mrs. Lansbury whispered in horror.

Laura was on the floor, face down. Deep purple marks were already beginning to show on various parts of her uncovered skin. There were crimson stains everywhere around the room, broken objects scattered about.

She had put up a fight.

Stefan didn't remember moving, but he was suddenly kneeling down over her, carefully checking her pulse. He breathed out in relief as he felt the soft thumping beneath his fingers. She was alive.

Laura moved slightly then, her face scrunching up in pain, a loud moan filling the room. Her bloodied hand grabbed her abdomen. "My baby..." she rasped through her swollen lips before falling back into unconsciousness.

Stefan thanked the mercy of the Gods.

He picked up what looked like a crumpled photograph lying next to her. He cursed inwardly as he saw what it was. How could he have been so foolish?

He tossed the picture aside, needing to focus on the more important problem. He had to take her somewhere else, but how?

His question was answered by the last person he had in mind to help.

"I need both of you to move away from the patient so I may examine her," Dr. Lastiris ordered.

Helena stayed at the entrance of the room, her head turned so she could avoid actually looking into it. "Stefan, I need a word with you."

Stefan hesitated, but he knew Mrs. Lansbury would watch over Laura. And the doctor could be more helpful than either of them at the moment. He followed his Mother to the hall, closing the door behind them.

"I've arranged for Laura's departure," Helena said without preamble.

"I'll be going with her," Stefan informed her, just as quickly.

A look of surprise crossed Helena's face. She had known there was an attraction between the two, but this went much deeper than she had suspected. "I see. You realize you won't be able to return."

He nodded. "I am aware of the consequences."

For once, there were no snide remarks. "Very well," Helena said. "Stavros will not be back for a few hours, but I suggest we move quickly."

They walked back into the room.

"How is she?" Helena asked, trying not to recoil as she got a clear picture of what had happened.

Dr. Lastiris stood up, while Mrs. Lansbury continued to attend to Laura's superficial wounds.

"The damage and blood loss is extensive, but not fatally so," he said. "She's lost the child, and will require a great deal of rest. Time will do most of the healing, once the main injuries have been attended to."

"Is it dangerous to move her?" Stefan asked.

Dr. Lastiris shook his head. "It's not recommended, but if done with care and not prolonged, it should not do any further damage. I've given her a strong sedative for now."

"Mrs. Lansbury," Helena said. "Gather all of Laura's belongings, and Stefan's, as well. Meet us at the back entrance."

"The bag on my bed is the only thing I require," Stefan told the housekeeper.

Nodding, Mrs. Lansbury left.

Laura had been settled as comfortably as possible in the large vehicle, so that any rough road they crossed wouldn't cause her to move too much.

All that was left was for Stefan to say goodbye. Goodbye to his childhood home, and the hopes that were tied to it.

"Thank you for your help," he told Mrs. Lansbury.

The woman nodded, smiling sadly. "Be well."

Stefan turned to his mother, unable to focus on just one feeling among the dozen that were suddenly hitting him at once, along with the realization of what he was about to do. "Goodbye, Mother," he said.

Helena stood rigidly, her face revealing nothing. "Goodbye, Stefan."

Neither said anything else, incapable of crossing the short physical distance between them.

Stefan walked away and got into the car, shutting the door. The tinted windows were raised. "We may go," he told the driver, as he continued to look out the window, taking one last look at what was now his past.

Somewhere in the icy depths of his mother's eyes, he thought he noticed a brief flicker of warmth. But just as soon, it was gone.

The car started moving, and he turned forward.

Chapter Nine

The sedative gave Laura a blissfully dreamless and oblivious night. She awoke late the next day to unfamiliar surroundings. That feeling was nothing new, but the intense pain that came when she tried to move brought all the memories of the previous day rushing back to her.

Terror paralyzed her, as she heard a scraping movement from close by, followed by footsteps. The slit of light coming from the covered window at her side wasn't enough for her to make out anything.

"Laura?" The whispered, disembodied voice seemed threatening in her heightened state of attention and fear.

The room became softly illuminated as Stefan turned on a lamp at the opposite side of the room.

"Stefan?" Laura asked, though he was now standing right in front of her. Her first reaction was to be relieved, but suspicion entered her mind as a dozen unanswered questions formed.

"This will help with the pain," he said, showing her a small pill.

He could see the uncertainty in her bandaged face, not fully knowing whether she could trust him. "Where are we?" Laura asked, a grimace forming as she raised a hand to her still tender mouth.

Stefan sat down in a chair close by the bed. "A small village in Greece. A good distance away from the Island."

Laura's eyes started to droop, already beginning to feel the pressing need to sleep again, but she forced her eyes to stay open. "Not Port Charles?" she asked, hoping he'd comprehend her short question. Forming words was

starting to become an effort.

He did understand. "There are still some things that need to be resolved before you can leave the country," he explained. "You're also badly injured, and a journey of that length would be dangerous to your recovery."

"Why help me?" Laura asked.

"I felt responsible," he said. There was truth in his words, just not all of it. "I saw the photograph."

The murderous look she had seen in Stavros' face returned to Laura, filling her with dread. "Stavros will--"

"Stavros won't risk further humiliation," Stefan assured her, anticipating what she was going to say. "Especially given" Helena will convince him to let things be, through flattery or threat. He will find a suitable wife. The rumors will die eventually, as they always do."

Laura couldn't suppress a shiver as she thought of the poor unknown woman who that fate would fall to. But her thoughts soon turned back to the question that she most wanted answered, but was also the most afraid to ask.

"And..." she began, her voice growing so soft Stefan had to lean closer to hear her. Her blue irises were filled with a mixture of torture and hope, as she searched his green ones. "My baby?"

Stefan looked down, and Laura closed her eyes against the new agony, a single tear falling down cheek. She turned her head away from him, a scream echoing in her soul, but not a sound passing through her lips.

It was a few minutes before Stefan realized she had finally succumbed to her exhaustion, her breathing steady, and her body relaxed.

He put the pill and glass of water down on the nightstand, hating that she would have to suffer the physical pain along with this devastating news, wishing that there were some way that he could help her bear it.

He gently pulled the covers over her sleeping form, meticulously checking that every bandage was in place, as the doctor had instructed him. He sat back down on the chair, and continued to watch over her.

Chapter Ten

Stefan rested his eyes, but was still aware of what was going on around him. There had been moments throughout the night when Laura had seemed agitated, though she hadn't woken up. He had whispered soothing words to calm her through her dreaming. It seemed to help.

He heard the soft mumbblings again and opened his bleary eyes. He stood up and walked over to the bed. He couldn't distinguish any words, but was relieved to see that she seemed to be having a pleasant dream this time.

Laura's eyes fluttered open at that moment, an indistinguishable look forming on her face as she saw him. "Hello."

Stefan backed away, giving her some space. "Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"I could ask you the same thing," she noted, seeing his tired appearance.

"I do not require much sleep," he explained.

"I think I had strange dreams," Laura frowned. "But I don't remember much." Her face softened as a snippet of a dream came back to her.

"Do you want to want to talk about it?" Stefan offered.

There was silence. The moments passed and Stefan took her answer to be no, so he headed towards the door to give her privacy.

"I loved someone, once."

Stefan turned and walked back, sitting in what was getting to be his usual place.

Laura spoke slowly, because of what she about to tell him, and to keep her strength. "His name was Scotty Baldwin." Her tears began to fall. It had been a long time since she'd said his name out loud. "He was so good to me, stuck by me even when I screwed up." There was a faint smile in her voice, as she lost herself in the bitter-sweet memories of that first love.

It faded. "He was murdered," she said in a low voice. Stefan said nothing, so she continued. "He was shot, during a mugging. Or at least that's what we all thought. I was a wreck. I started going to bars and drinking until I could almost numb the pain."

"That's understandable," Stefan said, thinking he should say something.

"But I never slept with anyone," Laura said defensively. "I was faithful to him, always"

She stopped, and Stefan saw that her breathing was becoming labored; she had to be in pain. "You should rest now," he urged gently. "We can talk more later, once you're well again."

Laura shook her head, and continued talking, almost feeling as though she were in confession. "And then one night, after I'd been drinking... this man, he grabbed me."

Stefan felt a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"He had been watching me for a long time, he said. He just had to get rid -- get rid of my 'bodyguard'." Her face crumpled in sorrow and guilt. "Scotty would be alive if it weren't for me."

"No. No, Laura," Stefan said, his voice quiet, but strong. "It wasn't your fault."

"And after I testified, my parents thought it'd be best if I took a vacation in Europe with my little sister. I was too tired to argue. I just didn't care. That's when I met Stavros. I knew I couldn't really love him, but he seemed nice. And it'd get me away from everything I knew." Her laugh was hollow. "Another mistake, big surprise."

Her head shot up, concerned that Stefan might misunderstand her words. "But my baby wasn't a mistake. I wanted my baby, more than anything. It didn't matter if Stavros was the father, it would be my child. I -- I think Scotty would have wanted that for me."

"I'm sure you're right."

They stared at each other in silence.

"I never told anyone that story," Laura said softly, mostly to herself.

No longer needing to unburden herself, she was reminded of her fragile state, not being able to keep ignoring the pain. She looked at the glass of water and pill that Stefan had left by the bed, untouched from the day before. She reached over to take them, but was instantly sorry as her already worn-out body protested to the quick movement.

"I'll get that," Stefan said. He placed the pill in her open mouth, and helped her drink from the glass.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Chapter Eleven

Laura stirred from her sleep, and the now-familiar pain shot through her body. It had gotten much better, but she knew she was still a ways from fully healing, even though she spent most of the days sleeping.

The silence in the room began to unnerve her and she called out, "Stefan?"

She had already grown accustomed to his constant presence. At night, when bad dreams would keep her from sleeping, he was there, without her having to ask. They usually said nothing, but just his being there calmed her. She would fall asleep eventually, feeling oddly safe.

"Good morning, Laura," Stefan appeared at the door, carrying a tray. He was glad to see the growing color in her face, though she still looked so frail.

"Good morning." Laura felt herself relax.

"I brought you your breakfast."

"Thank you, but I'm not really hungry."

"You must eat something, or you'll never regain your strength."

"Are you always this bossy?"

"I prefer to call it being firm."

A genuine smile appeared on Laura's face. "Right." She looked at the tray of food. "Okay, I'll try."

"Good," he said.

"At least you don't have to feed me anymore. That's a good sign, right?" Laura asked. She took a small piece of fruit, and put it in her mouth, chewing slowly.

"I'd definitely say so," Stefan agreed. "It's been almost a week since we've been here. You're making a good, steady recovery. I was thinking perhaps you would like to call your family."

A longing passed through Laura's face, but she shook her head. "Not yet." She smiled. "But I do want to thank you." He opened his mouth to interrupt her, but she beat him to it, "No, please, let me say it. Thank you for helping me. I don't know what I'd have done without your help. You've been like an angel. And I promise I'll try to get well fast so you can go back home soon."

"You need not concern yourself with that."

Laura regarded him skeptically. "I know it can't be fun for you to wait on me while I get better. And your parents can't be happy that you're here." She caught the troubled look on his face as she said that, and sensed that he was holding something back. "What is it?"

"I won't be going home. I can't."

"What do you mean?" Realization hit Laura as she remembered the lengthy code of conduct and honor that Stavros had often prattled on about. She'd been too preoccupied with herself to even think about what Stefan's actions meant for him. "I can't let you give up everything you've known. Maybe you can convince them of taking you back, make up something or--"

"Laura," Stefan interrupted. "Believe me, it is better this way."

"But you'll be cut-off..."

"I am financially secure, that is not a problem."

"What about your family?"

"I have Alexis."

"Who's Alexis?"

"My sister."

"Stavros never mentioned..." Laura stopped. "Whose daughter is she?"

"My father and Kristen Bergmann's, one of his mistresses."

"The apple doesn't far from the tree," Laura muttered under her breath.

Stefan nodded. "It's a veritable family tradition. Alexis grew up with her mother. She was happy there."

"And you?"

Stefan was quiet, wondering how he could explain his childhood. He tried not to think about it too often. "Once," he recalled, "when I was five years old, the four of us -- Father, Mother, Stavros, and I -- went on a rare outing, into the sea. As young children tend to do, I was exploring this new experience. I stood too close to the edge, and lost my balance. No one noticed I had fallen over, until the captain sounded the alarm. He was able to revive me."

Laura gasped, "Oh, my God." Her shock quickly turned into anger as she thought of the neglect that had nearly caused a child his life. "That's despicable."

"Father didn't care about any of us. But I never did understand how my mother could love my brother so much, and not have any tenderness towards me...." Stefan's voice trailed off and he looked at Laura, embarrassed that he'd gotten so emotional. "So, as you can see, I am not sorry to have left."

Laura wasn't convinced, but she let it go. "Thank you for sharing that with me."

"Thank you for caring."

Chapter Twelve

Laura sighed contentedly as the hot water from the shower massaged her sore body. Though it wasn't so much the soothing water as the fact that this was the first time she'd been able to do this on her own.

She remembered wondering the first few days how she was going to manage that -- or really who was going to help her do it. Stefan informed her he had hired a woman for that very purpose. She'd been relieved, of course. But a wicked part of her had been a little disappointed.

She carefully towed herself dry, and looked at her mending body. Some of the bruises had disappeared, some were now only slight discolorations, but there were still some that stood out plainly against her light skin.

Putting on her robe, she walked back to her room. She sat on the bed, and began the painstaking process of dressing, making sure not to move in a way that would cause her to utter unladylike phrases.

She unclipped her hair, and brushed the tangles out of it, pausing every time her arm started to feel like dead weight.

Once the grooming process was done, she laid back on the bed, exhausted.

"Good afternoon, Laura."

"Stefan!" She sat up too quickly, and winced. "Shit."

"Mrs. Roshenko tells me you've made excellent progress."

Laura chuckled at his funny pronunciation. "Well, I can wash myself now. That's always a plus. What's that in your hand?"

"The annulment papers, ready for your signature."

"That was fast." She put out her hand, and Stefan gave them to her. She scanned through the print. "Almost as if it never happened..." she murmured as she signed. This was turning out to be a great day. "I think this calls for a celebration!"

"I suspected you might feel that way," Stefan smiled. "And I brought something else with me." He walked out of the room and reappeared moments later, pushing a wheelchair. "I thought you might enjoy going outside."

"Yes!" Laura nearly shouted.

"You do know you aren't a prisoner here?" Stefan asked, a worried frown on his face.

"Oh, I know! Believe me. Just habit, I guess." She looked at the wheelchair. "I don't need that."

"Yes, you do. Unless you would prefer going through the town by car. But that may be a rather short drive."

"All right, you win."

Standing in the middle of the town garden, Laura felt completely free for the first time in too long. She spread her arms, ignoring the slight tenderness that was still there. She turned to Stefan and grinned. "Could we do this every day?" she asked.

"I'd like that," Stefan smiled.

"Sit with me," Laura ordered, as she planted herself on the grass.

Stefan looked amused, and did as he was told, not mentioning he would have done so even without her mandate.

Laura noticed he kept moving his head to one side. "Cramp?"

Stefan nodded.

"Turn around."

Laura started massaging his lower back, using her whole hand as she moved up and down. She then started kneading his shoulders, making small circles with her thumbs. She worked her way in slowly, spending extra time on the base of his neck. "Does that feel better?"

"Yes," Stefan said, his voice strained. He reached behind him to stop her hand, and turned to face her. "Thank you, I think that's enough."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

He was still holding her hand, making them both more aware of how close they were. The air between them became electric. Stefan felt his body react as her eyes lowered and fixed on his lips, then back up with what he would swear was a glow of desire in those blue eyes.

But suddenly she looked away, and stood up. "You better get a good night's sleep tonight," she admonished.

"Yes," he agreed, standing up himself. "We should return to the house, the sun will set soon."

"Good idea," Laura said, sitting back on the wheelchair.

"I'll come visit as soon as I can. Yeah. I love you, too." Laura hung up the phone, tears pricking her eyes. She hated lying to her mother, but she'd be able to tell her the whole story once they were face to face.

She took her nighttime medicine, and let out a deep breath. The walk earlier that day had tired her, but invigorated her at the same time.

The confusing feelings of that day returned, and she shook her head as if that would make them go away.

They hadn't talked about what had almost happened. Actually, they hadn't talked at all. They'd walked back -- well, he had walked -- to the house, and eaten dinner, without a word. And she knew he wouldn't say anything, not if he thought it would make her uncomfortable.

Wondering where he was, Laura walked into the living area. Once there, she almost laughed at the sight before her. He had fallen asleep on the couch. "Don't require much sleep, my foot," she thought. She walked over to him, kneeling down to raise his legs and put them on the cushions. She took off his shoes, and placed them on the floor.

She hadn't ever seen him sleep, which wasn't surprising. It was always the other way around. She touched his face, lightly tracing the edge of it. He looked so peaceful, despite the dark circles under his eyes. She smiled. He really was her angel.

She walked to a comfortable chair, and sank into it. She would look after him tonight.

Chapter Thirteen

"What's this?" Laura asked the minute Stefan came into the house, with an armload of newspapers.

Stefan set them down, while answering, "A blue ribbon, it seems. Have you been exerting yourself too much? The doctor warned you about that during his last visit."

Almost three weeks had passed since they had left the Island, but not enough time for her to be completely healed. And he knew the emotional wounds would take much longer.

Laura ignored him. "Why do you have a blue ribbon?" she insisted.

"I bought it in Greece."

"And?" Laura prodded.

"Where did you find it?" Stefan asked his own question.

"Um, I might have been looking through some of your things," she said, managing to look embarrassed. "I was bored!"

Stefan raised his eyebrow slightly. "I see."

"But you didn't answer my question. Why do you have this?" Laura eyes twinkled naughtily, and she raised her eyebrows suggestively. "Is there something you'd like to share with me? I don't think blue is really your color."

"You're exasperating," Stefan told her. "If you must know, I bought it in Greece... as a gift for you," he confessed.

"Oh," Laura said, surprised. "Why didn't you just say so?" She turned her back to him, and handed him the ribbon over her shoulder. "Can you tie it for me?"

The fluttering in her stomach grew as he barely touched her neck, sweeping her hair so that he could tie the ribbon around it.

"There," he said.

"Thank you," she smiled, turning to face him.

"You're welcome," he replied. "Now will you please sit and rest, as the doctor ordered?"

"All right," she said, finding her favorite chair. "Hand me the comics. And no more cracks about how well-read I am."

He chuckled as he gave her the pages, and moments later the rustling of newspaper pages was the only sound in the house. They had fallen into the routine rather comfortably.

Laura went through the funnies quickly, and settled on looking at Stefan read. There was a slight crease of concentration on his face. He looked so serious most of the time, anyone might think he had no sense of humor. But she knew better.

She noticed his expression change suddenly. "Something interesting?" she asked.

He looked at her, and considered whether or not to tell her. But he knew she would find out eventually. "A small article in the New York Times," he said carefully. "It seems that Luke Spencer was released--"

"What?" Laura felt a panic rise within her, and she stood up. She was thousands of miles away from New York, but she suddenly felt completely vulnerable. "Why would they let him out?" Her voice rose. "He hasn't served his time yet! What kind of stupid system is that?"

"Laura," he said, going to her and taking her by the shoulders. He waited until she looked at him, making sure she was listening to him. "He's dead."

Laura stared at him. "Huh?" was all that she could think to say.

"Yes. Apparently as he left the courthouse yesterday afternoon he was hit by a vehicle that was exceeding the appropriate speed limit. The injuries were severe enough that he died in a hospital several hours later."

"Are -- Are you serious?" Laura asked.

Stefan nodded. "Luke Spencer is dead."

A short snicker left Laura's mouth. She covered her mouth, but her shoulders shook. A loud laugh escaped, and she lost it, laughing for a solid minute. The tears that fell were both from the laughter and utter relief. She took several breaths, calming herself. She looked at Stefan, who was smiling with her. "I'm a bad person," she said, smiling broadly.

"We should all be so evil," he laughed.

Chapter Fourteen

Laura sniffed the concoction suspiciously. It seemed harmless enough, but one could never be sure. She dipped the tip of her tongue into the green goo. The look of disgust on her face nearly caused Stefan to laugh.

Laura's mouth set in a stubborn line, as she extended the arm with the glass. "No way I'm drinking that. It's gross."

"You have to drink it all," Stefan told her, not taking the glass.

"It. Is. Gross," she repeated, as if he were slow.

"Laura," Stefan warned.

Laura shook her head. "I'm practically all better now. And you can't make me."

A mischievous glint lit in Stefan's eyes. "Oh, no?" Calmly, he took the glass and set it on the bed stand. He turned back to Laura.

Laura knew he was up to something, and her eyes narrowed. "What are you up to?"

"Me?" Stefan asked, the perfect face of innocence. His hand snaked under the covers and took one of Laura's bare feet into his hand, and smiled at her. "I've been meaning to ask. Are you ticklish?"

"Oh, no, you don't!" Laura tried to wrestle her foot away from his grasp, but he held on tightly. Two fingers gently grazed her foot from the heel to her toes.

Laura laughed uncontrollably, but refused to give in. "I'm still not drinking it!" she said between laughs.

Stefan attacked her foot in earnest, causing her to thrash about in a fit of giggles.

"Okay! I give! I give!"

Stefan stopped his torture and smiled smugly. His smile turned into something different as he took in the picture before him. Her breathing was labored, her face flushed, her mouth parted. Stefan thought she had never looked more enticing.

"You, uh, you can let go of my foot now," Laura said, her voice oddly nervous.

Stefan nearly jumped out of the bed. He grabbed the glass, and turned back, handing it to her. "Enjoy," he grinned.

"Jerk," Laura glared at him. She closed her eyes and drank the whole contents in one gulp. She shoved the empty glass at him.

Stefan's laughter filled the room as he walked out.

Laura fell back onto the bed, turning her head so she was looking up at the blue sky through the window.

Every time he came near her, she felt as if her heart was going to jump out of her chest. And when he touched her"

"Please forgive me, Scotty," she whispered.

Chapter Fifteen

Laura was able to take longer walks through town as the days passed. It was the favorite time of the day for both of them. Hardly anyone knew them, so it was as if they were the only two people there.

They spent much of the time talking, about anything and everything. Laura would tell him a story of the mischief that she and Amy had gotten into when they were little girls. Stefan told her about the times he and Alexis had spent together in the Bergmann house, and after Alexis had left to study in the States.

They talked of the bad times, too. But they seemed less important now, each of them slowly learning to let go.

Still, Stefan saw the ache that she tried to hide whenever they would see small children playing in the fields, or when they saw a small toy meant for an infant. He had a feeling that ache might fade, but never go away completely.

And Laura noticed that among the many newspapers that Stefan read, there was always one of his hometown.

"Do you miss it?" Laura asked, handing him a scrubbed plate as they washed and dried the dinner dishes.

"No," Stefan said, after a slight pause. "For most of my life, I wanted nothing more than to belong. But I gradually learned that it was a trap, an illusion. There's a freedom in letting go, a burden that's no longer mine to carry. Alexis tells me it's about time I figured that out."

"I'd like to meet her someday," Laura said.

Stefan smiled at that. They hardly ever talked about the future, and even then it was only vague references.

He knew their time together was quickly coming to an end. Laura was moving around with barely a hint of discomfort. He would need to make the preparations for her to leave.

He pushed the depressing thought away, wanting to enjoy every moment they still had. He took another dish from her, and dried it off with the small towel. He wondered what his mother would think if she saw him doing this menial task. The thought cheered him up.

"Ooh, this is one of my favorite songs!" Laura said happily, as the music from the tape recorder changed to a different song.

Stefan chuckled as Laura sang along, while swaying her head side to side to the song's rhythm.

*Something in the way she moves
Attracts me like no other lover
Something in the way she woos me
I don't want to leave her now
You know I believe and how-*

He started mouthing the words himself, and Laura's eyebrow shot up in amusement.

"You know this song?"

"Yes, I'm not completely ignorant. And, who doesn't know The Beatles?"

"Well then, hot shot, why not sing a little louder?" she teased.

Stefan did more than that, and took one of her hands in his, while circling her waist with the other.

Laura shivered as his wet hand came into contact with the thin fabric of her dress, and she laid her own damp hand on his shoulder.

Stefan caught her smiling gaze and, pulling her closer, led her in a slow dance. He began to sing the last verse, his voice low and melodious, his eyes still locked with hers.

*Something in the way she knows
And all I have to do is think of her
Something in the things she shows me
I don't want to leave her now
You know I believe and how*

He spun her around to the last beat of the song, gallantly kissing her soapy hand when she was facing him again. "How was that?" he asked.

Laura couldn't help the soft blush that crept onto her cheeks. "Show off." She handed him another dripping dish. "Now keep drying, Fred."

He gave her a puzzled look, and Laura laughed, shaking her head. "I have so much to teach you."

Stefan smiled. "I'm looking forward to it."

Conclusion

Stefan stood in the doorway to Laura's room, silently watching her. He had made the necessary calls and everything was in order. There was nothing keeping her here anymore.

He was going to miss her; he could already feel the loneliness invading his body just thinking of the emptiness that would fill the house when she left.

Gods, how he loved her. There was no use in denying it. He loved her.

"Are you going to come in, or just stand there all day, Fred?" Laura asked, her back still to him.

He smiled at the teasing note in her voice, and walked in. "I wouldn't bother with those curtains, Ginger," he told her.

Laura stopped what she was doing, and carefully stepped off the stool, regarding him curiously. "Why not?"

"Are you ready to go home?" Stefan asked.

"Home..."

She knew he meant Port Charles, but the word evoked a different image in her mind now. She had just been thinking of how she wanted to redecorate her room, and now"

"I've arranged for your flight tomorrow morning," Stefan said, keeping his voice even. "You will be traveling first-class."

"You're not coming with me?" The idea that she would go alone had never entered her mind.

He looked at her, trying to ignore the feeling of hope. "I--"

"You think you can get rid of me that easily? You obviously still haven't learned how stubborn I can be. You're coming with me." Laura tried to make her voice as authoritative as possible, but her heart was beating rapidly, her stomach tied in knots. What if he said no? And why would he say yes?

Silence.

"Then I suppose I have no choice," Stefan finally said.

Laura laughed in relief. She ran to him and wrapped her arms around him. "Thank you," she said into his chest. "For everything."

"You know you don't owe me anything. If you're asking me to come with you because you feel indebted to me..." Stefan stopped as Laura placed one finger on his mouth, silencing him.

"It's for purely selfish reasons. I want you in my life, Stefan," she said quietly. She looked into his green eyes, her heartbeat once again accelerating as the words stumbled naturally from her lips. "I love you."

"Laura..."

"And don't tell me it's only gratitude, or that I'm on the rebound. I'm in love with you. And I want to be with you."

Stefan simply stared, lost in the swirling pools of blue that belonged to the woman who held the key to his happiness, and was offering it to him.

"If you don't feel the same way," Laura began, but this time Stefan silenced her.

The kiss was soft, at first barely a touch. But it grew deeper, and with it she had her answer.

~The End~

Lyrics from The Beatles' "Something." We love you, George :).