

Crossed Paths

by Becky

Chapter 1

"New York City!" Amy squealed. "That's where you should buy your wedding dress, Laura. After all, how many times does a girl get married?"

Laura glared at her.

"Oops," Amy said, "Sorry, I forgot."

Laura thought about Scotty, again. It hadn't been that long ago since she'd bought her wedding dress for their wedding. She had hurt him so badly. She sighed. There was nothing she could do about it now. He was somewhere in Mexico and probably didn't care what happened to her. She hoped he was okay. He had been her first real love. It was too bad everything had gone wrong. Right, she corrected herself. Everything had worked out, in the end. She and Luke were meant to be together. She looked up at her sister, and smiled. "New York City it is."

Amy let out a whoop and hugged Laura. "Yes!"

"Remember, I am the bride here," Laura laughed.

"Hmph, don't remind me. Someday my prince will come," Amy said dramatically, as she fell onto the bed.

"Reserve a hotel room, Snow White, while I go see Luke and tell him of our plans."

"You got it! New York City here we come!" Amy bounced off the bed. "Oh, and you can tell Lesley and Rick."

Laura groaned, "Come on, Amy. You know Rick isn't thrilled at the idea of me getting married to Luke."

"Not thrilled?" Amy laughed. "I think we can all safely say he hates the idea."

Laura was not amused and threw a pillow at her younger sister. "You can be a really big brat sometimes, Amy Vining." She walked out to the sound of Amy's peal of laughter. As she turned the corner of the hallway, she bumped into Rick.

"Did I hear right? You're going to New York City?" he asked, his displeasure obvious.

Laura's eyebrow shot up. "Were you spying on me, Dad?"

The pained look on Rick's face was enough to make Laura regret her accusation. "Laura, you know I only want what's good for you."

"I know, I know. But we've had this conversation before. I am in love with Luke and I'm going to marry him."

Rick sighed. "You always were stubborn. You get that from your mother."

"You're disappointed in me, aren't you?" Laura's eyes filled with tears.

"It just saddens me to think of what your life is going to be like with that man," Rick said. "I may not be your biological father, but you're very important to me, Laura. Just promise me you'll think about it."

"I promise," Laura lied. She walked out of the house, pushing all the doubts away.

Stefan Cassadine stared at the ceiling. He had been doing that for quite a while now. The only good thing about New York City was that he was very far away from the Island. The phone rang. He didn't know who it could be.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Stefan! I thought I'd find you there. Someone like you wouldn't actually be having fun in New York City."

Stefan contemplated hanging up, but he knew that wouldn't be a good idea. "What do you want, Stavros? And how did you know where I was?"

"That's Prince Stavros to you," Stavros corrected. "And tracking you down was easy. Her Ugliness is making me go to some fancy dinner engagement with those people that live on that house with the blue thing in the front and--"

"Stavros," Stefan interrupted, "You're almost going to be twenty-five. Don't you think it's time you learned these people's names and where they live?"

"I don't need advice on being The Prince from a pathetic loser like you," Stavros sneered. "Just tell me what I should bring as a gift."

"Anything absurdly expensive will be fine," Stefan said through clenched teeth. "The Lady thrives on ostentatious jewelry."

"Thanks, brother," Stavros said, and hung up.

Stefan wondered how he could make such a word sound so contemptible. Brother. Family. Would he ever know the meaning of these words? He thought too much, he determined. He'd call Alexis to see how she was doing. He dialed her number from memory.

"Unless you're selling coffee, I'm hanging up," a groggy voice answered.

"Alexis? Did I wake you?"

"Stefan!" Alexis' voice immediately cheered up. "No, you know how life in college is. I haven't gotten any sleep in weeks. Okay, slight exaggeration, but not by much. So how are you? Or rather, where are you?"

"I'm in New York City. I didn't want to return to the Island."

"Why didn't you come see me?" Alexis said, not able to hide the hurt from her voice.

"I apologize. I thought I needed to be alone. Hearing your voice makes me realize I made an error in judgment."

"Well, I would tell you to come right on over, but I'm swamped with finals, and you'd be incredibly bored. But you'll come see me the next chance you get, right?"

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

"Good. Um, well, you know," Alexis hesitated.

"I know. Goodbye, Alexis. Get some rest and eat." Alexis smiled. "Take care, Stefan."

Stefan hung up the phone, feeling better. 'Well,' he thought. 'Tomorrow can't be any worse than today.' He turned off the light and slept.

Chapter 2

"Oh my God," Amy sighed, "I've died and gone to heaven. Look at that gorgeous hunk."

Laura looked to where Amy was focused and her heart skipped a beat. He was incredibly handsome. He turned around and their eyes met. Laura's lips parted. She realized what she was doing and quickly turned away. "He's okay, I guess," she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Okay?! Are you blind?! I'm going to right over there and --"

"Don't you dare!" Laura almost yelled, grabbing Amy's arm. Turning a bright red, she said, "I-I just don't want you to make a fool of yourself. What if he has a girlfriend?"

"He'll tell me, and I'll try to show him that I'm the girl for him," Amy said, grinning. "Now let go."

Reluctantly, Laura did as she was asked. "Maybe I should go with you."

Amy shot her a look. "Um, thanks, but I don't need my big sister tagging along. How do I look?"

"You look great, but I don't think this is such a great idea."

"Laura, I'm eighteen, stop treating me like a baby. Unless you want him for yourself?" she teased.

Laura rolled her eyes. "Just go."

Amy proceeded on her mission.

Laura watched her go, and felt a pang of jealousy. "Why should I care," she thought. "Get a grip, Laura. He's just a pretty face. He probably has an awful personality. And you're getting married for crying out loud." Still, she couldn't stop herself from following Amy, and she knew it wasn't just to make sure her sister wasn't getting herself into trouble.

Her eyes started roaming his body. He was wearing a tight, white t-shirt that showed his gorgeous physique. What would it be like to run her hands over that chest, she couldn't help wondering. Her gaze lowered and...

Unexpectedly, Amy pointed to her, and the man's gaze came to rest on her. Laura was glad she didn't have to talk to him, because her mouth had suddenly gone completely dry and she could feel her cheeks burning, and not just because of the hot weather. He turned

back to Amy, who was poking him to get his attention. Laura realized she had been holding her breath, and slowly let it out.

After a few more minutes of conversation, Amy started walking back to her, but Laura was too busy watching him get into his car to notice Amy creeping up behind her.

"Boo!" Amy yelled.

"Oh!" Laura yelped. She rolled her eyes as Amy laughed. "Grow up, would you, Amy? Jeez." Out of the corner of her eye she looked over to where the car had been, but it was gone.

"He has a nice ass, huh?" Amy said.

Startled, Laura said, "How would I know?"

"Maybe because you were staring at him the whole time," Amy smiled knowingly.

"Oh, shut up. I love Luke," she reminded her.

"I know, but just because you're getting married doesn't mean you can't still enjoy the view. And you have to admit, that was a mighty nice view."

"You're hopeless," Laura admonished, evading the question.

"Yes, hopelessly in love," Amy declared.

"In love?! You've known the guy a whole five minutes. That's hardly enough time."

"It is for me. You should have heard his voice, Laura. It was so sexy. And you saw the car he got into. He's got to be loaded. A great bod and a load of cash. Perfect."

"Well, it's not like you're going to see him again."

"That's what you think. He's all alone in this big city, so I invited him to dinner. Don't give me that look. He's a gentleman, I can tell. He even asked about you, so I had to say you would come."

"What?! No way, you can forget about it." Laura shook her head determinedly.

"Please, Laura!!" Amy whined. "I already told him we'd meet him. Don't make me look bad! Besides, it'll be safer if we're both there."

Laura knew there was no point in arguing with her.

Lesley wouldn't be happy if she let her go off by herself, she reasoned, so she had to go with her. "Fine. So what's his name?"

"Stefan," Amy sighed. "Isn't that a beautiful name? I think we'll name our son that."

"And what will your son's last name be?"

Amy came back from her daydream and frowned. "I don't know. We didn't give out last names." She shrugged. "Guess I'll find out soon enough." She grabbed Laura's hand. "Come on, we've got shopping to do for tonight."

"Great," Laura muttered, wondering what Amy had gotten them into.

Chapter 3

Stefan arrived early to the restaurant. He had taken care not to choose something too elegant nor too casual. He sighed. He didn't know why he had accepted the girl's invitation. 'Yes, you do,' a little voice told him. 'Her sister.' Again the young woman's face appeared in his mind. He had spent all night thinking of her. Her long, flowing blonde hair... her svelte figure... her curved--

"Stefan!"

Stefan rose to greet Amy, quickly scanning around her. "Is your sister not coming?" he inquired, keeping his disappointment out of his voice.

"Oh, she should be here any second. Aren't you going to pull out my chair for me?" Amy teased.

"I'm terribly sorry. How rude of me." He started pulling out the chair, but Amy stopped him.

"I was kidding. We should wait for my sister anyway."

Stefan frowned slightly. He would never understand American humor, he decided.

"There she is! Laura, over here!" Amy waved her down, much to Stefan's chagrin.

Laura was equally embarrassed. She quickly walked up to them and grabbed Amy's hand to lower her arm. "You don't need to make such a racket, Amy, I could see you from where I was."

Ignoring her reprimand, Amy introduced her sister to

Stefan. "Stefan, this is my sister, Laura."

Stefan and Laura shook hands, and both felt a shock pass through them. Laura quickly took her hand away, not wanting to prolong the moment.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Laura," Stefan said.

The way he said her name affected her more than she wanted it to. She gave him a slight smile. "Likewise. Shall we sit down?"

"Please." He moved to help her.

"Oh, I can get it, thanks." She moved to sit the farthest she could away from him, while he helped Amy into her chair.

"Your sister informed me you are here shopping for your wedding dress."

Her radiant smile took his breath away. "Yes, I'm getting married soon."

"I wish you all the happiness," he said.

"Thank you," Laura replied. "So what brings you to New York?"

Before Stefan could answer, Amy piped in, not liking being left out of the conversation. "Stefan is just traveling. I was right, he is loaded."

"Amy!" Laura turned bright red. She smiled apologetically at the look of confusion on Stefan's face. "She means you're, um, very rich."

"Oh," Stefan said, not knowing how to respond. "Well, that is true."

There was an awkward silence.

"So what's your favorite TV show, Stefan?" Amy asked.

"I don't watch television," Stefan said. "I prefer reading. Do you have a favorite work of literature?"

"Seventeen," Amy joked.

Laura rolled her eyes. Stefan just smiled politely.

"Don't you get it?" Amy asked, slightly irritated. "It's a magazine. I don't read much, is what I'm saying." "Oh."

"Maybe we should order," Laura suggested.

"Excellent idea," Stefan smiled thankfully. Laura decided she liked his smile very much, especially since she had inspired it.

"Oh, this sucks," Amy declared, "I have a pounding headache."

"Shall I have the waiter bring you some medicine?" Stefan offered.

"I think it'd be better if we just go back to the hotel," Amy said to Laura.

"Amy, are sure it's that bad?" Laura said.

"Yes!" Amy complained. "Ow, I'll meet you in the car, bye Stefan. Have a nice life." She grabbed her head, stood up, and left.

Laura looked at Stefan. "I'm so sorry, she, um, she must really be in pain."

"I understand," Stefan said, "It was nice meeting you, if only briefly."

"You too," Laura said. She put out her slender hand and he took it in his large one.

They stood like that for a minute, neither knowing what to say. "I should probably go... my sister..." Laura finally said, finding it very hard to look away from his beautiful green eyes. She released Stefan's hand and started walking away.

"I've heard outdoor weddings are very beautiful," Stefan said suddenly.

Laura turned and smiled widely. "I'll remember that. Bye."

Stefan returned the smile. "Bye." He stood there until the last trace of her was gone from his sight.

Back in the hotel room, Amy flopped on the bed and let out a loud sigh. "Boy, am I glad that's over! Man, that guy was such a stuffed shirt. He may be drop dead gorgeous, but he's got the personality of a rock."

"You didn't have to be so rude, he wasn't that bad," Laura said. 'He wasn't bad at all,' she thought.

"Oh, please. Did you see how he didn't laugh at my joke?"

"Amy, no one laughs at your feeble attempts at jokes," Laura countered.

"Ack! Now he's got you talking like him. Feeble? Say lame!! Don't let the stuffed shirt get you under his spell. Woooo. Woooo." Amy fell to the floor laughing hysterically.

Laura tried to laugh, but couldn't. She needed to call Luke, needed to hear his voice. Then all these unwanted feelings would go away. Everyone had pre-wedding jitters. That was all it was. She was in love with Luke.

Making herself comfortable on the bed, she picked up the hotel phone and dialed his number. She let it ring ten times before she finally hung up.

"I'm just glad he doesn't live here," Amy stated. "Boy, give me a nice American boy any day. Those Europeans can stay where they belong."

The thought of not seeing Stefan again bothered Laura, but she pushed the feeling aside. "So I take it you don't want to bear his children anymore?"

"God, no. Can you imagine? Although I wouldn't mind the process at all," Amy smirked.

Before she could stop herself, the thought of Stefan naked passed through Laura's mind. She swallowed and tried to replace the image with the thought of Luke naked. It didn't work. She covered her head with a pillow and wondered again why life was so damn complicated.

Chapter 4

Laura found herself walking alone down Fifth Avenue early next morning. She had had a restless night, and had wanted to go shopping early, but Amy was not a morning person. She had tried her best to get her to wake up, because alone all she had been doing was thinking of--

"Laura?" a voice from behind her asked.

She turned around and briefly thought she might be hallucinating. She found herself once again looking at those piercing green eyes. "Stefan!"

"I hope I'm not bothering you," he said, unsure if he was imagining the pleasure in her voice.

"Not at all, I'm just taking a walk until Amy wakes up," Laura reassured him.

"I was on my way to have breakfast," he said. "Would

you care to join me?"

Warning bells flashed in Laura's head, but she heard herself saying, "I'd love to." She was rewarded with a dimpled smile, and the unexpected gift made her knees weak.

"Wonderful. The restaurant is not far way, shall we walk?"

"A walk sounds lovely, but is it okay that I'm dressed so casually?" Laura asked.

Stefan didn't waste the opportunity she had given him, as his eyes traveled down the length of her body, to her sandaled feet, and back up to her face. Laura could almost swear she felt him undressing her, and she had the urge to cover her body. But that was silly, and she had suddenly lost all her motor skills.

"It's fine," Stefan managed to say. Her short, floral summer dress had left much of her white skin revealed, and he was quite breathless after his "inspection." "I'm not dressed formally, either, as you can see."

It was Laura's turn to make him feel naked as her eyes once again enjoyed the view of another tight t-shirt, this one tan. She knew she was going into dangerous territory if she went any lower than his washboard stomach, so she tore her eyes and stammered, "Y-yes, that's right."

They walked separately, neither trusting themselves to touch for a prolonged period of time. Indeed, when one of Laura's straps made its way down her shoulder, and Stefan gently placed it back, there was an intimacy there that neither was prepared to acknowledge.

"I'm really sorry about last night," Laura said, "I have to admit I didn't like the way we didn't get a proper goodbye, what with Amy's headache and all."

"There's no need to apologize. I am not what you would call great company."

"I wouldn't say that. I'm enjoying our walk. I hope you are, too."

"I can assure you I am."

They quickly arrived at the restaurant, and Stefan courteously opened the door for Laura to walk through.

The temperature was more than a bit chilly, probably overcompensating for the heat outside. Goosebumps

quickly appeared on Laura's bare arms as she shivered.

"It is fairly cold in here, isn't it?" Stefan whispered into her ear, as he helped her sit. Laura suddenly felt warmer. She nodded. He moved to the chair in front of her. Wanting to avoid his gaze, she looked down, just to find a sight that only served to raise her body temperature even more.

The shirt couldn't hide the fact that his nipples had become firm. Laura took her glass of water and drank from it. To cover, she said, "That's a beautiful medalion you have. What part of Europe are you from?"

"My family resides in Greece, but our ancestors were Russian, hence the name Stefan. In Russian, as a term of endearment, your name would be Lasha."

"Lasha. I like that. What about your name?" she asked.

"Steeva, but no one calls me that."

He couldn't hide the sadness in his eyes, and she wished she could do something to help him. She wanted to take away his pain, she realized. 'It's none of your business,' she thought. 'Let it go.' Despite her own warning, she found herself asking, "Not even your mother?"

Stefan winced. "That is not a subject I wish to discuss."

"I'm sorry," Laura whispered.

"You needn't be. There are some things I do not wish to burden you with. We've only just met, and we'll probably never see each other again after today."

"That's true... we should order our food."

Stefan nodded and motioned for the waitress. She promptly took their orders and left, leaving them alone again. After a few minutes of silence, Stefan asked, "Have you bought your wedding dress?"

Laura smiled. "Not yet. Amy and I are going to go looking again once she gets her lazy butt out of bed. I want it to be perfect."

"I'm certain anything you choose will only serve to enhance your beauty."

Laura blushed. "Thank you. That's very sweet. I definitely want it to be different from my first--" She stopped as she realized she had revealed more than she had planned.

"You've been married before?" Stefan asked.

"Yes, when I was seventeen. I know what you're going to say, 'You were so young--'"

"Actually, I was curious as to why it didn't work out. I'm sorry, if that's too personal..."

"No, it's okay." She took a deep breath and let it out. "Um, different reasons, really. We really were very young. Not that I'm the epitome of maturity now, but... We... we argued all the time over money. And then there was Luke..."

"Luke?"

"The man I'm going to marry."

"Oh."

"Yeah. I, um, I cheated on my husband with him," Laura said. She dreaded the look of disappointment that she was sure would be coming soon. It didn't.

"You're marrying out of love then," Stefan commented.

Laura was surprised at his statement, and a little insulted at his implication. "Of course I am. I wouldn't be marrying him if I didn't love him."

"I'm sorry if I offended you. From my experience love is not always present in marriage."

Laura could have kicked herself for being so defensive. "Were you married?" she asked gently.

Stefan grinned lopsidedly at the absurdity of the idea. "No, no. I doubt I ever will. I wouldn't want to bring anyone into my family."

"They can't be that bad."

Stefan's expression darkened as he thought of his parents and brother. It softened as he thought about Alexis. "Not all of them," he said softly.

"I don't seem to be saying anything right."

"It's not your fault," Stefan reassured her. Changing the subject, he said, "What music do you prefer? I suppose you're a fan of the genre known as Disco."

"I hate it," Laura said vehemently. The tone of her voice took Stefan aback. He reached across the table, gently took her hand and undid the fist that she had created. Her hand trembled.

"It would seem it's my turn to say the wrong things."

Trying to regain her composure, Laura said, "No, no, it's just my overreaction." But the way she nearly yanked her hand from Stefan's belied her words.

He could see she was still deeply troubled, but he didn't want to pressure her. He couldn't help wondering what had caused her to have such a violent reaction.

Laura said a silent prayer of thanks as the waitress showed up then with their food. "Wow, that was fast!" Laura forced a cheerful exclamation. "It smells wonderful."

"Yes, the service and cuisine here are excellent," Stefan agreed.

They were both still starving, and they quickly ate up the delicious food. It was only after they were done and the dishes were taken away that they regretted eating so hastily. Their time together was drawing to a close, and neither was ready to go.

Laura looked at her watch, knowing she couldn't put it off much longer.

"Your sister is probably waiting for you," Stefan said.

Laura nodded. "Yes, probably."

Stefan was the first to get up, and he walked around the table to help her out of her chair. An incredible urge to smell her hair came over him, and he allowed himself the pleasure. After paying, they walked out of the restaurant in silence, back to the busy New York street.

"Goodbye, Laura," Stefan said sadly.

"Call me Lasha," she asked, not really knowing why.

"Lasha," he said hoarsely.

"Goodbye, Steeva. I hope you find happiness." She kissed his cheek. Her lips lingered longer than they should have. As she pulled back, their eyes met, and suddenly so did their lips. His arms encircled her tiny waist and pulled her to him, as she buried her fingers in his soft, brown hair. Their tongues savored the new flavor, a mixture of them with a touch of blueberry syrup, as they explored each other's mouths, their kisses growing more and more urgent... until Laura's guilt broke through the spell and she stiffened in his arms.

Thinking it was quite possibly one of the hardest things he'd ever done, Stefan removed his arms and stepped back, his breathing shallow, which matched hers. That and her swollen, lipstick-less lips reassured him that he hadn't dreamt it all.

Laura's blue eyes filled with unshed tears, as she whispered, "I'm sorry." She turned and ran, her heart beating a mile a minute.

Stefan looked wistfully after her. He raised his hand to his lips where her warmth and taste remained. It would be another sleepless night.

Chapter 5

Alexis sat cross-legged on her bed and stared at her cousin, who was sitting on the sofa across from her, staring at his luggage on the floor. He had arrived unexpectedly, but hadn't said a word. She had been trying to figure out what he was thinking for the last fifteen minutes. It wasn't working. He had always been of a serious nature, so his silence wasn't that surprising. Still, something told her this was different. It was time to find out what was wrong.

"Stefan," she said. He didn't seem to hear her, or was ignoring her. "Stefan," she said more loudly. Still no reaction. "Stefan!" she nearly shouted.

His head popped up. "I'm sorry. Yes?"

"This food you brought is going to get cold soon and I warn you all I have is coffee and a stale bag of popcorn."

He mustered a small smile and took the Chinese take-out from her hands. "Thank you."

Before he could go into his reverie again, Alexis asked, "You want to talk about it?"

"About what?"

"Whatever it is that's bothering you. Did Helena or Stav--?"

Stefan shook his head. "No, no, it wasn't them, for once, though Stavros did call me that day I called you."

"What did he want?" Alexis asked, her tone cold.

"Nothing important." Stefan smiled wickedly. "Helena was forcing him to go to an elegant dinner."

Alexis snickered. "I hope she brought his bib and leash." More seriously she said, "I'm sure it wasn't a pleasant conversation, to say the least. I don't see why you go back there at all."

Stefan shrugged. "I don't do it that often, and when I do, I live apart from them. It's not that bad."

"Right, and vultures are sweet, innocent creatures," Alexis said sarcastically.

"Alexis..."

She sighed, "Fine, okay, I'll drop it. So what is bothering you, if it's not them?"

"I met someone... I should let you study."

"Please, I'm brilliant, I'll have no trouble passing." At his unconvinced look, she added, "I already studied, don't worry. You met someone?"

He hesitated a moment, and then nodded. He needed to tell someone, and Alexis was the only one who could really understand him.

"And?" she prompted.

"And nothing. She's getting married."

"Oh," Alexis said, trying to keep the relief from her voice. She didn't think she liked the idea of sharing Stefan's love. Stefan looked up at her and the sadness in his green eyes tugged at her heart. She was being selfish. "When did this happen?" she asked.

"I met her yesterday, though I had met her sister the day before. She was standing across the street, so I couldn't talk to her, only see her."

"She's pretty then," Alexis remarked.

"Beautiful," Stefan corrected.

"I'm sorry she's getting married," Alexis said sincerely. "Maybe..."

Stefan gave her a sad smile and shook his head. "No, it wouldn't have made a difference if she were single. Haven't you thought that it's selfish for me to fall in love? What could I bring to the relationship? My great family life?" he asked bitterly.

"Stop right there. That's them talking, not you," Alexis said firmly. "You definitely deserve someone to fall in love with."

"What about you?," Stefan countered. "You haven't had any relationships that I know about, that is."

"I'm a busy woman, I don't have time for romance," Alexis quipped. "Besides, all the guys here are immature, and they don't want to deal with someone with so much baggage. Not that I blame them."

"You would make a man very happy, Alexis. Don't you ever think about marriage or having children?" Stefan asked.

Alexis shuddered at the thought. "I can't think of anything more petrifying. Do you think it's all really worth it?"

"I don't know. I don't even know what I'm feeling. I do know she was attracted to me. We kissed, and it wasn't a simple, good-bye kiss. We both felt something."

"Then maybe she won't get married, maybe one day you two will meet again and it could happen," Alexis finished.

"Not likely," Stefan said. "Let's be realistic, Alexis. Maybe I'm reading too much into it. What good are dreams anyway?"

"That's true," Alexis agreed, nodding. "Nothing beats cold, hard facts. Books are much easier to understand and you don't have to worry about getting hurt." They pondered the bleakness of their outlook in silence as they stared at their food, neither hungry anymore. Alexis threw a fortune cookie at Stefan and said, "Here, maybe this will help you more than I can."

"Just having you listen to me is a help, Alexis."

Alexis regarded him skeptically. She read her fortune cookie aloud. "'A life with love will have some thorns, but a life without love will have no roses.' What about yours?"

"The impossible is often the untried," Stefan read.

"Oh, what do they know anyway," Alexis muttered as she threw the piece of paper away. She popped the cookie in her mouth. "Mmm, good stuff though." "You have an exam tomorrow, don't you?" Stefan got up and started clearing the mounds of books from her bed. "Since you already studied, you need to rest."

"That's probably a good idea, it's going to be a killer."

"I'm sure you will do brilliantly, as always," Stefan said. "Have I told you how proud I am of you?"

Alexis looked down, willing back the tears that threatened to come forth. She looked up, her eyes betraying the vulnerability she tried so hard to conceal, giving her face an almost childlike quality. "You'll stay with me tonight?" she asked, searching his face.

"Of course," Stefan promised. "That sofa is very comfortable, I could stay here forever."

Alexis smiled widely. "Consider it yours. Good night, Stefan." She got under the covers and, unlike many other restless nights, quickly fell asleep.

Stefan looked at his cousin's sleeping face and smiled. He leaned down and placed a small kiss on her forehead. He turned off the lamp and went back to the couch and stretched out, trying to find a comfortable position. He looked into the darkness and determined to forget about Laura.

Chapter 6

"Baby!" Luke yelled as he saw Laura. Wiping his hands on his apron, he quickly took her into his arms and kissed her. "I've missed you. Miss me?" Laura smiled. "Of course I did. I tried to call you last night, where were you?"

"Just hanging out with the guys, you know. Did you have fun in New York City?"

"It was okay."

"Only okay? That's because I wasn't there." His hands lowered to caress her bottom, as he once again entered her mouth with his tongue.

Laura broke the kiss and gently took Luke's hands away from her body. "You want to see a picture of the dress I bought? It's really beautiful." Her eyes twinkled with excitement.

"I'm sure it is, darlin', but I have a better idea," Luke grinned, as his mouth moved to cover hers.

She moved to avoid his kiss. "Oh, Luke, I'm really tired and Amy's waiting in the car. I just came over here to see you. It's been a busy two days, and I need some sleep."

"Didn't you get any sleep there?" he whined. "Come on, baby, I need you. Please? Tell Amy to take a cab home."

Before Laura could respond, a woman yelled out, "Luke, get moving! It's lunch hour!"

Luke looked at Laura. "I gotta go take care of this, but--"

"Yes, you go take care of that, and I'll see you tomorrow, okay? I love you." Not giving him time to protest, Laura gave him a quick peck on the lips and hurried out the door. Once outside, she let out a sigh of relief. She got into the car and headed for Lesley and Rick's.

"Did you show him the picture?" Amy asked.

"He was busy," Laura replied offhandedly.

"Oh, well I'm sure he'll love it. It's really beautiful."

Laura smiled gratefully. "Thanks."

They arrived at the house, where Lesley and Rick were waiting for them. Amy quickly went into a moment by moment recount of the two days.

An hour later...

"So anyway," Amy continued, "I could tell he really liked me, but he was too boring. He was very good looking, though, great body, light brown hair, blue eyes, and--"

"Green," Laura corrected her.

"What?" Amy asked.

"Stefan has green eyes, not blue."

"No, they weren't, they were blue. I think I'd remember better than you." Turning to Lesley and Rick, she said, "Laura only saw him at the restaurant."

Laura shrugged. "Whatever. I still say they were green."

"Blue, green, who cares? The point is he was sooo boring."

"No, he wasn't," Laura interrupted again. "Amy didn't even give him a chance. Just because he didn't laugh at one of her *lame* jokes."

Lesley and Rick laughed. "Who does?" they said together.

Amy glared at them. "He was a snob. Asking me what my 'favorite work of literature' is," she said in a mocking voice.

"He was just asking a question! It's not his fault you don't read!" Laura said heatedly.

"Jeez, calm down, I was just saying," Amy said.

"I just don't see why you have to gossip about people, especially if you don't know them," Laura said, a bit more calmly.

"Cause it's fun! Lighten up, it's not like you guys are best buds or anything. You'll never see each other again."

Laura's temper flared up again, as she shouted, "Oh, shut up, Amy!" and ran upstairs to Amy's room.

Once there, she locked herself in the bathroom, waiting for the inevitable. Sure enough, she heard a soft knock, followed by her mother's concerned voice. "Are you okay, Laura?"

"I'm fine, Mom," Laura said.

"Really? Then why the outburst in the living room, hmm?"

Laura sighed. Her mother wasn't going to give up until she got a straight answer. She unlocked the door and walked out.

"I'll apologize to Amy, I promise."

"That's good, but that's not what I asked. You are obviously very upset, Laura. Is something going on that I should know about?"

"Nothing is going on Mother!" Laura snapped.

"Don't take that tone with me young lady. And don't lie to me, either. I know when something is troubling my daughter."

Laura flopped on the bed resignedly. "You promise you won't tell anyone? Not even Rick?"

"I promise," Lesley said, her concern growing. "Are you okay, Laura?"

"Yes," Laura said automatically. She sighed. "No. You know that guy Amy was talking about?"
"That Steven fellow?" Lesley asked.

"Stefan," Laura immediately corrected.

Lesley smiled. "Right. The one with the green eyes."

"Yeah. Well, what Amy doesn't know is that I saw him again yesterday morning."

Lesley's eyes widened. "Did you sleep with him, Laura?"

"No! I'm getting married, remember?"

Lesley let out a sigh of relief. "So what's the problem?"

"I wanted to sleep with him," Laura finally admitted.

"But you didn't. Honey, it's okay to be attracted to other men, just as long as you don't act on those impulses. So it was only a physical attraction?"

"Yes, definitely, only a physical attraction, nothing else," Laura lied.

"And you don't have any way of contacting him?"

"I don't even know his last name."

"Sounds pretty innocent to me," Lesley declared. She got up. "I should go down and save Rick from Amy." Laura laughed, feeling a great weight lifted off her shoulders. "Yeah, poor guy. I'm going to take a quick nap before I head back to my apartment."

"Okay, baby." Lesley stopped at the door. "Is there something you're not telling me, Laura?"

"Nothing. I'll be okay. I'm just tired, that's all."

"That's understandable. Just remember I'm here if you need me. I love you."

Laura smiled. "I love you, too."

Left alone again, it didn't take long for Stefan to wander into Laura's consciousness. She remembered the way the medallion had pressed against her body when he had held her to him. Muttering a curse, she turned, pressed her face into the mattress, and let out a muted cry of frustration. She finally drifted off into a fitful sleep, never suspecting her life was about to be once again tied to Stefan's.

Chapter 7

The months passed. Laura was swept into an adventure with Robert Scorpio and Luke. Stefan immersed himself in study. He started various affairs, none of which lasted very long. During the days, it was easier for them to forget about that fateful day. The dream-filled nights betrayed them. It had been a shock to both of them to realize that the Gods had played so cruelly with their lives... but they weren't done yet.

Laura stood still, lost in thought, while the woman stuck pins in her wedding gown. She had met a Cassadine in this city. Stefan Cassadine, if that was his real name. Who was he? A cousin? A distant relative?

They had gotten caught. She clamped her jaw shut to keep from crying as the guards dragged her and Luke through the corridors. She had never been so frightened in all her life. Why the hell had she thought it was a good idea to come on this adventure? They were roughly pushed through the doors and came face to face with the maniacal Mikkos Cassadine. Robert was already there. Both he and Luke were putting on brave fronts. It would have reassured her if she didn't know they were scared to death, too. She turned back to Mikkos and froze as her eyes came upon the medallion on his chest. It couldn't be. But it was. The same as his. The same as Stefan's.

"All done!" the woman declared happily. "As soon as we make the alterations needed, we'll send it to you without delay. Have a wonderful wedding."

"Thank you," Laura said absently, as she walked out of the store, where Luke had been waiting for her.

"All set?" he asked.

"Mhm," Laura replied.

Stefan had been walking for hours, impractical to say the least in a city like New York. He needed to be alone, but he couldn't sit still. Books didn't help and neither did music. Luke Spencer. She was marrying Luke Spencer. The man who had killed his father.

He had returned to the Island following the news of his father's death because it was expected, though he couldn't grieve a man who had never treated him kindly. His mother was in a rage, cursing the poor fools who had thwarted his father's idiotic plan. His brother, pretending to care, was at her side, offering his comfort. Stefan made an attempt to calm her as well, but she gave him a look that turned his insides cold. He didn't know why he still tried. He picked up the shredded newspaper from the United States and froze. The picture had been clawed but, it was her. He was certain. He looked down at the caption. Laura Baldwin.

He had played that scene countless times in his head, telling himself this was more than enough reason to finally forget all about her. She had probably done so, why couldn't he? He turned the corner...

And bumped straight into Laura.

"Watch it, dumbass," Luke barked.

"I'm--" Stefan and Laura began, but the word stuck in their mouths.

"Hi, Laura," Stefan said. Did she know who he was?

"You know this guy, Laura?" Luke asked as he possessively took her arm. There was something about him that bothered Luke, but he couldn't quite figure out what it was.

"Um, not really, Amy met him months ago when we came to buy my dress," Laura explained nervously. "What are you doing here?" she asked Stefan.

"Visiting my cousin. She goes to Columbia Univ--"

"That's nice," Luke interrupted, "Let's go," Laura's eyes sent out a silent apology to Stefan as they walked off.

They walked for a few minutes and then Luke suddenly stopped. "That's it!"

"Luke?" Laura asked worriedly.

"The medallion! He's a Cassadine!" Luke exclaimed.

"What? No." Laura said rapidly. "That's impossible."

"Darlin'," Luke said, "he had the same medallion that that Mikkos had."

"I don't think so, Luke..." Laura began but Luke cut her off by heading back to find Stefan. "Luke! Wait!"

Stefan was caught by surprise when a rude finger tapped him roughly on the shoulder. He turned to find Luke, and coming behind him, a very distressed Laura.

"Hello, Cassadine," Luke spat out.

So she did know, Stefan thought. He had suspected as much by the way she had obviously wanted to get away from him. He had to explain things to her. "We need to talk," he told Laura.

"Listen," Luke sneered, "we know your kind, and let me tell ya, you and Laura have nothing to talk about."

"That's right, we have nothing to talk about." Laura repeated, keeping her eyes focused on the building past Stefan's head. "Let's go, Luke."

"No? What about your fiancé killing my father?" Stefan asked, never taking his eyes off Laura. "Is that the kind of man you want to marry?"

It took a moment for Laura to recover from the shock. Her blue eyes moved to meet his green ones as she asked softly, "Your father?"

"Yes."

"Ah, so you're Mikkos' kid. Figures," Luke mocked.

"At least, sir, I know who my father is," Stefan replied evenly.

Luke decked him. Hard. Stefan fell to the ground, blood coming out of his nose.

"Stefan!" Laura cried out. She made a move to go to him, but Luke's sharp glance stopped her in her tracks.

"Did you say Stefan?" he asked incredulously.

"Y-yes," Laura stammered.

That's all she got to say. Luke grabbed her by the arm and said, "We're leaving."

"But he's hurt, Luke!" Laura protested. "We can't just leave him here!"

"I don't give a damn about a Cassadine, Laura! Do you?" He eyed her accusingly.

She couldn't look at him. Turning her back on Stefan, she said softly, "No."

Stefan watched them go. He had been wrong about her. He had thought she would understand. This is what he got for thinking he could escape his family legacy. He was a Cassadine. It was time he accepted it.

Chapter 8

Stefan watched the flames dance. He took the papers in his hand, and shook his head. It was hard to believe he had gathered information on Luke Spencer just to know what kind of man she was marrying. What kind of man she had fallen for. How pathetic. He didn't need this anymore, he thought bitterly, as he threw the papers in the fire. He unfolded the newspaper clipping. An announcement of their wedding. It was in a week. She looked happy with him. He placed the clipping into the fire.

Taking a deep breath, he looked at the clock. It was

3PM. He needed a distraction, but he didn't want to bother Alexis anymore. He looked through his address book. It didn't have many entries, and he was about to give up when he came to the Ts. Susan. He smiled. She had moved to New York and given him her phone number he now recalled. It had been years since they had seen each other, but he had nothing to lose. He'd give her a call.

"Hello?" a feminine voice answered.

"Susan Thompson, please," Stefan said.

"This is she."

"Susan, this is Stefan Cassadine."

"Stefan! My God, how long has it been?"

"Close to five years," he responded, relieved that she had remembered him. "I'm in New York City and was wondering if you'd care to join me for dinner tonight. I know it's very late notice--"

"It so happens I'm free and I would love to have dinner with you," Susan said warmly. "We have a lot of catching up to do, and I'd love to see how my favorite student has been doing these past years."

"Excellent, is your address the same?" he asked.

She laughed. "Goodness, no. Let me give you my new one."

As he jotted down the information, Stefan smiled. He would forget about Laura Baldwin yet.

Dinner with Susan quickly led to other things. She was as beautiful as he remembered, though now in her early thirties. She was also intelligent, articulate, and most importantly, unattached. She was not a child, she was a woman. The kind of woman that could help him move on.

Stefan was no longer that awkward, sexually inexperienced teenager, Susan soon found out. He still had a lot to learn, but she would teach him. She sensed he was hiding something, but she didn't pry. She had secrets of her own.

Neither was looking for a serious relationship, but it would be nice to have someone to share fun times with, someone who wouldn't ask any personal questions. Yes, this was exactly what they needed, they both decided.

Laura felt the light from the sun coming in from the window. It was her wedding day. She smiled and got up. She turned on the hot water and relaxed. Everyone had worked so hard to make this a perfect day. It had almost not happened, but she had managed to soothe Luke's ego after their encounter with...

No, she couldn't think of him. She had promised Luke. It was her wedding day and she was marrying the man she loved. That was all she needed.

The hectic day started soon after she walked out of the shower. Everyone was running around, fixing her hair, putting on her makeup, helping her dress. It was impossible not to get caught up in the excitement of it all. Before she knew it, the minister was asking her, "Do you, Laura Webber Baldwin, take Lucas Lorenzo Spencer to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"Yes."

Chapter 9

"I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you, speak a little louder, dear," the minister requested.

Laura turned to him, to the expectant guests, and then back to Luke's smiling face.

Is that the kind of man you want to marry?

The idyllic façade of the extravagant wedding suddenly shattered. Realization hit her like a ton of bricks and left her in a state of panic. What the hell was she doing? She opened her mouth and slowly said, "No."

Luke's smile faded. "Laura?"

"No. I'm sorry, Luke, but... I can't marry you," Laura said.

Luke gave a nervous laugh and took her hand. "Angel, I know you're nervous. Hell, I thought about bolting, too, but--"

She took her hand from his. "It's not just nerves, Luke. I don't want to marry you," she said with more conviction.

His eyes grew cold as he yelled, "Well, this is a fine time to tell me, Laura! Now I look like a first-class chump."

The crowd started murmuring. Lesley and Rick quickly came to Laura's side.

"Laura, what's going on?" Lesley asked.

"Oh, nothing Lesley," Luke said sarcastically, his voice growing louder by the second, "Your daughter has changed her mind again. I'm guessing she would rather be screwing a Cassadine than marry me!"

"That's enough!" Rick yelled, and lunged for Luke.

"Rick, stop!" Lesley shrieked as she placed herself between the two angry men. "I'm sure this is just a misun--"

"You lowlife," Rick shouted over her, "You never deserved her."

The murmuring grew louder and louder. Laura could feel Bobbie's accusatory stare, Lee Baldwin's smug smile. She couldn't face this anymore. She had to get away. She turned and ran, blocking the voices that were shouting her name.

"Want a ride, Laura?" a voice asked.

She turned, startled. She knew it wouldn't be long before they came after her. She nodded, slipped into the car, and they sped off. She didn't see the elegant woman slip into a car and follow them.

They rode in silence for a few minutes.

"I thought you were in México," Laura finally said as she removed her headdress.

"Thought I'd pay a visit to my ex-wife's wedding," he said bitterly, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

She flinched at the tone in his voice, though she wasn't surprised. "I'm sorry, Scotty," she said softly.

"Sorry doesn't cut it, Laura," he said harshly.

She wiped the tears from her eyes. "I know, but what else do you want me to say?"

"I suppose I should be happy," he said with a short laugh, "You couldn't remain faithful to Luke, either."

"I didn't cheat on him," Laura said quietly.

"Come on, Laura, this is me. Your ex-husband. Don't expect me to fall for that lie again."

Laura began to get angry. "Fine, I'm a tramp, just like you said. Whatever. I don't give a damn if you believe me or not, Scotty. You know what? Just let me out, I don't know why the hell you offered to give me a ride anyway."

Scotty pulled over. He turned to look at her. "I thought we needed to clear some things. I trusted you, Laura." "Well, I trusted you too, Scotty. I trusted that when we had problems... oh never mind." She opened the door and went to get out, but he gently touched her arm.

"We would be able to face them together," he finished for her, his tone softening.

She turned to look at him, surprised. "Yeah. Pretty silly, huh?" She gave him a tentative smile.

"Nah, I don't think so. We were just too young to know that it wasn't going to be all easy to fix. We both had to grow up."

"I'm still working on that one," Laura said.

"Me, too. Listen, I'll take you home..."

She made sure her dress was all inside and closed the door. "Thank you, Scotty. Um, I know I don't have the right to ask you for anything, but I need to see somebody, and..."

"Just give me the address, Laura, I'll take you. After you change, of course," he teased.

She laughed and smiled her 1000-watt smile. "Definitely, I don't want to be in this dress a second longer than necessary."

As Scotty gave her a smile he hadn't given her in too long, Laura remembered why she'd fallen in love with him.

Chapter 10

"Argh!" Alexis screamed as she threw the textbook across the room. "I am sick and tired of school!" A knock on her door interrupted her rant. With a scowl, she went to open it. A blonde girl and a cute guy were waiting outside. A very cute guy.

"Alexis Davis?" Laura asked.

Alexis narrowed her eyes, guessing the identity of the woman. "Yes. Laura Baldwin, I assume."

This was going to be hard, Laura thought. "That's right. This is Scotty Baldwin."

Alexis nodded slightly and smiled. Damn, the ex husband, so much for that. "I don't mean to be rude, but what do you want?"

"I need to talk to Stefan," Laura explained. "I know you know where he's staying, and you're the only way I can contact him."

"Hmm, let me think. No." Alexis shut the door in her face. "That felt good," she said with a satisfied smile. She hadn't taken two steps before insistent knocking once again alerted her to their presence. She looked at the door and waited for it to stop. It didn't.

She was persistent, she had to give her that. She opened the door and snapped, "What?"

"I know you're trying to protect your cousin, but I need to see him. If only to apologize for the way I acted."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"You don't," Laura said. "But I'm not leaving here till you tell me where he's staying."

"She means it," Scotty said.

Alexis sighed and waved them in. "Before I tell you anything, and I'm not saying I will, I want to know why you suddenly decided Stefan is worth your time."

"I made a mistake, I know that. It's just that I already failed at one marriage, and it was so much easier if I thought Stefan was like his family. The Cassadines... well, it threw me for a loop that he was related to them."

"I can understand that," Alexis said softly.

"But he's not like them, is he?" Laura asked.

"No."

"Which is why I have to see him. I'm not expecting anything, I just have to let him know that I know I was a jerk and... well, whatever happens, happens." Laura finished. She waited to see what Alexis' judgment would be.

"This isn't fair," Alexis protested. "I'm not supposed to like you."

Laura grinned. "Does that mean you'll help me?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I guess so. He's probably going to kick my butt, but I'll risk it." She went to her desk and quickly jotted down the name and address of the hotel. She handed the piece of paper to Laura. "There you go."

"Thank you!" Laura hugged Alexis tightly. "You've just

made a friend for life, Alexis. This is really cool of you." She looked at Scotty. "Ready?"

"Lead on," he replied. He smiled at Alexis and extended his hand. "It was nice meeting you, Alexis." Very nice, indeed.

"Same here," Alexis said shyly. "Bye."

She placed her forehead on the door after they left. "You idiot, why didn't you ask for his number?" she chastised herself. Oh, well, it was too late now. Her head popped away from the door as a knock interrupted her thoughts. Anxiously, she opened the door. "Did you forg--?" she froze in mid-sentence.

"Hello dear Alexis," Helena Cassadine said.

Alexis moved to shut the door, but a masculine hand kept it open. "Now is that the proper way to greet your aunt?" Helena reprimanded as she pushed Alexis aside and walked in. "You remember Damon, don't you?"

Alexis quickly backed away from the door, fear starting to creep into her. Damon leered at her as he locked the door. "I certainly remember you, Alexis."

"Down, Damon, we don't want to frighten the poor child," Helena said. "Now Alexis, what did Laura Baldwin want with you?"

"W-who?" Alexis asked, creating a puzzled look on her face.

"Let's not play games, Alexis," Helena said dangerously.

"I d-don't know w-what you're t-talking about," Alexis managed.

"Poor baby, and I thought you had cured that awful, awful stuttering of yours," Helena said, her voice dripping with insincerity. "You know what would cure that permanently?" She reached into her purse and pulled out a delicate dagger. "This." Alexis backed away, but Damon blocked her way. She was trapped.

Helena walked slowly up to her and placed the point of the knife at the middle of Alexis' throat, enjoying the look of utter fear on her victim's face. "What did Laura Baldwin want from you?"

"N-nothing," Alexis stammered.

"Don't tell me you want to end up like--" Helena stopped herself. "Damon, I think it's time to add a little

pressure, don't you?"

"Yes, madam," Damn answered. He pressed his erection up against Alexis's backside as Helena pressed the knife a little deeper.

"She w-w-went t-to go s-see S-stefan," Alexis stuttered, tears streaming down her face.

Helena lowered the knife and motioned for Damon to back away. "Thank you, my dear, you've been most helpful. You've done him a favor by saving him from that whore, believe me." She waited for Alexis to relax slightly and continued, an evil glint in her eye. "But I'm afraid you won't be able to tell him yourself. I can't have you calling and warning him, now can I? No, that won't do at all." She raised the knife again lightly traced the contours of Alexis' jawbone.

"You b-bitch," Alexis hissed.

"I'm not the one who betrayed Stefan," Helena said maliciously.

Fresh tears fell from Alexis' eyes. She deserved this. She had been weak and allowed Helena to win.

"But killing you with a knife is so... so redundant," Helena mused. "What do you think, Damon?"

"Poison, madam?" the henchman suggested.

"Excellent suggestion!" Helena said gleefully. "It just so happens I have some with me. Hold this, would you darling?" She handed Damon the knife, who was still maintaining Alexis in place, while she searched her bag, finally pulling out a small vial.

"Take her to the bed and hold her down, Damon."

He did as he was told, laughing at Alexis' struggle to free herself from his grasp, her survival instinct kicking in. "Does this bring back good memories?" he whispered as he covered her mouth with his hand. He removed it cautiously as Helena leaned over Alexis. A strangled cry escaped Alexis' throat as Helena poured the toxic concoction into her, shutting her jaw when she was finished. "There," she said. "Goodbye, Natasha. Give my regards to Kristin." Laughing, she and Damon quickly exited.

Alexis struggled to roll onto her stomach. She reached for the phone and managed to unhook it. It fell to a thud as intense pain racked her body. Her last thought was of Stefan as she slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 11

Susan lay gasping on the bed. "Where'd you learn to do that?" she asked her lover between breaths.

"I had excellent tutors," Stefan replied, catching his own breath.

"Remind me to send them a thank you note," she laughed. "What other surprises do you have waiting for me, Stefan Cassadine? I hope they're all this nice."

"As do I," he said. He moved to kiss her but was interrupted by the sound of a knock.

Susan groaned. "Must be room service, they always have lousy timing."

"Yes, and after making us wait an inordinate amount of time for our food," Stefan agreed as he moved off the bed. He pulled on his pants, but didn't bother with a shirt.

He opened the door to find... "Laura?!"

Before Laura could speak, Susan walked out of the bedroom wrapped in a sheet, asking, "Who is it?"

Laura's face turned bright red, as she stammered, "Oh, my God, I-I'm so sorry, I didn't know, I should have called..." She turned and ran.

Stefan easily caught up to her and grabbed her arm, turning her to face him. "Laura! I will not have you walking away from me again."

"Let go!" Laura pleaded.

"No!"

Laura eyes flashed angrily. "Go back to what you were doing. You seem to have been very busy and I'm sure she's missing you."

Stefan let her go. "May I ask what business it is of yours?" he said quietly. "Were you not getting married today?"

Laura arched her eyebrow. "I see you've been keeping up with Port Charles news. Should I be flattered?"

"Do not change the subject, Laura."

"I couldn't marry him," Laura said softly.

Stefan's heart gave a leap, but he didn't let it affect his appearance. He would not allow himself to fall back into her trap. "I am glad for you, Laura. However, I am not certain why you came to see me."

Laura felt like she'd been slapped. What had she expected? "I wanted to apologize for that day in New York City."

Stefan stared at her coldly. "Which day? The day we kissed or the day you left me bleeding?"

"I deserved that. I never meant to hurt you, Stefan. Please know that."

"Very well, Laura. Apology accepted." This time it was he who turned his back on her and walked away.

Laura stood in the hall for a few minutes, finally allowing the tears to fall freely. She had ruined everything. She had hurt every man that had ever remotely cared about her. God, she was screwed up. She made her way down the stairs, ignoring the strange looks being cast her way.

Scotty was waiting outside the car when he saw her come out. The look on her face worried him -- she looked defeated. And she had been crying. "Are you okay, Laura?" he asked as soon as she got to the car. "Did he hurt you?"

Laura shook her head. "No. Not anymore than I deserved, anyway."

"Hey, don't be so hard on yourself," he said.

Laura burst out crying. "Oh, Scotty, why are you being so nice to me? I don't deserve it."

He shrugged. "I think you do. And you know, Laura, I'm always right."

She looked up at him and smiled through her tears. "I forgot. Can I go home with you, Scotty? I just can't face anybody else right now."

"Sure, Laura," Scotty said.

It would have been so nice to have killed them both. Three in one night would be a new record for her. "Patience, Helena," she told herself as she watched Laura and Scotty from her car. "This will be much sweeter in the end." Laura Baldwin cared for her son, that was clearly evident by the maudlin exhibition she was witnessing. She had no doubt found that tacky Susan Thompson with her son. She laughed. This couldn't be more perfect.

"Are we going to kill them now, madam?" Damon asked from the driver's seat.

Helena smiled secretively. "No, I've decided that's too easy. After all, I'm not a common criminal, Damon. Speaking of which, I think it's time for me to pay a visit to my Mikkos' murderer. Take me back to Port Charles."

Susan was waiting for Stefan in the bedroom. She had dressed and was sitting at the edge of the bed. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"No," Stefan responded.

She nodded resignedly. This is what they had agreed on from the beginning. She got off the bed and went to pick up her purse from the top of the dresser. "All right." She walked over to where Stefan was standing and kissed him lightly on the lips. "I'll see you later."

Stefan watched her go. He didn't know if he should tell her to stay. He was confused. He should feel good, but he didn't. He heard the door close. She hadn't slammed it, that was a good sign. Thank the Gods she hadn't insisted on knowing about Laura. And the day had started out so nicely.

He went to the bed and laid down. Laura hadn't gotten married. And she had come to see him. He couldn't help smiling. Maybe they still had a chance... no, he couldn't forget or forgive what she had done. Besides, their being together would be too complicated, and not worth it. Things were much better with Susan. Never mind that he sometimes thought of Laura when he was with her.

The phone rang. It was probably Alexis, he thought. Good, he had a few choice words to tell his meddling cousin.

"Stefan Cassadine?" an unfamiliar male voice asked. "Yes, who is this?"

"I'm calling from Columbia University. I'm afraid I have some bad news regarding your cousin, Alexis Davis."

Stefan sat down, suddenly unable to keep standing. "Has something happened to Alexis?"

"I'm sorry to say she's in a coma," the man said, "It appears she has been poisoned. Luckily, we found her in time for the doctors to prevent the poison from spreading and killing her, but they are not giving a positive outlook for her recovery."

"My cousin is strong, she will survive," Stefan stated firmly. She had to.

Chapter 12

"One. Two. Three bottles!" Luke counted gleefully. He took the third bottle and poured himself another shot. Everybody had gone home. Lesley had dragged that asshole, Rick, away before he could get in a good punch. Barbara Jean had wanted to stay with him but he just wanted to be alone. Since he couldn't beat anybody up, he had settled on drinking.

"How have the mighty fallen," a mocking voice broke through his alcohol-induced haze. He looked up to see Helena Cassadine. Shit, that was all he needed.

"Go away," he shouted.

"I have some news that I thought you might find interesting. But first, could you possibly pick yourself off from that filthy floor?" She looked distastefully at the ground.

"f--- off," he slurred.

"I guess you don't care that I just saw your ex fiancee with my son, Stefan. Well, goodbye, Luke." She turned to leave, walking purposely slow.

"Hold on." Luke carefully got up, trying to keep the room from spinning. As his eyes focused, he asked, "What else?"

She smiled coolly as she turned back around. "Do you need anything else? They made a fool of you, Luke. They've been seeing each other for a while now behind your back."

"I knew it!" Luke snarled. "Laura promised me she hadn't f---ed him, but when I slipped into her bed one night, she called out his name." This would be easier that she had planned. "Then why not get revenge?" Helena urged, "You and I could make great partners."

"Why would you help me?" Luke asked suspiciously. "Stefan's your son."

"He's been a thorn in my side since the day he was conceived," Helena said, her face twisted in hate. "I would be glad to be rid of him once and for all."

"Aha, so you want me to kill your son for you. I can do that, no problem. But you don't touch Laura, got it? I'm sure once your son is out of the way, she'll come to her senses and beg me for forgiveness."

Helena resisted the urge to laugh. "Very well, Mr. Spencer. Then you accept my offer? I would, of course, pay you handsomely for your services." She ignored the pungent smell of alcohol and walked closer to lightly caress his drawn face. "I can be very, very generous when things go my way," she whispered into his ear.

Luke grinned, beginning to get excited by her warm breath and the thought of Stefan dead. That settled it. "You've got yourself a deal, lady. Care to seal the deal my way?" He moved to grab her, but she was too quick for him.

"I'm certain there are women who would be glad to service your needs. I am not one of them. I'll be back tomorrow to go over possible plans. Try to clean up."

As soon as she left, Luke slumped to the floor and poured himself another drink. Bitch. He would find one of those women later. After he'd had a couple of more bottles. "You'll be mine again, Laura," he promised into the empty room.

As he poured the coffee, Scotty gazed at Laura, who was sitting on a sofa. She had been silent all the way back to Port Charles. She probably felt awkward talking to him, after all they had been through. He wasn't sure how to act, either. He had thought he would never be able to think of her without feeling only bitterness and anger, much less be in the same room with her. He smiled and shook his head lightly. He still loved her, there was no denying that. He supposed he always would.

"Feeling better?" he asked Laura as he handed her a cup of coffee and settled into the sofa.

Taking it, she replied, "Much better, thanks."
"That's good."

"You know, I should warn Alexis how things went," Laura remarked. "It's not going to take Stefan long to realize who gave me his address. I never should have gotten her involved in this mess."

"You have her phone number?" Scotty asked eagerly.

Laura grinned. "No, but I'm sure the University can give it to us." She set her coffee down and stared at him openly. "You like her, don't you?"

"She seemed cool," Scotty said, trying to avoid her gaze.

Laura chuckled, thankful to have something to take her mind off her problems. "Come on, Scotty, you may not be my husband anymore, but I seem to remember that look in your eye. Somebody has a crush."

"Okay, so I wouldn't mind seeing her again," Scotty admitted, grinning. "You think she'd go out with me?" Doubt flitted across his face, as he recalled less happier times with Laura.

Laura nodded her head vigorously, knowing what he was remembering. "Given the looks she was giving you when we went to go see her, I'd say yes." She paused. "I was a fool to let you go, you know that, don't you?"

Scotty shifted uncomfortably in his sofa. "You don't have to--"

"I know. But I think that Alexis is a smart girl, and I think you should trust her."

"It's not easy, but I think I might be ready to try."

Laura nodded, blinking back the tears. "I'll go call her, then."

He took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thanks, Laura." She gave him a small smile and went to the bedroom to use the phone.

There was something strange about his ex-wife setting him up with someone, Scotty thought. He hadn't thought he would be able to be this excited about meeting someone again. He recalled the soulful brown eyes and sighed. One step at a time.

Minutes later, Laura walked out and he stood up quickly. "Well?" he asked anxiously. Laura looked at him, her face pale. Something was wrong. "What is it?"

"It's Alexis," Laura whispered, "She-she's been poisoned."

Scotty's mind took a minute to process the news. "Let's go," he said, his practical side taking over.

Laura nodded, grabbing her coat and purse.

Before they could make it to the door, there was a loud knock. Laura glanced at Scotty and he shrugged and shook his head. He wasn't expecting anyone. He walked to the door and looked through the peephole. Turning to Laura, he mouthed the word, "Cops." He opened the door.

"Scott and Laura Baldwin?" one of the officers asked.

"That's right," Scotty answered, as Laura came to stand next to him.

"We need you two to come down to the NYPD with us and answer a few questions."

Scotty and Laura took each other's hand in silent encouragement and followed the officers out the door.

Chapter 13

Stefan glanced at the nurses' station, debating whether to walk over there again. He was tired of not knowing anything, of sitting uselessly while Alexis was fighting for her life.

He got up and headed to the desk, ignoring the annoyed look of the nurse he had spoken with more times than he cared to count over the course of the past few hours.

"I don't know anything, Mr. Cassadine," she said before Stefan could ask anything.

"That is painfully obvious," his voice low, almost menacing. "I believe I have been exceptionally patient, but this ends now. I want to know my cousin's condition or I will make sure you are replaced by someone who is capable of doing their job."

The nurses' sarcastic retort was lost in her throat as she looked up into Stefan's darkened face. She let out her breath as she saw the doctor coming. "I believe Dr. Peterson will be able to answer your questions," she said, pointing to the man.

Stefan quickly turned and demanded, "How is my cousin? Alexis Davis."

"She is still in a very critical condition. I'm afraid there isn't much that we can do but wait. An antidote would be the quickest and surest way to her recovery, but she is young and healthy, that will work to her advantage."

"I don't care how much it costs, I want you to do whatever is necessary to save her. I want to see her."

"Of course, it can only help --" Dr. Peterson stopped mid-sentence as he was left standing alone.

Stefan stopped outside the door, feeling his bravado weakening. He couldn't allow himself to fall apart. He had to be strong for her. He slowly turned the knob and opened the door, walking in. He closed the door gently.

He walked into the room and stopped as he saw Alexis. She was ghostly pale, her hair in disarray. If it weren't for rise and fall of her chest, he might have believed she was dead. He continued walking until he was at the edge of the bed and kneeled down, taking her hand in his.

"Hi, Alexis," he whispered. The only response was the sound coming from the heart monitor. He found it oddly soothing. "I'm so sorry I failed you." Tears began to form in his eyes, his face contorting with pain, guilt, and slowly building rage. She had trusted him to keep her safe and he had tried so hard to do so. It just hadn't been enough.

He thought of what she must have gone through, the fear she must have felt, and felt his insides twist with hate at whoever had done this to her. "I will find out who did this, and they will pay. I promise you that. They will pay."

There was a soft knock and Stefan quickly got up, becoming the perfect picture of a gentleman. "Come in," he called.

The door opened and a young man walked in. He was clearly a law enforcement officer, and probably had just gotten his badge yesterday if the nervous speed at which he was talking was any indication of his inexperience.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir, but I need you to come with me. There are a few questions we need to ask. It'll be fast and it'll help us catch the scum who did this."

Stefan nodded, barely listening. He took one last look at Alexis. He hated to leave her. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I'll be back," he said softly, hoping she could hear him. "I love you."

Chapter 14

Laura fought the urge to curl up into a ball and again looked over at the room Scotty was in. He seemed so calm, which wasn't surprising. He had always been steady as a rock compared to her. It had been really annoying at times, but she was glad he was with her now.

She had never been good at situations like these. Especially not after the thing with David. She gave herself a mental slap. Thinking about that wasn't going to help; it just confused her mind even more.

Waiting was the problem. She needed to do something. She had tried to remember anything that might

help, but it was useless. If she hadn't been so set on finding Stefan...

Stefan. It was killing her not knowing how he was. It didn't make sense. Why did she care so much what happened to him? She hardly knew him. But she felt she did. It was all in her head, like this feeling that he was in the room. As if she were to look up...

And see him.

Tears formed in her eyes as she continued to stare at him, not feeling desire this time, but an almost suffocating sadness. She stayed seated, not sure what she should do. It was him, but something was different. It wasn't just his appearance; she could see it in his eyes, his movements. This was a side of him she hadn't seen before, and it was unsettling how unfamiliar he felt to her.

But there was still that thing she couldn't explain. She knew she had to go to him and try to help him. She walked to where he was and tentatively laid a hand on his shoulder. He turned around, a faint smile forming as he recognized her. He laid his own hand on hers and they stood in silence.

Scotty watched them and felt the old anger resurface. She fell in love so easily and just as quickly it was over. He walked over to where they were, almost feeling as though he were an intruder. "Laura, you ready to go?" he asked.

Laura looked at him, taking a second to react. She shook her head. "I'm going to wait. You can go on without me, though."

Scotty's answer was lost as a policeman came up to the group. "Mr. Cassadine, I have great news."

"What is it?"

The officer smiled, "Your cousin is conscious, and recovering."

Stefan stared at the man. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, sir. The doctor says there was no major damage and she'll be able to leave the hospital as soon as she feels up to it."

Stefan couldn't allow himself believe it and he turned to look at Laura. Seeing the confirmation in her eyes and smile, he let out a shaky breath and took her in his arms, a relieved laugh coming out. He turned suddenly, remembering his promise to Alexis. "Did she say who poisoned her?" he asked the officer.

"Yes, she did," the man replied. "They are standing next to you."

Laura felt time slow to a deadly pace as she felt Stefan stiffen and step away from her. She tried to reach out, but was vaguely aware of handcuffs being placed around her wrists. She tried to catch his gaze, and immediately regretted it as their eyes connected. A shiver ran through her, paralyzing her. The hate and condemnation radiating from his eyes was almost palpable. As he turned to walk away, she moved to go to him, but was yanked back roughly.

"Laura Baldwin, you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Alexis Davis. You have the right to remain silent..."

Chapter 15

People instinctively stepped away as Stefan walked through the hospital, as if they knew not to get in his way. He looked ready to strike. And he was. How could he have let this happen? He had been seduced by a pretty face and Alexis had gotten hurt. He finally made it to the room Alexis was in and tried to clear his head. He would deal with Mrs. Baldwin later. Right now Alexis was his only priority.

He knocked on the door. A feeling of dread crept up his spine as there was no answer. He knocked again. Still no answer.

He opened the door and walked in and a smile of relief appeared on his tired face as he saw his cousin. He thought he saw the beginning of a smile on her face, but it dissolved into an angry scowl as she made a motion for him to stop. "Get away from me."

Stefan's smile faded as he saw the hurt in her eyes. "Alexis, let me help you," he pleaded.

"Help me? YOU let her hurt me. I thought Stavros was the only one who thought with his dick," she spat.

Stefan blanched at the comparison. How could he argue with her when she was right? "Please forgive me, Alexis, I never meant to hurt you."

Alexis turned away from him. "Just leave me alone."

"Alexis--"

"Please."

Stefan stared at her, torn between what she was asking him to do and what his heart wanted to do. His needs were not important, he decided. He would give

her time and hopefully, she would be able to forgive him. "I want you to know how much...", he paused, his voice cracking. "How much I love you."

He waited for any response, then finally turned and walked away.

Alexis bit her lip, the pain helping her from turning around and ruining everything. Her face crumpled with agony as she heard the door shut, a scream stuck in her throat. She turned and stared at traitorous door that had let him leave.

"How very sweet."

Alexis looked to where Helena was emerging. Helena Cassadine hiding in a closet. If her world hadn't just ended, she might have laughed at the image. "That was an excellent performance, my dear, I am very impressed."

"I hate you," Alexis said flatly.

Helena shrugged. "That may be true, but you are mine, and you will do as I say or Stefan will pay the consequences. Remember I will be monitoring your every word."

Alexis' hand went to her ear, where the tiny device had been placed. It was barely noticeable.

"I have rented you a nice apartment where you will live for now," Helena continued. "I'll go with you and help you settle in." She smiled at Alexis. "I'm all you have now."

As Alexis followed her, she wondered if Hell could be any worse.

Stefan walked into his hotel room, the events of the day repeating themselves in his tired mind. He saw a faint light coming from his bedroom. He sighed. Susan. He walked in and found her sitting on his bed.

"I thought you might like some company tonight," she murmured.

He walked over to the dresser and placed his wrist-watch on it. He saw as the long hand of the clock moved to begin a new day. It was small comfort, but it helped. He sat down on the bed and started undressing. "My cousin was poisoned."

Susan gasped, "Who would do such a thing?"

He ignored the question and continued speaking, though not really to her or himself. "She has recovered now. The poison doesn't seem to have had any long-lasting physical or mental effects."

Susan smiled unsurely. "That's wonderful. I guess miracles do happen."

Stefan turned to look at her for the first time, a slight frown on his face. "Miracles," he repeated. The term was completely foreign to him. That was probably why he had just now felt uneasy at its mention.

"Let me stay, you shouldn't be alone," Susan asked.

"If you want to," Stefan answered. He settled under the covers and reached over to turn off the lamp.

Susan tried to get close to him, but he turned to his side, away from her comforting touch. He didn't want her to soften the anger that was keeping him going. As he stared into the darkened room, he cursed the Gods that had put Laura Baldwin in his path.

Chapter 16

Mark Huston looked at his young, exhausted client and tried to find the best way to phrase his words. He knew she had had a bad night and what he was about to tell her wasn't going to make things any easier for her. He spoke as gently as he could. "I'm going to be honest with you, Laura. This isn't looking good for you."

She looked up wearily at him, and rubbed her temples. "No shit."

"Maybe we should go over your story again," he suggested.

"My story?" Laura snapped. "I've told you my story three times already. I'm not going to slip up if that's what you're thinking."

Mark sighed. "You don't have to be so defensive, Laura. I'm on your side."

Laura turned her head to the side, blinking back the tears. "Can I see my mother now?" The desperation sneaked into her voice.

"I'll go get her," Mark agreed.

Laura got up and paced the interrogation room. The closed spaces were already starting to get to her, not to mention these damned handcuffs. She absently rubbed her irritated wrists as she became more agitated. Being alone did that to her.

She thought she remembered it all, but what if she hadn't? What if...? A wave of nausea hit her hard and it took all her strength to keep it under control. She heard the door open and ran to her mother, who enveloped her in a warm hug. Tears pricked Lesley's eyes as Laura began sobbing into her shoulder, her slim body shaking with the emotional release.

"It's okay, baby," Lesley soothed, rubbing Laura's back in a circular motion. "Let it out."

After a few minutes, Laura began to calm down and looked up at her mother. "I didn't do it." Her eyes bore into Lesley's, ready to find any hint of doubt.

There was none.

Lesley wiped the tears from her daughter's face. "I know, Laura."

"You believe me?" Laura asked.
"Of course I do. You're not a murderer, Laura."

Laura opened her mouth to respond, but Lesley silenced her by placing two fingers on her lips. "That was different. You didn't plan for him to die."

Laura whispered, "I was almost beginning to think that I had..."

"No," Lesley said firmly. "Mark is meeting with Scotty and he'll tell Mark what happened exactly as you just did."

Laura released a shaky sigh as fresh tears began to fall again from her reddened eyes, this time from relief. Her mother believed her, Scotty had been there. She wasn't a killer. She wasn't a killer.

"Come on, baby, let's sit down," Lesley said as she led Laura to a chair.

"Where are Amy and Dad?" Laura asked.

"At home, we didn't want to overwhelm you," Lesley explained. "They'll come tomorrow."

"Good," Laura said, a small smile coming to life on her face. It was getting easier to breathe now.

They passed the time talking about simple things. Laura even managed a laugh as she thought of Lee Baldwin allowing the same lawyer to represent her and Scotty.

"How is Scotty?" Laura asked.

"He's fine, honey. Lee says he's ready to fight this all the way."

Laura nodded. "So am I. I'm not going to give up."

The familiar determined look on her daughter's face almost made Lesley cry with joy. "That's my Laura," she smiled proudly, her eyes bright. She glanced at her watch and grimaced apologetically. "I have to go." "It's okay," Laura reassured her. "I'll be okay. I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too" Lesley hugged her daughter tightly to her before getting up and walking towards the door. She turned back and winked. Laura smiled and winked back.

When the door closed, she laid back into the chair and let herself relax, feeling all the muscles untangle themselves from the tight knots they had been in. She was going to get through this. For the first time, she believed it.

"Laura."

Laura quickly raised her head, and instinctively moved back. Trying to cover, she said coolly, "Stefan."

Stefan walked over to sit in a chair opposite hers, the table between them giving them both a feeling of protection.

"Why are you here?" Laura asked. She couldn't help but notice the dark circles under his eyes... and the hostility radiating from the green depths.

"To assure you that what you have done will not go unpunished," Stefan stated simply.

There was no wavering in Laura's voice as she said, "I had absolutely nothing to do with poisoning Alexis."

Her audacity caused Stefan's veiled anger to erupt. He moved forward and his hands darted out and grabbed Laura's, holding them forcefully, but not exactly hurting her. Laura stared down at their joined hands and then back up at him, fear etched in her face, her body frozen in place while her heart pounded almost painfully against her chest.

"Now you listen to me," Stefan seethed. "You tried to kill my cousin." He paused and looked down at their hands, suddenly very aware that they were still touching. His grip loosened and Laura took the opportunity to wrench her hands from his grasp and place them on her lap, thankful that he couldn't see them shake.

Stefan recovered and continued his condemnation. "Do you honestly believe that I'm going to let you get away with that?"

All the fear in Laura was transformed into righteous anger. "I'm going to say this one more time. I had absolutely NOTHING to do with poisoning Alexis! And I don't care if you don't believe me."

Stefan smirked. "It isn't me who you should be concerned with convincing. Only the authorities."

"I'm not a murderer," Laura said quietly.

"What about David Hamilton?"

Laura's eyes widened at the mention of the name. Stefan's words were filled with self-satisfaction. "Oh, yes, I know about him. I made it my business to find out everything about you."

"Before or after Alexis was poisoned?" Laura challenged, already knowing the answer, and wanting very much to wipe that smug look off his face.

Stefan's whole posture stiffened, his jaw clenching. "That is inconsequential."

Laura smiled mockingly. "Right."

"It is only now that I see you for the treacherous witch that you are. You may try to convince others of your innocence, Laura, but your past shows the opposite is true. How did it feel to take someone's life?"

"Stop it." Laura curled her hands into fists.

He was just getting started. "Did you enjoy pushing him to his death, relished the sound of his skull cracking under the pressure?"

"Stop it! Stop playing with me, you bastard!"

"I am merely curious. Your parentage also leaves much to be desired. In 1961, Lesley Williams, a college student, begins an affair with one of her professors. He is a married man."

"Leave my mother out of this. She has nothing--"

"The affair produces an illegitimate child. You. In short, your mother was a whore, your father an adulterer."

"And your family's the Brady Bunch from Hell," Laura retorted angrily. "I'm willing to bet that Rick is more of a father to me, his adopted daughter, than Mikkos ever was to you, his own blood. Did he ever hug you,

praise you, tell you that he loved you? Did you even care he was dead or was it an inconvenience to go to his funeral?"

The question hung in the air unanswered as she stopped speaking. They stared at each other in the deafening silence, each licking their wounds. The after effects of the insults they had given and received started to take clearer form. The bitter anger at the other for pushing all the right buttons, anger at themselves for letting it affect them, disgust at their weakness for feeling any guilt, and even more disgust at the underlying attraction that both had felt at their touch.

The room was becoming infinitely smaller, their closeness intolerable, choking.

"I think I should leave," Stefan said.

"I think so, too," Laura replied.

He got up slowly from his chair and looked down on her. "But make no mistake, Laura. One way or another, the pain you have caused will be returned to you tenfold."

"Go to Hell," Laura spat.

"I'm already there."

Chapter 17

Note: This chapter is slashy (PG-rated), in this case the female/female kind. If you're underage or don't dig slash of any kind, don't read it.

I'm all you have now.

Alexis awoke with a start, her heart beating loudly in her chest, her face wet with perspiration. She sank deep inside her covers, hoping it had all been a nightmare.

"Good afternoon, Natasha."

Alexis gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut. She wasn't going to let Stefan down again. She would keep him safe, no matter what. She pulled the covers down, wincing slightly at the light that attacked her barely awakened eyes. She looked around the room for the guard that Helena had assigned to keep an eye on her, almost wishing he were there now.

"He's waiting outside, Natasha," Helena answered the

unasked question. "I didn't want him to interrupt our girl talk, as the Americans say."

Alexis looked impassively at Helena. "Why do you keep calling me that? My name is Alexis."

Helena walked to the bed and sat down. She was going to enjoy this. "You are Natasha Cassadine, daughter of Mikkos Cassadine and Kristin Bergman."

"You're lying," Alexis dismissed her.

"I can assure you I am not," Helena laughed. She placed a folder in front of Alexis. "See for yourself."

Alexis looked suspiciously at the folder before taking it. She carefully opened it, and saw a worn photograph on top of a stack of papers.

"That's your mother," Helena murmured.

Alexis ignored her and flipped the photo upside down quickly, unnerved by the odd feeling that was growing within her. She was letting Helena get to her again. She needed to stay focused. Her budding legal mind scanned the papers, trying to find any anomaly. She couldn't find anything. She put the papers back in the folder and pushed it towards Helena. "All that can be easily falsified."

"But blood cannot," Helena countered.

Chapter 18

Stefan found himself at the door of his hotel room, not really knowing how he'd gotten there. The time since he'd left Laura was a blur. And he was still seething. How could the lies flow so seamlessly from that perfect mouth?

He closed his eyes, doing a silent meditation. She had unbalanced him ever since that first day. He needed to stay logical and methodical. He unlocked the door and went in.

He heard a noise coming from the bedroom and cringed. He had forgotten about Susan. Again. This was unfair to her. He needed to end this affair before he ended up hurting her, too.

"Susan?" he called out.

"Stefan!" The owner of the voice appeared quickly, a smile lighting up her pretty face. "I didn't even hear you come in, how do you do that?" She came up to him and greeted him with a quick kiss. She noticed his

silence and overly stiff posture, and became concerned. "Are you okay?"

"No," he answered honestly. "We need to talk."

"Uhoh," Susan said, trying to tease. "Talk. That's never good." She sighed as she watched him look down. "It's over, isn't it?"

Stefan nodded. "We both knew that this wouldn't last long, Susan. I care about you, and I believe that it is time to end this before one of us is hurt."

"You're right, we made a deal. But I care about you, too, Stefan. I always have. I know that mother of yours--" She stopped as she saw Stefan's jaw set tightly.

"This has nothing to do with her," he said tersely. "I will expect you to be gone by the time I return." He turned his back to her and walked out.

Susan flinched as the door slammed, then became resolved. She wasn't going to let him run her off. He needed someone by his side.

She would stay right here until he returned.

"I. Am. Going. To. Change. Positions. Now," Alexis announced loudly.

The guard looked at her, his expression not changing.

Alexis scowled. "Two points for good looks, minus twenty for lack of personality." She stretched out her legs, flexing her feet. She bent over to touch her toes, touching one knee with her nose. Her head popped up as she heard a knock on the door.

The guard finally moved, getting up silently. Alexis followed suit, and walked to the door. "Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me, Alexis," Stefan's voice filtered through the door between them.

Alexis looked at the guard, who was pointing to her ear, reminding her of the device there. As if she could forget.

"I thought I told you to leave me alone," Alexis said.

"Just one minute, Alexis, that's all I ask."

"No," Alexis said firmly. She had to stop this conversa-

tion fast. "Go away, I'll talk to you when I'm good and ready, not before."

There was a pause. "As you wish, Alexis," Stefan finally replied. "I'll be waiting."

Alexis sighed as she heard him walking away, mostly in relief, but with a twinge of hurt. He had given up rather easily. She turned to the guard who was still standing next to her and snapped, "What are you looking at?"

The guard regarded her placidly and replied, "It is time to go to the courthouse. You have an appointment with the prosecution."

"Now? Never mind." This meant getting out of this prison, and she was all for that. "I'll be ready in a few minutes, then we can go."

"I will not be going with you." He ignored Alexis' knowing smirk and continued. "You will proceed directly to the courthouse. There will be someone waiting for you at the entrance. After your appointment, you will come back here immediately. If you delay, I will be forced to report it to Mrs. Cassadine."

Alexis rolled her eyes. "Blah, blah, blah. I'm going to get ready. You make yourself at home and try not to miss me too much," she told him as she headed for the bathroom, suddenly feeling better than she had all day.

Stefan sat in his car and waited. He looked at the main doors of the apartment building and tried to will Alexis to appear. It didn't take long. He started his engine and followed her, making sure to keep his distance.

When they reached the courthouse, he parked far enough away to avoid suspicion, but close enough to see where she was headed.

He closely watched her as she met the people he assumed were representing her case. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was something odd about the whole situation. Alexis seemed unnaturally tensed, even angry.

He didn't have time to further analyze the scene as they all headed inside the building. He traced their steps, trying to find a way to get within hearing distance. He sighed in frustration as they went into a private room. He found a place where he could be inconspicuous and once again waited for Alexis to appear.

This time he had to wait considerably longer. It was a good thing he was a patient man. It was a bad thing that he couldn't keep his thoughts from going back to his confrontation with Laura.

He replaced the feeling of their hands touching with the image of her hurting Alexis. He held on to it, remembering the look of betrayal his cousin had given him at the hospital. He focused all of his energy on her, not allowing anything else to intrude into his consciousness.

The door finally opened and Stefan watched carefully, ready to move. Alexis came out alone and closed the door behind her.

She seemed oblivious to everyone, walking at a leisurely pace. He used her distraction to his advantage and moved quickly, grabbing one arm and pulling her to a darkened place.

He felt her tense up as she saw who it was. He was about to say something when his eyes fixed on her ear, suddenly noticing the device embedded there.

Alexis hand flew to cover it, but it was too late. Her hand moved and clamped over his mouth, making sure he remained silent.

"Helena," Stefan mouthed.

Alexis nodded, knowing it was useless to deny it, and needing to at least say the truth for once.

Stefan shook his head, thinking back. It all made sense now. How could he not have seen it? "I will help you," he silently told her.

Alexis shook her head firmly, and pushed her way out of the corner he had her in. She pointed to herself and mouthed, "My fight." She gave him a reassuring smile and quickly walked away.

Stefan didn't stop her. It would be too dangerous. He needed to formulate a plan that would ensure everyone's safety. And that included Laura.

Laura. It hadn't all been a game. She had been telling the truth. Everything between them had been real. They had been on the same side all along, without even knowing it.

But he had been so cruel. Her words to him earlier that day came back to him again in full force, causing a sickening feeling to emerge in the pit of his stomach. Would she forgive him? Would she understand? He had to make her understand. This changed everything

between them, again. If they could just go back...

He forced his thoughts back to the present problem and away from her. He wasn't helping anyone by standing around and thinking of his past mistakes. There was no time to waste.

He walked off, a new determined look lighted in his eyes, his steps assured. He was unaware of the man skulking nearby.

Luke Spencer grinned, not bothering to follow Stefan as he had been for a while now. Maybe there was something better than just killing him. He didn't know exactly what he had just seen, but he was willing to bet that the Cassadine broad would be very interested in knowing about it. And he was just the man to tell her.

Alexis' eyes narrowed, searching Helena's face. "Even if it were true, why would you tell me?"

Helena smiled. "Two reasons. It means Stefan is your brother and you will be more likely to testify against Laura Baldwin than to risk causing his death."

Helena moved closer to Alexis, lowering her tone in a conspirational manner. "And I killed Kristin," she confessed. She waited for a reaction, and smiled admiringly as there was none. "You have your mother's stubbornness."

Alexis watched as Helena's face softened, and felt fear unlike any she'd ever felt before. She backed away and covered her body with the bedspread, feeling utterly vulnerable. She watched as Helena took out the photograph and lightly touched the woman's imprinted face with the tips of her fingers. The tone in Helena's voice as she began to speak caused her to shiver involuntarily.

"Kristin was beautiful, wasn't she? I still remember the first day I saw her. Mikkos and I were at the opera. The curtain rose and there she was, her blonde hair flowing past her shoulders."

She looked up and her eyes wandered over Alexis, a spark coming to life in her blue eyes. "You look almost nothing like her, except your hands." She reached over and took one tenderly and brought it to her lips, placing a soft kiss on it, her tongue lightly touching the skin. Alexis struggled to free her hand, but Helena held it tighter. "Just like hers."

"Let go of me," Alexis demanded.

Helena's hand moved up Alexis' arm in a slow caress, until she yanked it, bringing their faces to near touching distance. "I expect a little more cooperation from you. I would hate to see your brother suffer the consequences."

The warm breath on Alexis' face caused her repulsion to intensify. Vomit rose in her throat as she felt Helena press her lips against hers, but she controlled it. It was a small price to pay to keep Stefan safe.

Helena broke the kiss and picked up the folder, satisfied. She rose and walked to the door. "I'm beginning to be glad that you didn't die, Natasha. I hope you don't betray me, too."

Alexis waited until the door closed to throw up.

"Damon, locate Luke Spencer's phone number and connect me with him," Helena ordered as soon as she and her henchman entered the suite.

She settled onto the settee, deep in thought. She needed to reformulate her original plan. She couldn't kill Stefan now, it would mean losing all hold over Natasha. She smiled as she remembered feel of the soft skin under her lips.

"Madam," Damon interrupted her daydream, handing her the phone.

Helena took her time removing the earring on her right lobe before placing the receiver at her ear. "Mr. Spencer," she greeted halfheartedly.

"Hells, baby, I've been waiting. So when, where, and how do I kill little Steffin?" Luke asked eagerly. "There's been a change of plans. I no longer require your services."

There was a long, silent pause at the other end. "What if I do it anyway?"

"That would be inadvisable. And I also suggest you do not discuss these tête-à-têtes we've had with anyone."

"Are you threatening me?" Luke asked.

"Just consider it a friendly warning, Mr. Spencer. I will handle my family business on my own. You should worry about your ex-fiancé's impending prison sentence."

"What?! Laura's in--" The phone went dead, and Luke cursed and slammed down the phone. A slow smile

formed on his face. His angel was in jail? This could work to his advantage. He would go see her tomorrow. Right now, he had to take care of some unfinished business.

Chapter 19

Luke is trying to take over my story! ::grabbing Gabby stick and THWAPing the loser:: There. :-)

Laura stared at the ceiling, counting the number of spots on it. She gave up after the tenth one. That was quite a way to start the morning. She was going to go insane if she kept that up.

She got up and stretched, her yawn turning into a grimace. Her whole body was sore from lying on that hard bed. At least if she moved around she would be getting good exercise.

She began pacing the small cell, her thoughts drifting back to the previous day. They had been doing that all night, even in her dreams. She could still feel his hands pressing into hers. No! She had to stop thinking about that.

Why did she always fall for the wrong man? David, Luke, Stefan. It was almost as if she did this to herself on purpose. Did she like playing the victim?

The only man who had truly cared for her was Scotty. She smiled at the thought of him. Sweet Scotty. She had been so stupid! Why? Why couldn't she want him? Why did her pulse speed up when she saw Stefan? Even now! Why did she feel this way? WHY?

Because she was an idiot.
And she had really been a sucker this time. He's different from the other Cassadines, she had told herself. How could she have fallen for that? She kicked the wall. Stupid, stupid, stupid.
"Laura Baldwin, you have a visitor."

Laura spun around and was immediately at the door, impatiently waiting for the officer to let her out. She wondered how much he'd seen, then decided she didn't really care. She couldn't wait to see her family. She put out her hands for him to cuff her, smiling widely. He did, tightening them a little too much for her liking. This one wasn't as nice as the guard she'd had yesterday had been.

It took some self-control not to push him out of the way. He was walking as if she had all day to waste. They finally made it to the private visiting room, and

she suddenly stopped, her smile fading as she saw who her visitor was.

She thought about asking the officer to take her back to her cell, but the image of returning to that cramped, smelly space changed her mind.

"Luke," Laura said as she sat down. "How did you know I was here?"

Luke shrugged. He wasn't about to tell her the truth. "Port Chuckles is a small town, things get around," he answered her as he walked around the table to where she was. He looked down at Laura pityingly, and shook his head. "See what you got yourself into? I told you all Cassadines are the same. You never listen."

She didn't need this. Even if it was true, she didn't want to hear it. "If you came here to tell me 'I told you so', Luke, save it. I have more important things to worry about right now."

Luke crouched down so he was at her eye-level. "You still want to jump that Cassadine's bones, is that it? Or maybe you're worried about how Baldwin is doing?" he laughed.

"He's a better man that you'll ever be," Laura muttered.

Luke's face instantly grew darker. "What did you say?"

Laura smiled bitterly, and looked him straight in the eye. "I think you heard me. Or maybe not. You've always only heard what you wanted to hear."

Luke looked at her carefully, wondering if he had really heard the accusation in her voice. Was she going there? Well, he wasn't going with her. "Baldwin's not much help in the slammer, now is he?"
Laura shook her head at the petulant tone. What had she ever seen in him? "Don't you worry about us, Luke," she told him. "My husband and I will be just fine."

"So now you're back to wanting him, is that it?," Luke leered. "You're nothing more than a --"

Smack

The back of her hand coming in contact with his face caused him to lose his balance and he fell backward onto the hard floor.

Laura flexed her throbbing hand, trying to keep from laughing at the ridiculous sight. She knew she should feel bad. She had run off on their wedding day and

now she had slugged him. But, damn, that had felt good.

With as much dignity as he could muster, Luke got up, rubbing the reddened cheek. He inhaled deeply, forcing himself to remain calm. His voice came out soft, revealing none of his rage. "Have it your way, Laura. But please know, I'll be here if you ever need me."

Laura was left speechless. That was the last thing she had expected him to say. He was being... kind. "Um... thanks, Luke." He smiled just enough to make her feel guilty, especially since his cheek was turning a sickly shade of purple. "Hey, I'm sorry I--."

Luke took her hands in his. "It's okay, baby. I know you've been under a lot of pressure. Good luck. I'll be rootin' for ya." He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

He went to the door and knocked to be let out. He winked at her before leaving and she smiled slightly, still confused.

What had just happened? One minute she had felt righteous in her anger, the next like a complete jerk.

Her contemplation was cut short as she felt someone grab her from behind, covering her nose and mouth with what felt like a rag, muffling her scream. A strong, pungent smell stung her nostrils. She tried to hit her assailant, but her muddled mind caused her to mostly strike at thin air. Her limbs grew heavier and everything became hazy until blackness overtook her.

Luke kept his ear to the door until the last sound of struggle ended. He nodded to the guard who had let him out. The guard nodded back. Walking quickly, Luke soon found a pay phone outside and dialed Helena Cassadine's number. "It's done," he said when she answered.

A chill ran through Luke as Helena laughed. "Excellent. Now you leave everything to me, Mr. Spencer. When I'm done, she will be all yours."

Luke hung up, his momentary hesitation vanishing. "All mine," he murmured.

A million details ran through Stefan's mind as the elevator made its way to his floor. Everything was going as planned. Soon his mother would be behind

bars, where she wouldn't be able to terrorize anyone. He would take a quick shower, knowing the men he had hired would continue to work dutifully. Thankfully, none of them required much sleep.

He arrived at his place, entering without delay. A deep frown formed on his handsome face as a sliver of light shone through the opening underneath the bedroom door. The only light on. It had to be Susan. She had stayed. And she had to leave now.

He crossed the living area in a few large strides, his eyes having adjusted to the minimal light. He turned the doorknob, ready to speak first.

"Susan, we discu--" The word stuck in Stefan's throat as his mind tried to assimilate the image before him.

Blood.

Not allowing his emotions to override his reasoning, Stefan walked to the phone and called for help. It was too late, he knew. The smell that permeated the room was one of death. It was all he could do to keep from vomiting.

After hanging up, he turned back to the figure on the bed. Blood stained the bedspread Susan lay on. It had seeped into her nightgown, staining the white material with crimson color. His eyes followed the length of an outstretched arm, finally arriving at the weapon that had aided in taking her life.

A gun. She had been shot through the head. He looked around the room, his eyes coming to the night stand that held a piece of paper. He walked over to it, making sure not to touch anything.

His eyes clouded with unshed tears as he read the words.

*Stefan,
I can't live without you. Please forgive me. Take care,
my pet.*

*All my love,
Susan*

The handwriting would fool everyone, everything had been done to perfection. But he knew Susan hadn't committed suicide.

My pet.

There was only one person who had ever called him that.

His mother.

Helena gently stroked the sleeping young woman's soft brown hair, a soft sigh escaping her mouth.

Things had taken an unexpected turn, but everything was turning out much better than she had expected.

Her son would surely know she had been the one behind Susan Thompson's untimely death. A small price to pay for trying to take Natasha away from her. It would be fun to see what he did next. She so did love to play games, and there were just enough players in this one to make it very interesting. Laura Baldwin would be arriving soon, and then it would all be set in motion. Luke Spencer had been so willing to help, it was almost a shame that she would have to kill him eventually.

Almost. Helena's eyes twinkled in expectation. She would have her revenge on them all.

But that could be put to rest for the time being. She laid down next to the slumbering figure, wrapping her arms around her waist, inhaling the feminine scent.

"We'll be going home soon, Natasha," she whispered. "And you will belong to me, forever."

Chapter 20

Stefan waited at the NYPD for the officers to tell him what he already knew. Susan's death had been ruled a suicide and he was free to go.

He had gotten in touch with her relatives. He had offered to pay for the funeral, but they had refused. They had made it clear it was best if he didn't try to contact them again. He couldn't blame them, but he resolved to visit Susan's grave if, no, when he succeeded in bringing his mother down. He would pay his last respects to her. It was the least he could do.

He looked at the clock on the wall, his agitation threatening to rise with every second that passed. He was losing time.

After waiting a few more maddening hours, he was finally able to leave.

He found the nearest phone, dialing the number of the men he had hired. He looked around surreptitiously, making sure no one was within hearing distance.

"Have you discerned the whereabouts of my cousin?" He listened intently while the voice on the other end informed him of what they had found. "My mother is a very dangerous woman, we should not do anything to

directly provoke her until absolutely necessary. Everything must be handled with the utmost discretion. I will be there soon, have everything ready for our departure." He hung up, and turned around, not taking one step before bumping into someone.

"I am going with you."

Stefan sighed and looked at the very haggard-looking man staring at him. Where had he come from? He instantly recognized him as Scott Baldwin, Laura's husband. He did not look happy. And Stefan didn't much care.

"Excuse me? Do I know you?" he asked with disinterest.

"Scott Baldwin. And you're Stefan Cassadine. Your mother kidnapped Alexis, am I right?" Scotty went on when it was obvious he wasn't getting an answer. "Did you know Laura's missing, too?"

Stefan made an effort not to react to the news, even though he wasn't surprised. His mother had worked exceptionally fast. "I do not know what you are talking about, Mr. Baldwin. If you'll excuse me, I have to be going."

Scotty stepped in his way, making it clear he wasn't done with the conversation. "Why do you think I'm out of jail? They think Laura escaped, but I know she was taken by force. At first, I thought of you and that freak cousin of yours. But after hearing that phone call, I'm prepared to change my mind."

"I'm afraid I don't know what it is you want from me."

Scotty's voice grew testy. "Look, I can help you. I've learned a thing or two in Mexico. You're going to try to rescue your cousin, and in the process, Laura. Laura doesn't trust you or your family. You need someone she does trust or it could get even more dangerous for everyone involved. She trusts me." He paused, a quirky smile forming on his unshaven face. "Or would you rather work with Luke Spencer?" Scotty smiled in earnest as he finally got a reaction from Stefan, catching a look of distaste he fully sympathized with. "I didn't think so."

"Are you supposed to leave the country?"

Scotty shrugged. "No. What's your point?"

Stefan had to admire the man's drive, and the quickness of his mind. And he couldn't afford to waste anymore time. "Very well, Mr. Baldwin, it seems we've just become allies. I suggest we move as quickly as possible." He motioned to a car, and they continued

talking as they headed towards it.

"Where do you think she's taking them?" Scotty asked.

"Our island in Greece."

"Why there?"

"That is a question I intend to ask my mother."

"OW." Laura looked at the door, rubbing her throbbing shoulder. She had just tried to break it down. She hadn't even made a small dent. Superwoman she was not. She had learned that painful lesson well.

"That wasn't smart."

Laura turned her head to glare at Alexis, who was sitting on the floor. "Better than just sitting on my butt like you. If you're trying to convince me you want to get out of here as much as I do, you're not doing a very good job."

"What would we have done if we'd actually managed to break down the door? Jumped into the Atlantic and swam to shore? And I already told you how everything happened. And I apologized."

"And why should I believe you? How do I know you're not in this with Helena? How do I know she didn't put you in here to soften me up?"

"You don't. But she didn't. She locked me here with you because she doesn't trust me, she just wants..." Alexis stopped as she remembered waking up to Helena's breath. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up at the memory. She had been spared more, with Helena being so busy with her plans. But every rocking of the ship brought them closer to that accursed Island, a place she had vowed never to return to again. "Do you think we're almost there?" Alexis tried to keep her shivering under control, but her hands began to visibly shake.

Laura looked at her, trying to decide if this was all part of Helena's game. If it was, she was doing an exceptional job. She watched as Alexis began to tremble more forcefully. Laura took a step towards her, then hesitated, still untrusting. But soon she moved to Alexis, settling on her knees in front of her, pushing down her suspicion. To Hell with it. If she was wrong, then she'd deal with it later. "I don't even know where 'there' is. Helena hasn't bothered to show herself to me."

Alexis managed a rueful smile at that, which calmed her down. "Be glad. And 'there' is her home, the Cassadine Island in Greece. Better known as Hell."

Laura felt the first real stirrings of her own fear, watching Alexis' face as she talked about their destination. "Speaking from experience?"

Alexis simply nodded, closing her eyes as if to keep childhood memories hidden from public view.

"We'll be okay, Alexis. We'll find a way out of this."

Alexis shook her head. "You don't understand. I can't go back there. I can't survive without him. He protected me."

"Stefan?" Laura asked gently, though she already knew the answer. She would never forget Stefan's reaction when he thought she had hurt Alexis. She had thought then it had all been a charade, but now... She shook herself out of her thoughts and focused on the scared girl in front of her.

Alexis nodded. "I c-can't," she took a breath, forcing her speech back to normal. "I can't do this alone."

"And what am I, chopped liver?" Laura quipped, fighting to keep some measure of sanity in the room. Humor seemed to be the only weapon available. "You're not alone. We're going to get through this."

Alexis was silent for a minute, looking pensive. Finally, she spoke, her brown eyes having taken on an odd glint. "You're right, I really shouldn't be the one worried here. This is like a bad horror film. And you're the blonde."

Laura stared at Alexis a second before falling onto the floor, racked with laughter. Her laughter was infectious and soon Alexis began laughing with her, both of them rolling on the floor, tears streaming down their faces. It was mostly from the stress, but it was better than giving up.

The swaying of the ship abruptly stopped and both women immediately sobered, their eyes making contact, expressing their combined fears. They instinctively moved together, linking hands, as the sound of a lock coming undone resonated from the door.

Their eyes caught every movement as the door knob turned and the door was gently eased open, until revealing the imperious figure at the other side.

Their captor.

For a moment, Helena's face was shadowed by the image before her, her sharp eyes locking onto any place that Laura's body came in contact with Alexis'. That would end quickly enough, and the thought was enough to make her smile.

The curved lips did nothing to comfort the women trapped within her icy stare. And the words she uttered only furthered their renewed feelings of despair.

"We're home."

Chapter 21

Stefan looked at Scotty, sitting across from him, trying to figure out if he had made a mistake in trusting him. "If you will not be able to carry out your part of the plan, I need to know right now."

Scotty turned his eyes away from the sky they were flying through. "I'll be able to do it. We've gone through everything a million times. I wouldn't purposely risk Laura's life... or Alexis', if I wasn't sure. But what I need to know now is who we're dealing with here. I think I have an idea of how dangerous your mother is, but is she crazy or what?"

Stefan shook his head. "My mother's mind is not muddled in the least, it is only twisted."

"Oh, that makes me feel a lot better," Scotty said sarcastically.

"Do you want the truth or do you want to feel better?" "The truth," Scotty answered without hesitation. "It's just my way of relieving stress. You were saying?" "I don't know why she has become fixated on Alexis. During our childhood, Helena thrived on torturing her whenever my father was absent, which was often. But she lost interest in her once Alexis left the Island. Or so I had thought. The reason she kidnapped Laura is more obvious."

Scotty nodded, speaking their thought, "Mikkos' death." He breathed deeply. "What will she do to them?"

Stefan answered honestly, "I don't know. My mother can be unpredictable. But whatever she does, it will be meant to break them down -- physically, emotionally, and psychologically."

"Will she kill them?"

Stefan's face was grim. "Probably, but not quickly. She prefers to play with her prey before devouring them. However, she tends to act haphazardly when provoked. She loses interest in the details of her plans, which is a weakness we shall use to our advantage."

Scotty leaned back in his seat, running his hands through his brown hair. "Don't take this the wrong way, but your family is really out there."

"That is an understatement."

"And you said your brother shouldn't be a big problem?"

"My brother is... less than intelligent. His power lies in Helena's love for him." Stefan looked down for a second, letting the sadness leave his eyes. When he looked up, there was no hint of any emotion. "Once she is neutralized, so is he."

"That's one good thing. I'm almost glad Alexis is with Laura. She'll know what to expect, and how to deal with Helena. She seemed very smart."

Stefan's tone was filled with pride. "She's brilliant." His green depths clouded over. "But the Island holds very bad memories for her. And Laura has no reason to trust Alexis, she may not believe what she tells her."

"She will. Laura's that way, she has a big heart. And she's no dummy. She's a fighter. Helena picked the wrong people to mess with."

Stefan smiled faintly at that, remembering the fiery look in Laura's eyes when he had verbally attacked her. "I know. She's quite remarkable."

"Promise me you won't hurt her. If you do, I will have to hurt you. And I'd hate to do that, I think you're an okay guy."

Stefan looked slightly amused for a moment, but his expression grew serious. "The role of Laura's protector doesn't quite suit you, Mr. Baldwin. I'm not the one who gave up on the first sign of trouble. If she were my wife, I would have moved Heaven and Earth to keep her."

"It's Scott. And point taken. But it was too much to take..." Scotty's words faded away, as he stopped himself from going back there.

"That she chose to leave you for the man who raped her?"

Scotty's surprise showed plainly on his face. "You

don't miss much, do you? But we shouldn't be talking about this, so maybe we should change the subject."

Stefan agreed, "You're right. We're almost there. I suggest we prepare ourselves."

"Sound like a good idea to me."

Before they got up, Stefan said, "And Scott?"

"Yeah?"

"You have my word."

"Yes, Mr. Spencer, I have already told you I will let you know when you can make your entrance. Now, I am a busy woman, please refrain from calling again. Goodbye." Helena let the phone drop onto the hook. "Insufferable idiot," she muttered. She leaned back into her seat, purging her thoughts of anything unpleasant. He would cease to be a pest soon enough. Her mind thought ahead to her plans for the evening, which was fast approaching. It would be a memorable night.

"Mother, would you care to tell me why you're doing business with my father's murderer?"

It took a moment for the voice to register. A pleased smile formed on Helena's face as she looked up to see her oldest son. "Stavros, my darling, how are you?" She rose and embraced him.

"I asked you a question," Stavros said as he took the earring she was holding in her hand and pinned it to her ear.

"You should really stop that annoying habit of eavesdropping," Helena scolded lightly. She smiled at his annoyed expression. "I'm not doing business with Luke Spencer."

"That's not how it seemed to me."

Helena grew serious. "I will not have you question me, is that clear?"

Stavros nodded, he really wasn't that interested in that part of the conversation anyway. "What was that about his ex-fiancé?"

"Laura Baldwin," Helena said the name distastefully. "She's here."

An interested spark lit up in the otherwise dull eyes.

"Really? She's most beautiful, if I remember correctly."

"She is off limits to you, Stavros," Helena cut in, not liking the familiar predatory look on his face. "It's a beautiful plan, really," she continued smugly. "Na-- Alexis is here, too."

"Alexis," Stavros sneered. "You should kill her and put the little mouse out of her misery."

Helena glanced sharply at her son, but smiled sweetly. "You need not concern yourself with her."

Stavros shrugged, growing bored. "So what do you plan to do with Lasha?"

Helena frowned slightly at his use of the pet name, but let it go. "It's quite simple. Make her pay for her part in your father's death. And what would be the fun of just killing her? Spencer thinks I'll actually let him xrescue her so he will earn her undying gratitude," she gave a throaty laugh. "As if I would let either of them be happy."

"I want to meet her."

"Stavros, I already told you--"

"I want to meet her, Mother," he said, a stubborn look underlying his words.

Helena cupped his face lovingly, and sighed, "Whatever Stavros wants, Stavros shall have. We'll all have dinner together, how does that sound, my darling?"

Stavros smiled.

Laura looked suspiciously at the older woman standing at the doorway, meant to keep them from trying anything foolish. She walked to where Alexis was sitting. "Do you think we can trust her?" she whispered.

Alexis nodded absently, her eyes having a far-off look in them.

"Hey, are you okay?" Laura said, concern etched on her face. They had been taken to this room before she had had a chance to see anything. Alexis hadn't said a word since they'd arrived.

It took a moment before Alexis looked at Laura, finally answering her. "Yes. I was just thinking... I hate this room," she stated with conviction. "I always have. And I hate this house. I hate this Island. I hate--"

"I think I get it," Laura interrupted with a small laugh.

Alexis smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, it's just that, the last time I was here... I was so afraid of saying the wrong thing. But it didn't matter what I said or didn't say, I was always wrong. It's sort of freeing knowing that now. I can't change Helena. I can't make her into a nice person."

"Speaking of the devil, I wonder where she is right now."

"Probably having a sickening reunion with Stavros."

"Stavros?" Laura tried out the foreign name, finding it unpleasant.

"Stefan's brother." Alexis grew pale as realization hit her. "And maybe my half-brother."

"That's right. You said Helena told you Mikkos was your father and--."

"I don't want to talk about it. She's probably lying, anyway."

"Okay," Laura nodded. She began to look around the room, talking as she did. "I understand how hard it can be figuring out who you are. I didn't know my birth mother until a few years ago. And I've never met my birth father."

"It's screwed up, isn't it?" Alexis said.

"Yeah. I'll never be like my mother. She's... better than I am. Good mother, lousy kid. Stefan's just the opposite, isn't he? Lousy mother, good kid."

"He's the best," Alexis agreed, changing positions so she was facing in Laura's direction. "And you're not half-bad, either."

Laura grinned and looked over from what she was doing, her eyebrow slightly raised. "Was that a compliment?"

"Don't let it go to your head," Alexis said, propping her chin on the armrest. She wondered if this might be what it would be like to have a sister. She shook the sentimental thought out of her mind, and cocked her head sideways. "What are you doing?"

"Looking through all these books! They must be hundreds of years old. I'm nosy, it's a bad habit I intend on breaking one of these days."

"We're in mortal danger and you're looking around a study at books that have little value outside of this family. Makes perfect sense," Alexis snickered.

"So I guess you wouldn't be interested in what I just found?" Laura held up the thin, bounded book in her hand. "It's Stefan's journal from when he was a kid."

Alexis perked up and was immediately next to Laura.

Laura allowed herself a chuckle, which earned her a mock glare from Alexis. Their eyes went to the opened journal in Laura's hands, and Laura began to read out loud. "It's two weeks until my 10th birthday. Today I decided to be someone else and live far away from Stavros and mother and all the Cassadines, except Alexis."

Before Laura could read anymore, Alexis snatched the book from her hand. "I don't think it's right that we're reading this."

Laura didn't protest, seeing how much it had affected her, though she couldn't contain her curiosity. "Did you, Stefan, and Stavros grow up together?"

Alexis nodded, walking back to the luxurious couch. "Pretty much." She sat down, and Laura followed, finding her own spot.

"But you weren't as close with Stavros as you were with Stefan, were you?"

"God, no. Stavros is spoiled and stupid, and often cruel. That's a dangerous combination. He expects to get everything he wants, do whatever he wants. He didn't have any interest in me except the diversion I could provide. He loved to use his power over me by getting me in trouble with Helena. She would be the one to... but Stefan took most of it. I'll never be able to repay him."

"I doubt he's looking for any payment. He loves you," Laura said, feeling oddly sure of her words.

Alexis smiled. "It's knowing that that's kept me alive all these years." She paused. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What's it like to be in love?"

Laura gave a short laugh. "You're asking the wrong person. I've mistaken love more times than I care to think about. Scotty was the one who showed me what real love is, but it wasn't meant to be."

"He has kind eyes," Alexis commented.

Laura smiled, "Yes, he does. And for a time, he was my Prince Charming. Until I realized happily ever after

doesn't exist. But it was all worth it at the end. Our true loves are waiting... I hope."

"You're such a romantic. I wish I weren't so cynical sometimes."

"Being a romantic has its dangers, too. You sometimes try to see something that's not there, twist things to forget..."

"But some things are impossible to forget..." Alexis said, her voice soft.

Laura nodded. "No matter how much you try."

They looked at each other, no longer able to avoid the reality of their situation.

"We'll get out, won't we?" Laura asked.

"One way or another," Alexis promised.

Mrs. Lansbury heard voices coming from outside the room, knowing who it was, but hating to have to announce them. She could see a special bond forming between the young women she had been assigned to watch over. She was glad. They would need it to get them through this.

"Ms. Davis, Mrs. Baldwin," she whispered loudly. They turned their heads toward her. "They're coming."

Conclusion

Laura and Alexis were on their feet when Helena and Stavros walked through the door. They stood with their spines in a straight line, neither one making a sound.

Helena was the first to speak. "You already know Alexis, dearest." She stretched out her arm towards Laura. "This young woman is Laura Baldwin."

Stavros' eyes had fixed on Laura since he'd come into the room. Never acknowledging Alexis' presence, he walked up to Laura, smiling. "It's a pleasure to meet you," he said, lifting Laura's hand and placing a soft kiss on it.

"Likewise," Laura smiled politely, trying her best to ignore the sickening feeling that his gesture produced in her. This was Stefan's brother? Aside from the physical resemblance, everything about him felt the opposite of what she had felt when she had first met Stefan.

"May I escort you to dinner?" Stavros asked.

"I'd be honored," Laura lied, linking her arm with his. She would play nice, for now. She glanced at Alexis and gave her a reassuring smile before heading out.

Alexis felt a sinking feeling in her stomach as she watched Stavros lead Laura out of the room. She had caught his attention. She couldn't worry about Laura anymore as she felt Helena place her hand at the small of her back, pushing her gently out the door.

"We'll be alone soon, Natasha," she said, softly enough so that only Alexis heard her ominous words.

Stefan stared at the large expanse of land that held his home. It really was a prison now. He had often felt a prisoner there, but he always knew he could leave if he wanted to. He heard a low whistle coming from beside him, shaking his thoughts of the past.

"Impressive," Scotty uttered.

Stefan nodded. "And almost impossible to penetrate." "It's a good thing we're on the same side, or we wouldn't get very far. I'd hate to get on your bad side."

"I'm sure you would make a worthy opponent."

"Let's hope we never have to find out."
"Are you ready?"

"Let's go."

Laura thanked her lucky stars for the elongated table that made it possible for her to sit far enough away from Stavros so that her skin stopped crawling. Helena was at one end of the table, Stavros at the other. Alexis was right across from Laura, another thing to be thankful for.

Laura and Alexis tried to slow time by chewing their food meticulously. It didn't help. Even though it was obvious they weren't done eating, Helena would order the next course to be served, bringing them closer to the end.

They said little. Stavros spent his time drinking, with the occasional bite of food, and gazing at Laura. She avoided that gaze by looking anywhere but to her right.

The smile Helena had been wearing throughout dinner widened as the servants removed the dishes from the last course. She signaled a manservant to help her

out of her chair, and then walked over to stand behind Alexis.

"Alexis and I will be retiring to my room. We'll leave you two alone. And Laura, I wouldn't try to escape if I were you. You won't survive," the cheerfulness in her voice was in stark contrast with her words.

Helena tapped Alexis on the shoulder, letting her know she was to follow. As they walked away, Alexis didn't know who to feel more sorry for, herself or Laura.

Timing was of essence. They moved quickly. As soon as they arrived on land, they parted ways, allowing only a nod before continuing on their own charted path.

They had the easier task, but it wasn't without danger, and the guns they each had showed that they were well aware of that.

Their dark clothing blended into the night-clothed vegetation, lending them a measure of invisibility.

They hoped they weren't too late.

Laura looked around the large, empty room, searching for any sign of life. They were alone. Stavros rose unsteadily from his chair. Laura did the same, and moved so that the chair was like a shield between them.

His glazed-over eyes and stumbling form were similar enough to bring back memories of a night she had fought to keep buried in her mind. As he was almost upon her, she took a step back.

Stavros reached out and grabbed her by both arms, pulling her towards him. "Where are you going, Lasha?" The alcohol breath on her face stirred the barely-settled food in her stomach.

Never again.

Hooking her hands on his arms, she pulled tightly on them as her knee rose in a swift, striking motion.

With a painful grunt, Stavros doubled over, releasing Laura. Wasting no time, she ran to the phone, picking it up. There was no dial tone.

"Mrs. Baldwin, we must hurry."

Laura nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of

Mrs. Lansbury's voice. She turned to see the woman kneeling over to what looked like a passed-out Stavros.

But what if it was all a trick?

Her suspicion seemed to be confirmed as a camouflaged man appeared.

"This belonged to your mother."

A beautiful woman, bending down and placing the necklace on her little girl's neck. "One day you'll wear it to be with the one you love, Natasha" she said in that melodic voice that would sing her to sleep every night.

Alexis stepped back, stunned by what had just passed through her eyes. The woman from the photograph.

Helena mistook the reason for her fear, and sighed, taking a step forward. "You might as well accept the inevitable, Natasha."

"NO!" Alexis screamed, pushing Helena away enough for her to have to stumble back a few steps in order to regain her balance. "NEVER!"

Helena's face flushed with anger, as she walked towards Alexis, her hand raised, ready to strike. But in a twist of good timing, she stopped and was suddenly in a crumpled heap on the floor.

Alexis was paralyzed for a moment. She swiveled around as she heard the door behind her burst open.

Scotty lowered the gun in his hand as he saw Alexis standing and Helena's unconscious figure on the ground. "So there you are, we've been looking all over for you."

He unhooked the phone and listened. No dial tone. He gave a satisfied nod. Alexis watched as he rolled Helena over, took out a pair of handcuffs, and secured Helena's hands.

"You come prepared, don't you?" Alexis gave a nervous laugh, still finding it hard to believe how things had changed in matter of seconds.

Scotty grinned. "I try. Take this." He took out another gun and handed it to her. "Do you know how to use it? Will you be okay here?"

Alexis cocked the gun. "Yes and yes. Now go!"

As the man moved, Laura realized there was another man behind him. She instantly recognized the second man.

"Stefan!" She had never been so happy to see anybody in her life. She crossed the space between them in a second, wrapping her arms around him.

Stefan let himself get lost in her embrace, but their reunion was cut short as Laura pulled herself away from him.

"Alexis! She's with Helena!"

Stefan turned to Mrs. Lansbury, who anticipated his question and nodded. "She was also given the drug, and should be incapacitated. But I would be careful. I will stay near the entrance and wait for the men who will be taking Mrs. Cassadine."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lansbury. I am indebted to you."

The maid smiled. "Nonsense. You were the reason I've stayed in this household as long as I have. I knew this day would come."

She left, and Stefan turned to the other man. "Stay here. Make sure nothing happens to her. Everything is going well, but I don't want to get to comfortable just yet."

"Understood," the man replied.

Laura balked, "I don't think so. I'm coming with you." Stefan opened his mouth, and Laura was ready to argue, but they were both silenced by footsteps.

Scotty talked while he walked. "Alexis is fine, Helena is unconscious and handcuffed. And the communication system is down, so no one will be able to get a hold of anyone outside, except us. But I'm sure you knew that already." He stopped in front of Laura, hugging her tightly. "You're okay?"

"I'm fine now."

"Good. I'm going to go back upstairs and make sure Alexis is okay." He turned to look at Stefan. "What do you want me to do about...?"

"The men should arrive soon to deliver her to a high-security mental institution. She should remain unconscious until then, but it would be best to keep guards outside her door."

"I'll stay, then." He looked at Laura. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Laura sigh in mock exasperation. "Yes, I can take care of myself." She pushed him gently. She smiled and walked to stand near Stefan, who was giving new orders to the other man.

"Take him and lock him in his room, and stand guard outside his door. He won't take the news of our mother's incarceration well, but I don't believe he'll be foolish enough to try anything against us without her."

The man nodded and lifted Stavros' body easily and carried it out.

Alexis tapped her foot on the floor, trying to keep from kicking Helena. That would be low. So would shooting her in the head. But, oh, was it ever tempting.

A knock from the door pulled her from temptation. She undid the heavy lock and slowly opened the door, gun in hand. Scotty's face revealed itself on the other side, and Alexis backed away to let him in.

"They're okay," he said, anticipating her first question. "The drug that Helena took had the same effect on Stavros. Stefan is handling everything."

Alexis let out her breath, relieved. "Good. He does that well."

"Would you like to go see them? They're just downstairs. I need to stay here and keep an eye on her."

Alexis frowned. "Alone? No way." To make her point, she sat down on the floor.

The thought of arguing with her was fleeting. With a smile, Scotty joined her, turning his head as a shimmering light caught his attention.

Scotty reached over and picked up the necklace that was now lying near the door. He showed it to Alexis. "Yours?"

Alexis stared at it, then relaxed as no sudden memory appeared in her mind. "It belonged to my mother. I think. I don't really remember her. She's dead," she said in a flat voice.

She didn't say more and Scotty didn't push her. He took her hand and placed the necklace on it. "Then it's yours. If you ever want to talk..."

Alexis smiled, "Thanks."

Laura watched Stefan, she could almost see him going through everything in his mind, making sure he hadn't missed anything. He was standing as if ready to attack at the slightest provocation.

She laced her hand into his, breaking him out of his reverie. He turned to face her, a faint smile softening his grave look and relaxing his alert posture.

"Come," she ordered, leading him to an elegant sofa where they could sit. She waited until he had found a spot at the corner, then joined him, her weary body loving the feel of the soft seats.

She watched him slip again into his own thoughts, and was content to sit quietly, watching over him. This couldn't be easy for him. He had relaxed a little, at least.

He finally turned to her, a mystified look on his face. "How did we ever get here? And trusting each other again?"

"Do you always think so much?" At his look, Laura laughed. "It's not a bad thing. I just don't think we need to analyze this... us."

"We should talk about this."

"Probably. But right now, why don't we just be? Can you do that?"

"I can try."

"Good," Laura nodded, satisfied. Her eyes drooped, growing heavier by the second. The adrenaline was fading, and she was left with the combined fatigue of many days.

Stefan smiled at the adorable sight before him. Taking her by the shoulders, he brought her down with him as he sunk deeper into the cushions, letting her stretch out her legs.

She gave a contented sigh, laying her head over his heart, her body molding itself to his. She smiled as she felt and heard his heartbeat speed up. "You're a nice pillow," she mumbled.

He wrapped his arms around her, the air from her steady breathing warming him, erasing everything but the two of them.

And in those moments, they all knew peace.

The End.....
