

Committed

A JASANNI FANFIC



BY  
JOURDYN KELLY

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**The Destined Series:**

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***Committed***

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"GOOD MORNING." ANNI wrapped her arms around a seated Jasmin's neck, giving her a soft kiss on the cheek.

"Morning. I have your coffee here." Jasmin gestured to the carafe, as well as a readied mug, before returning to her laptop.

"Mmm. Thank you." Anni, her coffee fixed to perfection, took a blessed sip. *Abh. Now I can wake up.* "Where did you go this morning? I woke up and you weren't there."

"Sorry, sweetie. I have to get this article done before the deadline this afternoon."

"Always waiting 'til the last minute," Anni teased.

"Yeah, well, *someone* decided they wanted to keep me occupied last night."

"Complaining?"

Jasmin glanced over at Anni, giving her a sexy smile. "Absolutely not. Last night was amazing. We should do that more often." She winked at Anni, blowing her a little kiss.

Anni's dimples stood out as she grinned at her girlfriend. *Oh yeab. We'll definitely do that again.* She poured herself a bowl of cereal, while surreptitiously watching Jasmin as she worked. *So beautiful.* Sometimes Anni couldn't believe that Jasmin was finally with her. After so many months of painful-beyond-imagination heartache, she's finally able to hold the woman she loves in her arms. Even in public! The musician was thankful that Jasmin had come to terms with her sexuality. Nothing feels better than to walk hand in hand with Jasmin.

"What are you thinking?" Jasmin asked, unwittingly bringing Anni out of her reverie.

"Hmm?"

"You keep watching me."

"Well, why wouldn't I? You're beautiful."

Jasmin stopped typing and just stared at Anni. A bright smile bloomed slowly. She stood up and slid onto Anni's lap.

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"I think you're beautiful, baby." Jasmin kissed Anni soundly when she made a face. "You are, so deal with it."

"Couldn't I just be hot?"

"Fine, you're beautifully hot," Jasmin chuckled. "Wanna go mess around?"

"I thought you had a deadline," Anni murmured while giving her girlfriend wet kisses along her neck.

Jasmin sighed heavily. "I do. But if you keep doing that, we're going to end up like we were last night. And, my legs are still sore."

Anni snorted, then slapped Jasmin on the ass, making her yelp. "Up. Get your work done. I have to go shopping anyway."

"Ooh, shopping. Getting anything special?" Jasmin hinted. She knew their one-year anniversary was coming up and was hoping Anni's little shopping trip meant something special for her.

"Nope. Just some food. Maybe some guitar strings. Things like that. I shouldn't be long." Anni smirked behind Jasmin's back. Of course, she wasn't going to tell Jasmin that she was going shopping for their anniversary. She may not have experience being in a relationship, especially one this long, but she's no dummy. "Ok, baby. I'm out. I'll see you later." She kissed Jasmin, lingering a little longer than necessary. With a frustrated grunt, she pushed away and hurried out the door.



"PIA! YOU ARE not helping me!"

Pia laughed out loud at Anni's irritation. "She would totally like this!" She held the white dress up in front of her, turning this way and that. "You don't think she would look good in this?"

Anni studied the dress. Jasmin would look amazing in the dress, but she also knew how it would be perceived. She just didn't think she was ready for *that* kind of commitment, yet. Yes, she loved Jasmin. Of course, she did. But did she really believe that Jasmin was in this for the long haul?

"She would look lovely in that, but I'm looking for something different."

"Ok, what are you looking for?"

"I don't know, Pia!"

"Hey! Don't get all pissy with me just because you are stressing over an anniversary gift for Jasmin." Pia huffed, stuffing the dress back on the rack.

"Sorry, ok? I just want this to be special."

"So, write her a song or something," Pia said absently, flipping through clothes.

"Been there, done that," Anni muttered. But the idea struck something inside her. She had written 'Far Away' when she thought she had no chance with Jasmin. Maybe now, the musician could write something less heart-wrenching. "Ugh! Enough of this. I have two weeks to think of the perfect gift. Thanks anyway, Pia, for coming out shopping with me."

"Sure. And, hey, don't worry so much about it. It'll come to you."



"I DON'T THINK she remembers, Tuner." Jasmin started on a cappuccino for 'outside, table one' of Vereinsheim. As much as she loved Dominik and Tuner, Jasmin couldn't wait to be able to make a living off of her articles for Metropolitan Trends. At least that dream seems to be a little more obtainable now that Katrin wasn't in charge anymore.

"Why? Because she didn't tell you she was shopping for you? Did you expect her to?" Tuner watched, amused as the beautiful brunette glared at him.

"Don't be all practical when I'm trying to be dramatic," Jasmin whined teasingly. "Fine," she sighed. "*Maybe* she didn't forget. I just wish she was more excited about our first anniversary."

"Careful. I may get practical again and ask why you think she's *not* excited about it," Tuner returned with a sly smile.

"Pssh. Whatever. I have to take these drinks out." Jasmin sent Tuner a grin over her shoulder before heading out. As she reached for the door, it opened and Anni walked in, almost running into the tray Jasmin was carrying.

"Oops! Sorry, baby." Anni moved to the side, sweeping her arm in a bow, ushering Jasmin out. She received a winning smile for her efforts which made her feel an intense happiness inside. She shook her head at her silliness and made her way to the bar. "Hey! Could I get a coffee, Tuner?"

"Sure. How'd the shopping go?"

Anni frowned. "Um. Okay?" How did Tuner know she went shopping? And, why did it matter to him? Unless . . . Jasmin must have said something. Was Jasmin trying to get information from their friends? *Good luck, baby. The*

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*only one who knows what I'm up to is Pia. And, she swore she wouldn't say a word.* A quick kiss on the cheek made her snap out of her trance with a smile.

"Did you get everything you needed?" Jasmin asked innocently, walking behind the bar.

"Mmmhmm. Did you finish your article?"

"Mmmhmm." Jasmin studied Anni for a minute, not able to hold back her smile. She never imagined she'd be in love with a woman, but she had to admit, she couldn't have made a better choice than Anni. There was just *something* about her that touched Jasmin deep down in her heart. It was more than her looks, though Anni was totally hot. More than her talent, which was immense. And, even though Anni had her moments of being extremely blunt, it was that honesty that had drawn Jasmin to Anni in the beginning. She just felt Anni in her heart. It was different than anything else she had ever felt before.

"What?" If it had been anyone else besides Jasmin looking at her that intensely, Anni would've been uncomfortable. But she found herself elated at the blatant inspection.

"Nothing," Jasmin smiled sweetly. "What would you like to do . . ."

Anni frowned at the look on Jasmin's face. Within seconds she went from happy to . . . stunned? She turned to see what had caught Jasmin's attention, and Anni's face fell. There stood Jasmin's ex-husband, Kurt, smiling as though he had just won the lottery.

"Baby! I'm back!" he shouted, his eyes trained on Jasmin.

"*Shit.*"

The whispered expletive had Anni turning back to Jasmin. To say that Anni was scared out of her mind was an understatement. She didn't think she'd be able to survive losing Jasmin now. Yes, she tried to prepare herself for the day Jasmin decided she was no longer into women. But that doesn't mean it worked.

Jasmin saw the look on Anni's face, and it broke her heart. *She thinks I'll go back to him.* She reached out and took Anni's hand in hers, squeezing it lightly.

"Well? Are you going to give me a proper welcome?" Kurt smirked, holding his arms out.

"What are you doing here?" Jasmin asked, not bothering to come out from behind the bar.

Kurt lowered his arms, looking a bit bemused at Jasmin's lack of interest. "I came back for you, Jasmin. I forgive you."



"You forgive me?" She squeezed Anni's hand harder. Whether it was for strength or to keep from throwing Anni's cup of coffee at Kurt, she didn't know. "Kurt, we're divorced. I couldn't give a shit whether you forgive me or not."

"Come on, baby . . . "

"Don't call me baby. I'm not your baby."

"Look, Jasmin, I just needed some time. You gave me that. I got over it. Now I'm ready to be with you again."

Anni stiffened, trying to remove her hand from Jasmin's, but the grip only tightened more.

"I don't want to be with you, Kurt. I'm happy now."

"Ba . . . Jasmin, you were happy with me. I'm here to give that back to you."

"Go to hell, Kurt. If you want to know the truth, I don't know what or *who* I was when I was with you. You *left* me when I was at my lowest. Why in the hell would I ever want to be with you again? Besides, I'm in love with someone now." Her eyes flickered towards Anni.

"In love? You were in love with me," Kurt retorted.

"No. Maybe I loved you. I'm sure I cared for you. But it was nothing like this," Jasmin confessed.

Anni couldn't help but smile. She was still nervous about Kurt being here, but hearing these words from Jasmin helped ease that fear a bit. What if Jasmin was just saying these things because Anni was here? Would she feel the same way if she and Kurt were alone?

Kurt frowned at Jasmin, looking at her hand that was still clasped in Anni's. "What is this?" he asked, gesturing towards the interlaced hands.

"I'm sure you remember Anni," Jasmin said, sweetly.

"Of course. What? Did she finally get in your pants? She always wanted to when we were married."

Jasmin smiled brightly even as Anni blushed. "Yes, she did. And, let me tell you, it's galactic!"

"Galactic? Come on! It can't be what it was like with us," Kurt sneered, sending Anni a contemptuous glare.

"You're right, it can't. It's much better." Jasmin glanced at Anni, worried that she had yet to say anything. The usually outspoken woman now sat quietly,

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shoulders hunched, not even bothering to turn around to look at Kurt. Jasmin leaned close, looking Anni in the eye. "Hey. Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"Yeah. I just have to get to Mauerwerk to work the sound board," Anni answered without emotion.

"Oh. Sure. Can you wait for five minutes when my shift is over? Then I can go over with you."

"Nah. I have to get going now. Besides, you and Kurt should talk." Anni didn't know why the words came out of her mouth and regretted them instantly, but she couldn't take them back now.

"Kurt and I have nothing to talk about, Anni."

"Yeah, we do," Kurt spouted.

"Wait for me," Jasmin pleaded, ignoring Kurt altogether. "I want to go with you."

"Jasmin, just work out whatever this is with Kurt. You can come by later," Anni insisted, surprising herself and Jasmin.

"Anni, it's over with Kurt. It has been for a long time. We don't have anything to say to each other."

"We have plenty to say, Jasmin. You're not a dyke! I understand that you want to experiment. You're young, that's normal. And, hey, if you want to invite Anni to be with us, I'm down for that . . ."

"Kurt! Will you shut up, please? You're disgusting! I would *never* share Anni with you. Now, if you don't mind, I'm trying to talk to my girlfriend." Jasmin leaned closer, dropping her voice even more. She didn't want Kurt, or anyone else, to hear her next words. "You still don't believe in my love for you, do you?"

"Man, Jasmin. That's not it. I just think you should talk it out with him."

"Why, Anni? Do you think my words will change if you're not here?"

Anni shrugged a little, not able to deny that she had actually thought that exact thing. The hurt in Jasmin's eyes cut Anni to the core.

"Well, they won't."

"Fine. But I have to go. I'll see you later, ok?"

"Anni!" Jasmin watched with tears filling her eyes as Anni hurried to the door.

"You know she's not a dyke, Anni. It's better for you to get out of this now before it gets too serious for you. She'll never be able to love you like you want."

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Anni shot him a death stare before storming out. Once the fresh air hit her, she stopped abruptly and drew in a deep breath.

"Shit! Son of a bitch!" She wanted to hit something, namely Kurt. Then she thought of the hurt look on Jasmin's face. "Fuck!" Anni realized then that she had just walked out on the woman she loved because of her own insecurities. Everything that Jasmin said came flooding back to her. The love she heard in Jasmin's voice filled her with a warmth that chased away the chill of the November air. Anni straightened her back, held her head high and pushed her way back into the café.

Jasmin wasn't listening to a word Kurt was saying. All she could think about was how Anni had just walked out. *How could she doubt my love after all this time? Does she really think I'm just going to stop loving her and go back to men?* The sound of the bell above the door caught her attention and Jasmin looked up. Her smile was instantaneous when she saw Anni walking towards her. Jasmin practically ran around the bar and flew into Anni's arms.

"Thank you! Thank you for coming back."

"Nowhere I'd rather be, doll." Anni glanced over to Kurt, who looked furious. "Your shift over now?" she asked Jasmin.

"Yep!"

"Let's get out of here."

"Gladly!"



"HEY!" ANNI YELLED over the loud music, tugging on Jasmin's hand to pull her close. "I'm sorry about earlier."

"I had no idea he'd be there, sweetie, but I want nothing to do with him."

"Because you're mad he left you?"

Jasmin stared at Anni for a minute, noticing the fear still lingering in her eyes.

"No. Because I love *you*, Anni!"

Anni searched Jasmin's face and saw nothing but sincerity shining back at her. She wished so much that she could make this insecurity disappear.

"I'm working on it, Jasmin." She said, wrapping Jasmin in a tight embrace. "I'm working on it."

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"I know, baby. And, as much as it hurts, I understand. Okay? I know I hurt you before." Jasmin pulled back slightly, taking Anni's face in her hands. "I won't do it again, Anni." She lowered her lips to Anni's, kissing her gently. Just that simple kiss made her want more. "How long will you be tonight?"

Anni smirked knowingly. "Not long. The band has one set, with four songs. Hour? Hour and a half?"

Jasmin nodded. "I'll bring you something to drink. Then, when we get home . . ."

"You'll give me something else to drink?" Anni finished with a suggestive eyebrow wiggle.

Jasmin laughed, slapping Anni playfully on the arm. "Exactly. Deviant."

"You know you love it."

Jasmin's brow lifted, and she gave Anni that sexy smile that showed her dimple. "Yes, I do. Very much."



"GOD, I HOPE no one is home," Anni murmured against Jasmin's lips. She was feverishly trying to unlock the door, kiss Jasmin, and trying to stay on her wobbly legs as Jasmin's hands roamed her body all at the same time. She was definitely multitasking.

"Or asleep," Jasmin giggled. "Hurry!"

"I'm trying, *God!* How do you expect me to hurry when you do that!"

Jasmin's hand had found its way down Anni's pants, which had mysteriously become undone. "Well, if you hurry, these can come off and I'll have a better angle."

"Jasmin! You're killing me!"

"But what a beautiful death it will be," Jasmin breathed into Anni's ear, making her tremble.

Anni, frustrated with the lock on the damn door, switched their positions. She sacrificed a moment of having her lips on Jasmin's in order to get to their destination quicker. Her knees almost gave out on her when Jasmin's free arm circled around her waist, making its way up to her breast. Close to kicking the door in, she finally got the key in the lock, and hurriedly pushed open the door.

They came to an abrupt stop when they saw Nele and Ayla staring back at them from the couch. From what Jasmin could hear, they had been watching

another episode of Lovers & Lies. Not even remotely interested in the TV or her roommates, Jasmin tried guiding Anni towards the bedroom, while being as inconspicuous as she could with her hand still down Anni's pants.

"Hey," Nele snickered.

Anni gave a mock salute, then ran into the room, dragging a stuck Jasmin with her. Once the door was closed, they both burst out laughing.

"Um. That was . . ."

"Embarrassing?" Jasmin offered.

"For them, maybe."

"Oh? Not for you with my hand down your pants?"

"Nope. Was it for you?"

Jasmin smiled, then brought her fingers up to her mouth and licked them clean as Anni's eyes widened with shock and desire.

"Nope," Jasmin answered, sucking her finger one last time, before removing it with a pop.

Anni moaned, grabbing Jasmin's shirt and whipping it off. "You're bad," she said huskily.

"That's good," Jasmin returned. Her breath caught as Anni expertly discarded her bra, replacing the silky material with her mouth. "That's really good," she sighed when Anni ran her teeth lightly over her nipple.

Anni feathered her fingers down Jasmin's toned stomach, hooking them into the waistband of her pants. She tugged lightly, getting Jasmin to follow her to the bed. Once there, she kneeled and unbuttoned Jasmin's pants, sliding them, along with her panties down magnificent, tanned legs. "So beautiful," she whispered, nuzzling the hot wetness of Jasmin's sex.

"Anni, please," Jasmin begged, threading her fingers into Anni's hair, gently guiding her closer to her.

Anni groaned, wanting nothing more than to taste that uniquely wonderful essence that is Jasmin. But she also knew that Jasmin wouldn't be able to keep standing for long. "Lay down, baby," she whispered, staying on her knees.

Jasmin immediately complied, laying back on the bed, resting on her elbows, with her feet still touching the floor. She watched as Anni crawled on her knees until she was between Jasmin's legs.

Anni ran her fingers gently up Jasmin's legs. Starting at her ankles, she barely touched the skin as she roamed over Jasmin's calves, and inside her

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knees, leaving goosebumps as she went. As she neared Jasmin's thighs, she flattened her hands over the skin, smoothing her way up until she reached Jasmin's glistening sex. Mouth watering, she lowered herself until her tongue reached the copious wetness.

"God!" Jasmin gasped, hands once again burying themselves into Anni's hair, silently begging for more.

Anni wrapped her arms around Jasmin's thighs, pulling her even closer, not able to get enough of the sweet nectar that was pure Jasmin. She groaned when she felt Jasmin begin to move her hips, keeping rhythm with Anni's explorative tongue. Never had it been this way for Anni. She was in complete awe of Jasmin. In complete love. And, it made every taste, every touch, *everything* that much better when she was with Jasmin.

"Anni!"

The musician felt the beginnings of Jasmin's orgasm, and increased her effort, slipping two fingers inside to make the orgasm even stronger.

Jasmin felt Anni inside her, felt her tongue batting her engorged bundle of nerves and grabbed a pillow at the last second to muffle her screams. Anni was relentless as she milked every last drop out of Jasmin, not stopping until Jasmin finally had to beg her for mercy.

Anni kissed her way up Jasmin's soft body, removing the pillow from the panting Jasmin, and kissing her deeply.

"Wow," Jasmin breathed, reveling in the taste of herself on Anni's tongue. "You are really good at that."

"I aim to please," Anni grinned.

"You have great aim, baby." Jasmin chuckled. "But I have one complaint."

The smile dropped from Anni's face. Complaint? She's never had complaints before, and she was *way* more thorough with Jasmin than she ever was with anyone else.

Jasmin laughed softly. "Not about your skills, sweetie. My complaint is you are entirely overdressed."

"Ah, well." Anni breathed a sigh of relief. "That's easily fixed." She immediately shed herself of her clothes, and they both climbed into bed under the sheets.

"Mmm. I love the way your body feels on mine," Jasmin whispered.

"So do I." Anni situated herself between Jasmin's legs, their sex resting on each other. "God, so do I." Anni began moving her hips against Jasmin's in a

circular motion, needing a release of her own. Tasting Jasmin always made her hot and ready, and this was no exception.

Jasmin knew instinctively what Anni needed, and wiggled her hand between them, opening Anni up to her before opening herself. She felt Anni's body jerk when their clits came into contact with each other, and Anni began to pump faster.

"Oh, Jasmin," she panted, rotating her hips.

Jasmin spread her legs further apart, giving Anni more access to the most intimate part of her. "Yes, baby!" She could feel the heat begin to build inside her again, and she knew it wouldn't be long before her second orgasm came crashing down on her. But she willed her body to wait until she knew Anni was ready.

It didn't take long. Anni propped herself up on her forearms, leaning down to kiss Jasmin as her thrusts became stronger, more urgent. "Fuck! Jasmin!"

"Come, baby. With me."

The quiet words were Anni's undoing, and she crushed her mouth to Jasmin's in hopes that her screams would be muted even a little bit. Unable to help herself, she collapsed onto Jasmin with a heavy sigh.

"My God, woman! You're incredible!" she managed to get out, even though her face was buried between Jasmin's neck and the pillow.

"Right back at ya." Jasmin held Anni tight, arms and legs wrapped around her.

After taking a moment to catch her breath, Anni finally slid off Jasmin, not wanting to suffocate her.

"I love you," she whispered, as she burrowed close to Jasmin, wrapping her arm around her lovingly.

"I love you, too, Anni." With a happy smile, content sigh and a small kiss to the top of Anni's head, Jasmin drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

Anni watched Jasmin sleep, hoping that whatever Kurt was up to, he wouldn't be able to take this from her. She kissed Jasmin's shoulder, then followed her into a deep sleep.

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(Part 2)

"HEY, ANNI."

Anni squinted through the sunlight that was filtering through the window as she headed to the coffee pot. Apparently, Nele has forgotten the rule not to speak to her before her coffee.

"Hey."

"Is Jasmin up?"

"Do you see her?"

Anni could feel Nele studying her as she grabbed a cup from the cabinet. She was beginning to feel annoyed at the scrutiny, hoping that Nele wasn't imagining what she had caught a glimpse of last night.

"Are you okay?"

She scowled at Nele. Why the hell wouldn't she be okay? All she needed was a damned cup of coffee. "Mmmhmm."

"Are you sure?"

"Nele, please. Whatever you think is wrong, just tell me. Don't play twenty of the same question with me before I've had my caffeine."

"Kurt showed up yesterday," Nele said carefully, as though waiting for Anni to blow up or fall apart.

Anni sighed. "Yeah. I know."

"What does Jasmin think?"

"Man, Nele! I can't talk about this before coffee! I don't want to talk about it at all."

"Talk about what?" Jasmin's sleepy voice penetrated the tension filled air in the room.

"Nothing," Anni muttered, finally taking a sip of her much needed coffee.

"Kurt," Nele answered, receiving a glare from Anni.

"Oh. There's nothing to talk about," Jasmin shrugged. "Morning, baby." She kissed Anni sweetly on the lips before going for a mug of her own.

"Morning. Sleep well?"

"Mmm, like a rock." She sent Anni a saucy wink.



Both of them knew Nele was watching them with barely contained questions, but they refused to acknowledge her. Anni just wanted to forget Kurt even existed. Jasmin didn't want Anni to feel uncomfortable, so she stayed quiet. There was nothing to say anyway. Kurt was a part of her past. Anni is her present. And, hopefully, her future.

"You guys are seriously just going to ignore the fact that Jasmin's ex-husband is in town?!"

"Nele!" Jasmin delivered Nele an angry stare.

"What?"

"I already said there's nothing to talk about. Kurt showed up at Vereinsheim, spouted nonsense, then Anni and I left. That's it." Jasmin brushed her hands together as though she were dusting them off. "Done."

"So you're not going back to him?"

The sip of coffee that Anni just took instantly came back up as she began to choke. Jasmin was instantly at her side, gently tapping her back.

"Okay?"

"Yeah. Just went down the wrong pipe." Anni tried to hide her embarrassment - and fear - behind her flippant remark, but Jasmin didn't buy it.

"Nele, why would you ask me that," she asked angrily. "I'm with Anni. Of course, I'm not going back to Kurt."

"Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. It's not like you've been a lesbian for long, I just thought . . ."

"Maybe you should stop thinking, Nele," Anni retorted. "How do you think it makes me feel when you are basically asking Jasmin if she's just going to toss me to the side to go back to her ex?"

Jasmin's eyebrow rose as she gave Anni a look. Anni tsked, waving away Jasmin's questioning look with impatience. Yes, she had the same thoughts, but that's not what they're discussing here.

"I'm sorry, Anni." Nele at least had the good grace to look genuinely contrite.

"Whatever. Can we stop talking about this now?"

"Yes, baby, we can. Right, Nele?" Jasmin looked pointedly at Nele, daring her to say more.

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"Right. Um, I'm just going to go upstairs. Mesut . . . " she trailed off as no one was listening to her anyway.

Jasmin opened her mouth to ask Anni if she was okay again but thought better of it. Anni's emotions are probably in turmoil right now, and the last thing Jasmin wanted was to argue. Especially this close to their anniversary. Damn Kurt! He just *had* to choose *now*!? *I refuse to let him ruin Anni's and my special time.* She didn't care if Kurt fell to his knees begging for *her* forgiveness, she was over him. Completely.

"What time do you have to work today?" Jasmin asked, hoping it was a safe topic.

"I have to leave here in about an hour," Anni answered flatly.

"Come on, sweetie, don't let Nele bother you."

"It's not Nele."

"Well, then, don't let Kurt bother you."

"Jasmin, I'm sure you wouldn't like it if someone like Lucia came here with the intention of getting me back."

Jasmin's nostrils flared with jealousy. "No, I wouldn't. I know this is hard, sweetie. What would you like me to do? I've already told him I'm not interested. I've already told him I'm with you . . . "

"Which apparently no one believes is real," Anni snapped.

*Including you,* Jasmin thought silently. She was determined to show Anni that she is *exactly* where she wants to be.

"I do," Jasmin said softly.

Anni looked up at Jasmin, seeing the love reflected back at her. Her eyes filled with unshed tears as she reached up and caressed Jasmin's cheek lovingly.

"Thank you."

Jasmin smiled with a small shrug.

Anni cleared her throat, pushing herself back from the table. "I need to take a shower and get ready for work."

"Can I watch?" Jasmin grinned, welcoming the change of topic.

"You can wash my back."

"Mmm, even better." Jasmin popped up, placing her hands on Anni's hips as she followed her to the bathroom. "As long as you wash mine."



"SOPHIE?" JASMIN HELD up a vest in front of her. "Do you think Anni would like this?"

Sophie studied the garment thoughtfully. "Yeah. I think she'd look good in that."

"Mmm, me too," Jasmin agreed readily, folding the vest over her forearm. She was grateful that Sophie agreed to go shopping with her during their lunch break. She could use all the help she can get finding the right gift for Anni. The vest is a nice beginning, but certainly not that *special* something she's looking for.

"So, what's going on with Kurt?" Sophie asked nonchalantly.

"Oh for chrissake! Does everyone know Kurt is back and being a complete ass?"

Sophie shrugged. "Seems he's been talking to all of your friends, asking about your relationship with Anni."

Jasmin groaned disgustedly. "Has he spoken to you?"

"No. I don't think he knows we're friends. Yay me."

Jasmin joined Sophie's amused chuckle. "Well, good. At least he'll leave *one* of my friends alone. Ugh, he is so aggravating, Sophie! You should have heard the way he was talking to Anni. I could have punched him, I was so mad."

"At least Anni knows where your loyalties lay. Right?" Sophie looked up at Jasmin when she didn't answer. "Jasmin?"

"She's scared, Sophie," Jasmin confessed.

"Does she have reason to be?"

"No! Absolutely not. But you're the first person who didn't question my intentions. You automatically assumed that my choice is Anni. And you're right."

"Others think you'll choose that ass?"

"Yeah, I guess. And the worst part is, they doubted me in front of Anni."

"Wow. Way to make her feel more confident."

"Exactly!" Jasmin exclaimed with frustration. "She already feels insecure, and they're certainly not helping matters!" She plopped down on a bench in front of the dressing rooms. "What am I going to do, Sophie?"

"About?"

"Anni! What can I do to make her see that being with her is what I really want?"

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Sophie sat next to Jasmin and patted her on the knee. "I think you keep doing what you're doing. You keep rejecting Kurt, and once he gives up, she'll see."

"Until the next time? Sometimes I wonder if she'll ever truly believe in my feelings for her."

"She will, Jasmin. Just give her some time."

"It's been almost a year, Sophie!" Jasmin sighed. She knew she was being impatient. She needed to remind herself of what Anni went through before they got together. How hard it must have been for Anni to see her with Kurt. "It doesn't matter. I will keep reminding her until she gets it. I'm not going anywhere."



JASMIN LET HERSELF in the apartment, arms filled with shopping bags, yet none of them held that one special gift. She kicked the door shut behind her, not noticing when it was stopped by a hand.

"Whew! I should have asked Sophie to help me bring these things up," she muttered to herself.

"I could have helped you."

Jasmin gasped, dropping the bags at her feet and spinning around at Kurt's voice.

"You scared the shit out of me. What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you. Without an audience this time. Now you can be honest." Kurt stepped closer, making Jasmin step back.

"I was being honest. I'm not interested, Kurt." She walked towards the kitchen, putting more distance between them. Being here alone with Kurt made her feel uncomfortable.

"That's ridiculous, Jasmin. You're not . . ."

"If you say the word dyke one more time, I'm going to scream."

"I always liked it when you screamed," he said, leering at her.

"You were never that good, Kurt. Don't kid yourself," she retorted, hating the way he looked at her. Odd. She was once married to this man, thought she loved him, and now he just makes her feel dirty and awkward.

"Seems to me you need to be reminded of how it was between us."

Jasmin shivered at the words. Was she really scared of Kurt? Did she believe he would do something that would hurt her? She didn't think he would. Then again, she didn't think he would come back for her.

"Kurt, you need to leave. Now."

"Scared, Jasmin? Afraid that if I kiss you, you'll see that whatever you have with Anni is a lie?"

Jasmin slammed her hands down on the counter. "What I have with Anni is real, damn it!"

"Prove it."

"I don't have to prove anything to you, Kurt. The only one I care about is Anni."

Kurt laughed ruthlessly. "Of course."

Jasmin walked around the counter, towards the door with the intention of pushing Kurt out the door if she had to. Unfortunately, Kurt grabbed her arm as she tried to pass by him, and pulled her close. She pushed against his chest, trying to turn her head when he closed the distance between them.

"Hey, Jasmin, you left the door . . ." The words died on Anni's lips as she took in the sight before her. "Unbelievable!"

"Anni!" Jasmin pushed away from Kurt, only to have him tighten his grip on her arm. "Let me go, damn it! Anni, wait!"

With a furious shove, she dislodged herself from Kurt's grasp and grabbed Anni before she could leave.

"Let go, Jasmin. Go back to Kurt."

"Anni, please! It wasn't what it looked like!"

"Oh? You weren't kissing your ex-husband?" Anni asked, her voice eerily calm considering the torment she felt inside.

"No, I wasn't."

"I *saw* you, Jasmin!"

Jasmin stepped into Anni's personal space, not giving her a chance to leave. "What did you really see, Anni? Think about it. What did *you* see? Not your insecurity."

"I saw you kissing him." Even as Anni said the words, she felt they were a lie. She closed her eyes, thinking about what she saw when she walked in. It hurt like hell, but she made herself see the reality. "I saw . . . Kurt kissing you."

"Exactly. I was pushing him away, Anni."

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"You know she's lying, don't you, Anni? She wanted it as much as I did." Kurt's eyes were crinkled, as though he were laughing at the situation. As if the turmoil between Jasmin and Anni was entertaining him.

"Why the hell won't you just leave us alone, Kurt? Go back to America where you belong." Jasmin took Anni's face in her hands. "That wasn't a kiss, baby. *This* is a kiss." She lowered her head and took Anni's lips in a sensuous kiss, not giving a damn that Kurt was there watching.

"Jasmin . . ."

Kurt's voice invaded the nice moment she was having with Jasmin, and Anni reluctantly tore her lips from Jasmin's, whirling around to confront him. "Get the hell out of here before I throw your ass out!" She took a step closer to him, adrenaline giving her a boost of courage. "If you *ever* come near Jasmin again, I'll kick your ass. She doesn't want you! Get over it!"

"You're going to get hurt, Anni." Kurt brushed by her, stopping in front of Jasmin. "This isn't over," he said before walking out the door.

"It is over! Don't ever come back here!" Jasmin yelled after him before slamming the door, opening it back up and slamming it again for good measure. "Ugh! He makes me so mad!" She paced the floor, kicking shopping bags in her wake.

"Why was he here, Jasmin?"

The pacing stopped abruptly, and Jasmin took a deep breath to rein in her temper. "He came out of nowhere when I opened the door. Like he was lurking in the hallway or something."

Anni studied her for a moment before nodding. "If he comes around anymore, I'm calling the cops. What he's doing is just creepy, and I don't like him being around you."

"I am trying so hard, Anni," Jasmin sighed. "So hard to be patient. To be understanding." She raised her hand, gesturing for Anni to wait when she began to speak. "I've done everything I can think of to let you know how much I love you. I've defended you. I've defended our love. I've come out over a loudspeaker, joined a protest, assaulted an officer, risked thousands of dollars by coming out to the press. I tell you I love you every day. I *show* you I love you every day. What more can I do? Tell me, please. My actions and words aren't enough, so please, tell me what to do. I will do anything, just tell me, Anni. What will it take for you to trust my love for you?"

A single tear trickled down Anni's cheek, matching the ones flowing freely from Jasmin. She closed the distance between them in two strides, taking Jasmin in a crushing embrace.

"You just did it," she whispered in Jasmin's ear. "No. You've been doing it all along. I'm just an idiot." Anni kissed Jasmin's cheek, tasting the saltiness of her tears. She then kissed both of those tear-filled eyes gently, before placing a small kiss on the tip of her nose. "I'm not going to be an idiot anymore." She kissed Jasmin deeply, pouring all of her emotion into the kiss as her tongue caressed Jasmin's bottom lip, asking for entrance.

Jasmin immediately granted permission, gently sucking Anni's tongue into her mouth. As passionate as their kisses and lovemaking has been, she felt a definite shift in what they were doing now. It was as though there were no longer any barriers between them at all. This is what Jasmin wanted. What she needed. And, Anni was granting her access to it all.

*"You're in my heart, Anni,"* she whispered against Anni's lips.

*"And, you are my heart, Jasmin."* Anni slipped her fingers into Jasmin's silky hair, bringing her back for another heated kiss. She felt more than heard Jasmin's moan as she let her hands roam over the incredibly beautiful body that was pressed against her.

"Bedroom." Jasmin was loathe to break their connection, so she stayed plastered to Anni as they stumbled towards the bedroom. If she didn't think someone would come home and interrupt them, she would have been happy to consummate this turn in their relationship right there on the table. She didn't care where they were, as long as she was with Anni.

They slowly undressed each other, taking the time to explore each new expanse of skin that was exposed with tongues, lips, and hands. Neither of them was in a hurry, wanting to prolong this exquisitely more intense connection they each felt deep down.

Anni nudged Jasmin down on the bed, taking a moment to take in the vision that never ceased to amaze and arouse her. She placed a knee on the bed before lowering herself, using her erect nipples and breasts to stimulate Jasmin's smooth skin beneath her. She teasingly grazed over Jasmin's sex, feeling how hot and ready she was, smelling that wondrous aroma that was Jasmin's arousal. It was almost enough to make her abandon her slow seduction. Almost.

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Jasmin's hips bucked at the light touch, and she whimpered in protest when Anni moved further up her body. "Anni."

"Patience, baby."

"I think I've already proven I have patience, sweetie."

Anni chuckled. "Yes, you have. Just a little more, okay? I promise it'll be worth it."

"I have faith in you." Jasmin smiled brightly, then gasped at the feeling of Anni's nipples scraping against her own painfully hardened peaks.

"Good to know," Anni murmured before taking Jasmin's mouth in a sensual, wet kiss. She moved until she was straddling Jasmin's thigh, her own arousal slick against the silkiness of Jasmin's skin, causing both women to moan at the contact.

Jasmin lifted her knee slightly, putting more pressure on the spot Anni needed it most. She matched each move Anni was making, adding pressure before taking it away for a moment, driving Anni crazy with need. Jasmin forgot all about teasing Anni when she felt curious fingers sliding through her oh-so-ready wetness. Anni hovered over Jasmin's sensitive and swollen clit.

"Please. I need you inside me, Anni."

An almost animalistic growl came from Anni before she slipped two fingers inside Jasmin's heat. She immediately felt the muscles contract around her, drawing her deeper.

"You feel so good wrapped around me, Jasmin." The musician kept her rhythm steady, playing Jasmin as expertly as she played her guitar. Strumming each moan, each whimper, out of Jasmin like a master.

Jasmin's fingernails dug into Anni's back as she felt the beginnings of what she knew would be an intense orgasm. "More."

At Jasmin's urgent request, Anni inserted a third finger, increasing the speed of her thrusts a bit as she began to move her own body over Jasmin's thigh once again. "Oh, yes! Jasmin!"

"Anni! Oh God!" Jasmin knotted her hands into Anni's hair, crushing their mouths together in a desperate kiss. She didn't even attempt to quiet her moans, it was impossible.

Anni ignored the nearly painful hold Jasmin had on her, the intensity only adding to her pleasure. "So close, baby."

"Mmm, yes, Anni. I want you to come with me."

Knock. Knock. Knock.



"Jasmin?"

Nele's voice coming through the door startled the lovemaking couple so much they almost fell off the bed.

"Don't stop!" Jasmin pleaded. "Anni, baby, I'm so close, please don't stop!"

Anni wouldn't be able to stop even if she wanted to. She thrust harder, both inside Jasmin and against her completely drenched thigh.

"Yes!" Jasmin held on tight as her body began to convulse. "Oh! Anni!" She cried out as she exploded around Anni's fingers.

"Shit! Jasmin!" Anni couldn't hold back her own shout as she came hard on Jasmin.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"Jasmin! Come out here, please!"

Jasmin sucked in much-needed air, then choked on it when she heard Katrin's voice yelling at her from the other side of the door.

"Please tell me that's not your mother," Anni begged.

"I could. But I won't lie to you," Jasmin answered, still out of breath from their lovemaking as well as her impromptu choking session.

"What the hell is she doing here?"

Jasmin chuckled. "Well, I don't know, sweetie. I've been kind of busy in here with you."

Anni grinned, nipping the tip of Jasmin's nose playfully. "True." She gently pulled out of Jasmin, bringing her coated fingers up to paint Jasmin's still erect nipple. She forgot all about Jasmin's mother as she dipped her head to taste her masterpiece.

Jasmin arched her back, offering more to Anni. Somewhere in her consciousness, she knew she should be getting up to greet her guest. She just couldn't find the motivation to do anything but stay in bed forever with Anni.

"Jasmin!"

Anni scrambled to cover both her and Jasmin when she realized Katrin had barged into their room.

"Are you crazy!?" Jasmin clutched the covers to her breast, glancing over her shoulder to see Anni duck her head under the comforter, trying to disappear. Jasmin wished she could disappear right along with her. "This isn't a good time, Katrin."

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"If you had been more considerate, I wouldn't have had to come in here," Katrin complained.

"Considerate? This is my home. *My* bedroom. And, I'm sharing an intimate moment with my girlfriend. Perhaps you should learn about this consideration concept."

"Your attitude is unbecoming."

Jasmin barely managed to keep herself from yelping when she felt a pinch on her ass. She was *so* going to get Anni for that.

"Did you come in here to belittle me, Katrin? If so, I have much better things to do."

"I came to talk to you about your future, Jasmin."

Jasmin sighed heavily. "And, this couldn't wait for a more convenient *future* time?"

"Kurt came to see me . . . "

"Oh no! No, no, no, no, no. I am *not* talking to you about Kurt. I'm not talking about him at *all*."

"Jasmin, he can offer you so much more."

"Enough! I don't know what he's offering *you*, but you can forget it! I've made my choice. I choose Anni. I will *always* choose Anni. Now and forever. So, if that's all you came over here to interrupt me for, you can leave."

"We'll talk when you're . . . "

"What? Alone? More compliant? *Dressed*? No matter *when* you talk to me, my answer will always be the same."

Katrin shook her head before turning to leave.

"Tell me something, Katrin," Jasmin called before Katrin closed the door. "What *did* Kurt offer you to do this?"

"Jasmin, I just want what's best for you."

"If that were true, you would be jumping for joy that I've found what's best for me in Anni. You *never* do anything unless it serves *you*. So, what did he offer you? You know what," she continued when Katrin said nothing. "It doesn't matter. Tell Kurt to go to hell. And if you've decided not to support my relationship with Anni, you can go there with him."

When Katrin closed the door behind her with a distinct snap, Jasmin fell back onto the bed with a frustrated growl. Before she could stop herself, she started kicking her feet, and punching the bed, in an *epic* temper tantrum, while letting out all of her resentment in a throaty yell.

"Whoa! Hey." Anni tentatively reached out, placing a calming hand on Jasmin's arm. "It's okay, baby."

"It's *not* okay! Who do these people think they are?! Why can't they just leave us alone?"

"Maybe they will now." Even saying it, Anni knew Kurt wasn't finished trying to persuade his ex-wife to take him back.

Jasmin blew out a breath, panting a little from her . . . oh, God, she just had a tantrum in front of Anni. Great. That's all she needed, was for Anni to think she was being childish. She groaned, slapping her hands over her face, hoping to hide the blush she could feel creeping up.

"It was cute," Anni laughed.

Jasmin peeked through her fingers at her girlfriend. *Can she really tell what I'm thinking?* "What was cute?"

"Your little conniption. I thought it was cute."

"Shut up. I did not have a conniption!"

"Oh, it was a conniption alright. Worthy of a true drama queen." She smiled at Jasmin, making sure she knew she was just teasing her.

"Whatever. Lesbian."

"It's true. Bimbo." Anni winked. "This lesbian is hungry."

"Well, I suppose *this* lesbian should feed you then."

Anni threw her head back and laughed enthusiastically. "God, I love you!"

Jasmin smiled. "I love you, too."

# Committed

(Part 3)

"WHATCHA COOKING?" ANNI slipped her arms around Jasmin's waist, peering over her shoulder.

"Pasta."

"So, your signature dish?" Anni teased.

"Hey!" Jasmin pushed her bum back, nudging into Anni. "Be happy I'm cooking for you."

"I am, baby, thank you."

Anni hopped up onto the counter, swinging her legs back and forth, watching Jasmin hum while she cooked. It felt nice spending quiet time, just the two of them. As much as she liked her roommates, Anni would like these moments a little more often.

Jasmin glanced over at Anni. "What?"

"Nothing," Anni smiled. "Do you want to talk about Kurt?"

"No."

"Okay." If she were honest with herself, Anni would admit that she didn't want to talk about Kurt either. But with Katrin being involved, she couldn't help but wonder what was going on. Why would Kurt come back after so long? He and Jasmin have been divorced for over a year now. "Jasmin?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you not the least bit curious about all of this?"

"Should I be?"

Anni wasn't sure how to take Jasmin's nonchalant attitude. Her ex-husband was back in town, doing everything he can to get her back. Why wasn't she more concerned about it?

Jasmin placed the spoon she was using to stir the sauce to the side and stepped between Anni's legs. Even though they had turned a corner in their relationship, and she had a feeling Anni was more secure, she knew there was still some trepidation.

"It doesn't matter why he's back or what Katrin has to do with it, sweetie. I'm with you. Nothing is going to change that."

"I believe you, Jasmin. This whole thing just makes me uncomfortable."

"I know. Me, too. But I'm not going to let them ruin things for us. Especially not now," Jasmin smiled sweetly.

"Oh? What's so special about now?" Anni grinned.

Jasmin wrapped her arms around Anni's neck. "You better be kidding." She gave Anni a peck on the lips before returning to her task of cooking a meal for her girlfriend.



"THIS IS REALLY good, baby." Anni accepted a bite from Jasmin, leaning in to thank her with a small kiss.

"Thank you." She dabbed at Anni's chin with a napkin, cleaning a bit of errant sauce. Jasmin lost herself in Anni's big, brown eyes that looked at her with such love and devotion. The two women moved together as if pulled by some cosmic force. Jasmin felt that force often, knowing that was why she ultimately couldn't fight her feelings for Anni any longer. Even when she was married to Kurt, she had felt a strong connection to Anni that she didn't understand at the time.

When their lips touched, she experienced that now familiar electricity flow between them. Jasmin leaned into the caress Anni gave her cheek, complying readily when Anni pulled her even closer.

"Oh! Sorry guys!" Ayla blushed slightly, witnessing the intimacy from her two roommates. She closed the front door behind her, rushing across the room to leave the two in peace again.

"It's okay, Ayla. Do you want some pasta?" Jasmin gave Anni one more kiss before returning to her own space.

"I don't want to intrude."

"Don't be silly. Jasmin made enough for the entire apartment," Anni smirked. "Come on. It's goood." She taunted Ayla by waving her fork full of pasta around.

Ayla laughed at Anni's antics, then got a plate from the cabinet and joined them. "Thanks, I'm starving!"

"Water?" Jasmin asked, already getting up to get Ayla a bottle. Ayla nodded enthusiastically, her mouth stuffed with pasta. Though Jasmin was thoroughly enjoying her alone time with Anni, she didn't begrudge Ayla's presence. On the

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contrary, she was happy to share time with someone who was such a great friend to both her and Anni.

"Are we avoiding the topic of Kurt?" Ayla asked, thanking Jasmin for the water.

Jasmin groaned, and Anni couldn't help but laugh. Kurt certainly found his way into their life, even if just by conversation.

"Not avoiding it," Anni answered, shrugging as she received a side glance from Jasmin. "Did he talk to you?"

"Mmhmh." Ayla swallowed her food before continuing. "He asked about your relationship."

"What about it?" Jasmin wasn't even remotely interested in Kurt, but she *was* interested in what others had to say about her relationship with Anni.

"How long it had been going on. If it was serious. Things like that. He seems to think you two had something going on when you were married to him," she told Jasmin with a grimace.

"Please. *He* was the one cheating on me, not the other way around," Jasmin scoffed.

"That's what I told him. I didn't want to talk to him at all," Ayla added hurriedly. "But he wouldn't leave me alone."

"It's okay," Anni reassured her. "Sophie already warned Jasmin that Kurt was talking to our friends. We have nothing to hide. Right, baby?"

"Right. I don't know what he thinks he's accomplishing, but whatever. I have more important things to think about." She smiled at Anni, picking up both of their plates to take them to the sink.

"Here, let me help."

Jasmin placed her hand on Anni's shoulder, stopping her. "Sit with Ayla so she doesn't have to eat alone. I got this."

Anni's eyes followed Jasmin, concentrating on her beautiful backside. She snapped out of her trance when she heard a throat clearing. "Sorry," she muttered, not really meaning it.

"No problem. Hey." Ayla leaned forward, lowering her voice. "Are we still going shopping tomorrow? Sorry I couldn't go the other day."

"Yeah. And, it's okay. Pia went with me, but I would like your opinion. You sure you don't mind?" Anni kept glancing over at Jasmin, making sure she wasn't paying attention. There was music playing lightly in the background, and

the water was running, so Anni was confident that her and Ayla's conversation remained unheard.

"Not at all! I think it's romantic."

Anni snorted softly at the dreamy look on Ayla's face.

"What's so funny?" Jasmin pulled her chair closer to Anni's, draping her arm around Anni as she sat.

"Um . . ." Anni floundered for an explanation that wouldn't give her intentions away.

"I, um, told Anni that, um . . . I heard Mesut scream like a girl the other day," Ayla answered lamely. "I don't know what Nele was doing to him, but it was funny."

Anni laughed outright at the ridiculous explanation. Jasmin looked between the two, coming to the conclusion that they were either keeping something from her or just plain weird. It could go either way, she thought with a smile.

"Oookay. Well, I really don't want to know what goes on in Nele's bedroom."

"We don't always want to know what goes on in yours, either," Ayla countered with a grin. "But that's what roommates have to deal with."

Although Anni and Jasmin knew Ayla was teasing them, they both blushed at the thought that the others heard their lovemaking.

"Yeah, well, you just can't hold back when lesbian sex is so incredible," Anni smirked, trying to regain control of the situation. She received a playful smack on the arm for her efforts. "What? Oh, sorry, not just lesbian sex, lesbian sex with Jasmin." She howled with laughter at the stunned looks she got from the other women. "Aww, don't be mad, baby. It's true!"

Jasmin's stunned look turned into a beautiful smile. "As long as you think so, sweetie, that's all that matters."



"SO," ANNI BEGAN, standing behind Jasmin as she got ready for work in the bathroom the next morning. "I'm going to walk you over to Vereinsheim, then I'm going to help Ayla out with whatever she has to do."

"She didn't tell you what it was." Jasmin put the final touches of her makeup on, then turned to her girlfriend. She knew something was up, and she hoped

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it had something to do with their anniversary. With that thought, she decided not to give Anni too hard of a time with questions.

"Nope. Just that she needed my help," Anni answered evasively, hoping Jasmin would drop the subject.

"Okay!" Jasmin kissed Anni chastely, leaving a bit of lip gloss on Anni's lips. She watched with amusement as Anni licked her lips eagerly with an 'mmm'. "Ready?"

"To take you back to bed? Absolutely."

"You're incorrigible, you know that right? And, insatiable."

"Not true! You always satisfy me, baby. You just do it so well, that it leaves me wanting more," Anni said proudly, nipping at Jasmin's nose, and running away from swatting hands. "Though, I do agree with your incorrigible assessment."

"You're a nut!" Jasmin laughed. "Come on. Walk me to work, woman!"

"As you wish." Anni bowed, opening the door for her lover.

They walked hand in hand out of the building, only to be suddenly bombarded by the press. *What in the hell?* Jasmin thought as questions were being barked out from every direction.

"Mrs. LeRoy! What do you say to Kurt's allegations that you're cheating on him with a woman?"

"Mrs. LeRoy, how romantic is it that Kurt came back for his muse?"

"Mrs. LeRoy . . . "

"Flemming!" Anni yelled loudly. "Her name is Flemming! And, just leave us the hell alone!"

"Are you the one she's cheating with?"

Anni put her arm around Jasmin, guiding her through the sea of flashing bulbs and recorders thrust in their faces.

"Mrs. LeRoy! Are you using this lesbian relationship to get back at Kurt for his alleged cheating?"

"Will you be uploading a sex tape of you and your lesbian lover?"

The questions kept pounding in Jasmin's head while her body was being jostled by people clamoring to get a reaction out of her. The only thing keeping her sane at the moment was the weight of Anni's arms around her.

"Mrs. LeRoy, will you be accompanying your husband on his promotional tour?"

"Wait. Stop, Anni."

"No, Jasmin. Come on."



"Wait!" She stopped abruptly and faced the crowd. "Are you even interested in my answers?" She yelled over the chaos.

"Jasmin, it's not worth it, come on," Anni pleaded.

"No. Sweetie, I'm not going to let them do this to us. I know you don't like hearing them call me Kurt's wife. I don't like it either." She leaned closer to whisper in Anni's ear. "Let me just make one statement and then we'll go. I promise. I know you hate this, baby, but I can't let Kurt get away with this."

Anni studied Jasmin for a moment, then nodded. No, she didn't like this attention shit, but she would support Jasmin.

*"What do you have to say, Mrs. LeRoy?"*

Jasmin glared at the reporter. "First of all, my name is Flemming. I'm no longer LeRoy. Kurt and I have been divorced for over a year now. He needs to get over it. I *am* in love with a woman. I *did not* cheat. And, I am *not* going on tour or anywhere else with Kurt. We are done. I'm no longer his muse. He needs to move on. I have."

With that, Jasmin grabbed Anni's hand and walked away. She knew that the press would follow and keep hounding them, but she had said what she needed to say and was done.

Finally, they reached their destination, and pushed their way into Vereinsheim, slamming the door behind them, effectively shutting out the rest of the world.

"Shit!" Anni leaned on the door, trying to catch her breath. "I guess we know what Kurt's up to."

"He's such an ass," Jasmin spat angrily.

"What's going on out there?" Tuner stood on his toes, trying to peer out the door.

"Fucking press." Anni was *not* happy. *Mrs. Fucking LeRoy. That son of a bitch! He knows damn well they're not married anymore.*

"Anni?"

Jasmin's soft voice cut through Anni's angry thoughts. One look at the beautiful face with the worried expression and Anni melted. She hugged Jasmin to her, smiling when the hug was immediately returned.

"What do they want?"

Tuner's question brought back some of Anni's tension, and Jasmin rubbed her back lovingly to try and keep her calm.

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"Kurt set this up," Jasmin answered flatly.

"Why?"

"Because he wants Jasmin back." Anni fought to keep her emotions in check. Just the thought of Kurt putting Jasmin through this was enough to set her off. She had never been happier about the fact that Jasmin no longer wanted that lifestyle. Being in the press, being famous. None of that mattered to her lover anymore, and that was a blessing to Anni. Especially now. There was no risk of Jasmin leaving her to be in the spotlight again.

"If he thought this would work, he's an idiot. That's not the life for me," Jasmin said, unwittingly echoing Anni's thoughts. She shivered at the thought that the press was out there now, waiting for her. How she ever saw the appeal in that life, she doesn't know. It brought her nothing but heartache.

"Thank you for your statement, baby."

"No need to thank me, sweetie. It's the truth." Jasmin rubbed her nose to Anni's, patting her on the backside. "Want some coffee?"

"Yes, please," Anni answered desperately. Caffeine was exactly what she needed. And, perhaps a huge hose to spray the press down with. Maybe that would cool them off. It certainly would do wonders for Anni's mood.

"I have to call Sophie. I'm supposed to go over to MT after my shift here. If they're still out there, I don't know if I'm going to make it." Jasmin prepared Anni's coffee expertly, setting it in front of her brooding girlfriend. "You'll be careful when you go out with Ayla, right?"

"Oh, no. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not leaving your side."

"Anni, sweetie, you made plans with Ayla. Don't let them ruin it," Jasmin gestured with an angry flick of her hand to the offending crowd.

"I'll call Ayla. She'll understand. Man, Jasmin, I don't want you alone!"

"Baby, I'm not alone. I'm going to stay here. Tuner is here, Dominik is coming." She glanced at Tuner for reassurance, continuing when he nodded. "I won't go anywhere until you get back. I promise."

"What if they come in here?" Anni was almost whining, she knew, but the thought of leaving Jasmin with these vultures circling just didn't feel right.

"We'll take care of it," Tuner assured her.

"Tuner, you need to take it easy, man," Anni argued.

"I will. I am. I'll get Dominik to do all the ass kicking," he smirked.

Jasmin skirted the bar to stand next to the woman she loved. "Hey. I'll be okay. I'm more worried about you being out there with them. On second

thought, maybe you shouldn't go." The more Jasmin thought about it, the more she didn't want Anni to leave. Not for her sake, but for Anni's.

"I can handle it." Anni warred with herself. She really wanted to go shopping for Jasmin, but it just didn't seem to be the right time now. She laughed at both herself and Jasmin for their inability to make up their minds on the subject. "We're a pair, aren't we? Go, don't go."

"I think we make the perfect pair." Jasmin wound her arms around Anni's neck, pulling her in for a lingering kiss. "What do you want to do?" she asked, slightly breathless from their kiss.

Anni sighed. "You won't leave?" Jasmin shook her head. "Will you call me if something happens?" Nod. "I think they'll leave me alone. If not, I can just lose them. I won't be long, okay? I'll definitely be back before the end of your shift for you. Do you think Sophie will let you skip today?"

"I can ask her. I can always work on articles at home, so it shouldn't be a problem. Hang on." Jasmin dug her phone out of her leather jacket, dialing Sophie's number. "Soph? Hey, it's Jasmin. I . . . what? Shit, they're there, too? Yeah, they were waiting for us when we walked out of the building." Jasmin paused to listen. "No, that's why I was calling. Would it be okay if I worked on that article from home? . . . I don't know what he's trying to prove . . . no, I haven't spoken to Katrin since she stormed out of my house . . . wait, she what? Are you sure?" A heavy sigh came from Jasmin, and she rubbed her temple that was beginning to throb. "I'm really sorry about this . . . I know, but . . . Okay, thanks. I'll call you later, okay?"

Anni waited patiently - okay, impatiently, but she still waited - for Jasmin to end the call. "What's going on?"

"The press is at MT as well, trying to get 'exclusive interviews' with the staff there. Great. Most of those people don't even like me. I can just imagine what they have to say."

"What about your mother?" Anni asked, trying to get Jasmin back on track with their conversation.

"Hmm? Oh! Sophie thinks Katrin is working with Kurt. As in, she's his new PR person."

"No shit?" Anni was stunned by the news, though she didn't know why she should be.

## Committed

"No shit. She says it's just speculation at this point, but her sources are pretty reliable."

"I guess that explains what she's getting out of this," Anni muttered hotly.

"Guess so. But I still don't understand what I have to do with all of this. Kurt has been doing this on his own, and I'm sure he's been doing just fine."

"Added press?" Tuner suggested, startling the women. They had forgotten he was there. Though technically, Jasmin should be working right now, and Tuner is the one covering her ass.

"Sorry, Tuner!" Jasmin grabbed the tray from him, asking him where it goes.

"Table four."

"Added press, huh?" Anni asked when Jasmin left. "Why would he need it?"

"I read something about him trying to release a new album, but the dip in sales for his current album doesn't make a new one promising. Of course, that's all tabloid theory."

"So, he's trying to use Jasmin to help his sales?" Anni was so angry she could probably spit fire if she tried. This had *nothing* to do with his feelings for Jasmin, and *everything* to do with his damn image and money! Damn him!

"What about sales?" Jasmin set the tray down on the bar. "Table two needs a milky coffee, please."

"Tuner says Kurt's sales are down, and he wants to drop another album. He's using you to get back into the spotlight."

"Oh for fuck's sake! He's putting us through all of this shit for notoriety!?" Jasmin began to wonder if this was payback for everything she put others through when she was doing that whole reality show shit. *Paybacks are a bitch*, she thought bitterly.

"Here's your order for table two," Tuner said, handing her the drink. "And, I can't be sure that's what's going on. It's just what I've read in those stupid tabloids. I had a lot of time on my hands," he said with an embarrassed shrug.

Jasmin had to will herself not to stomp over to table two. She calmly set the drink down, and gave the customer a sweet smile and thank you. The scowl was back on her face by the time she made it back to Anni.

"It has nothing to do with loving me, does it?" she asked, reiterating Anni's earlier thoughts.

"Don't think so."

"God! Why can't he just leave us alone? Why can't he just let me be happy?" To her surprise and dismay, Jasmin felt her eyes start to water.

"Hey, come here." Anni took Jasmin in her arms, holding her tight. "Look, now we have an idea of what's going on, right? Maybe we should talk to your mother . . ."

"Why would we talk to Katrin?" Jasmin pulled back, a bewildered look on her face. "She's working *with* him!"

"We don't know that for sure, and if she is," Anni continued, cutting Jasmin's protests off, "then we'll see if we can talk some sense into her. Maybe she'll get Kurt to back off? It's worth a shot, baby."

Jasmin sighed tiredly. "You're right. Fine, we'll talk to her. But right now, I've got to get to work. Tuner doesn't need to be doing this all by himself."

Just then, Dominik pushed his way inside, yelling incoherently at the horde of jackass press.

"What the hell is going on out there!"

"Long story," was the answer that came from all three at the same time.

"I gotta get going, baby. I told Ayla I'd meet her at noon." Anni rubbed Jasmin's arms in a comforting gesture.

"You'll be careful, right?"

"Of course. Call me if you need me?"

"Mhmm. You do the same. Have fun!" Jasmin flashed Anni a genuine smile.

"I'll try," Anni laughed. "I'll be back soon, okay?" She kissed Jasmin thoroughly before leaning close to her ear. "Tonight, we're locking ourselves in the bedroom and tuning everyone else out. No exceptions."

Jasmin shivered from the breath that tickled her ear and her senses. "Sounds like a wonderful plan to me. I can't wait."

Anni beamed a bright smile. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

"See ya, guys!"

Dominik and Tuner waved and wished her luck out in the sea of piranha reporters.

"Think you can work now?" Tuner teased Jasmin.

"Hmm. Maybe. Since I have no more distractions," she winked. Silently, she hoped that the press would leave her girlfriend alone. Jasmin knew how

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much Anni hated all of that, and she cursed Kurt for bringing it back into their lives.



"SORRY I'M LATE!" Anni jogged up to Ayla who was waiting patiently for her at their agreed upon location.

"No problem. Jasmin keep you tied up?"

Anni lost her concentration for a moment, thinking of Jasmin tying her up. *Hmm. Not a bad scenario*, she thought provocatively. Clearing her throat, she pushed that image out of her head - or at least to the back of her mind - for now.

"No. Press."

"Huh?"

"Come on, I'll tell you about it on the way."

Anni filled Ayla in on all that was happening with Kurt, Katrin, and the press as they walked to the store Anni had decided on.

"Wow. So all of this is for publicity?"

"Yep."

"How is Jasmin taking it?"

"Not well. Or as well as can be expected. She made a short statement, then walked away," Anni announced proudly.

"What did she say?" Ayla asked, intrigued. Not too long ago, Jasmin would have been eating this attention up. Things have changed so much since then.

"She corrected them on her name, told them she was in love with a woman and that she wasn't interested in Kurt."

"Bet that made you feel good, huh?"

"Hell, yes." Anni stopped and waited for Ayla to notice. "I have no doubts anymore," she confessed. "It shouldn't have taken me this long, and I think, deep down, I knew. But I have no doubts about Jasmin's love for me."

"That's great, Anni! I'm so happy for you guys!"

Anni grinned. "Thanks!" She looked up at the store they stood in front of. "I think I'm going to find what I want in here."

Ayla stood speechless for a moment, then followed Anni inside.

# *Committed*

*(Part 4)*

JASMIN COULD BARELY breathe as Anni's tongue picked up its pace against her throbbing sex. They had been making love since getting home over two hours ago, and Anni has already given Jasmin two incredible orgasms. She was currently working on the third, and Jasmin wasn't completely sure she would survive this one.

"Anni," she panted, torn between wanting to ride out this amazingly pleasurable torture, or pushing Anni away for some much-needed relief. As she felt her body start to tremble, she knew there was no stopping now. She let herself be completely overtaken by her lover, giving her everything. A hoarse cry filled the air as the climax shook her to her core.

Anni was in heaven, and relentless when it came to drinking every bit of the essence that was Jasmin. She couldn't get enough.

"Baby, you have to stop," Jasmin begged.

"Don't wanna," Anni murmured against Jasmin's still throbbing nub.

"Please? I don't think I can take more."

With one more lick with the flat of her tongue, Anni finally eased off. She kissed her way up Jasmin's sweat-slicked body, lingering at her hardened nipples for a moment before giving Jasmin a deep kiss.

Jasmin moaned into the kiss. As sated and lethargic as she felt, the sensation of tasting herself on Anni's tongue, ignited her body once again. With a strength she couldn't explain, she reversed their position, a startled Anni now beneath her.

"My turn," she whispered huskily.

Anni could only groan as her body immediately responded to the look of desire in Jasmin's soulful brown eyes. Although she had already had an orgasm of her own from going down on Jasmin, her body needed more. "I'm all yours, baby."

"Yes, you are." Jasmin trailed her lips and tongue down Anni's neck, tasting the saltiness of the film of sweat remnant from their passion. She bared her teeth, and nipped Anni's pulse point, hard enough to mark her lover. Jasmin

## Committed

grinned when Anni's hips bucked at the bit of pleasurable pain. She continued her journey, nibbling and licking her collarbone, then taking a small, firm breast into her hot, wet mouth. Jasmin marked her lover once again, this time with a powerful suck to the tender flesh.

"Jesus! Jasmin!" Anni gasped, her hands instinctively grasping Jasmin's silky hair, pulling her even closer.

"Tell me what you want, baby," Jasmin murmured, licking her handiwork.

"You," Anni ground out, barely able to speak.

"How? Tell me, Anni. I want to hear you say it."

Anni groaned once again, loving when Jasmin was like this. It turned her on so much to know she could tell Jasmin to do anything, and she would satisfy beyond belief. Anni may have been the first woman Jasmin had ever been with, but Jasmin was a natural. Anni had never come as hard as she does with Jasmin. It was amazing. "*I want you inside me*," she whispered.

"Mmm." Jasmin trailed her fingers down Anni's torso, circling her navel before continuing down to Anni's hot and ready center. "You're so wet."

The musician locked eyes with her beautiful girlfriend as she felt two digits slip inside her. When Jasmin curled her fingers up, Anni's hips immediately lifted, bringing Jasmin even deeper. "More. Please."

Jasmin's body shivered at the words, and she slipped a third finger in, keeping her pace even and slow. She couldn't believe how incredible it felt being inside Anni's wetness, feeling how the silky walls of Anni's sex contracted around her fingers. Especially when she hit that certain spot. "Do you like that, baby?"

"God, yes! Don't stop!"

"Never." Jasmin picked up the pace, using her body to help her thrust deeper, harder as Anni lifted her hips to match each plunge. She felt the beginnings of Anni's climax and bent to take a rigid nipple in her mouth, sucking hard.

Anni's orgasm exploded at the overwhelming sensations of Jasmin inside of her and sucking her. It was so intense, she saw stars behind her eyelids, and was almost afraid she would pass out from the force. Her thighs clamped together, trapping Jasmin between them, effectively stopping her movement.

"My God!" Anni blew out an exhausted, yet completely satisfied breath. "You may very well be the death of me."



Jasmin chuckled softly. "I can see the headlines now. '*Jasmin Flemming kills lesbian lover with fierce orgasms*'."

Anni laughed, pushing Jasmin's sweat soaked hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. "Well, if I had to choose a way to go, that would certainly be it."

"Hmm." Jasmin rolled off her lover with a weak sigh. "I have no idea where I got the energy to do that after what you did to me."

"Divine intervention?" Anni suggested with a grin.

Jasmin rolled her head to the side to look at the beautiful musician. "Perhaps."

"Hungry?"

"Uh uh. Too tired to move."

"Go to sleep, baby. I'm going to go make me something light to eat. Okay?"

"Mmhmm. Bring me back something?" Jasmin mumbled sleepily before losing her battle with exhaustion.

Anni shook her head, chuckling at her girlfriend. She knew Jasmin would most likely be out for the night, but she would make her a little something just in case. She shrugged into her black button-up shirt, grabbed her guitar and quietly stepped out of the bedroom.



ANNI SAT CROSS-LEGGED on the couch, strumming her guitar and humming softly. She would play a few chords, sing a few words, then stop to write down what she just played. The musician was pleasantly surprised by the ease the song was flowing from her, and could only attribute it to the intense love she felt for Jasmin.

"That's pretty," Nele said quietly as if trying not to startle the musician.

"Um. Thanks." Anni was a little embarrassed at being 'caught'. She was normally shy about singing her songs in front of others, but this one was special. She was even more bashful about this song being heard by anyone other than Jasmin.

"Is it for Jasmin?"

"Yeah. Hey, don't say anything, okay?"

"No, I won't." Nele sat in the chair, a bit tentatively. "I wanted to apologize for the other day."

## Committed

Anni looked up, a little annoyed by being interrupted until she saw the sad look on Nele's face. "Don't worry about it. You were just saying what I'm sure a lot of people were thinking."

"I still shouldn't have doubted Jasmin like that. It hurt both of you, and I don't want that."

Anni shrugged with a tsk. "We got over it as I'm sure you saw and heard." She grinned at Nele, lifting her chin towards the bedroom door.

"Oh God." Nele blushed hotly. "Tell me you don't hear Mesut and me like that!"

"Uh . . . " Anni laughed out loud as Nele buried her burning face in her hands. "Hey, it happens when you live with roommates, right?"

Nele shrugged. "Want a drink?"

"Nah. I'm just going to work on this a little longer, then go back to bed."

"Do you want me to leave you alone?"

Anni looked at Nele sheepishly. "Do you mind?"

"No, not at all. I really just wanted to say sorry for everything . . . "

"It's all good, okay?"

Nele smiled with a nod, then said goodnight, leaving Anni alone once again. With a glance towards the stairs, Anni began playing once again. The melody surged through her, flowing through her fingers as if they had a mind of their own. Her smile was wide and happy, thoughts of Jasmin going through her head as the song all but composed itself. Where "Far Away" broke her heart, this song . . . oh, this song made her heart sing. She thought that was a good description since it seemed like her heart was what was really writing it.

Putting the finishing touches on paper, she slipped the sheet into her guitar case, placing her guitar over it. Anni snapped the case shut with a smile, and returned to her beautiful girlfriend with a happy bounce in her step.



"WHAT ARE YOUR plans for your day off, baby?" Anni watched from under the covers as Jasmin got dressed. Her eyes were glued to a perfect ass as Jasmin shimmied into leather pants Anni loved so much.

"Just a bit of shopping," Jasmin answered, knowing full well where Anni's eyes were.

"Who's going with you?" When Anni didn't get an answer, she looked up at her amused girlfriend. "What?"

"Enjoying the show?"

"Immensely," the musician answered, grinning rakishly.

"Good." Jasmin made her way over to Anni, leaning down to kiss her soundly. "Pia and Nele are going with me."

"Great. I'm glad you're not going alone."

Jasmin smiled at her protective lover. "I told you I'd be careful."

"You did." Anni slipped her hands up Jasmin's thighs, settling them on her hips. "Are you okay with calling your mother today?"

"Can we discuss this later, baby?"

"Jasmin, I know you don't really want to do this . . . "

"Anni, wait. I'll do this because it may give us a way to get Kurt out of our lives. That's what's important to me. So, yes, we'll call Katrin. I just don't want to think about it right now, okay?"

Anni nodded. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I know this is hard for you. We'll get through this, I promise."

"I know, baby. Hey, why don't you and the girls stop by Vereinsheim after you're done shopping? Come and see me. I'll buy you a coffee," she winked.

Jasmin laughed. "Sure! See you later?"

"You bet."

Jasmin traced a finger across Anni's jaw, then tapped her on the nose before leaving the grinning musician.



"ARE YOU SURE about this, Jasmin?" Pia looked at her friend, then at Nele, who gave her a shrug, and back again.

"Yes." Jasmin's answer was full of confidence and enthusiasm. She handed the guy behind the counter a piece of paper with a rough drawing. "Can you do this?"

The older man pushed his glasses up his nose, picking the drawing up, studying it. "All of them?"

"Yes. Is it possible?"

"Yeah, yeah. This one may be a little tricky," he told her, pointing to one of the sketches. "But, doable."

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Jasmin sighed with relief. The 'tricky' one was the most important. "How long will they take?"

"Three weeks? Maybe a month," the old man grunted.

"Shit," Jasmin muttered, then apologized to the man for her language. "Can it be done any sooner?"

He considered her, then the drawing again. "Yeah. I can do a rush job. When do you need it by?"

"Next week?" Jasmin answered hopefully.

"It will cost more," he warned.

Jasmin winced. "How much?"

The old man was thoughtful for a moment, and took a pencil from behind his ear, writing a figure down and sliding the paper over to Jasmin.

Jasmin's breath caught at the price, but she swallowed down the apprehension. Anni was worth it. She was worth everything. She held out her hand. "Deal." She turned to her friends who were still looking at her with disbelief. "Ready for coffee?"



"HEY! HOW'D IT go?" Anni gave Jasmin a quick kiss, nodding to Pia and Nele.

"Good! The press is still following me around, but I think we did pretty well at keeping them at bay." Jasmin grinned proudly, making her girlfriend laugh.

"Well, I don't see any bags. Was shopping a bust?" Anni knew she was fishing, but she wanted to know how much Jasmin would tell her.

"Nope." Jasmin took the coffee Anni held out to her and plopped herself down on the couch in the corner.

"That's it?" Anni glanced at Pia and Nele who immediately turned away, suddenly finding the café's décor extremely interesting. Anni narrowed her eyes at Jasmin. "Anything you want to tell me?"

"I love you." The corners of Jasmin's eyes crinkled when she smiled over the rim of her glass.

"Fine. I can take a hint." She made her way back behind the bar, to fill orders. "Want to call Katrin?"

"Ugh." Jasmin drank the rest of her milky coffee, setting the empty glass on the table in front of her. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

Anni sent her girlfriend a sympathetic smile. She knew this was going to be difficult for Jasmin. Her relationship with her mother was already tumultuous at best. If it turned out that Katrin was working with Kurt to break her and Jasmin up, Anni was afraid the thread the mother/daughter relationship was hanging by would finally snap.

Jasmin reluctantly dug out her phone, pressing Katrin's number. Part of her hoped that the call would go unanswered. The other part wanting to do what she just told Anni. Get it over with.

"Hello?"

"Katrin. It's Jasmin."

"I know who it is. Have you finally decided to listen to me?" Katrin's voice held a condescending bite that Jasmin did not appreciate.

"I've decided to ask you a few questions. Do you have time to meet?"

"Of course. Kurt and I . . ."

"No. Just you. I will not have any kind of discussion with Kurt." Jasmin saw Anni's eyes turn to her at Kurt's name. She just shook her head and focused on her conversation with Katrin. "You can come to Vereinsheim, or you can come by the apartment later. But, Katrin, I swear if Kurt is with you, I will never speak to you again."

"Very well. I trust your friend won't be there either?"

Jasmin frowned at the emphasis Katrin had put on the word 'friend'. "My *girl*friend will be there, yes. This involves her just as much as it involves me."

"Then I think all parties should be present," Katrin countered.

"All parties that count, will be. Take it or leave it, Katrin. This is the only invitation I will be extending." After a long silence, Katrin agreed to meet at the apartment later that evening.

Anni sat next to her not-so-happy girlfriend, taking her hand. "So?"

"She'll be there tonight. Though, I don't see what the point is. It's obvious she's working with Kurt."

"The point, baby, is to try and get them to stop. We already knew it was a possibility they were working together. Maybe we can appeal to your mom's caring side, and get her to tell Kurt to back off."

"Katrin? Caring side?" Jasmin looked at Anni skeptically.

## Committed

"Come on, doll. She has her moments." She kissed Jasmin's knuckles. "I have to get back to work. Want another?" she asked, gesturing at Jasmin's empty glass.

"Sure. Get me wired up before this talk tonight," she smirked. "Did Nele and Pia leave?"

"Yeah, they had stuff to do," Anni tossed over her shoulder on her way back to the bar. "Said to tell you bye."

"Bye," Jasmin muttered, deciding to keep herself occupied by browsing the internet on her phone. "Well, that was a mistake."

"What was a mistake?" Anni handed Jasmin her drink, taking her phone from her. ***Kurt LeRoy and Jasmin Flemming: Marriage on the Mend.*** The article included a photo of Jasmin and Kurt kissing, Kurt's hand on Jasmin's ass. "Shit. Katrin's doing, I assume?"

"Probably. That picture was taken right after we were married. We were at some stupid studio party." Jasmin snagged her phone back, quickly closing the internet. "She's not going to be on our side, you know that, right? Katrin will do whatever it takes to be in control of *something*. If it's not Metropolitan Trends anymore, it's going to be this. Or me."

"She can't control you, baby."

"She'll try."

"Come here." Anni wrapped her arms around her girlfriend, holding tight. "We're in this together, okay? No matter what happens with Katrin, I'm here with you."

"Thank you, sweetie. I feel better already." Although she said the words lightly, Jasmin truly did feel better with Anni by her side. She felt as though she could face anything with the love of her life next to her. The thought startled Jasmin a little. Love of her life? She pulled back, taking Anni's face in her hands, looking deep into her eyes. "*It's true*," she whispered.

"Huh?" Anni's brows furrowed in confusion at Jasmin's curious words.

Jasmin smiled brightly. "I said it's true. That you make me feel better," she explained. There was a better time, a better place to tell Anni that she was the love of her life.

The dimples that Jasmin loved so much, stood out prominently as Anni beamed with pride. "Good."



JASMIN PACED RESTLESSLY as the time for Katrin to come by drew closer.

"Baby. Come sit down." Anni patted the cushion next to her on the couch.

"I can't. Too edgy."

"I can help with that," Anni told her, wiggling her eyebrows.

Jasmin couldn't help but laugh, even though she felt nauseous at the thought of talking to Katrin again. "You can, can you?"

"Mhmm. Come over here and I'll show you."

Just as Jasmin took a step towards her lover, a knock sounded on the door. With a dramatically heavy sigh, Jasmin straightened her shoulders and opened the door.

"Katrin. Come in." Jasmin warily checked the hallway outside the door, half expecting Katrin would have brought Kurt against her wishes. With a relieved breath at no sign of her ex-husband, she closed the door.

"Okay. I'm here. Are you sure you want to talk about this in front of Anni?" Katrin gave Anni a cursory glance.

"I have nothing to hide from Anni." Jasmin gestured to the chair, offering Katrin a seat, which she declined. "I want to know why you're doing this. Why are you working with Kurt?"

"It's a job. Metropolitan Trends was stolen from me, I have to do something with my time."

"And, you choose to work with Kurt?"

"Why not?"

"Why not?" Jasmin repeated angrily. "How about because you're using your *daughter's* feelings for the sake of your own gain! I do *not* want to be with Kurt!"

"Jasmin, you're not looking at the whole picture. That's always been your problem. You're very shortsighted. Never able to see what's good for you."

"Anni is good for me." Jasmin purposefully went to Anni, sitting close to her, and taking her hand.

"Just think about this, Jasmin. Imagine the career you can have as Kurt's wife. If Anni means so much to you, then continue seeing her *discreetly* on the side. But this is your chance!"

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"My chance? My chance to what, exactly?" Jasmin knew she was squeezing Anni's hand - or was Anni squeezing hers? - but she felt her body tense at Katrin's words.

"To make a name for yourself, of course! It's what you wanted. With the publicity we could generate from your reconciliation with Kurt, you'll be the new 'It' girl."

"Haven't you been paying attention," Anni practically growled. "She doesn't want that anymore!"

"Is that true, Jasmin? Or, are you just going to let Anni speak for you?"

"It's true," Jasmin answered without hesitation. "That life almost ruined me. I want nothing more to do with it." She could practically feel Anni's entire body relax at her response. *I guess she was still worried about that*, Jasmin thought with another squeeze to Anni's hand.

"Dreams like that don't just go away, Jasmin. I know that it was hard for you . . . "

"You've got to be kidding me!" Anni stood abruptly and began to pace. She ran a trembling hand through her hair, madder than hell that Katrin was here speaking like this to Jasmin. "You were *pissed* at Jasmin half of the time when she was in the press. The other half, you were asking her not to be herself! Now that it suits you, you want her to go through that all again?"

"This is really of no concern to you."

The self-righteous look Katrin gave Anni stunned her. She had really thought Katrin was on their side. *I guess when it comes to money and control, anyone is fair game*, Anni thought angrily. "It is my concern! Jasmin is the woman I love, and you're telling her to go back to being married to someone she doesn't want to be with!"

"Jasmin loved Kurt once. I'm sure it's still there. They just need to spend some time . . . "

"Enough!" The vehemence in Jasmin's voice had both Anni and Katrin looking at her speechlessly. "Stop this now, Katrin. There's nothing either you or Kurt can possibly say to change my mind. I do *not* want to be with him. I do *not* want that lifestyle again. I certainly do *not* love Kurt, nor will I ever again. I'm in love with Anni. *This* is where I want to be, and how I want to live my life." Jasmin stepped closer to Katrin. "You are my mother. You're supposed to want what's best for me. That life almost destroyed me. I've never been



happier than I am right now. If you can't see that, or *won't* see that, I no longer want or need you in my life."

Katrin looked positively shocked at Jasmin's words. It was as though she had no doubts that Jasmin would come running back for a chance to be in the public eye again. "You really don't want that life? The money? The notoriety? You could be huge, Jasmin."

"Do you know why I needed that in my life then, Katrin? I felt unworthy, unloved, and insecure. *You* certainly didn't think I was good enough. Kurt treated me like eye-candy on his arm. No one thought that I, Jasmin Flemming, was special enough just being who I am." She walked over to Anni, holding her gaze as she said her next words. "Except Anni. She always thought I was special. Even when she was sick of all the games I played with the publicity shit, she thought I was special." She turned back to Katrin. "So, the only love and devotion and acceptance I need are right here in Anni's arms."

Anni didn't bother holding back the tears of joy from Jasmin's beautiful dialogue. She wrapped her arms around Jasmin, and held her tight, murmuring sweet words of thanks in her ear.

Katrin sighed. "If you change your mind . . ."

"She won't," Anni grumbled, wanting Katrin to just leave.

"You realize you're taking a job away from me, right?" Katrin said, trying another tactic.

"Then find something else that doesn't involve selling your daughter out." Jasmin turned in Anni's arms to glare at her mother. "You're a smart woman. Figure out what to do for Kurt that doesn't include me."

Katrin stared at the both of them for a moment before leaving in a huff.

"That went well," Anni said sarcastically. She felt the body in her arms begin to shake slightly, and she turned Jasmin around to see her sobbing quietly. "Oh, baby, come here." She guided Jasmin to the couch, sitting and motioning for Jasmin to lay her head on her lap. Anni stroked her hair tenderly, letting her lover cry until she got it all out. She reached for a tissue when she heard the sniffing.

"Thank you."

Jasmin's voice was hoarse from crying, her eyes were red and puffy, and her nose was running. Anni had never seen anyone more beautiful in her life. She hated to see the woman she loved so upset and wished there was something

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she could say or do to make her feel better. Making love was always an option, but she had a feeling Jasmin wasn't in a very sexy mood at the moment. Anni smiled as an idea came to her.

"Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"To the bedroom."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm just not . . ."

Anni silenced Jasmin with a sweet kiss. "Not for that. At least not yet. I want to play something for you." She closed the bedroom door softly behind them, escorting Jasmin to the bed. "You just sit there. Don't move." Anni winked as she went to retrieve her guitar. "I was going to save this for our anniversary, but I think you could use it now."

"Did you write me a song?" Jasmin asked, completely charmed by the slight blush that graced Anni's cheeks.

"Yeah," she answered with a shy shrug. "I wanted to do something special. I have a real gift for you," she added hastily. "This is just something a little extra."

"Oh, baby. A song is perfect! I don't need anything else."

"Too bad. Now hush and listen." Anni blew her a kiss, then began to strum the first notes of her song for Jasmin.

Jasmin's eyes filled with tears, this time happy ones, as Anni began to sing softly.

*Never in my wildest dreams*

*Did I ever believe*

*I would give my everything*

*I didn't want to need*

*Didn't want to open myself*

*To let my heart bleed*

*Then you walked into my life*

*And I found myself not wanting to hide*

*I gave you my heart, my body, my soul*

*I wonder if you will ever truly know*

*You are my*

*Love forever*

*I want to leave you never  
Love forever  
I need you when I remember  
All the years before I found  
Love forever*

*Never had I imagined  
This joy so burning  
Or pain so deep  
The will to give up everything  
Just to take that leap  
Only when you're near  
Does the past disappear  
Can you really believe  
That you are my*

*Love forever  
Baby, leave me never  
Love forever  
I need you when I remember  
All the years before I found  
Love forever*

*Baby, be with me  
Touch me as no other  
And then you will see  
You are my*

*Love forever  
Baby, be my love forever  
Leave me never  
I need you to be my  
Love forever*

*I don't want to be the person*

*I was before I found*

*Love forever*

*Baby, be my love forever*

Anni finished the song, fidgeting slightly when Jasmin remained quiet. She saw the fresh tears flowing from Jasmin's eyes, unable to stop her own.

"Can you put your guitar away, please?" Jasmin asked softly.

"Yeah, sure." Anni nervously placed her guitar back into its case and rubbed her sweaty palms on her jean clad thighs.

"Come here."

The musician obeyed the request, making her way over to Jasmin. Her breath left her in a hurry when Jasmin suddenly pulled her into a crushing hug. Kisses were rained upon her face before wet lips were pressed against hers in a fiery, seductive kiss.

"I guess this means you liked it?" she managed against Jasmin's lips.

"No. This," she lifted the hem of Anni's shirt, bringing it over her head, and throwing it to the side, "means I loved it. And, I love *you*!" Jasmin discarded the rest of Anni's clothes, then rapidly ridding herself of hers, and climbed in bed with who she was now certain was the love of her life.

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(Part 5)

ANNI HUMMED AS she worked, unable to get the song she wrote for Jasmin out of her head. Or Jasmin's reaction to it, for that matter. Damn. What a thank you *that* had been. Anni smiled, remembering just how many times Jasmin 'thanked' her that night. And, each night since. She chuckled. Her beautiful girlfriend certainly has stamina, and if Anni sang to her before, that stamina always rose a notch. As did Jasmin's adventurous side. *Now I know what it's like to be tied up by Jasmin*, she thought with an amused shake of her head.

Anni's mood was especially good today. It had been a really good week. After Jasmin's talk - if you could call it something as benign as that - with Katrin, they had essentially been left alone. No word from Kurt, nothing from Katrin, and even the press had died down a little. Okay, there were a few press jerks that still hung around, trying to make their lives miserable, but the couple wasn't letting it get to them. On the contrary, Jasmin had told Anni that if the press was going to follow them, she was going to give them something to write about. Jasmin then took every opportunity she could to make sure everyone knew how she felt about Anni. And, that was just fine with Anni. Just fine, indeed.

Another reason for Anni's good mood? Tomorrow was the big day for the couple. As apprehensive as Anni thought she would be for such a milestone - well, a milestone to her, at least - surprisingly, she was looking forward to it. Excited even. Anni had everything planned. She gave Jasmin explicit instructions to leave all of the preparations to her, and though Jasmin was curious, she consented. Anni rubbed her hands together, smiling like a fool, she was sure. She didn't care. Tomorrow was going to be perfect. The only thing that could make her happier right at this moment was if her girlfriend was here with her. Mauerwerk was going to be hopping tonight, so Anni wished Jasmin could be here while it was still quiet.

"Anni?"

The voice cut through Anni's thoughts, and her happiness. Of course. She was thinking she was on the home stretch, nothing would ruin this, and here comes Kurt.

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"What do you want?" Pleasantries be damned. He just soured her mood, so he can reap the reward for that.

"To talk," Kurt answered, his tone friendly.

"Nothing to talk about, man." Anni busied herself with winding up cables she wouldn't need. If she were honest, she would admit that it was busy work to keep from looking at Kurt. Or, perhaps to keep from hitting him, which is what she really wanted to do.

"You know there is. Man, Anni, you know Jasmin is not a lesbian. What are you doing? Are you really willing to get hurt?"

"It doesn't matter what Jasmin is. Labels aren't important. What's important is that Jasmin loves me."

"Come on. Jasmin is going through a phase, Anni! You know her! She does this. She tries out something new until she gets tired of it." Kurt stepped closer, understanding eyes gazing into Anni's angry ones. "She's going to get tired of you."

"Fuck you."

To her surprise, Kurt laughed. "Look, I get it, okay. Jasmin is hot! Who *wouldn't* fall for her? But you know her Anni. She's pretty flighty. Jasmin is really good at looking good, but that's about as deep as it goes. Her best bet at anything in this world is to be on someone's arm. Like mine. You want to keep fucking her, fine. Hell, come on tour with me. You're a damn fine musician. As long as she makes appearances with me, I'm good. It's not like I'll be lonely if she's with you every once in a while. I'll have side pieces as well."

Neither one of them were aware that Jasmin was listening to them from atop the stairs. Her eyes filled with tears, her heart breaking from what she was hearing.

Anni clenched her fists, nostrils flaring with rage. She stepped into Kurt's personal space, leaving only inches between their faces. "You fucking piece of shit! You claim to love Jasmin, and *that's* how you talk about her!? If that's what you think of her, you *never* knew her at all. Jasmin is intelligent and generous, and not only beautiful on the outside, but inside as well. Get out of here now before I kick you sorry fucking ass!" She could barely contain her animosity towards Jasmin's ex-husband. She wanted so much to punch him, to make him feel just a fraction of the pain she felt when she listened to him speak so crudely of the woman she loves.

"Wow, she really has you pussy-whipped, doesn't she? Yeah, I know how that is, too. She's pretty incredible in bed, isn't she?"

Kurt's head snapped back from the surprise blow to the jaw. It was a surprise to Anni that it happened, so she knew he wasn't prepared.

"You hit me!"

"You deserved it." Both Anni and Kurt whirled around to see Jasmin standing there, unchecked tears tracking down her cheeks. She went straight to Anni, picking up the hand she had used to hit Kurt. Jasmin brought her lover's knuckles up to her lips, kissing them gently. "You okay?" she asked, looking steadily into Anni's eyes.

Tears immediately threatened at the back of Anni's eyes. Had Jasmin heard everything Kurt said? The possibility that she did hurt Anni's heart. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

"Why are you sorry? You defended me when my ex-husband basically called me a blow-up doll. You didn't agree when he said I have no other purpose in life than to be an accessory." Jasmin caressed Anni's cheek lovingly. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"He's full of shit, baby." Anni took Jasmin's hand in hers, kissing her palm as they both pointedly ignored Kurt who was dabbing at his split lip. "Don't listen to a damn word he says."

"*It hurts,*" she whispered for Anni's ears only.

Anni felt an anger course through her unlike any other. *Fucking Kurt*. If she could get away with seriously maiming him, she would do it in a second. Maybe break a finger or two, she thought sardonically. See how he'd like not being able to play his damn guitar. It hurt her heart that his words caused Jasmin pain. "Forget him, Jasmin. He's no one. I know who you are, baby."

Jasmin nodded, trying to replace Kurt's words with Anni's in her head. Insecurities from her past - that she thought she was over - came flooding back. Anni must have been able to sense her self-doubt, because she stepped forward, taking Jasmin in a fierce hug. Just being in Anni's arms brought Jasmin intense healing. She had never before felt such peace within. With a new found confidence just being in Anni's presence, she turned to Kurt.

"Leave. Don't come back here, Kurt. I've made it perfectly clear to you and Katrin that I want nothing to do with you. Hearing how you really feel about me only solidifies that decision. You don't want me, you want an image. A

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plastic doll. There are many of those out there. Go and find you one. Leave me and Anni alone."

"I didn't mean all of that, honey . . . "

"Please." Jasmin raised a hand, effectively cutting Kurt off. "Just stop. I don't want to hear any more." She wrapped her arm around Anni's waist. "I know now that what you and I had was superficial. It wasn't love. Not for you and certainly not for me. *This* is love," she said, squeezing Anni closer to her. "The way Anni sees me? I feel that inside. You've never seen *me*, Kurt. We're done."

"You heard her," Anni all but growled at Kurt when he opened his mouth to say something else. "You're not wanted here. Leave my girlfriend alone."

"You're going to regret getting involved with her," Kurt snarled. "Your heart is going to get broken into tiny little pieces by Jasmin. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Being loved by Jasmin, if even for a moment, could never be a regret," Anni called out to Kurt's retreating back. She felt Jasmin squeeze her hand, and before she knew it, she was being dragged upstairs. "Jasmin?"

"Elevator! Now!"

Anni immediately began to grin like an idiot. The elevator holds special memories for the couple, and Anni was determined to make at least one more right now.



"GUYS, THIS IS really great! Thanks so much!" Jasmin lifted her champagne glass and toasted to her friends who had thrown her and Anni a surprise anniversary party. After everything Kurt had to say about her, knowing she had people in her life that truly did love her for who she was, meant so much.

"Yeah, thank you," Anni chipped in, touching her glass to Jasmin's and anyone else's she could reach. Ever since the scene at Mauerwerk, she hadn't wanted to be far from Jasmin's side. She knew her girl was still feeling a little vulnerable and wanted to offer as much comfort as she could without seeming *too* clingy. Though, to be perfectly honest, she wanted to cling. The 'clinging' they did in the elevator was way too brief for the musician, and Anni couldn't wait to get home to continue where they left off.



"We're just so happy for you guys!" Nele's enthusiasm was contagious, and soon everyone was laughing and telling 'JasAnni' stories.

Ahh, a walk down memory lane. Jasmin and Anni glanced at each other and smiled. They each thought of their own special memories as they listened, and saw themselves through their friends' eyes.

"Remember when Jasmin assaulted that police officer! That was hardcore! So awesome," Nele laughed. "They got their message across though!"

"I wish I had been there," Pia snickered. "I just don't think seeing photos does it justice."

"Oh, it doesn't, believe me," Anni smirked. "My baby-doll was fierce!"

"Hush!" Jasmin swatted Anni's thigh playfully, giving her an indulgent smile. "I saved your life!"

Anni answered with a 'mmhmm', wisely staying quiet by taking another drink.

"Wait! What about that bet!?" Nele snorted.

"Ugh, the bet! I won ten bucks!" Mesut announced. "Then lost it. Thanks, Jasmin," he grunted.

Jasmin grinned and shrugged. "What can I say? My Anni is irresistible."

"Uh uh, that's you, baby. I told you that day that I knew what you were. I couldn't stay away from you." She leaned over, nuzzling Jasmin's nose with hers.

"You two are disgustingly sweet," Emily laughed. "I'm kidding. You're cute. Disgustingly cute."

Anni nonchalantly scratched her cheek - with her middle finger - directed at Emily.

"Well, I for one think they're perfect for each other," Ayla stated with authority. "They complement each other so well. Jasmin, I don't think I've ever seen you so happy. And, Anni? I'm glad you got the girl."

"You and me both!" Anni saluted, receiving a bump on the shoulder from her lover.

"Wait!" Sophie called over the chatter. "What was this bet?"

"You didn't hear about it?" Nele asked, incredulously. As if 'the bet' was the biggest news around. "Anni bet she could get Jasmin in bed. Of course, this was before Jasmin knew what her feelings were, and . . . "

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"Okay!" Jasmin interrupted. That time was both the best, and worst time of her life. On the one hand, she gave in to her feelings for Anni. Her want, her need. On the other hand, she was so confused about how she felt. She ended up hurting Anni, and Jasmin had a hard time forgiving herself for that. "Enough of the bet," she laughed, hoping she didn't sound too panicked about it.

"Yeah," Anni added, sensing Jasmin's discomfort. "We're *way* past the bet. I won. Enough said," she said cockily.

"That you did, baby." Jasmin kissed her chastely on the lips.

"Hey, what happened with that whole Kurt issue?" Tuner asked, causing the couple to groan. "Sorry. I've given up reading tabloids," he added with a sheepish shrug.

"I think he finally gets it that Jasmin isn't coming back," Anni answered, her voice harsher than she intended. "Sorry. That asshole just gets on my tits," she mumbled grumpily.

"Hey, baby," Jasmin whispered close to Anni's ear. "It's over now, okay? Tonight is for us. As is the rest of our lives."

"You're right. We're not going to worry about Kurt anymore," she told Tuner, in a much calmer tone. Anni got another kiss from Jasmin for that, and she took the opportunity to make it linger a little longer this time.

"Okay, before these two start making out," Nele cleared her throat, "which, believe me, they totally will no matter where they are. It's midnight, and technically your anniversary!" Glasses were refilled and lifted. "To Jasmin and Anni!"

"Jasmin and Anni!" the others shouted. Then came the chant as the couple kissed again. "Team Janni! Team Janni!"

"Alright, alright! Present time!" Anni announced. Although it wasn't what she planned, she was happy to include their friends in some of the celebration. Especially since they went through all this trouble for them. She hopped off the barstool and went to get Jasmin's gift out of her messenger bag, glad that she hadn't taken it out to hide it in the apartment.

Jasmin also went to get her gift for Anni, her thoughts unwittingly mirroring her partner's. Nerves crept up as she retrieved the gift from her bag. Will Anni like it? She took a deep breath and made her way back to her girlfriend. "You first," Jasmin said, holding the box out to Anni.

Anni took it with a smile. She didn't care what was in the box, she knew she would love it. Hell, it was a gift from Jasmin. How could she not love it?

She started unwrapping, laughing at Jasmin's wrapping job, wondering if she used an entire roll of paper for the small box. It reminded her of another gift she had once gotten from the beautiful brunette. That gift made all the difference in the world to Anni.

"Come on!" Pia yelled.

"Hey, I didn't wrap it," Anni countered, finally getting the gift free of the paper. Now, she held a velvet, rectangular box. She looked up at Jasmin with a smile, then slowly opened it. Inside sat a white gold link chain with four diamond insets. Resting on the chain was a pendant. A guitar pick of white gold with another diamond adorning the center. Between the chain, there was also a barbell ear cartilage piercing with a matching guitar pick that dangled from the end. "Baby, they're beautiful!"

"The pendant on the necklace is inscribed," Jasmin said shyly.

Anni tore her eyes away from the stunning pieces of jewelry to give Jasmin a genuine smile. Then, with trembling hands, she lifted the pendant, turning it over. In what she immediately recognized as Jasmin's handwriting, the pendant read ***'I pick you. Always. Love, Jasmin'.***

Anni's eyes were shining with tears when she found Jasmin's gaze once again. She closed the distance between them in two steps, taking Jasmin in her arms and holding her tight. "*Thank you,*" she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "*I love you.*"

"*I love you, too, Anni. So much.*"

"Do we get to see?" Nele asked quietly as if hating to interrupt the moment.

Anni reluctantly backed away from Jasmin - a little - and held out the gift for everyone to see. After waiting for what she considered to be an appropriate amount of time for the 'oohing and ahhing', Anni was ready to give Jasmin her gift. "Your turn," she grinned, handing Jasmin a gift similar in size to the one she just received.

Jasmin smiled brightly, practically snatching the wrapped box out of Anni's hand. She took much less time opening the package, and in seconds held a black, leather box. The goofy grin turned to a stunned look as she opened the box revealing its contents. Inside was a gorgeous rose gold bracelet with two unique charms attached. One was a silver heart that read 'I love you' and was dissected by a clear vial. The second was a tiny 'message in a bottle'.

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Anni took the bracelet from its casing, slipping it onto a crying Jasmin's wrist. "The vial inside the heart contains chlorine," she explained, knowing Jasmin knew exactly what she was talking about. "The message in the bottle is the lyrics to the song I wrote you, so you can keep it with you always."

"Anni." Jasmin couldn't keep the tears from falling even harder at the significance of Anni's gift. She took Anni's face in her hands, gazing into those expressive brown eyes she loved so much. "Thank you. It's amazing," she managed before giving Anni a kiss she was sure made their audience blush.



BOTH ANNI AND Jasmin struggled to be patient with their friends for the next hour or so. They loved them dearly, but they also had the need to properly thank each other for their gifts. The frustration was about to get out of control when Nele finally decided to give the couple their much-needed chance at escape. With quick goodbyes, they hurried home, eager to keep the party going. Only this time, just for two.

Jasmin twisted her arm this way and that, making her bracelet catch the light. "This is so beautiful, baby. And, thoughtful. I love it."

Anni grinned at her lover over her shoulder. "I love mine, too, baby-doll." She unlocked the door to their apartment, and ushered her girlfriend in, heading straight for their bedroom. "Come here," she murmured after closing the door and locking it.

Jasmin hurried to the musician, immediately wrapping her arms around Anni's neck in a strong embrace. "I'm happy," she hummed close to Anni's ear, taking the lobe into her mouth and sucking gently.

Anni moaned softly, at the words as much as the sensation of Jasmin sucking her earlobe. "Me, too, baby." She brought Jasmin's lips to hers, kissing her tenderly, not bothering to hide the passion and emotion she was feeling.

"Wow," Jasmin whispered, breathless and flushed. She pulled Anni towards the bed, unbuttoning her shirt as they went. She pushed the garment off slowly, her fingertips grazing Anni's soft skin as she followed it down and off her arms. Bringing her hands back up, she kept her touch light, leaving goosebumps in their path, as she trailed them over Anni's breasts.

Anni sucked in a breath at Jasmin's touch, her nipples hardening almost painfully at the contact. Lips joined again as Anni leaned in. Tongues tasted,

battling each other in a seductive dance only lovers knew. Bodies delicately pressed together as Anni pulled Jasmin closer.

Jasmin gasped at the connection, feeling Anni's taut nipples through her shirt. "Take my shirt off, baby. I want to feel you."

Anni didn't hesitate. She rid Jasmin of the offending garment, tossing it to the side. Seconds later, both women's bras were following. "Yesss," she hissed as Jasmin's naked upper body came together with hers. She shivered when Jasmin's nails raked softly down her back.

"I need your mouth on me, Anni."

Anni dipped her head and used the tip of her tongue to tease a sensitive nipple, batting it gently before covering it with her lips. She alternated between sucking, biting and teasing, knowing she was driving Jasmin crazy with need for more.

"Oh! Yes . . . Anni."

Anni's fumbling fingers worked the button of Jasmin's pants, needing her to be naked for the things she wanted to do. Jasmin took pity and helped, though her hands were trembling just as much. Finally, they were both completely naked, much to Anni's joy, and she gently nudged Jasmin down on the bed. She wanted to take her time, make this last for Jasmin, and Anni tried reining in her passion. But when Jasmin's hand found her breast and began massaging, that passion almost got the best of her. Anni arched her back, pressing herself into Jasmin's hand. It never failed to amaze her that she was granted this intimacy with Jasmin. Anni never wanted to take that gift for granted.

"Touch me," Jasmin whispered.

Anni never lost eye contact with Jasmin as she slipped her hand down between their bodies. When she reached her destination, she could feel how wet Jasmin was. As always, she was astounded that *she* was the one that could affect Jasmin this way. Anni loved the way Jasmin's body responded to her. With that thought, she dipped her finger deeper between Jasmin's swollen sex. She groaned at the feeling of Jasmin's arousal coating her finger.

"God . . . yes." Jasmin felt herself get even wetter when Anni pulled her finger out, trailing it along the sensitive bundle of nerves that begged for attention.

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Anni stimulated the hardened nub, rubbing her well-coated fingers back and forth, pinching it lightly between her two digits. She smiled inwardly when Jasmin moaned loudly, her hips rocking with desire, looking for much-needed release. Anni's own body began to burn with need as she entered the beautiful brunette with two fingers. Thrusting deep, keeping her pace steady, she curled her fingers, hitting that one spot she knew drove Jasmin crazy. Confirmation came in the form of a loud groan from her girlfriend, her hips lifting off the bed, pulling Anni even deeper. The musician gave more, pushing inside as deep as she could while bringing her thumb into play by rotating it in circles over Jasmin's hard, extended clit.

Jasmin cried out with passion, calling out Anni's name as she came. Her body convulsed with the violent orgasm. It was unlike any orgasm she had ever had, so intense, so forceful that her breasts heaved as she tried to catch her breath.

Anni positioned herself over Jasmin's strong thigh, desperate for relief of her own. Watching her girlfriend come, hearing Jasmin calling her name, had her senses on overload, and the musician knew it wouldn't take long for her to follow in Jasmin's bliss. She ground herself against the silky skin, her own wetness painting Jasmin's leg with its abundance.

Jasmin pressed herself harder into Anni, her hands finding purchase on the musician's ass. She gripped the taut backside, pushing and tugging along with Anni's frantic rhythm until the musician let out a long, throaty groan.

"Jasmin!"

"Mmm, yes, baby. I love it when you come on me."

Anni moaned loudly, her hips bucking against Jasmin again as an aftershock shook her along with Jasmin's words. "I love you," she murmured when she could once again form words.

"I love you, too. Happy anniversary, baby."

A beautiful, content and sated smile blossomed on Anni's face. She never thought she would be in a relationship, let alone one this long. And, the fact that she had someone as wonderful and beautiful as Jasmin to love her, made her feel like the luckiest woman in the world. "Happy anniversary, Jasmin."



ANNI SNUGGLED CLOSER to Jasmin's warm body. She was so comfortable and happy there, that she was loathed to get up. *Come on, Anni. It's your anniversary and you need to get up!* She continued her internal pep talk, but listening to Jasmin's soft breathing was starting to lull her back to sleep. *Breakfast in bed!* That did it. Anni wanted to make her girl a nice little breakfast before taking her somewhere special. She let out a quiet groan and forced herself to get up.

"Morning."

"Shh." Anni shushed Nele quietly. "I don't want Jasmin to wake up yet."

"When does she ever wake up this early," Nele quipped, and Anni could help but laugh. It was true. Her girlfriend wasn't a morning person. But Anni had no doubt that she would be okay with being awake early today.

"True." She went to the refrigerator, gathering ingredients for her surprise.

"I'm actually surprised *you're* up this early. It sounded like you two had a long night last night."

Anni blushed a little as she sent Nele a mock glare over her shoulder. "It's our anniversary, we're supposed to celebrate," she shrugged with a grin.

Nele laughed. "What are your plans for today? More 'celebrating'?"

"Maybe." Anni smiled as she thought about her real plans for Jasmin today. She hoped Jasmin would enjoy herself so much that they would indeed be 'celebrating' *all* night. Again.



"BABY?" ANNI LOVINGLY tucked a stray strand of hair behind Jasmin's ear. "Baby, it's time to wake up."

"Nu-uh." Jasmin's sleepy voice was muffled from her face being half buried in her pillow.

"Come on. I have something for you," the musician sang cheerfully.

Jasmin opened one beautiful, brown eye, and peered at her lover. "Didn't you get enough last night?" she mumbled teasingly.

"Never! I can never get enough of you, babydoll."

"Sweet-talker."

"Truth-speaker," Anni countered happily. "As much as I would like to crawl back into bed and feast on you," she wiggled her eyebrows with a leer, "I brought you food."

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"Breakfast in bed?" Jasmin's other eye popped open.

"Oh, that gets you, but me feasting on you doesn't?" Anni teased.

"I can't have both?" Jasmin answered seductively, making the musician chuckle.

"Well, you could, but then we'd be late." Anni brought the food-laden tray over as Jasmin adjusted herself to sit up against the wall. The sheets slipped down, leaving her bare breasts exposed. The sight took the musician's breath away, and she fumbled with the tray slightly.

"Late?" Jasmin smiled knowingly as she steadied the glass of juice on the tray. She loved the fact that her body produced that kind of reaction from her lover.

"Mmhmm."

"Late for what?" Jasmin took in the veritable feast on the tray, wondering how on earth Anni had time to do all of this. It wasn't even six in the morning! French toast, strawberries, bananas, juice, and coffee. "This is amazing, baby. Thank you."

"Welcome," Anni chirped gleefully. She couldn't remember ever feeling as happy as she did at this moment. She picked up a strawberry and fed it to her love. "Hurry and eat, and you'll get your question answered. Come on, woman! We have stuff to do!"

"You're going to have to help me," Jasmin laughed. "I can't eat all of this!"

"Tsk. Did you think this was all for you?" Anni teased. "Scoot over. And, don't hog the French toast."



"ANNI!" JASMIN'S VOICE was perilously close to a whine as she begged her girlfriend to tell her where they were going. "Please?"

"Nope. Just hang in there. We'll be there soon."

"Be where soon?"

"Nice try, doll. Not going to work."

"Fine," Jasmin pouted playfully. She looked around, finding her surroundings suddenly *very* familiar. "Anni?"

"Hmm?" The musician knew that her girl had figured out their destination.

"Anni, we can't go in there. What about security? They had dogs!"

"Relax, baby. It's too early for security to be here."



"Yeah, that's what we thought last time," Jasmin muttered as she followed Anni over the fence. Her anxiety faded away when she saw the crystal blue water of 'their' pool. "We're crazy for being here. You know that, right?"

"Eh. We're crazy in love, so come on!" Anni took Jasmin's hand, pulling her towards the platform. "Ready?"

"Let's do it."

They climbed the same platform they did that first night they went out partying together, just the two of them. They were sober this time, though if Anni was being a mushy romantic, she would say they were drunk in love. She laughed internally at herself, thinking about how she would never have thought things like that before Jasmin. They settled down on the board, swinging their legs back and forth with synchronicity.

"Thank you for bringing me here today, baby." Jasmin grasped Anni's hand, interweaving their fingers.

"This place is special to me, Jasmin." She watched Jasmin nod thoughtfully. The musician turned slightly to watch her girlfriend's reaction to her next words. "I fell in love with you here."

Jasmin's eyes widened slightly. "But I . . . we . . ."

"I know. And, that time was pretty tense for us. But you sat there with me that morning, and *really* talked to me. Not only that, you *listened*. You cared about what I had to say. I don't know, Jasmin. Something happened to me that day, and you've been in my heart ever since. No matter what happened in between then and now, I never stopped loving you."

A single tear trailed down Jasmin's cheek. "I felt it, too," she whispered. "Of course, I didn't know what it was, and it confused the hell out of me. But I felt it. It's why I gave you the bottle of chlorine from here when you were going back to Barcelona."

Anni squeezed Jasmin's fingers, trying to keep her emotions from getting out of control. She knew this place was special to Jasmin, too, she just didn't know how special. Until now. "Jasmin. Before I met you, I thought I'd be single for the rest of my life. I'm not even sure if I believed in love. The first time I saw you, man, I thought you were so hot." Both of them chuckled.

"Yes, well, you being naked in the bath was pretty hot, too," Jasmin confessed.

"Oh? You thought so, huh?"

## Committed

Jasmin just smiled, biting her bottom lip.

Anni's eyes lowered to take in those full, luscious lips. She had to force herself not to lean in and take them in a passionate kiss. The musician drew in a deep breath, bringing her eyes back up to Jasmin's soft brown ones. "When I think about my future, I see you. There is no scenario where I don't see you standing by my side." Anni reached into her pocket, pulling out a shiny, black box. "I have one more gift for you, baby."

Jasmin's trembling hand flew to her mouth. Tears flowed unchecked, and her breathing became labored as she thought about what Anni was doing. "*Anni*," she whispered from behind her hand.

Anni opened the box, revealing a platinum infinity love design ring, with a single karat diamond. She reached up, taking Jasmin's hand in hers. "I love you, Jasmin. I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?"

"Oh, Anni! Yes, baby! Yes!"

They had to remember that they were perched high up above the water, or risk plunging in from their excitement. They laughed at their predicament, with Anni wondering if she should have thought this through a little more. One look at the pure joy on Jasmin's beautiful face, and she knew her choice was the right one. Anni plucked the ring out of its resting place in the box and slipped it on Jasmin's finger. Both pairs of hands were shaking so bad, Anni was afraid she might drop the ring. She breathed a sigh of relief when it slid effortlessly, and safely in place.

"It's beautiful, Anni."

"So are you."

"I can't believe you did this." Jasmin shook her head in amazement.

"You really had no clue?"

"After almost giving you a heart attack when I got on bended knee to give the plectrum for your birthday, I wasn't so sure this would ever happen," Jasmin laughed.

Anni buried her face in her hands and groaned with embarrassment at the memory. "You know, I don't think it was so much me being scared," she finally said. "I think I was just surprised."

"So, you would have said yes?" Jasmin bumped Anni's shoulder playfully.

"Of course!" Anni answered confidently. Okay, *maybe* she wouldn't have said yes then, but things have changed now. Her confidence in their love for each other was strong.

"Good to know," Jasmin said cryptically. "You know, when all of this crap came up with Kurt, it made me realize things."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Well. For instance, I realized that you," Jasmin held Anni's gaze as she discreetly took the same silver box that held the plectrum out of her pocket, "are the love of my life." She watched as Anni's expressive eyes widened, and immediately filled with tears.

Those words filled Anni with such bliss that she felt an urgent need to wrap her arms around her girlfriend - no, wait, fiancée. She twisted more towards Jasmin, bringing her arms up . . . hitting Jasmin's hand that was oddly in the space between them.

"Oh no!" Jasmin watched in horror as the silver box flew out of her hand, landing with a small splash in the water below.

"What was that?" Anni asked carefully.

"Something I *have* to get back!" Jasmin answered, pushing herself off the diving board.

"Jasmin!"

Anni's cry was drowned out - literally - by the sound of a bigger splash as Jasmin hit the water feet first.

"Fuck!" The musician waited for Jasmin to come back to the surface, but after a few excruciating seconds, there was still no sign of her lover. Anni took a deep breath and making sure she wouldn't be landing on top of Jasmin when she jumped, took the plunge.

Jasmin let out a watery shriek when she wrapped her hands around the precious package, then kicked her way to the surface. She barely registered the splash nearby, her need to get air first and foremost in her mind. As the brunette broke the surface, she took in a deep breath of precious oxygen, coughing slightly as water got in her nose.

"Are you crazy?" Anni spluttered, swimming over to her love.

Jasmin made her way over to the edge of the pool, trying to keep from drowning, she was laughing so hard. "Crazy about you!" She shouted breathlessly.

## Committed

"What happened?" Anni rested her forehead against the cool concrete next to Jasmin.

"You knocked something out of my hand."

"Was it so important that you had to risk drowning to get it?"

"Yes." Jasmin swam to the ladder, pulling herself out of the pool with a strong sense of déjà vu. "Come on."

Anni shook her head, of course feeling the same familiarity. She looked up at Jasmin, who stood there dripping wet, hair slicked back, clothes clinging to her amazing body. She knew would never see anyone look beautiful as Jasmin looked right at the moment. As she hauled herself out of the water, she watched in amazement as Jasmin got down on one knee and held out a very recognizable silver box. Anni's brows furrowed in confusion. Speaking of déjà vu, she thought.

Jasmin held the box out to Anni, a bright smile on her face. "Let's see if you were telling the truth."

That only confused Anni more, until Jasmin opened the box. "Oh my God." She stared down at the most unique and spectacular ring she had ever laid eyes on. The platinum band was designed as a musical staff, with musical notes adorning the intricate design, with a treble clef the central focal point. Within that treble clef, sat a clear, brilliant diamond.

"Will *you* marry *me*, Anni?" Jasmin looked up at her with hooded eyes. She had chlorinated water dripping from her lashes, and clothes that were soaked and heavy on her body, but all she could focus on was Anni.

The musician fell to her knees in front of Jasmin, never losing eye contact with her lover. "Yes," she breathed.

Jasmin beamed with love and pride as she slid the ring into place. "The love of my life," Jasmin said again.

"And, you're mine, baby." Since they were now on solid ground, Anni didn't hesitate to close the distance between them, capturing her new fiancée in an intense, passion-filled kiss.

The sound of dogs barking was the only thing that tore them apart. They looked at each other, then towards the sound of the barks, then back at each other. Laughing hysterically, they ran for the fences.

# *The Planning*

*(Interrupted)*

ANNI STOOD OUTSIDE the door of the apartment and took a deep breath. She knew Jasmin was on the other side, happily going about her day. It made what she had to do even more difficult.

"Come on, man." She shook herself, hoping that it would let loose some courage. Anni knew she was going to need a lot of it, and a lot of love to get Jasmin through this. At least she had an abundant amount of the latter. She pushed open the door, forcing herself to take a step in.

"Hey, baby!" Jasmin looked up from the computer and smiled.

"I thought I was supposed to meet you at Vereinsheim? No matter," she waved a hand enthusiastically. "Come here and see this! I know I'm supposed to be working on my article, but I got caught up on this wedding site."

"Jasmin."

"I know, I know. We're supposed to look at this together, but I couldn't help myself. Of course, I'm not going to do anything without your input . . ."

"Jasmin, baby, stop."

The tone in Anni's voice caught Jasmin's attention, and she frowned at the sheer sorrow on her lover's face. "What's wrong?"

"I . . . we . . ." Anni stopped, taking another breath for courage.

"Please tell me you're not calling off the wedding." Jasmin knew she sounded desperate, but it had been a fear of hers since she and Anni decided to get married. Anni had never been in this committed of a relationship, and though Jasmin tried not to overwhelm her with planning, or over enthusiasm, sometimes she couldn't help being excited about the prospect of being Anni's wife.

"No! Of course not, Jasmin." Anni was instantly at Jasmin's side, kneeling before her. "I love you. You know that, right? I love you so much."

Jasmin released the breath she was holding with a sigh. "I love you, too." She leaned in and kissed Anni softly, cupping her face in her palm. "Tell me what's wrong. You look so sad."

Anni stood, taking Jasmin's hand in hers. "Come sit on the couch with me."

## Committed

"You're starting to scare me," Jasmin said, but dutifully followed her fiancée, and sat next to her.

"I know, I'm sorry. It's just that . . . I don't know how to tell you this, baby."

"Just say it, Anni. Because everything going through my head is probably ten times worse than what you have to say."

"I don't think so," Anni murmured sadly. She inched closer to Jasmin, holding her hands tightly. "Baby, Dominik . . . well . . . he went out this morning before Elena woke up."

"You're not going to tell me he left her. He would never do that." Jasmin was confused as to where this conversation was going, but she suddenly felt a sick dread in the pit of her stomach. *I won't jump to conclusions.* She repeated the mantra over and over in her head.

"No, he didn't. Not intentionally. Jasmin, Dominik was in an accident this morning." Anni paused, letting that part of the news sink in.

"Oh, God. He's okay, right? Oh no! Did he break something?"

We should get to the hospital! He's not in a coma is he?" Jasmin started to get up, but Anni held her firmly.

"Jasmin, I'm sorry, baby. He . . . he didn't make it." Anni whispered the words in hopes that it wouldn't be true. But she already knew they were. And, now, she would be here for Jasmin.

"No. No that's not true." She tried to rise again, this time shaking Anni's strong hands off. "Why are you saying this? No. No, no, no, no. You're mistaken. I'll just call Nik." Jasmin fumbled for her phone, but Anni caught her hand.

"You can't call him, baby," she said softly.

"Right. Right. Tuner! I'll call Tuner and he'll clear this all up. You just misunderstood . . ."

"Jasmin. Baby, I was at the hospital. I went there with Elena when she found out Dominik had been in an accident. I didn't misunderstand, sweetie. I'm so sorry."

Jasmin stared at Anni, trying to find any hint of a lie. Which she knew was ridiculous, even in her confused state. Anni would never do that to her. Or perhaps doubt. Even doubt in Anni's eyes would give Jasmin some much-needed hope. But she saw none. She only saw sorrow and compassion.

The air left Jasmin's lungs in a rush, and she collapsed to her knees. Sobs shook her uncontrollably, and she barely registered Anni's arms coming around

her. Barely heard Anni's whispers of love and sympathy. Yet, even through her heartbreak, she could feel the love radiating from Anni, and she wanted to grab on to it. She wanted to feel the peace it gave her. Then Jasmin wondered who would give that peace to Elena now.

"Oh God, Anni. Elena. She must be devastated." Jasmin wiped angrily at her tears. Was it selfish of her to grieve this way when Dominik's new wife just lost him?

"Baby, Dominik was one of your best friends. Don't feel guilty for mourning him," Anni said gently, knowing she had read Jasmin perfectly.

"But she . . ."

"She is mourning as well, and the others are with her. I needed to be here for you. I needed to tell you, to hold you, because I know this is beyond difficult for you. You loved him, Jasmin. Mourn him."

Fresh tears flowed from Jasmin's eyes. She didn't want to mourn. She didn't want any of this to be real. Damn it! It wasn't supposed to be this way! Dominik was happy. He was finally with the woman he was meant to be with. How could he be taken away so abruptly?

"Come on, Jasmin. Let's get you off the floor."

Jasmin just curled deeper into Anni's side, not wanting to move a muscle. If she pretended to be asleep, this could all just be a terrible nightmare. Right?

"Baby," Anni whispered. "*Come on. Let me hold you properly.*"

Jasmin finally allowed herself to be pulled from the floor, and she blindly followed Anni to the bedroom. "I need to see him. I want to see him, Anni. And, I need to see Elena."

"We'll go in just a minute, I promise. Jasmin, give yourself a moment, okay? Lay down with me."

With great reluctance, Jasmin acquiesced. "Only a minute," she sobbed, collapsing once again, only this time in Anni's arms.



THEY WALKED BRISKLY into the hospital, Jasmin following Anni to where she last saw Elena. True to her word, Anni got them ready and out the door within minutes of Jasmin's breakdown.

Of course, Anni knew instinctively that it really hadn't hit Jasmin, yet. It won't until she sees Elena. Until she sees for herself that Dominik is no longer

## Committed

here. When that happens, Anni vowed to be there to pick up the pieces. She would put the love of her life back together as many times as she needs to. It made her heart bleed knowing Jasmin was hurting inside. And, it was about to get worse.

They stepped into the corridor where Anni had left the others earlier. It was as though no one had moved. Like they didn't want to leave Dominik there in the hospital by himself. Only now, Dr. Gerner was there with Sophie. Both were crying quietly in the corner. Tuner hadn't moved from his spot. Mesut and Nele stood arm in arm near the window, Nele crying softly, her face buried in his shoulder. Ayla sat close to a distraught Elena, holding on to her hand as though she were Elena's life preserver. Anni wouldn't be surprised if that were true at the moment.

"Elena?" Jasmin fell to her knees in front of Elena, grabbing her into a hug and holding her tight. "It's true isn't it?" Jasmin's voice hitched as Elena nodded. Her heart ached profusely as Elena's weeping renewed with intensity. Elena held on to Jasmin, both of them trying to find comfort where no comfort could be found. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Anni watched them for a moment before turning to Tuner. She put her hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. "Tuner?"

"This must be hard for Jasmin," he said, his voice monotone and emotionless. Though Anni knew the abundance of emotion that lay just below the surface.

"It is. I don't really know how she's going to be when this actually hits her." Anni studied Tuner for a moment. "It's hard for you, too. Tuner, man, you have got to let it out. It's not good for you to keep it in like this."

"Not in front of Elena. Dominik wanted me to make sure she was alright. He wanted me to take care of her. If I let it out now, I don't know if I will be able to stop."

Anni heard the tremor in Tuner's voice and wondered just how close he was to the edge. "I'm sure she understands that you're in pain, as well, Tuner."

He didn't respond, so Anni took a spot between him and Jasmin. Ready to catch either one when they finally fell over that edge.

"How could he be gone?" Elena cried. "We just got married. You were there, Jasmin. You saw how happy we were, right?"

"Yes. Dominik was so incredibly happy with you, Elena. He loves . . . " Jasmin faltered, knowing she should correct herself but didn't have the heart



to. Hell, she didn't even know how she was remotely able to keep it together right now. *Elena needs me*. She supposed that was what kept her from falling apart herself. "He loves you, Elena."

"We were supposed to grow old together. Have kids." Elena stood suddenly, effectively knocking Jasmin back onto the floor. "How could he do this to me!" Elena yelled angrily.

Anni hurried to Jasmin, helping her up. "Are you okay?"

Jasmin nodded, unable to find her voice when looking at Anni. She knew in Anni's arms she could break down completely, knowing that Anni's strength could put her back together. But she couldn't do that now. Elena needed them. She clutched Anni's hand for a moment, then released it and went to Elena who was yelling uncontrollably now. Ayla and the others were trying, in vain, to calm her down. Tuner just kept staring at the wall in front of him.

"Elena." Jasmin pushed past her friends to get to the heartbroken woman. "You know Dominik didn't mean to leave you," she said firmly. "Please, sweetie. You have to calm down. I know how hard this is for you . . ."

"You do, don't you?" Elena said unexpectedly. "You loved him, too."

A tear escaped, rolling down Jasmin's cheek. "Of course I did. He was a wonderful friend."

"You loved him as more than a friend."

Jasmin wondered why she didn't detect anger or jealousy towards her until she understood that Elena was looking for someone who knew exactly how she felt.

"I did at one time, yes. But you, Elena, are his true love. As Anni is mine. Dominik and I both knew that. We talked about it some last night . . ."

Last night, Jasmin thought. It was just last night that Dominik was laughing and dancing. It was just last night when she and Dominik wished each other well, each knowing they were exactly where they needed and wanted to be. It was just last night when Dominik and Elena used the room their friends had decorated for that special occasion.

She didn't know what it was that warned her, but Anni felt the change in Jasmin. It was coming, she thought sorrowfully. It was finally hitting Jasmin that Dominik was truly gone. Anni hugged Tuner. "She needs you now," she said close to his ear. "And, Jasmin needs me."

## Committed

Tuner snapped out of his trance, looking Anni in the eye. With a nod, he made his way to Elena, taking her in his arms.

Jasmin took a step back. Then another. And, another. Until she hit something behind her. The overwhelming feeling of grief was abated, if even just a fraction, as Anni's arms came around Jasmin's waist.

"Let me take you home, baby," Anni whispered in Jasmin's ear.

Jasmin started to protest, thinking she should be here for Elena. But when she saw Tuner take Elena down the hall, she nodded. With one last look at the doors, she knew Dominik was somewhere behind, she let Anni lead the way.

Anni was grateful that Jasmin agreed to go since she could feel the emotions still rising. It would be a miracle if they made it home with Jasmin still able to stand on her own two feet. But Anni would carry her if necessary. She didn't know how, but she'd figure it out if it came down to it. From the corner of her eye, Anni caught Nele and Ayla stepping towards them. With a discreet shake of her head and apologetic look that she hoped their friends would understand, she took Jasmin out of the sorrowful place and headed home.



ANNI WATCHED AS Jasmin moved about the apartment in a trance-like state. *She's still trying to be strong.* Waiting patiently for Jasmin to finish her routine, she finally made her move when Jasmin stopped in the middle of the room. Anni wrapped her arms around her, guiding her to bed. "Come on, love."

"He's gone, Anni."

"I know, baby. I'm so sorry."

"He was just here. Last night he was so happy. We laughed, we joked about how if we had gotten married all those years ago we'd be divorced by now." Jasmin shuffled slowly beside Anni, feeling as though her feet were stuck in the mud and each step was almost impossible. "He joked about how I would have cheated on him with you."

Anni smiled wanly, laying Jasmin down gently on the bed. She covered her and kissed her on the forehead before crawling in beside her. She didn't have to wait long for the violent sobs that rocked Jasmin.

"Why?" Jasmin cried.

"I don't know, baby."

"Anni."

Anni was just able to make out Jasmin saying her name through the weeping.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere, Jasmin."

"Promise me. Oh God!" Jasmin sat up unexpectedly, startling Anni.

"What is it?"

"We can't get married!"

Anni was dumbfounded. Surely she had heard that wrong. Reaching around Jasmin, she grabbed a tissue and handed it to her lover. "Say that again."

"We can't get married!"

Anni blinked. She really *did* say that. "Jasmin, why can't we get married?"

"What if this happens to us? We get married, we think everything is wonderful, and we're so happy. And then . . ."

"Jasmin, sweetie, this was an accident. It wasn't fate or destiny or because Dominik and Elena were happy together. It was an accident."

"But . . ."

"No buts, baby. Do you love me?"

"You know I love you, Anni. That's not the problem."

"Jasmin, the problem right now is you lost a dear friend who you loved very much. You're confused and scared. Later you'll be angry. Please don't make a decision like this when you're not thinking clearly." Anni brought Jasmin back down to lay beside her. "We love each other, baby. We're happy now. Getting married isn't going to change our fate. It's just going to change our status. I want you to be my wife, Jasmin. Please?"

The tears still flowed freely from Jasmin. She didn't think they'd ever stop, her heart hurt so much. But hearing those words coming from Anni felt like seeing a light in a very dark, very scary place. If she kept going towards Anni's light, maybe she'd make it out of this scary place.

"I want to be your wife, Anni. More than anything." She snuggled closer to Anni, feeding off her warmth, strength, and love. "We should postpone the planning, though. Just for a little while," she said between sniffles. "For Elena's sake."

## Committed

"I agree. She needs us." Anni tipped Jasmin's chin up so she could look her in the eye. "*You* need *me*. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere, okay?" Nod. "I promise." She kissed Jasmin gently, but thoroughly, pouring all of her love into the kiss. "I love you," she murmured as she watched Jasmin's red, puffy eyes begin to droop with fatigue.

"I love you, too," came the sleepy, tearful reply.

"Sleep, baby." Tomorrow will be another hard day for Jasmin, Anni knew. A day of coming to terms with the enormous loss she just endured. Anni pulled Jasmin close, tucking her head under her chin and held her tight. And, she prayed to whatever entity that was listening to never take her love away from her.

# *The Planning*

(Part 1)

“JASMIN!”

Anni ran after Jasmin, staring dumbly at the door as it slammed behind her very angry girlfriend. *Fiancée*, Anni reminded herself. *I hope.*

“Anni?” Ayla walked out of the bathroom of the apartment they all shared. She loved sharing with Anni and Jasmin, but sometimes – like now – it could get uncomfortable. In fact, that has been happening a lot lately. “Is everything okay?”

Anni trudged her way to the couch, plopping down with a heavy sigh. “I don’t know. Jasmin is mad at me. Again.”

Ayla’s eyes softened with compassion. She knew the two women loved each other completely. She just didn’t understand why they were constantly bickering these days when it was supposed to be the happiest time for them. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Man, I . . . all I did was ask her if she thought of a date for the wedding.” She sighed again, rubbing her hands over her face. “I don’t think she wants to get married anymore, Ayla.”

“That’s ridiculous. Jasmin loves you!”

“Maybe. But is that enough? Ever since Nik died, Jasmin has been distant.” Anni laid her head back on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. “I know she’s grieving, and I know how much he meant to her. Maybe she’s realizing that I’m not what she wants,” she said miserably.

“I don’t believe that for one second,” Ayla stated with conviction. “Look, Jasmin has been really busy the past few weeks. She has her job at MT, and she’s getting back into fashion, plus she still does shifts at Mauerwerk and Vereinsheim. Maybe she’s just stressed out.” She eyed Anni for a moment, contemplating on whether she should continue or not. *Oh, what the hell. It’s not like Anni holds back. Ever.* “And, you *did* tell her she was being too clingy at one point.”

Anni glared at Ayla. “I know. But I didn’t mean I don’t still want to get married.”

## Committed

“Well, perhaps she’s still upset with you for that. She was mourning Nik.”

“Yeah, I know. But, man, she wouldn’t let me do anything by myself!”

“Did you ever think she was possibly scared of losing you, too?” Ayla knew for a fact what Jasmin’s fears were. She had told Ayla as much after a few glasses of Prosecco after Anni had left for work in a particularly bad mood. *‘She doesn’t even want to be around me,’ Jasmin slurred. ‘How do I give her space when I’m afraid to lose her?’*

“I get it, okay? We talked about it, and I thought we were good. But now . . . “

“Now the tables are turned,” Ayla finished quietly.

*Am I being too clingy now,* Anni brooded. When she had said that to Jasmin, Anni was feeling overwhelmed by the attention. Boxed in. Caged. Yet, the more space Jasmin gave her – and the more Jasmin’s mood changed – the more Anni regretted her hasty decision to say something. It was an odd situation to be in for Anni. She was so used to being on her own, being her own person, that she didn’t know how to always be a part of someone else. Even after a year, Anni found it difficult to come to terms with all of the rules being in a relationship held.

What she did know was that she had hurt the woman she loved, and now she was paying the price for that.

“I’m going to Mauerwerk, you coming?”

Ayla smiled indulgently at Anni’s petulance. “No. I have things to take care of, and then I’m meeting Tayfun.”

Anni shrugged, popping up from the couch. “Ciao.”



“YOU’RE IN A mood.” Sophie kept her tone even, hoping not to upset Jasmin even further.

“I’m fine,” Jasmin answered testily. Okay, so she *was* in a bad mood, but it was all Anni’s fault. Why was she so concerned about a wedding date now? Hadn’t she told Jasmin she was ‘too clingy’? Jasmin scoffed, receiving a bemused look from Sophie. *Too clingy. I wonder if she thinks that now.* Jasmin had made it a point to keep busy and stay out of Anni’s way. She hated it, hated being distant from Anni, but she didn’t know what else to do.

“Clearly,” Sophie muttered. She stacked her papers together, readying her things to leave when she felt Jasmin’s hand on hers.

“I’m sorry. None of this is your fault, and I shouldn’t be taking it out on you.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Jasmin exhaled sharply. “I just don’t know where I stand with Anni anymore.”

“Jasmin, Anni loves you. You’re engaged.”

“Yes, and I’m ‘clingy’ and ‘can’t do things on my own,’” Jasmin quoted bitterly.

“I don’t think she meant . . . “

“She meant every word!” Jasmin interrupted heatedly. “She can’t go to parties, or do whatever else she wants to do because I’m ‘always there’! What in the hell does she want? Shouldn’t a couple want to go out together? Unless there are things she does that she doesn’t want me to know about!” Jasmin’s heart constricted as she thought about those things.

“Anni would never do anything to hurt you, Jasmin,” Sophie told her softly.

Jasmin lifted her eyes to Sophie’s, the hurt clearly evident. *She already has.*

“I need to get to Mauerwerk.” Jasmin stood abruptly.

“I thought you were off today?” The sudden change of subject confused Sophie, but she knew Jasmin well enough to just go along with it.

“One of the girls called in sick, so I’m going to fill in. It’s not like I have a girlfriend that wants to spend time with me anyway,” she grouched.

“Fiancée,” Sophie corrected gently.

“Hmm. I’ll see you later. Come by tonight, and I’ll buy you a drink.” Jasmin didn’t wait for an answer. She just needed to get out in the fresh air. Hopefully, the walk to the club would help clear her head.



ANNI LAUGHED AT the woman’s joke. She had been standing at the soundboard when the petite, redhead walked up to her and started chatting her up about music. Anni could tell that the redhead – *What was her name again?* – was beginning to flirt with her, but she wasn’t interested. She had *one* woman on her mind and in her heart. That was Jasmin. Just the thought of her fiancée made her smile, her heart stutter, and her belly clench.

## Committed

The small redhead must have taken Anni's smile as an invitation, and placed a hand on her arm. "So . . ."

Anni's eyes widened, and she shook the woman's hand off immediately when she saw Jasmin staring at her. The hurt and anger clearly visible in her eyes.

"Jasmin! What are you doing here?" Anni tried smiling at her beautiful lover, but it wasn't returned. Perhaps asking what she was doing there while being flirted with was not a good idea. *Shit.*

"Interrupting, apparently," Jasmin answered icily.

"You're not interrupting anything," Anni reassured her quickly. She noted Jasmin's disbelief and blew out a breath. "I'm with *you*, Jasmin."

"That's never stopped you before."

Anni winced remembering earlier in their relationship when she had been scared and stupid and ended up kissing a couple of different women. She had never been sorrier or felt such disgust with herself than at those moments of weakness. "I would never do that again, Jasmin," Anni vowed quietly.

Jasmin raised an eyebrow, unsure of whether to believe Anni or not. She was feeling extremely vulnerable and uncertain about their relationship at the moment. She had tried to be the perfect girlfriend for Anni, but after Dominik died, the fear of losing Anni became overwhelming. She clung to Anni as though they were spending their last days together. Yes, she had been clingy, but why couldn't Anni understand why? "Yes, well, Armin called and asked me to come in, so I have to go get ready. Sorry to cramp your style." With that, Jasmin stormed off angrily.

"Jasmin!" Anni started after her, only to be stopped by the small woman stepping in front of her. "*Fuck.*"

"Could I buy you a drink?"

"No. I'm engaged," Anni told her fiercely.

"To her?" The redhead gestured with her head in the general direction Jasmin ran off in. "That has to be a drag. She didn't seem to be very happy." She stepped closer. "Neither do you."

"Back off. Jasmin is perfect!" As Anni said the words, she knew they were true. Jasmin *was* perfect – for her. Sure, they both had their imperfections, but they complemented each other completely. *What the hell was I thinking, telling her she was too clingy? Especially after she had just lost Dominik.* "I have to go."



“But I thought we were getting to know each other,” the woman whined, grating on Anni’s nerves.

“No, we were talking about music. That’s all it was for me.” She looked at her coldly. “I don’t even remember your name. Now, excuse me.”

Anni took off up the stairs, hoping to catch Jasmin before she started working.



JASMIN TOOK A shaky breath, trying to calm her roiling stomach. Seeing Anni talking to that woman had brought back those rocky times in their relationship. She could have lost Anni forever. She could have never looked into those big, soulful brown eyes again. That thought alone brought tears to Jasmin’s eyes. She swiped angrily at her cheeks, catching the tears before they fell completely. Tying her apron around her waist, she walked downstairs, determined to get through this shift with some dignity. She just hoped Anni didn’t flaunt that fucking red head in her face.

Anni checked the storage room, the bathroom, and even the elevator without any luck. Standing beside the elevator now brought back more memories for her. One was not particularly good, but oh there were memories that made her blood boil with arousal. She and Jasmin had abandoned all inhibitions here, and Anni wanted that back again. The only way to do that was to beg Jasmin to forgive her for her recent stupidity. *She’s forgiven you before, I just hope she has it in her to do it again.*

Anni pushed away from the wall, trotting downstairs. Jasmin should be behind the bar by now, which means she would be a captive audience. She stopped in her tracks when she saw Jasmin smiling sweetly at a customer. Normally, that wouldn’t have cause Anni to feel any sort of jealousy. It was just how Jasmin was. Sweet. However, the way the customer was looking at Jasmin, as though she wanted to devour her, made Anni’s blood boil for a totally different reason now.

She watched as the tall, blonde woman’s eyes raked over Jasmin’s backside as she turned away. When Jasmin turned back, the woman would leer at her. *God. Is this how Jasmin feels when she sees other women talking to me?* Anni felt sick to her stomach and angry beyond reason. In her heart of hearts, she knew Jasmin would never hurt her like that. *But what if she wants to get back at me for everything*

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*I've done?* Anni shook off that thought, even while believing she might deserve it.

“How about giving me your number?”

Anni's stomach dropped when she heard the question as she walked closer.

Jasmin's eyes darted to Anni. She had felt her presence before seeing her and had hoped the flirtatious woman at the bar would go away. *I should agree and see how Anni likes it*, she thought bitterly. But Jasmin knew she could never do that. She loved Anni too much. Besides, it just wasn't her style.

“I'm seeing someone,” Jasmin answered with a smile.

“That's okay with me. I can be discreet.”

Unable to take it anymore, Anni marched up to the bar, purposefully bumping the tall woman, and making her spill her drink. “The lady said she's seeing someone.”

“What's it to you?” The woman asked with an annoyed expression and began dabbing her sleeve with a napkin.

“*I'm* that someone,” Anni scowled.

The woman turned back to Jasmin, slipping a card out of her pocket and sliding it across the bar. “If you ever want a *real* woman, give me a call.”

Jasmin picked up the card, and Anni's heart began to ache. With a radiant smile, the beautiful brunette ripped the card in half and slid it back to the woman. “Anni *is* a real woman. That'll be 7,50 for the drink.”

Anni beamed proudly. *Take that, bitch*, she thought, giving her fiancée a loving smile. She couldn't help the gloating grin when the woman slapped money down on the bar and walked off with an unintelligible grumble.

“This doesn't fix anything,” Jasmin warned when they were alone – or as alone as they could be at a club.

“I know,” Anni agreed. “Only I can do that. We need to talk, baby.”

Jasmin could feel the tears prickling in her eyes and closed them for a moment to gain control. “Well, I'm here for a few hours, so it's going to have to wait.”

Anni nodded. “Look, about before with that, um . . .” Anni paused, taking a breath. “I wasn't flirting. *Nothing* was happening. She came up to me . . .”

“I don't really want to know,” Jasmin interrupted.

“But you need to,” Anni insisted. “She walked up and began talking to me about music. It was all very innocent.” Anni shuffled her feet, stalling. “Until she asked if she could buy me a drink.”

“Was that before or after she put her hands on you?” Jasmin crossed her arms in front of her, waiting for Anni’s answer.

“Um.” *Did she put her hands on me?* Anni honestly didn’t remember that or think anything of it. Her mind had been preoccupied with thoughts of Jasmin, and she was truly just being polite.

“Exactly.” Jasmin turned from Anni, walking off to serve another customer.

“Goddamn it,” Anni muttered. She rooted her ass on the stool and waited for Jasmin to come back her way.

After a few minutes of delaying, Jasmin wandered back Anni’s way. “Are you going to drink something?”

“Beer, please.”

Jasmin nodded, grabbing a beer and sliding in front of Anni. She had to admit that her lover looked extremely depressed, and Jasmin’s heart softened. “Were you interested in her?”

Anni’s eyes popped up, widening with disbelief. “No! Of course not!” She sighed. “Look, I know I screwed up before, but I’ve changed, Jasmin. *You* changed me. For the better,” she added hastily when she saw Jasmin’s dazzling brown eyes narrow. “I’ve learned my lesson, baby. I can’t hurt you like that again. I won’t.”

“But you can hurt me with your words instead?”

“Do you really want to have this conversation now? When we can be interrupted at any time?”

As if proving her point, another customer beckoned Jasmin. With a heavy sigh, Jasmin agreed to postpone the chat until later.

Anni was picking at the label of her beer by the time Jasmin made it back to her.

“Were *you* interested?” she asked Jasmin timidly.

Jasmin frowned. “Interested?”

“In the woman that was hitting on you,” Anni explained.

Jasmin barked out a mirthless laugh. “No. However, it *was* flattering.”

Anni scowled, flicking the lid of her beer with annoyance. “I see.”

“Do you? You know, I’ve never been hit on by another woman? Well, at least outside of the gay club we once went to,” she clarified. “I think of it as a

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rite of passage. If I can get approached by a woman outside of a gay bar, I must be doing this lesbian thing right,” she smirked.

Anni finally cracked a smile, realizing that Jasmin was teasing her. “You’re definitely doing the ‘lesbian thing’ right.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Jasmin snickered, then sobered when she thought of the problems they still needed to work out. “Want another one?” she asked, gesturing towards Anni’s empty beer bottle.

“Nah. Maybe a bottle of water?”

Jasmin nodded, taking a water from the refrigerated case, opening it for Anni.

“Thanks.”

Their eyes met as Anni looked up, and they both felt the connection. Never taking her eyes off of Jasmin’s, Anni reached over and stroked a finger across the back of Jasmin’s hand.

Jasmin shivered as much from the contact as from the way Anni was looking at her. She had been so hurt by Anni’s accusation that Jasmin was suffocating her, that they hadn’t been intimate in the past couple of weeks. She had to admit she missed Anni terribly.

“Can you take a break?” Anni asked huskily.

Jasmin shook her head. “I just started working.” Anni looked so completely crestfallen that Jasmin couldn’t deny her anymore. “Armin, I need to, um, get a few things,” she called over her shoulder. She gave Anni a small smile and walked away with a nervous Anni following close behind.



UPSTAIRS, ANNI RUSHED around Jasmin and pulled her into what she thought of as “their” elevator. All of the images that flooded Anni before, came back in a rush. She shut the door, immediately pressing the STOP button. Now that they were here, and alone, Anni felt a bit insecure. Jasmin hadn’t been very receptive to Anni’s advances recently, not that she blamed her. After telling Jasmin she was feeling smothered, what did she expect the reaction to be?

Jasmin saw the unsure look in Anni’s eyes. It wasn’t something she was used to. Anni was normally extremely confident, especially when it came to intimacy. *Well, it’s up to me, then.*

Jasmin lifted her hand to Anni's face. "It's been a long time," she said quietly.

Anni nodded and swallowed hard.

"You should know, it's not going to be slow and gentle." Jasmin stepped closer.

Anni's dark eyes turned almost black with desire. "Well," she began, clearing her throat when her voice cracked, "you are supposed to be getting a few 'things'. So, come and get me."

*There's my self-assured Anni.* Jasmin's smile was fierce as she turned them both, and pushed Anni against the wall. "Hmm, this seems familiar," she purred, then kissed Anni passionately.

Anni moaned when Jasmin's tongue slipped between her lips and tangled with hers. Her legs buckled as Jasmin's hands found their way to her breasts and squeezed hard. "Jasmin." It came out as a plea.

Jasmin smiled against Anni's lips, trailing her hands down Anni's stomach. Unbuttoning the button, Jasmin slipped her hand inside Anni's pants, dipping lower until she found the copious amount of wetness that awaited her. "*I love how wet you get for me,*" Jasmin groaned.

"Inside, baby. I need to feel you," Anni begged. She was used to being the aggressor, but it was times like this, when Jasmin took control, that drove her nearly insane.

Jasmin obliged, plunging two fingers inside her lover, and bringing her thigh up between Anni's legs to provide a more powerful thrust.

Anni gripped onto Jasmin's ponytail with one hand, as the other squeezed Jasmin's ass, bringing her even closer. "I've missed you," she panted heavily. She knew, after a couple of weeks apart, she wouldn't last long. Even so, she fought to hold off her orgasm. She wanted to prolong the feeling of Jasmin buried inside her for as long as she could.

"I've missed you, too." Jasmin tilted her head to allow Anni access to her neck. Feeling Anni's lips pressed against her skin spurred her on even more, and her thrusts became faster. "*Let go, baby.*"

"Not yet," Anni managed. She talked a good game, but the need for release was quickly taking over her resolve to delay the inevitable.

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Jasmin chuckled lightly, then moaned when Anni bit down on the sensitive area between her neck and shoulder. "We'll have longer when we get home," she promised. "For now, you need to let go."

Anni looked into Jasmin's eyes, amazed that she still had coherent thoughts. "Promise?"

Jasmin instinctively knew that Anni feared their relationship was becoming irreparable. She had had the same fear herself. But Jasmin knew deep inside that there was no one else in the world for her other than Anni. They had been through so much. They would get through this as well.

"Promise."

With Jasmin's declaration hanging in the air, Anni groaned loudly as the orgasm ripped through her body. Jasmin thrust deeper, feeling Anni shudder and tighten around her fingers. The sound of Anni's pleasure coupled with the feel of Anni's release flowing into Jasmin's hand, led to her own powerful orgasm.

Anni swallowed Jasmin's cry of pleasure, holding her tightly as Jasmin's body continued to tremble. They stayed like that for a moment before Jasmin broke away, needing to catch her breath.

"You okay?" Anni whispered.

"Perfect," came the breathless reply.

"Yes, you are."

Jasmin lifted her head, expecting to see laughter in Anni's eyes. What she saw, floored her. There was no teasing, no laughter. Undisguised sincerity and love stared back at her. She kissed Anni tenderly.

"I'm not even close to perfect," she said softly. "But we can be perfect for each other if we work at it."

"And, we will," Anni promised. "I made a mistake, Jasmin. I know we have a lot to talk about. My insecurities, yours."

Jasmin pulled back slightly. "You have insecurities?"

"Of course I do."

"What have I done to make you feel insecure?" Jasmin was genuinely curious. She had thought she was being *too* attentive, and that's what the problem was. Anni couldn't be insecure about Jasmin's feelings. Not after everything that happened with Kurt right before their year anniversary. Jasmin had made it perfectly clear that Anni was the one she loved. The one she wanted to be with for the rest of her life.

“That’s something we need to talk about when we have more time.”

Jasmin agreed, removing her hand from Anni’s pants. “I should get back.”

“Yeah.”

Jasmin started to back away but was stopped by Anni’s hand on her arm.

“Are we going to be okay?” Anni asked hesitantly. She wanted desperately for Jasmin to be excited about marrying her again. The planning had come to a halt with the tragedy of Nik’s passing, and Anni’s temporary stupidity. It was time for them both to remember what’s important. Their love for each other.

Jasmin searched Anni’s eyes. Love, fear, hope. Oddly enough, it was the fear that made Jasmin more secure. If Anni was afraid of losing what they have, she must really care. Knowing that renewed Jasmin’s desire to marry the beautiful woman in front of her. “Yes, baby. We’ll be okay.”

Anni took Jasmin in her arms, holding her tightly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

# *The Planning*

(Part 2)

ANNI CLOSED THE door of her and Jasmin's room behind her and whistled her way to the coffee pot.

"Whistling? Before coffee?" A very confused Ayla stared at Anni, her brows furrowed.

Anni shrugged. "Why not? I'm in a good mood." She set about getting her coffee, and after a second thought, grabbed another cup for Jasmin.

"What has you in such a great mood?" Ayla smiled as she watched Anni prepare Jasmin's coffee, and grab a yogurt out of the refrigerator. She couldn't help but think how much Anni has changed since being with Jasmin. Even if the past couple of weeks had been a little strained between them. At least now it seems to be okay.

Anni grinned widely. "Jasmin is in there looking at bridal magazines," she answered quietly.

"So, you've talked everything out? It's all good now?"

Anni's smile faltered. "No. I mean yes. I mean . . . Damn it." She raked her hand through her short, dark hair, causing it to spike a bit. "We still need to talk. There are things she should know, and I'm sure I don't know everything about her yet."

"How have you been together for over a year now, and not have discussed the *important* things?"

"It's not so easy, you know," Anni grumbled, her good mood quickly deteriorating with this conversation.

"But you love each other. You should *want* to talk about all of that." Ayla stood in front of Anni, blocking her path back to Jasmin's room. "She deserves to know why you sometimes act the way you do."

"How do I act?" Anni asked, offended. Though, she knew very well how much of an ass she had been to Jasmin in the past. "Look, I said it wasn't easy, okay? Jasmin and I know we have to get everything out in the open, and we will. Doesn't mean I really want to."

"It's Jasmin. You know she'll listen without judgment no matter what you tell her."



Anni blew out a breath. “Maybe.” She placed the coffee and yogurt on a tray and made her way back to her and Jasmin’s room.



“HEY.”

Jasmin looked up from the magazine she was flipping through and smiled at Anni. “Hey.” Her eyes fell to the tray with coffee and yogurt. “For me?”

“Of course,” Anni grinned. “You need nourishment.”

“After what you did to me last night, I think I’m going to need more than yogurt,” Jasmin teased.

Anni smirked. “Complaining?”

“Absolutely not.” Jasmin accepted Anni’s sweet kiss and the yogurt. “Thank you.”

Anni gingerly climbed over Jasmin’s body and settled back into bed. “So, find anything interesting?” She nodded at the bridal magazine in Jasmin’s lap.

“Maybe,” Jasmin smiled, handing Anni her coffee once she stopped wiggling around. “I take it you’re not going to wear a dress?”

Anni choked on the sip of coffee she just took. “Um, I could if that’s what you wanted,” she stuttered, wiping a drop of coffee from her chin.

Jasmin laughed softly. “I want you to be comfortable, sweetie. Even if it means wearing black,” she winked and took a bite of her yogurt. “Mmm. Want some?”

“No, thank you.” She looked over Jasmin’s shoulder. “This is pretty.” She pointed to a strapless gown.

“Yeah?” Jasmin snapped the magazine shut. “You won’t know which one I choose.”

“Superstitious?”

Jasmin glanced at her fiancée. “Do you really think we need to take any chances?”

Anni sighed heavily, guilt weighing on her. “Baby, I really am sorry for the way I’ve been acting.”

“That would be easier to take if this were the first time.” Jasmin set her yogurt and the magazine aside to turn to Anni. “Sweetie, I’m not saying that to be mean. It’s just that if we don’t sit down and talk about this, *really* talk, it’s going to keep happening.”

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“Man, I know.” Anni’s frustration at her own inability to be open with Jasmin was beginning to overwhelm her.

“I mean that for me, too.” Jasmin pushed Anni’s bangs aside. “There are things that we’ve both been . . . unwilling to talk about. If we’re going to spend our lives together, that needs to change.” She leaned in, brushing her lips to Anni’s. “Because, honestly, I don’t know how much more of this ‘hot and cold’ I can take.”

“We will talk. I promise.” Anni saw the disappointment in Jasmin’s eyes and knew they should probably have that talk now. But she just couldn’t. Not yet. She reached over Jasmin, putting her coffee down. Then, she straddled her beautiful bride to be. “Jasmin, I promise. Let me prepare a little, okay?”

Jasmin studied Anni for a moment, looking for any sign of insincerity. Seeing none, she nodded. “Okay. Now kiss me.”

Anni gave her a toothy grin and obliged.



“THANK YOU FOR coming with me today, Elena.” Jasmin sorted through dress after dress on the rack in front of her, while Elena did the same on a second rack.

“No problem. I guess it would be hard for you to make your own dress?” She pulled a dress out that caught her eye, and set it aside for Jasmin.

“I’m just starting with fashion again. It’s too much pressure,” Jasmin answered distractedly. “I have enough of that without having to worry about designing and making my own wedding dress.”

Elena stopped rummaging through a sea of white and sequins and looked over her shoulder at Jasmin. “Are you and Anni still having problems?”

“No. I mean yes. Damn it, I don’t know.” She pushed at the gowns in frustration. “I’m trying so hard to be patient, but Anni keeps avoiding the things we need to talk about.”

“Maybe she scared,” Elena offered sympathetically. “Anni doesn’t strike me as the type that opens up easily.”

“She’s not,” Jasmin agreed. “But this is me, Elena. She should trust me and feel comfortable opening up to me.”

“Jasmin, I know you’ve been together for a year, but if you think about it, this is still new to Anni.”

Jasmin glanced at Elena. “Whose side are you on anyway?”

“Both!” Elena laughed. “I’m trying to help you both because I think your relationship is one for the ages.”

A slow smile formed on Jasmin’s lips. “One for the ages?”

“Epic,” Elena confirmed with a nod and a smile. “I’d like to think that Dominik and I would have been epic, too.”

Tears caused both women’s eyes to shine as a silent moment passed between them. Then Jasmin pulled Elena into her arms, hugging her tightly.

“Of course you would have been.” She pulled back slightly, looking Elena in the eye. “He found you in London when it seemed impossible. It was meant to be.”

Elena gave her a watery smile. “Come on. This is your day. Let’s find you the perfect dress!” She pushed Jasmin back to her side. “And, as for Anni, just give her the time she needs. She’s already confessed to needing to open up more. That’s a step in the right direction, at least.”

Jasmin contemplated Elena’s words, idly running her hands over the different textures of the dresses. When her fingertips touched a satiny, smooth surface, she stopped. Jasmin’s eyes widened as she pulled out the dress, and held it up.

“This is it,” she whispered.

Elena turned at Jasmin’s quietly spoken words. “Oh! It’s perfect! Go try it on!”

Jasmin beamed as she headed to the fitting room.



ANNI SAT ON the bed, aimlessly strumming her guitar. It had been a few days since she and Jasmin agreed they needed to talk. Of course, Anni has been avoiding it like the plague, and she could see Jasmin’s patience wearing thin.

*Wish I could just write a song explaining everything,* Anni thought glumly. Then quickly discarded that thought. That would be one depressing song.

“Hey.”

Anni looked up abruptly as her fiancée came into the room, her arms full of bags. She set her guitar aside and got up to help.

“Hey. Need help?”

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“Nope.” Jasmin turned her back to Anni. “You’re not allowed to touch this, or look at it.”

Anni smirked, getting on her tiptoes to look over Jasmin’s shoulder. “Why? What is it?”

“You know perfectly well what it is, now get back.” Jasmin pushed Anni back with her butt.

“Mmm. Do you think using your ass is going to deter me?” Anni placed her hands on Jasmin’s hips, pulling her into her. “That just makes me want more.”

“You’re such a fiend,” Jasmin chuckled. “Will you get back?”

“Come on, baby. Just a peek?”

“No. And, if I find out you stole a peek when I’m not here, there will be hell to pay.”

“Oh yeah? Will you punish me?” Anni smiled sexily.

“Mmhm. I’ll wait until our wedding night to have sex with you again.” Jasmin pushed away from a slack-jawed Anni and hung the dress up in the closet.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Jasmin smiled sweetly. “Do you want to test me?”

“No! No, baby, I don’t. I won’t look at it. I promise!” Anni knew she sounded pathetic, but she was too worried that Jasmin meant what she said. The wedding was months away. There’s no way she could go without sex with Jasmin for that long. “In fact, why don’t you come over here and occupy me so that I don’t get tempted.”

Jasmin laughed as Anni tugged her close. “Is this all you think about?”

“It’s hard not to think about it when I’m with you.” Anni wrapped her arms around Jasmin’s waist. “You’re incredibly sexy, and I’m lucky to have you.”

“What’s gotten into you?”

Jasmin was torn about Anni’s attitude. On the one hand, she was happy that Anni had been more attentive and wanted to spend more time with her. On the other hand, Jasmin was scared that things would turn around again, and Anni would feel ‘trapped’. Jasmin just didn’t know if she could go through ‘cold’ Anni, again.

“What do you mean?” Anni squeezed Jasmin, rocking back and forth. “Have I ever made you think I don’t want you?” Jasmin lifted a brow, and Anni smiled sheepishly. “I’ve never *not* wanted you, Jasmin. It’s just . . .”

“It’s just?” Jasmin could see the internal struggle Anni was going through inside. It broke Jasmin’s heart that Anni couldn’t just open up to her. But, knowing her own struggle, Jasmin was sensitive to how hard it was. “Hey.” Jasmin lifted Anni’s chin until they were eye to eye. “We don’t have to talk now. If I recall, you had something else in mind.” Jasmin smiled and kissed Anni thoroughly.

The relief Anni felt made her feel guilty. She made a vow to herself to talk to Jasmin before it was too late. She had almost lost Jasmin too many times in the year they’ve been together. Anni remembered the time she had stupidly proposed an open relationship. The consequences of that were devastating, and Anni couldn’t think of that time without intense regret. She didn’t think she’d ever regret anything more in her life, and she’d be damned if she would lose Jasmin now, so close to their wedding.

“*Soon*,” Anni whispered against Jasmin’s lips.

“*I’ll wait*,” Jasmin whispered back.

Anni guided Jasmin back to the bed, blindly pushing her guitar off onto the floor. She gently nudged Jasmin down, then lay on top of her. It felt so reminiscent of their first time together, that Anni horrifyingly felt tears threaten. She hated getting emotional, but it seemed to happen all too often when she was with Jasmin.

“You know you can let go with me,” Jasmin said quietly. “You don’t have to be so strong all the time. Who can you be *you* with if not me?”

“How did you?”

“The same way you know when I’m upset,” Jasmin answered. “It’s a good thing to have someone in your life that knows you, and lets you . . . just be.”

“I’m trying.”

“I know. But, sweetie, you’re still holding back. If our marriage is going to work . . . “

“I have to try harder,” Anni admitted.

“As I’ve said before, we both do.” Jasmin cupped Anni’s cheek in her palm. “But right now, let’s just be together.”

Anni smiled brightly with relief and arousal. “Best. Plan. Ever.” She leaned down and kissed Jasmin sweetly, yet passionately, wanting to show her how much Jasmin really meant to her. Anni knew a successful relationship was more

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than just sex. Even if it was amazing sex. She loved Jasmin with all of her heart, and she would do anything to show her. Even open her deepest wounds.

“Anni?”

“Hmm?”

“Let it go, for now, sweetie. Make love to me.”

Anni did as she was asked. She let the past go, and held on to her future with everything she had.



“JASMIN?”

Jasmin looked up from her sketch, frowning when Katrin walked in. Their relationship was still strained after the whole Kurt fiasco, but Jasmin had to admit that Katrin had been trying hard to repair the damage. Whether Jasmin was ready to accept the effort was a different story.

“Katrin. What are you doing here?” Jasmin felt a stab of guilt when she saw a flash of pain in Katrin’s eyes. *Why should I feel guilty when she tried to break me and Anni up?*

“I heard you found your dress,” Katrin answered almost meekly. “I had hoped we could go together for that.”

Jasmin laughed shortly. “You tried to get me to leave Anni and go back to Kurt! Now you want to go shopping for a wedding dress with me?”

“I was desperate, Jasmin. I needed the work.”

“More than you needed a daughter. A *happy* daughter?”

“I’m sorry.”

Jasmin studied Katrin, looking for any hint of deceitfulness. Seeing none, her heart thawed a little. Just a little. “Fine. But we’re still not at the point where we can go shopping together for my wedding with Anni.”

Katrin raised her hands in surrender. “Fair enough. Can I at least see what you’re working on? I heard you’re getting back into fashion.”

Jasmin couldn’t help but wonder what Katrin’s angle was. Did she want something? Need something? Obviously, she was checking up on her. It broke her heart that she had such thoughts about her *mother*.

“I am,” she answered cautiously. “I enjoy writing about fashion, but Anni helped me see that creating it was in my blood.” She made it a point to credit Anni for Jasmin’s recent interest in getting back into fashion.

“Good. I’m glad she did.” Katrin took a tentative step forward. “May I sit down?”

Jasmin hesitated, contemplated telling her no. “Sure.”

“Jasmin,” she began as she sat down. “I really do apologize for how I acted when Kurt was here.”

“You said that already.”

“I know. But I . . . I want to be a part of your life again.”

“My life includes Anni, Katrin. We’re getting married.”

“Yes, I know.” Katrin sighed heavily. “What I said before, about Kurt being what’s best for you? I was wrong. You and Anni have had your ups and downs, like all couples, but *she* is who is best for you.”

“Why the change of heart, Katrin?” Between her mother’s and Anni’s complete turnarounds, Jasmin’s head was spinning.

“I’m your mother.” Katrin paused when Jasmin let out an unladylike snort. “I deserve that. Jasmin, please? I’m trying to make up for my mistakes. Let me?”

Mistakes. How many mistakes did Jasmin have to forgive from the people she loves? She sighed inwardly. It was her weakness, and possibly her strength. Forgiveness. If she hadn’t forgiven Anni for the open relationship shit, they wouldn’t be planning a wedding now. And, if Anni hadn’t forgiven Jasmin for her transgressions during that time . . . Jasmin shivered at the thought. That was not a time she was proud of. She’d rather forget. And, forgive.

“Okay.”

Katrin’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yes,” Jasmin nodded. “But if you question my relationship with Anni again, I won’t be so forgiving next time.”

Katrin smiled genuinely for the first time since arriving to see Jasmin. “I promise, my focus is now helping you plan your wedding with Anni.”



“YOU’LL NEVER GUESS who visited me today,” Jasmin announced as she breezed into the apartment.

Anni looked up from her computer and smiled. “Hello to you, too.”

“Hi, sweetie.” Jasmin bent down and brushed her lips across Anni’s. “How was your day?”

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Anni shrugged. "Same. A shift at Mauerwerk, and now I'm working on some music. So, who came to visit you?"

Jasmin stood behind Anni, peering over her shoulder. "Anything I can listen to?"

Anni closed the laptop. "Nope." She pulled Jasmin around until Jasmin was sitting on her lap. "Visit?" She asked as she nuzzled Jasmin's neck.

"Hmm? Oh. Um. I can't think when you do that." Even as she said the words, she tilted her head to give Anni better access. "Katrin."

Anni's caresses ceased suddenly. Kissing Jasmin's neck while talking about her mother was not something Anni found desirable. "Let me guess, she wants you to break up with me, and go find Kurt?"

"Actually, she apologized."

Anni's eyebrows raised with surprise. "No way!"

"Yes. She also said that she was wrong about Kurt. And, you." Jasmin kissed Anni.

"Mmm. Do that again."

Jasmin laughed softly and did as she was asked.

"So, she was wrong about me?" Anni asked after she was thoroughly kissed.

"Mmhmm. She actually said you are good for me."

"Well, I could have told her that," Anni said cockily with a slap to Jasmin's ass. She smirked when Jasmin yelped. "Why the complete about-face?"

Jasmin shrugged. "She said she wanted to apologize for her mistakes and be there for me. She wants to help plan the wedding."

"Wow. How do you feel about that?"

"Wary," Jasmin admitted. "But it would be nice to have a relationship with my mother again."

Anni rubbed Jasmin's back. "I can understand that. But, baby, I don't want her to hurt you again."

Jasmin grinned, taking Anni's face in her hands. "You're so sweet," she said, then gave her a noisy smack on the lips. "I don't want that either, and I let her know that."

"Good. I'm behind whatever you want one-hundred percent, baby."

"Thank you. Now for the important stuff . . ." Jasmin gave Anni a serious look.



Anni stiffened involuntarily. *Does she really want to have that talk now?*  
“Okaaaay.”

Jasmin paused for dramatic effect. “I’m . . . starving. What are we eating?”

Anni laughed with relief. “Whatever you want. My treat.”

“Ooo. I’m thinking . . .”

“Just remember,” Anni interrupted with a finger to Jasmin’s lips, “that I’m not a rock star. Yet.”

“You are in my eyes,” Jasmin told her as she batted her eyelashes.

“Cute. Food?”

“Sushi?”

“Sounds good. Let’s go.”



JASMIN AWOKE TO Anni tossing and turning, mumbling as her head thrashed back and forth on her pillow.

“Sweetie?” Alarmed, Jasmin tentatively touched Anni’s shoulder. Anni had never had a nightmare like this before. “Anni? Sweetie, wake up.”

“Jasmin, no!”

“Anni!” Jasmin risked being hit by Anni’s flailing arms and positioned herself close to Anni’s side. She wrapped her arms around her now crying fiancée, knowing full well this probably wasn’t the best course of action. She just didn’t know what else to do. “Anni, please wake up.”

Anni struggled in Jasmin’s embrace, still mumbling unintelligible words. Eventually, Jasmin felt Anni begin to relax, and she loosened her hold slightly.

“Anni?”

“Hmm?” she muttered, then turned and burrowed into Jasmin’s side.

Jasmin contemplated waking Anni up, but she seemed so peaceful at the moment, that she just didn’t have the heart.

“Oh, sweetie. Whatever it is that you need to talk about is taking its toll on you.” She pulled Anni closer. *Maybe I should tell her she doesn’t need . . .* Jasmin stopped that line of thinking. Both of their pasts were like a wedge between them. As long as they kept the truth from each other, the bigger the wedge would get. Jasmin wasn’t willing to risk her future with Anni because of the past. “*We’ll get through this, I promise,*” she whispered close to Anni’s ear. Even as

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she said the words, she shivered at the thought of bringing her own past up.  
*We'll get through this*, she vowed silently and kissed Anni on the top of the head.

# *The Planning*

(Part 3)

SHE WAS IN a bad mood. It wasn't uncommon for Anni to be in a bad mood, but she just couldn't figure out why she was now. Why was she scowling at everyone? Why was she being grumpy? And, most importantly, why was she copping an attitude with the woman she loves? Jasmin was trying to be understanding, and give her space, but nothing seemed to help Anni's mood.

"What the fuck?" Anni scrubbed her hands over her face in frustration. Hell, she was tired of frowning. Talking about the wedding didn't help, drinking beer didn't help. Even tuning everyone out by playing loud music through her headphones didn't help. She didn't want to be here in the apartment. She wanted to be out, maybe go to the club and just lose herself. The problem with that is Jasmin would want to go with her. As much as she loved Jasmin, that just didn't sound appealing to her right now. And, *that* confused her even more. Jasmin was the *only* person she actually wanted to be around all the time. But ever since they agreed to have THE talk, Anni had slowly been pulling away. She felt herself doing it, but couldn't do anything to stop it. Even now, Anni found herself hiding in the corner of her and Jasmin's bedroom, avoiding everyone and everything.

"Sweetie?"

So much for hiding out.

"In here," Anni called out, unable to veil the frustration in her voice. She closed her eyes and waited for Jasmin to find her.

The door opened slowly, and Jasmin poked her head around the corner. "There you are."

"Here I am," Anni muttered irritably. She watched helplessly as Jasmin closed her eyes, obviously needing a moment to rein in her own emotions. Anni knew Jasmin was getting close to her breaking point. She would do anything to be able to get out of this funk and treat Jasmin the way she deserved to be treated. *So, why the fuck can't I*, she wondered miserably.

"Sorry to bother you." Jasmin's voice picked up an edge that hadn't been there earlier. *Yep. Definitely getting to the end of her rope with me.* "I'm going to have

## Committed

dinner with Katrin. You're welcome to come if you want, but I'm pretty sure I know what your answer is going to be."

Anni sighed heavily. "Sorry I'm being such a bitch." It was an apology, but to anyone's ears – including her own – it held little sincerity. "I think I just need to be alone for a while. Maybe I'll go to Mauerwerk."

Jasmin shut the door, facing Anni's brooding form with her hands on her hips. "How is that being alone? Or, did you just mean without me?"

"It's not like that, Jasmin." She ran her hands through her hair, leaving it in complete disarray. "Man, I don't know. Maybe."

Jasmin stared at her long enough to make her start to feel uncomfortable. "So, we're back to this? Are you unhappy with me again, Anni?"

"No! I'm not . . . it's not . . ." Her frustration was growing, but this time it was frustration at herself, and her inability to articulate what was going on inside her. "We're not 'back to this'. I promise."

"I hope not," Jasmin said softly. "Because I don't know if I could handle that again. And, I'm certainly not able to handle the whole open relationship debacle again."

Anni's feet finally caught up with her brain, and she made her way to her beautiful fiancée. "That won't happen again," she vowed, taking Jasmin's face in her hands. "Maybe I'm just overwhelmed?"

"With the wedding?"

Anni shrugged.

"Anni, *you* are the one who pressed me to set a date, who kept buying me magazines, and kept wanting to talk details," Jasmin reminded, her voice tinged with exasperation.

"I know."

"What's the problem, then? Never mind," she said quickly when she saw a flash of annoyance in Anni's eyes. "I'm going to go. If you want to talk about this later, fine. As of now, I say we table the wedding talk until we figure everything else out."

"What?" Belatedly, Anni realized that Jasmin had marched out of the room. She could hear her gathering her stuff to leave. It's never a good idea to have Jasmin mad at you. But to be mad, and then leave, where anything could happen? She ran out of the room. "Wait! I don't want to table the wedding talk!"

“Well, I do. At least for now. All it seems to be doing is making you cranky.” Jasmin’s gaze softened when Anni’s bottom lip poked out in a silly little pout. “Sorry, sweetie, but it’s true. We still have time, so we can take it a little slower until you figure out what’s going on.”

Jasmin’s phone beeped with an incoming text, and Anni watched with a mixture of amusement when she juggled the phone and unfounded jealousy at wondering who was texting her.

“That’s Katrin. I really need to go. She has some contacts in the fashion industry,” she explained distractedly. “We’re going to talk about strategy to get major buyers interested in *Tussi Attack*.”

“Well, you don’t need me there for that, anyway. Nothing I can contribute.” Anni tucked her hands into her pockets, rocking on her heels a bit.

“I don’t think that’s true, but okay. I’ll see you later.” Jasmin kissed Anni sweetly on the lips before walking away. Pausing at the door, she turned. “Are you going out?”

Anni shrugged. “Don’t know.”

Jasmin gave her a small nod after a considerable pause, then slipped out the door without another word.

“Shit, Anni,” she berated herself and her actions. “That’s just fucking awesome.”

If she sat down and thought about it, she’d would have to wonder if she was jealous of Jasmin’s success with her *Tussi Attack* label. Even the thought was completely insane to her, so that’s why she never sat down to think of it. Anni’s own career had come to somewhat of a standstill. Perhaps she was just restless because of that. She’d been harsh with Jasmin at the beginning of their relationship, telling her she needed to grow up and get a career. Now those tables have turned. Jasmin was doing what she loved to do, while Anni stood behind a soundboard at Mauerkwerk, or served drinks at Vereinsheim. She wanted Jasmin to be proud of her. There was no way that was going to happen unless she could be proud of herself, first. With a heavy sigh, Anni grabbed her jacket and keys and took off.



“HEY.” JASMIN SET her purse in one of the empty chairs, sliding into the seat in front of Katrin with a sigh. “Sorry, I’m late.”

## Committed

Katrin checked her watch. "You're right on time. I just got here myself. Would you like some prosecco?"

"Yes, please." Jasmin winced inwardly at the anxiety in her voice.

Katrin signaled the waiter, tipping her glass to him. "Is everything alright?" she asked, turning her attention back to her daughter.

"Hmm?" Jasmin scanned the menu, not seeing anything that peaked her interest. She wasn't very hungry. Whatever was going on with Anni was making her stomach churn, and Jasmin didn't know what she was going to do about it. One thing she did know, she didn't want to talk to Katrin about it. They weren't there, yet. This newfound truce of theirs was fragile at best. After what happened with Kurt and Katrin saying Anni wasn't right for Jasmin, this was a subject she would rather avoid with her mother. "Yes. Yes, everything is fine. I'm just thinking about this idea of getting buyers to work with us."

It wasn't a complete lie, but it also wasn't what was weighing her down at the moment. Anni was. It really wasn't a good time for her to be distracted, especially with less than a month before they had a meeting with a major buyer. Jasmin immediately stopped that line of thinking, silently chastising herself for even thinking of Anni as a distraction. She shook her head, trying to clear it of negative thoughts.

"I think it will be good for your label," Katrin said, breaking through Jasmin's internal criticism. "Though, I still think you should do more high-end ..."

"Katrin. *Tussi Attack* is not about couture. *Maybe* I will expand later on if the line starts to grow. But for now, this is what I want to do. Please respect that."

Katrin sighed, taking a long sip from her glass. She was grateful when the waiter came back with a full bottle of Prosecco settled in ice. She waited for him to refill her glass, and fill one for Jasmin before speaking again.

"I do respect that, Jasmin. I'm only trying to help."

"And, you are by sharing your connections with me," Jasmin readily agreed. "Just let me worry about the designs, okay?"

Katrin gave her a small shrug and nodded. "Let's talk about this buyer. They're going to want a sample of all of your work. Will you be able to supply that?"

"Yes, of course. I can get help if I need to."

“From your friends? Jasmin, you need to start getting more serious about this. We’ll look into getting a factory to do bulk orders.”

“We’re not there yet, Katrin. The orders aren’t that extensive, and I simply can’t afford the cost,” Jasmin argued. She drank down half of the bubbly liquid in her glass, hoping it would soothe her frayed nerves.

“It would be more cost effective for you to do bulk, instead of having to create each shirt by yourself.”

“I’m not by myself.”

“Jasmin. You plus three or four of your friends are not going to cut it if this buyer wants a large quantity.”

Jasmin had thought of that. But if the buyer wanted such a big order, they would have to pay at least a deposit upfront. That would give Jasmin the means to hire more people. Or, do as Katrin suggested and find a factory.

“We’ll see how everything goes, and what they want. It’ll be fine.”

“I hope you’re taking this seriously, Jasmin. I know you’re busy planning your wedding.” Katrin stopped abruptly when Jasmin’s fiery eyes glared at her. “That wasn’t meant to be a criticism, Jasmin,” she said quietly.

“Sorry.” Jasmin took a deep, cleansing breath, grateful when the waiter ambled back to their table to take their orders. An awkward silence remained once they were alone again. Anni’s mood was affecting Jasmin, and Jasmin’s mood was affecting dinner with her mother. She glanced up at Katrin. “I really am sorry. I’m just a little stressed with . . . everything that’s going on.”

“Well, we can just eat dinner, and save the strategizing for later if you would like,” Katrin suggested.

“No. I would like to hear more about this buyer you’ve contacted. Does it sound promising?”

Katrin regarded her for a moment before answering. “Yes, I think so. We’re going to start at the top,” she explained as she reached into her bag. Katrin brought out a portfolio, handing it to Jasmin. “If that doesn’t work, we’ll move on to the next.”

“Okay.” Jasmin studied the papers Katrin gave her. “Kiara Adler? That’s the name of the buyer?”

“Technically . . .” Katrin hesitated, fiddling nervously with the charm hanging from her necklace.

“Katrin?”

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“Just hear me out, yes?” She waited for Jasmin’s nod, then continued. “I told you we were starting at the top. Kiara is the CEO of *Frida*.”

“CEO? Katrin, *Frida* is the biggest fashion company around. What on earth makes you think they would be interested in *Tussi Attack*? And, do you really believe the CEO is going to want to waste their time with this?” Jasmin flipped through the pages, not really seeing the words. Katrin had said ‘start at the top’, but was she ready for *Frida*? Her designs were fun and hip, but were they good enough for a fashion icon like *Frida*? She just hoped they weren’t setting themselves up for a tremendous fail.

“Jasmin, Kiara is a former model, something you two have in common. From what I hear, she’s very focused on helping young designers make a name for themselves. She knows what it’s like to strive for something more, and the competition of the fashion world. I really do think we have a good chance at impressing her.” Katrin saw the doubt on Jasmin’s face. “You’re talented, Jasmin. Don’t doubt yourself. When we have that meeting with Ms. Adler, I want you to be confident. You deserve this.”

For the first time all night, Jasmin gave Katrin a genuine smile. “Thank you. We can do this.”

“*You* can.”



“YO, ARMIN! I’M going to jump on the soundboard for tonight’s band.” Anni projected her voice enough for Armin to hear her over the crowd.

“You’re not supposed to be working tonight!” he shouted back, popping the top off a beer for a patron.

“So?” She didn’t feel the need to explain any further, and made her way to one of her favorite spots. When she was behind the soundboard, she felt at home. *More at home than in front of the mic*, she thought with a scowl. Anni would much rather be the person singing and writing the songs, but never felt good enough. She didn’t think people would get her music, or feel it as deeply as she felt it. Jasmin told her they would, but Jasmin loved her, so to Anni’s mind, her opinion was biased.

“Hey, you the club’s sound engineer?”

Anni faced the newcomer with a cocky smirk. She had seen him checking her out as she walked past. *Not in a million years, man*. “Who wants to know?”



## Jourdyn Kelly

He was scruffy looking. Long, stringy hair and a goatee. With his leather jacket and pants, Anni could guess who he was but was irritable enough to want to make things difficult.

“I’m the manager for the band,” he confirmed with a cocky grin of his own. He passed her his card. “Name’s Sans.”

Anni lifted a brow. “What are you lacking?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I figured it out for myself,” she muttered. “Yeah, I’m the engineer.”

“You good?”

“Been offered gigs on tours, so yeah.”

Sans checked her out again, letting his eyes wander relentlessly. He nodded once, then walked away.

Anni shook her head. *People are weird.* Just then, a piece of paper landed on her board. A glance told her it was a phone number, and with a flick of a finger, she sent it flying to the floor. *Nope, not interested.* The thought surprised her a little. Even after she started dating Jasmin, she was flattered when other women would show her attention. Sometimes it got her in trouble, and maybe that’s the reason she has learned to ignore it. She had made a few mistakes early on in her and Jasmin’s relationship. She snorted quietly. “*You’re still making mistakes,*” Anni corrected herself with a terse grumble.

Anni was beginning to regret not just going out to a club and getting plastered. At least then she wouldn’t have to deal with her thoughts. *No, just more women throwing themselves at you, and you being too much of a drunken idiot to ignore it.* Shit. Now even her internal dialogue was pissing her off. Enough thinking for tonight, she decided as David jumped on stage to announce the band. Just block it all out, then go home and try not to be a dick to your fiancée.



IT WAS 3 am by the time Anni got back to the apartment. She was in so much trouble. But she had to put equipment away, then she helped out the band. Of course, that lead to talking and having a few beers. She should have called Jasmin to let her know where she was or at least sent a text. But each time she took out her phone to do so, she realized that Jasmin hadn’t called or texted her. Maybe it was childish – okay, it was extremely childish – but if Jasmin

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didn't care enough to find out where she was, Anni didn't see why she had to volunteer the information.

"Lame," she whispered in the dark, empty room. She blew out a disheartened breath that ruffled the bangs out of her eyes. "Time to face the music."

Anni shuffled to the bedroom door, quietly letting herself in. Perhaps Jasmin would be asleep they wouldn't have to argue tonight. *Yeah, and perhaps pigs could fly.* But as she closed the door behind her, Jasmin didn't stir. Feeling a bit lucky, Anni undressed, forgoing pajamas. It would be really nice to get into bed and feel Jasmin's naked skin against hers. With that thought, she gently slid into bed.

It was a bit of a shock to feel fabric between them, knowing that lately, Jasmin had taken to sleeping in the nude. It was more 'convenient' she had said, and Anni had no complaints at all. Tonight was different. Not only was Jasmin clothed, she lay rigidly facing *away* from Anni. Undeterred, Anni scooted close to Jasmin and draped an arm across her hip. She buried her nose in Jasmin's hair, inhaling the sweet scent that was uniquely Jasmin. Her hand found its way beneath Jasmin's shirt, and Anni smiled, loving how soft Jasmin's skin was.

Jasmin felt Anni jump when she caught her wandering hand. "Go to sleep, it's late."

"I thought you were sleeping." Anni's soft words were colored with embarrassment at being caught, and shame at being such a coward.

"I can sleep now that you're home."

"Baby, I'm sorry. I should have called . . ."

"Goodnight, Anni."

Fuck.



JASMIN WATCHED THE soft rise and fall of Anni's chest as she slept soundly. A single tear rolled down her cheek. She truly loved Anni, but just didn't know if she had the strength to go through this again. It shattered her heart to think of never being with Anni again, but it also crushed her soul not knowing if she could trust her completely. Where had she been last night? Why didn't she call or text? Was it because she was with someone else? Is that why Anni hadn't wanted to go out with her?

"*Oh, Anni. If you would just talk to me.*" Jasmin's quiet plea hung in the air, taking her breath away. It seemed so simple to her. Talk, get everything out in the open, and let it go. She just didn't think Anni was capable of that. When another tear fell, Jasmin turned her back on her partner.

"Jasmin?" Anni's eyes opened to see Jasmin staring out the window. Her brain was fuzzy from the beers she consumed, but she was far from being hung-over. She knew perfectly well that she had screwed up. Jasmin's rebuff last night made that very clear.

"Do you need something for your head?" Jasmin asked without turning around.

"No, I'm fine."

"Good. Maybe you should take a shower and brush your teeth. You smell like beer."

Anni winced. "Will you look at me, please?"

"I don't think I want to right now," Jasmin responded after a noticeable delay.

"I should have called, I know that." Anni hesitated, allowing Jasmin to agree or yell at her. When she said nothing, Anni's heart began to pound. She could handle the yelling. What she couldn't handle was the silence. "I went to Mauerwerk . . ."

"I'm going to start some coffee," Jasmin interrupted abruptly. "If you want something to eat, you should hurry. I have to get to the shop early."

Anni jumped out of bed, completely oblivious to the fact that she was naked. "Jasmin! Wait, please!" She reached out to put a hand on the door. "Just give me two minutes before you walk out on me. Two minutes," she repeated when Jasmin's hand remained on the door handle. Finally, it dropped away, and Jasmin crossed her arms over her chest.

"Can you please put something on?"

Anni frowned, glancing down at herself. A slight blush crept up her cheeks, but she shrugged it off. "It's nothing you haven't seen up close and *very* personal before."

Jasmin narrowed her eyes. "Do you want to talk, or . . ."

"Or! I'll take 'or'. Every time, baby, I'll take 'or'."

Jasmin shook her head sadly. "You asked for two minutes," she reminded Anni.

## Committed

“Right.” Anni let out a long, breathy sigh. “Look, I went to Mauerwerk, and I worked the board for the talent. Then afterward, I helped Armin clean up, put equipment away, and all that shit. The band was still there, so I thought I’d give them a hand.” Anni took a breath. “They bought me a few beers to say thank you, and we talked. Then I came home. I swear, Jasmin, that’s everything.”

“Is it that terrible being around me that you’d rather talk to strangers until 3 am?”

Anni leaned back, bumping her head a few times on the door that was holding her up. “That’s not what I said, Jasmin.”

“Did you really have to say the words?” Jasmin shot back. “What’s that saying about actions being louder than words?”

“That’s not fair! *You* didn’t call me or text me, either!”

“I was home!”

“But you obviously didn’t care where I was.”

Jasmin stared at Anni incredulously. “Is that what you thought? I was *scared* to text you, Anni.”

The revelation made Anni frown. “Why?”

“Why? Because I’m fucking petrified that you’re going to tell me how clingy I’m being, and that you need your goddamn freedom. *Again!*”

Anni’s jaw dropped. Fuck, she had really left a huge, angry scar on Jasmin’s heart. Would it ever heal? Would Jasmin ever be able to trust her fully? She risked a step towards Jasmin, hoping there would be no retreat. Encouraged when Jasmin stood steady, Anni took another step.

“I thought you were too pissed off at me to care,” she confessed to Jasmin softly.

“I was pissed off,” Jasmin admitted. “But, Anni, that doesn’t mean I don’t care. I will *always* care.”

“Jasmin.” Her hand was shaking as she timidly brought it to Jasmin’s face. “I’m sorry that I stayed out so late. It’s just . . .”

“It’s just you had someone you *wanted* to be talking to,” Jasmin finished softly.

“No! We were talking shop, talking touring and stuff. With you, things have to be deep.”

“That’s not true at all,” Jasmin argued. “We talk about everything.”

“But you *want* more. And, damn it, I just don’t think it’s necessary,” Anni shot back.

Jasmin removed Anni’s hand from her cheek. “If you really don’t think it’s necessary, then we have a problem.”

“Man, why does it always have to be difficult with you?”

Jasmin’s eyes widened slightly. She had made it a point *not* to pressure Anni into talking. Ever since they agreed it was essential, she could feel Anni pulling away. So, Jasmin decided to let Anni prepare – as Anni asked. All Jasmin wanted was for it to happen before their wedding. She didn’t feel that was too much to ask.

“I didn’t mean that,” Anni backtracked quickly.

“Yes, you did.”

“No. Look, Jasmin, maybe I just need to get away for a while,” she said carefully. Anni didn’t want Jasmin to think this was like before. That she was running away, or unhappy with Jasmin. That wasn’t the case at all. Talking about her past was something Anni never did. She was about to open herself up to Jasmin as never before. Surely Jasmin could understand her hesitation. Right? She risked looking up to gauge Jasmin’s reaction. It wasn’t good.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this again.” Jasmin’s words were spoken so softly that Anni almost didn’t hear them.

“I told you, it’s not like before.”

“They asked you to go on tour with them, didn’t they?” Jasmin asked, referring to the band Anni had spent the night talking to.

“Are you going to tell me not to go again?” Anni asked, not bothering to deny that the opportunity had presented itself.

Jasmin scoffed, shaking her head. “I *knew* you still blamed me for that. I *never* asked you not to go on tour with Nessi.”

“You weren’t exactly supportive, either.” She *knew* she was creating an argument. It was like word vomit. Anni couldn’t shut up, even knowing it was damaging what she wanted the most. Jasmin. If only she could tell her everything else that was in her brain. But it felt like there was something blocking the words that *needed* to come out, as the damaging words were able to seep out.

“I was completely supportive,” Jasmin retorted. “*You* came back. I told you to go, but *you* came back.”

## Committed

“You were miserable. How could I leave with you crying?” *Shut up, shut up, shut up! What the fuck is wrong with you?* Anni’s heart was begging her to stop screwing up.

“Of course I was miserable! My girlfriend tells me she’s going to be away for six months, am I supposed to be happy? The difference between us, Anni,” Jasmin lowered her voice dangerously. “I was actually going to miss you. If you’re still blaming me for that, you didn’t decide not to go for me. You did it because you felt guilty.”

Anni didn’t know what to say to that. Was Jasmin right? Had she felt guilty for agreeing to go on tour without talking to her girlfriend about it first? She didn’t want to think about that. Fuck, she didn’t want to think about anything right now.

“I had nothing to feel guilty about,” she responded defiantly. “I don’t want to talk about that now.”

“You don’t want to talk about anything,” Jasmin spat. She was getting angrier by the second, and that was not good for either of them. “You *never* want to talk about anything.”

Anni sighed dramatically. She walked away, grabbing her black shirt and slipping it on. “I think you were right.”

“Finally,” Jasmin muttered. “About what?”

“We should table the wedding talk for now.” Inside Anni was screaming at herself not to do this. She was fucking up so bad but didn’t know how to be the person Jasmin needed her to be. She wasn’t the talking type. She didn’t want to be that vulnerable. Not even to Jasmin. And, if she were completely honest with herself, she had convinced herself she needed this gig to feel better about herself. Her life was at a standstill. No, she amended silently. It was just her career that was at an impasse. Her life had actually been perfect. Jasmin was perfect. It made what she was saying and doing even worse.

Jasmin studied Anni with tears filling her eyes. Yes, she had suggested postponing the planning, but just for a couple of weeks. “How long will you be gone?” she asked quietly.

“I didn’t say I was going.”

“How long, Anni?” Jasmin knew Anni wanted to go. She knew Anni was feeling restless when it came to her work. Jasmin had tried to get her to write more music, but Anni had told her she was done with that. She seemed . . . lost.

Jasmin wanted nothing more than to support whatever Anni wanted to do. But she wasn't strong enough to do this again.

"Few weeks," Anni shrugged. "I don't have to stay the entire tour. I think I just want to put what I've worked so hard for to use."

Jasmin nodded slightly. Her heart was breaking. It was about to shatter. With shaking hands, Jasmin slipped the ring Anni gave her off of her finger.

"What are you doing?" Anni asked incredulously.

"You go and do what you need to do, Anni. Figure out what you want."

"I want you." She refused to take the ring from Jasmin. And, she sure as hell wasn't taking hers off, even if Jasmin asked for it.

"It shouldn't be this difficult, Anni. You get overwhelmed, and you search for a way out. Or, you become agitated which stresses both of us out. I'm tired of being scared that I'm being too clingy for you, or pushing you into something you're not ready for." Jasmin paused, taking a deep breath. "Find out what it is you need. If it really is me, then we'll see if we can work this out."

"You're breaking up with me?"

"I'm setting you free," Jasmin amended. "You have nothing pressuring you one way or another. If you don't want to talk, to genuinely know me and let me understand you, I'm not sure how this would work anyway. We keep going in circles, Anni. It's not healthy. And, it hurts too much."

Anni was scared shitless. Which pissed her off. And, of course, being pissed off made Anni speak without thinking about the things she was saying, or how hurtful they might be. She was hurting, and her response was to punish the one she thought was causing the pain. Unfortunately, she was blaming Jasmin for the shit pile *she* created herself.

"So, I'm *free* to do whatever or whomever I want on tour?" she asked bitterly.

"That right there? That's proof enough that you're not ready for this relationship to go further." Jasmin pushed past her, pausing with her hand on the door handle. "I love you. More than you will ever know. I will miss you. Good luck on tour. I hope you find what you need."



ANNI'S DUFFLE BAG sat next to the front door, its owner sitting quietly at the table pen in hand. Jasmin left hours ago, leaving Anni alone. As much as

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she thought that's what she wanted, the moment Jasmin walked out, Anni felt as though a part of her heart was missing. Since she refused to take the ring back, Jasmin had carefully laid it on the dresser. The delicate and loving manner in which Jasmin touched the ring one last time before leaving, gave Anni hope. Perhaps when Anni got back, she would be better equipped to . . . her thought process stopped abruptly. Shit. Forget being 'better equipped'. Hopefully, when she came back she'd be a fucking adult and have an adult relationship without fucking it up.

She pushed those thoughts aside, concentrating on the other words flowing from her soul. It seemed, lately, that all of the songs she writes are for Jasmin. It was her way of letting out all of the feelings. It just wasn't enough. Not for Jasmin. Jasmin needed to know everything. Deep down, Anni understood that. And, of course, she wanted to know all of Jasmin. Damn it, why couldn't she find the words to say that to her . . . her what? What is Jasmin to her now? Not knowing made her eyes fill with unshed tears as she put pen to paper once again, and continued writing.

**You think that I don't love you  
You think that I don't care  
You think that I don't think of you  
Every time that I'm not there.  
That couldn't be further from the truth.  
How could you think I don't love you?  
I think about you, dream about you.  
That couldn't be further from the truth.**

**Attitudes change, but the love remains  
The harsh words and slam of the door,  
It doesn't mean I don't love you anymore.  
Space is all we need sometimes, time apart.  
It doesn't mean I don't think of you, darling.  
It doesn't mean I don't care.  
That couldn't be further from the truth.**

**Maybe, baby, we say things we don't mean,  
And, things aren't as perfect as it seems.  
But I do love you, I know it's hard to believe.**



**Please trust in me, without you, I couldn't live.**

**You think I don't want you, that there's someone new.**

**Well, that couldn't be further from the truth.**

**No, that couldn't be further from the truth.**

Anni read over the words after she finished, wiping a tear from her cheek. She knew she should share it with Jasmin, but was afraid it wouldn't matter. Nothing would matter until she could open up completely to the woman she loved with all her heart.

She heard keys jingle from outside the door and spun around when it opened, hoping to find Jasmin. The disappointment ran deep as Ayla came in, almost tripping over Anni's bag.

"What in the world?" Ayla glanced at the bag, then up at Anni. "Going somewhere?"

"Away for a while. Got a gig."

Dark eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Really? What about planning the wedding?"

White, hot pain shot through Anni's heart. As always, she hid it behind indifference and arrogance. "What about it? Jasmin isn't putting her career on hold for the wedding. Why should I?"

It was snarky, and the words made her feel even worse. Especially seeing the hurt look on Ayla's face.

"Okay. How long will you be gone?" Ayla asked cautiously.

Anni shrugged. "Don't know. Why all the questions?"

"Look, I don't know what your problem is, but the attitude is unappreciated. I was just wondering if you were going to be here to help Jasmin, that's all." Ayla passed Anni, giving her a look, on the way to the refrigerator.

Anni frowned as she watched Ayla take a bottle of water from the fridge, opening it to take a long drink. She figured she had done enough to help Jasmin. Right out of her life. "Help her with what?"

Ayla capped the bottle, turning her attention back to the grumpy Anni. "She has that big meeting coming up with a major fashion store or something. She's going to have to have samples of all of her work, so we're going to help her out. I just thought you'd want to be there, too."

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Anni's heart sank even further. Jasmin never mentioned the big meeting. Of course, she had told Anni about strategizing with Katrin. What had happened between last night and now? She slumped down in her chair when she realized she hadn't bothered to ask Jasmin how her dinner with her mother went. Anni didn't even think about it. Shit. Jasmin's career really was taking off. She didn't need someone like Anni interfering with that success.

Anni needed to be Jasmin's equal. She couldn't justify the things she had said to Jasmin before about having no goals in life. Not when Anni herself turned out to be a big disappointment.

"Yeah, well, I'm sure she has all the help she needs from you gals. I've gotta get going." Anni stood, folding the paper and slipping it into her pocket before shouldering her bag. "Will you tell Jasmin . . ." she clamped her mouth shut. If Ayla knew Jasmin had broken up with Anni, it would make it real. Anni refused to believe that. "Never mind. I'll call her later. See you in a few weeks. Take care."

Anni glanced at her and Jasmin's bedroom. There was no reason for her to leave today. She could stay and work things out with Jasmin. Then again, Jasmin had made it clear that Anni needed to grow up. She hadn't said those exact words, but the intent was unmistakable. With that in mind, there was no reason to stay here. She would grow up. She would show Jasmin she knew how to be in a relationship without freaking out when things got deep. Anni had to believe that. She had to believe that when she got back, she would be able to convince Jasmin they belonged together. God, she hoped she would finally learn how to communicate what she's really feeling without letting the anger control her words. That hope and belief were the only things that carried her out the door.



"JASMIN?" SOPHIE AND Katrin looked at each other, then back at Jasmin. It was the third time they had called out to her without a response. "Jasmin!"

Jasmin blinked. "Huh?"

"What's going on? You're like a million miles away." Sophie placed a hand on Jasmin's shoulder, squeezing gently. "Everything okay?"

Jasmin's eyes tracked over to Katrin who was watching her intently. "Yeah, I'm fine. This meeting with Ms. Adler is all a little overwhelming." It was as good an excuse as any, so she went with it. Perhaps if Katrin wasn't there,

Jasmin would have been able to confide in Sophie. But that wasn't the case. "I just want to impress her."

"Well, it is a bit daunting," Sophie agreed, sending a slightly disapproving look to Katrin.

"Nonsense," Katrin interrupted. "You have to go big to get anything done in this business." She came forward, standing somewhat in front of Sophie now. "You can't be afraid, Jasmin. You have to show Kiara Adler that you belong in this business. If you meet with her feeling apprehensive and overwhelmed, it's going to show. She'll think you're not ready."

"I don't know that I am, Katrin."

"You *are*." Katrin gestured to Jasmin's open laptop. "Your designs are getting great reviews. The only reason you aren't selling more now is because you're not exposed enough. *Frida* can help with that. Kiara Adler is your ticket to *Frida*. Be yourself, and know that what you're doing is worth it."

Katrin had never been one to hand out compliments or advice. Not when it came to Jasmin. It was hard to reconcile this Katrin with the ruthless, sell-your-daughter's-happiness-for-business Katrin from a few months ago. She wished she knew which one was real. Damn it! She was so sick of people changing in the blink of an eye. It was giving her whiplash.

"You're right, Katrin." Her tone sounded defeated. Hell, she *felt* defeated. Jasmin wished that she could just crawl into bed, throw the blankets over her head, and curl up. *In Anni's arms*. The instinctive thought almost brought Jasmin to her knees. The last words she had said to Anni, besides 'I love you' – which weren't returned – were 'I hope you find what you need'. God how she wished *she* could be what Anni needed. She was so afraid to go home and find that Anni had left. But Jasmin already knew she was gone. She felt the anguish in her soul like a debilitating punch to the gut.

"Good." Katrin patted Jasmin on the shoulder, oblivious to her daughter's inner turmoil.

Jasmin caught Sophie's eye over Katrin's shoulder. She shook her head at the questioning look, mouthing 'later'. Right now, she had to concentrate on this upcoming meeting.

# The Planning

(Part 4)

JASMIN SAT IN her shop trying to decide which designs to choose for her presentation. Two weeks have passed since Anni left - *since I set her free*, Jasmin thought wearily – and she was absolutely miserable. Not a moment went by that she didn't question – and regret – her decision. The *only* thing that was keeping her sane is getting ready for this meeting with Kiara Adler. Even that was barely successful.

There were many times when Jasmin would pick up the phone, prepared to beg Anni to come back to her. But what good would that do? Things would never change if Anni refused to talk, or if she couldn't determine what made her run every time things became difficult. The relationship is doomed despite the love Jasmin had for Anni. So, instead of calling - as Jasmin truly wanted to do - she would make a silent wish on her ring, kiss it gently, and then lay it back on the dresser where it stays.

Jasmin bit her lip, trying to keep her tears from falling. She couldn't cry. Not here, not now. At home, when she lay in bed alone, that's when she let the tears come. It kept her from sleeping, but Jasmin was okay with that. When she *did* fall asleep, she would have nightmares about Anni finding someone else. It terrified her that Anni could be happy and open with another woman.

"What is wrong with *me*?" Jasmin wondered aloud. What was it about her that made everyone leave? Was she really that unlovable? Tears threatened again, and Jasmin forced herself to get back to work. *Use your time wisely*, she ordered. If - no *when* - Anni came back, Jasmin wanted her to be proud of what she had accomplished. Anni was the reason *Tussi Attack* existed. The tough love Anni had given Jasmin had driven her to be creative again. And, it turned out to be extremely good for Jasmin, as well as her confidence in herself.

The bell over the door chimed, and Jasmin felt her heart rate pick up. When Katrin walked in, she had to bury her pain and disappointment. *I need to stop thinking Anni is just going to come back to me. Why should she?*

"Katrin? Were we scheduled to meet?"

Katrin lifted the coffees she had in her hands. "No, but I thought you could use a break. You've been working yourself ragged."

Jasmin gave her a small, grateful smile. “Thank you.” She accepted the cup and took a careful sip. The burn of the bitter liquid was welcome as it took her mind off of the emotional hurt she felt. Jasmin pushed her sketchbook towards Katrin. “I’ve been going over these, trying to select the items I think will impress Ms. Adler. I even came up with a couple new designs.”

Katrin flipped through a few pages, taking in the illustrations. “Are these the ones you’ve picked?” she asked, indicating the bright sticky-notes that ‘bookmarked’ certain pages.

“Yes. They range from fun and flirty to urban chic. I think they’re a good representation of *Tussi Attack*.”

Katrin nodded thoughtfully. Jasmin knew Katrin didn’t understand or even agree with the direction she went with *Tussi Attack*. But at least she was getting better at not showing her disapproval. The chime sounded again, and again Jasmin cursed her jumping pulse. *It’s not her*, she admonished even before looking up to see their new visitor. When she did glance up, she was inexplicably captivated by the woman that walked in.

She was stunning. Tall with long, golden-brown hair that fell past her shoulders, and shimmered in the sunlight. The hair framed a perfect face with flawless skin, high cheekbones, a regal nose, and full lips that held a hint of a smile. Even from where she was standing, Jasmin could see the woman’s eyes – framed by long lashes - were a fascinating shade of green. The way the woman carried herself spoke of confidence and maturity, but her eyes held enough mischief to make it impossible for Jasmin to determine her age.

“Ms. Flemming?”

“Yes?”

“Yes?”

Both Jasmin and Katrin spoke in unison, making the newcomer’s smile grow, exposing straight, white teeth.

“Jasmin Flemming,” the woman clarified.

Her velvety voice tickled Jasmin’s senses. Shaking the feeling off, she made her way to the woman.

“I’m Jasmin Flemming.” She extended her hand in courtesy, slightly surprised at how soft the other woman’s skin was in comparison to a firm handshake.

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“Kiara Adler. I’m very pleased to meet you.” The ever-present smile was genuine, and Jasmin was sure she had imagined a flicker of interest behind those emerald eyes.

“Oh!” Caught completely off-guard, Jasmin let her hand drop lifelessly to her side. First, she hadn’t expected this meeting to be so soon. She could have sworn she still had a couple of weeks to prepare. Second, she would have thought the CEO of a large, prestigious company, such as *Frida*, would be dressed in something more businesslike than the form-fitting jeans, and loose, sheer white shirt that exhibited her black bra “I . . .”

“Ms. Adler,” Katrin spoke up, clearly sensing her daughter’s distress. “Katrin Flemming.” They shook hands briefly. “I’m sorry. We must have gotten our dates mixed up. I thought we were supposed to meet you in a couple of weeks.” Katrin began to dig out her phone in an effort to make sure she wasn’t going crazy.

“No mix-up,” Kiara’s words held a hint of amusement, however, both Jasmin and Katrin somehow knew there was no malice behind them. “I’ve found over the years that you get to know the true character of a person when you do the unexpected.” Kiara turned her attention to Jasmin. “You would have been prepared, perhaps overly so, if I had decided to keep the original date. This way, I get to see a few things. A,” she ticked off on her long, elegant fingers, “how you work under pressure, B, what you will choose to show me *without* overthinking it, and C – the most important one – how you will cope with working with someone like me,” she finished with an almost self-deprecating grin.

It was the childlike grin that snapped Jasmin out of her catatonic shock. Flashing Kiara her own best smile, Jasmin squared her shoulders and walked back to the counter. With courage she didn’t know she possessed, Jasmin tossed a smile and a ‘come on’ over her shoulder.

Katrin, however, was not as accommodating. This was an important meeting for *both* her and Jasmin. Being prepared meant success in her book. It was something her business depended upon. “I must insist on the time we . . .”

“Katrin, it’s fine,” Jasmin interrupted gently. “I’ve got this covered if you need to get back to the agency.” She turned to Kiara to explain. “Katrin is starting her own advertising agency.”

“Ah. A daunting task.” Kiara studied Katrin curiously. “However, I have no doubts you’ll do just fine. Good luck.”

Katrin was struck mute for a moment. Being observed by the intelligent eyes was nerve-wracking at best. She also knew that she was being dismissed by Jasmin. While that hurt – after all, she was the one that secured the meeting – she understood Jasmin’s need to do this on her own.

“Right. It was nice to meet you, Ms. Adler. Jasmin, I’ll call you later.” With a tense smile, Katrin left.

Kiara’s lips stretched into an entertained smirk. “Overprotective mother?” she ventured.

“New development,” Jasmin murmured, staring at the door with a bemused look on her face. Suddenly remembering she had a visitor – a very important visitor – Jasmin gave Kiara an apologetic smile. “Sorry, yes, Katrin is my mother. It’s complicated. I’ll call her later and apologize.”

“Apologize?”

“She’s the one that got me this meeting. I’m sure she’s not happy that I asked her to leave.”

Kiara tilted her head, studying the beautiful woman in front of her. Jasmin had surprised her. She wasn’t sure what she had been expecting, but this young, vibrant – gorgeous – woman wasn’t it. *Don’t go there, Kiara.* There was a story there between Jasmin and Katrin. It surprised Kiara that she was interested in knowing what that story was. Hell, she was interested in knowing quite a bit about Jasmin. *Get your head back into the business.*

“She didn’t get you this meeting, Ms. Flemming. Your mother may have gotten in touch with my assistant, but I do not agree to a face to face without doing my own research. I did my due diligence with you.”

Jasmin was delighted. And, then completely ashamed. There was no telling what Kiara found. So many negative things have been said about Jasmin, she couldn’t imagine what Kiara thought of her now.

Kiara caught the look of humiliation. “I researched *Tussi Attack*, Ms. Flemming. I’m here to check out your designs, not judge you for whatever you’ve done in your life.”

Jasmin blew out a relieved breath. “Thank you. It’s not that I’ve done terrible things . . .” she paused, thinking of the sex tape she had uploaded in a moment of utter stupidity and desperation. Her mouth clicked shut. *Better to stay quiet.*

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With a slight nod, Kiara decided not to ask more personal questions, for now. “May I ask how you came up with the name of your business?”

“Ah.” A light blush graced Jasmin’s cheeks. “My . . .” *My what? Fiancée? Anni wasn’t hers anymore, was she?* “My girlfriend at the time gave me the idea.”

*Girlfriend? Well, that’s an interesting development.* And, something Kiara did not want to think about right now, no matter how much she disagreed with herself. She smiled. “It’s catchy. And, what made you choose this style?”

“Again, my, um, ex. She’s a musician,” Jasmin answered a bit uncomfortably. It would be fine if she knew what Anni was to her anymore.

Kiara lifted a curious eyebrow. “Rocker chic,” she nodded, glancing around her. “Along with fun and sassy. It was a good decision.” Gesturing to the sketchbook on the counter that separated them. “Show me your designs, Ms. Flemming.”

“Please, call me Jasmin, Ms. Adler.”

“Alright,” Kiara agreed with a sexy grin. “If you call me Kiara.”

Jasmin blinked. “Right.” Jasmin was nervous. More nervous than she thought she would be. But Kiara Adler was intimidating. She glanced up at the woman that stood a couple inches taller than herself. *You can do this, Jasmin.* “I don’t have samples to show you,” she said nervously, then caught Kiara looking around at the many pieces she had displayed. Jasmin closed her eyes, embarrassed, and tried to gather her wits.

Kiara chuckled softly. “Relax, Jasmin.”

“I don’t have *all* of the samples I wanted to show you,” Jasmin corrected.

“That’s okay. I can work with sketches.”

Jasmin turned the book towards Kiara, opening it to the first design she bookmarked. There was no time for her to second guess her decisions now. “I have this one on display,” she said, pointing to the wall behind Kiara.

“How about you show me what you didn’t mark.” Kiara’s eyes twinkled.

“But . . .”

“Jasmin, when people choose what to show me from their design book, they inevitably go for the designs they *think* I want to see. I don’t want you to do that. I want you to show me what *you* like.”

Jasmin hesitated, but only for a moment. Before she could talk herself out of it, she turned to the back of the book. To her new designs. “These are new,” she explained, showing Kiara drawings of more edgy designs. They were inspired, of course, by Anni. Her aching heart guided her hand, and what



emerged was a darker side of *Tussi Attack*. She glanced up, trying to gauge Kiara's reaction, but the woman's face was unreadable. "I know it's not what *Frida* is known for. When I was younger I used to design more sophisticated clothing, but . . ."

"But people change?" Kiara offered. "I know I have. When I first started *Frida* I thought Couture was what I had to do."

"Started? You're the owner?"

Kiara nodded. "I am. Of course, I was young and impressionable. I took the advice of board members, and other advisers in this industry, and made it 'posh and expensive'." She tapped a pale pink tipped fingernail on Jasmin's illustration. "I'm at a point in my life now where I've decided to do what *I* want. That includes making designs like yours available."

"You're interested in *Tussi Attack*?" It was almost too good to be true. Jasmin didn't want to celebrate prematurely, but she could almost taste triumph. It only took one second of thinking about telling Anni to deflate her excitement.

Kiara saw the light in Jasmin's eyes dim. Something told her it had nothing to do with business. "I wouldn't be here if I wasn't, Jasmin. I had already made the decision to invest in *Tussi Attack* even before meeting with you. These new designs only solidify my choice." She knew she was playing with fire with what she was about to suggest. But it wasn't going to stop her. "How about I buy you a cup of coffee, and we can discuss terms?" She then noticed the coffee cup sitting just on the corner of the counter. "Or, lunch," she laughed softly.

The light came back, if only just a glimmer, as Jasmin laughed with Kiara. "Lunch would be great, thank you."



THE NEXT COUPLE of weeks were a whirlwind for Jasmin. Kiara had taken Jasmin under her wing, working closely with her, and showing her the ropes. Jasmin was beyond grateful. She highly enjoyed spending time with Kiara, finding the older woman to be extremely easy to talk to, as well as fun to be around.

Her nights, no matter how long they were or how exhausted she was, were still lonely. She still missed Anni with every fiber of her being. So, it was a welcome distraction when she and Kiara worked into the wee hours of the morning, sitting on the floor, sharing a pizza, and discussing everything from

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business to fashion to celebrity gossip. There were subjects that were avoided, however. Whether that was deliberate or not, Jasmin didn't know. But she didn't know anything personal about Kiara, and Jasmin stayed away from discussions about Anni.

The bell above the door jingled, and for the first time in the past few weeks, Jasmin didn't wonder if it was Anni. She looked up and smiled warmly at her visitor.

"Hey!"

"Good morning, Jasmin," Kiara returned Jasmin's smile. "I come bearing gifts." She held up a holder with two cups of coffee, and a bag of goodies was tucked between her arm and body as she held on to a binder.

"Yum! I'm starving," Jasmin scooted around the counter, grabbing the bag to help lighten Kiara's load. She immediately dug, picking out a chocolate frosted donut.

Kiara grinned at Jasmin who had completely become enthralled in donuts, failing to notice that Kiara still had her hands full. "Good?"

"Mmhhh." She turned to thank Kiara, finally noticing her mistake. "Oh my gosh, I'm sorry!" She chuckled sheepishly. "I told you I was starving," she repeated, taking the coffees. "What's that?"

"First of all, the coffee on the left is yours. Just how you like it." Kiara's stomach jumped a little when Jasmin beamed at her. "Second, this," she held up the binder, "is a list of stores that will be carrying *Tussi Attack*, along with numbers, and all that business stuff."

"Wow." It was still hard for Jasmin to believe this was actually happening to her. Part of her was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Or, perhaps that happened when Anni left, and this was her life now. It was bittersweet. A mixture of sorrow and happiness that felt almost bi-polar. "How long before the items are stocked?"

"The factory will be sending out shipments starting tomorrow." Kiara was busy sorting through the goody bag, looking for a plain, glazed donut, missing the shocked expression on Jasmin's face.

"Tomorrow?" Jasmin squeaked.

Kiara abandoned her search, focusing her attention on Jasmin. "Yes. Are you ready for this?"

Jasmin plopped down on the stool she had behind the counter. She pressed a hand to her forehead, suddenly feeling extremely overwhelmed. “I don’t know.”

“Hey.” Kiara reached over, taking Jasmin’s hand in hers, deliberately ignoring how good that felt. “Everything is going to be fine. Jasmin, this is a good thing.”

“What if it fails?” *What if I can’t handle the pressure? God, why can’t Anni be here? How am I supposed to do this on my own?*

“Have faith in your designs, sweetheart.” The endearment just slipped out, shocking Kiara. With effort, she schooled her emotions, continuing as if she called everyone sweetheart. “If you start to feel like it’s too much, just remember I’m here.”

The tears that were threatening suddenly dried up. Jasmin’s lips quivered slightly, but she managed to give Kiara a small, but grateful, smile. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Kiara slipped her hand away from Jasmin’s. Away from temptation. Only to find herself about to put temptation back into the forefront. “Have dinner with me? We can celebrate you being one step closer to a household name.”

Given her options of dinner with Katrin or going home to an empty room, dinner with Kiara sounded divine. “I would love that.”



JASMIN SPOTTED KIARA almost immediately as she walked into the trendy sushi restaurant. She had seen this place many times but had never been inside. Anni wasn’t much for going on dates, so unless they went to a club with deafening music – which Jasmin loved most of the time – they usually stayed in. Besides, from what she’s heard of this place, it was quite expensive.

“This is amazing,” Jasmin said as soon as Kiara stood, gesturing to the chair in front of her. Jasmin took her seat, then looked around again. The establishment was decorated richly in an Asian motif that was both relaxing and exhilarating at the same time.

“You look lovely tonight,” Kiara said with a hint of uncharacteristic shyness. Jasmin’s flower print dress was modest, yet sexy. Or perhaps it was just Jasmin that made the dress sexy. *Stop it*, Kiara chastised herself.

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Jasmin didn't seem to notice Kiara's slight embarrassment as she smiled widely. "Thank you, so do you." Kiara had changed from her jeans and t-shirt of the beginning of the day into a pair of black slacks, and a pale green blouse that brought out her eyes. "Thank you for inviting me. I know you probably have better things to do."

Kiara opened her mouth to answer just as their waiter showed up at their table. She held up a finger, indicating for him to hold on for a minute. "I should have asked you before, but do you enjoy sushi?"

"Love it! Though I've never been here, so I'll need a moment to scan it."

"Good. Would you mind terribly if I ordered for us?"

"Oh! Not at all."

Kiara nodded happily. "White wine okay?" At Jasmin's nod of approval, Kiara ordered. "Two glasses of white, and a sushi boat, please."

The waiter scribbled down the order, letting them know he would be right back with their drinks. He left, giving Kiara an opportunity to get back to their earlier conversation.

"In answer to what you said before, no. I don't have anything better to do. I enjoy spending time with you, Jasmin. You're intelligent, funny, talented . . . " she paused again as the waiter came back, setting two glasses in front of them. He scurried away again, and Kiara lifted her glass, touching it to the rim of Jasmin's wine before bringing it to her mouth. "Beautiful," she murmured.

The quiet word caused Jasmin's heart to race, her palms to sweat, and her tongue to become tied. She had been flirted with before, of course. However, something in Kiara's eyes made this entirely different. Jasmin didn't think she was ready for that, yet.

"May I ask you a personal question?"

Kiara blinked, switching gears in her head. She had expected Jasmin to say something or to be uncomfortable with her compliment, but instead, Jasmin chose to ignore it. "Of course."

"How old are you?"

Kiara, unfortunately, was in the middle of taking a drink when the question was spoken. It took a great amount of effort *not* to spray her dinner companion in the face. She quickly swallowed, and let out a bark of laughter. "*That's* your personal question?"

Jasmin smirked, prominently displaying her dimple on her right cheek. “Yes. I tried looking you up,” she confessed. “But I didn’t find anything with your birthday, and it’s driving me crazy trying to guess.”

“No one carries my birth date because I’m a private person. So tell me, what is your guess?” Kiara teased.

Jasmin studied Kiara intently, relishing the fact that she could make the normally formidable woman squirm. “Well, with your success I have to believe you’re at least in your thirties. But you don’t look like you are.”

Kiara was overly pleased with Jasmin’s assessment, yet almost sorry that she would have to give up her real age. *Too old to be thinking of you the way I do*, she thought cynically. “I’m thirty-eight, though if you tell anyone that I will deny it. Aging is a model’s worst enemy. Even an ex-model.”

“Hmm.”

Kiara got nothing more from Jasmin than that as the waiter sidled up to their table with their food. She didn’t know whether ‘hmm’ was a good or bad thing, but the small smile gave her a thrill.



KIARA CLASPED HER hands in front of her as she walked Jasmin back to her apartment. Many times she had to catch herself before placing a hand on the small of Jasmin’s back. Or brushing Jasmin’s knuckles with hers as they walked side by side. There was a comfortable silence between them, each lost in their own thoughts. For Kiara, dinner had been quite delightful. She couldn’t remember the last time she had enjoyed someone’s company so much.

Despite Jasmin’s age, she was able to hold a conversation covering various topics with ease, without making Kiara feel ‘old’ as others had tended to do. It was an occupational hazard in her industry, and Kiara being an ex-model, she’d had to learn to deal with it. She was beyond relieved not to have to go through that with Jasmin.

“This is me,” Jasmin announced, gesturing to the building in front of them. She was disappointed that the night was coming to an end. Dinner with Kiara had been fun and enlightening. It had been such a different experience than with Anni. Hell, it had been a different experience than with anyone Jasmin had been with. Kiara listened intently to everything Jasmin had to say and took her seriously. Kiara never once made Jasmin feel immature or stupid. In fact,

## Committed

Jasmin felt like an equal to this very successful business woman. It definitely gave her self-confidence a boost.

Kiara tilted her head, looking up at the building. "I'll walk you up." She held up a hand, cutting off Jasmin's denial. "After that dinner, I could use a few more steps."

Jasmin laughed softly, making a show of checking Kiara out. "I don't think you have anything to worry about." Her eyes widened as she considered what she just said. *Did I really just flirt with her?!*

It was Kiara's turn to chuckle. She contemplated teasing Jasmin for the innocent flirtation but thought better of it when she could see the blush even in the low light. "That's only because I work at it," she revealed. "Like walking a beautiful woman up a couple flights of stairs at the end of the night." *I can flirt, too, Ms. Flemming.* She signaled for Jasmin to walk ahead of her.

Jasmin's blush deepened, and she ducked her head, leading Kiara upstairs to her apartment. *Should I invite her in? Is that too forward? Will she think I want more? Do I?* Her head was filled with confusing questions, and before she realized, they were standing in front of her door.

"So . . ."

Kiara smiled gently at Jasmin's obvious indecision. "Thank you for indulging me, and coming to dinner with me," she said softly.

Relief and disappointment battled each other in Jasmin's heart. "Thank you for asking. I had a wonderful time."

"As did I. Sleep well, Jasmin. Tomorrow is a big day for you."

"For *us*, hopefully. I want *Tussi Attack* to be good for *Frida*, and for you."

Kiara was flattered. Most people in this business were in it for themselves. They only cared what Kiara could do for them. "I have faith that this will be an amazing pairing for both of us," she told Jasmin sincerely. "Goodnight, Jasmin."

Kiara didn't think, she just acted. Before she could stop herself, she leaned in, gently kissing Jasmin on the cheek. She heard the soft gasp of surprise, then felt Jasmin's hands resting on her hips. Slowly she pulled back, taking in Jasmin's closed eyes, the quickening of her breath. Perhaps later she will regret this moment and wonder what made her think it was okay. Or perhaps this one moment would be the one she would remember forever. With that thought, she brushed Jasmin's lips tentatively with hers.

Jasmin's senses were on overload. The feel of Kiara's lips, so gentle and soft, took her by surprise. Yet, she couldn't deny how her body responded. Kiara's tongue skimmed her lips, and Jasmin answered by opening up to her. As soon as their tongues met, a jolt went through her, and she pushed Kiara away.

"I can't do this."

Kiara turned away. *Stupid*. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"Kiara?" Jasmin waited until Kiara faced her. She saw a flash of hurt in those verdant eyes, but it disappeared fast enough that Jasmin wondered if she imagined it. She sighed softly. "I'm in love with someone else."

Kiara nodded. "Your ex-girlfriend? The rocker chick?"

"Yes. But I'm not sure if she's my ex." Jasmin sighed again. She should invite Kiara in so they can both get comfortable for this conversation. But Jasmin wasn't sure that was a good idea considering the circumstances. Instead, she opted to sit on the top step of the stairs.

Kiara hesitated. Was she sure that she wanted to hear Jasmin talking about loving someone else? *Don't be an idiot. You're friends. It's better to have her in your life as a friend than not at all*. She sat down next to Jasmin, bumping her slightly. "Tell me."

And, so, Jasmin did. They sat there until their asses were numb, but Kiara listened to every single fear, every single worry, and brushed away every single tear.

"I'm sorry," Jasmin sniffled.

Kiara dug around in her purse until she found a pack of tissues. "Don't be," she said, offering the pack to Jasmin.

Jasmin dried her face the best she could, hoping against hope she didn't have the puffy, red eyes, and blotchy skin. "I am. I never want to hurt you, Kiara."

The older woman smiled kindly. "Jasmin, you are the kind of woman I could see myself . . ." she stopped. *Don't tell the woman that just confessed to being in love with someone else that you could fall for her*, Kiara scolded herself silently. "I can't compete with love."

"If it were really love for Anni, she would have called me. We haven't spoken for weeks."

## Committed

“I don’t know Anni apart from what you’ve just told me, Jasmin. But I know how hard it is to change who you have been your entire life,” Kiara offered, making Jasmin snort with humor and aggravation.

“I know how hard it is.” Jasmin looked up at Kiara, her eyes clear now. “I was straight when Anni pursued me.” Kiara’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “It was a stupid bet. Anni was so sure she could get me in bed within a certain time frame. I was so sure I would win that bet, but as time went on it scared me to realize that I wanted it. She won.” Jasmin shook her head. “And, I fell in love with her, heart and soul. It hasn’t been easy. Our relationship has run the gamut from blissful to downright ugly. It shouldn’t be this hard, Kiara.”

“Jasmin, you’re both young. I’m assuming Anni is around your age?” Jasmin nodded. “You’re both trying to find out who you are. That’s going to put a strain on any relationship. But love is worth the fight. What you both need to figure out is if you want to grow together, or grow apart.”

Jasmin stared at Kiara for what seemed like endless moments before speaking. “You are so good for me. Why can’t I . . .”

Kiara pressed a finger to Jasmin’s lips. “Don’t. The one that is good for you is the one that holds your heart. That isn’t me. If you decided to be with me now, you would be settling for something less. I don’t want that for you. And, Jasmin, I don’t want that for me.” Another tear ran down Jasmin’s cheek, and Kiara caught it with her thumb. “Call her.”

“I’m afraid,” Jasmin whispered.

“Of what?”

“I’m scared she’s moved on. I’m scared that she’s happy with someone else. I’m scared to find out if she’s screwing around with different women every night.” The last confession made Jasmin feel nauseous. How could she survive that? And, what kind of hypocrite did it make her when she was just kissing another woman. Yes, she stopped it, but she still responded to the kiss. And, she liked it. A lot.

“Fear is a useless emotion, Jasmin. Imagine the things you miss if you stand at your door, afraid to take that first step. The sunrise, nature, beauty,” she said, tucking a strand of hair behind Jasmin’s ear. “Your soulmate. All of that is out there, but you will never experience it unless you let go of that fear. You’ll never know the answers to your questions about Anni unless you take that first step.”

“She hasn’t called me either,” Jasmin pointed out. Perhaps it was childish, but it was true nonetheless.



“Whatever is holding Anni back from opening up to you is keeping her from making that step. It may not be fair, but you could be the one that takes that step for both of you.”

“And, what if she can’t do this with me?”

“Then at least you will know if you need to walk away, or if it’s worth taking the journey together.”

Jasmin inhaled a long, calming breath, letting it out slowly in hopes it would quiet her nerves. “I’m sorry about earlier. I don’t want to lose you, Kiara,” she said suddenly.

Kiara frowned. “Do you think you think I’m going to terminate our agreement just because you won’t sleep with me?”

Jasmin gasped. “What! No! I meant I don’t want to lose *this*,” she waved her hand back and forth between them. “I couldn’t care less about the agreement right at this moment. It’s just been a long time since I’ve been around someone who understands me. I can’t lose that.”

There was a hint of desperation in Jasmin’s voice that tugged at Kiara’s heart. *There is so much there under the surface with you, Jasmin. What happened to you?* “I’m not going anywhere. And, if Anni was smart – which I have to assume she is since she fell for you in the first place – but if she was smart, she would fight like hell to get you back and keep you. Because I promise you, if she screws this up, I’m stepping up,” Kiara grinned. She stood up and dusted off her slacks before holding a hand out to Jasmin. “Call her. Take that step. And, if you need me, you know where I am. Goodnight, Jasmin. For real this time.” Kiara tossed a wink over her shoulder before disappearing down the stairs.

Jasmin let out a little laugh. “Take that step,” she repeated. “Easier said than done.” Nevertheless, Jasmin brought out her phone, pressing the first, and only, name in her favorites list before she could chicken out.



“ANNI!”

Anni ignored the bellowing of her name, scrolling through picture after picture of Jasmin on her phone. *Why haven’t you called?* She frowned when she couldn’t figure out who she was asking the question of. Had she expected Jasmin to call as she normally did after cooling off?

## Committed

Every time Anni hovered over the call button, she could never just pull the trigger and do it. Why? Was she afraid Jasmin wouldn't answer? Or was she afraid Jasmin *would* answer, but she would hear a difference in her voice? What if she has moved on? *Get real, Anni. It's only been a few weeks. Jasmin wouldn't do that. She loves you.*

"She also broke up with your sorry ass," she muttered as she scrolled past yet another photo.

"Dude! I've been calling you."

Anni didn't have to look up to know who was there. Richelle Kruse or "Cruz" as she was known, slid down the wall next to Anni. She was one of the few women on tour with the group, and had chosen Anni to be her new 'best friend'. Anni was pretty sure she knew the motivation behind it, but whatever.

"I'm busy."

Cruz scoffed, snatching Anni's phone from her hands. "Busy doing what?" She looked at the cell, eyebrows hiking up to her hairline. "Damn! She's fucking hot! Who is she?"

"Don't worry about," Anni snapped, trying to get her phone back. Cruz scrambled out of Anni's reach, standing up. Anni was irritated, but she would be damned if she let Cruz know something that personal.

She studied the other woman with a bored expression. Cruz was the total opposite of Jasmin. She was attractive enough, in a rocker chick kind of way, with her bleached, spiky hair, and pixy face. But she wore too much makeup for Anni's taste, and there was one huge problem with her. She *wasn't* Jasmin.

"Hmm. Ex?" Cruz flipped through a couple more photos, sporting a cocky smirk. "Man, what the hell did you do to lose this one?"

"What makes you think *I* lost *her*?" Anni asked bitterly.

"Please. What woman in their right minds would kick this hottie to the curb?" Cruz looked up to see Anni glaring at her. She slipped Anni's phone into her back pocket, then held up her hands in surrender. "Woah, okay. Forget I said anything. You know what you need?"

"I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"I am. You need to go out, get drunk and have some wild sex. That will help you forget Miss Thing here."

"You offering?" Anni asked sarcastically. Getting drunk and having wild sex was *not* what Anni needed. Unless it was with Jasmin.

Cruz snorted. "I was thinking you should find a stranger. Or two. But I'm willing to sacrifice if that's what you want."

"It's not."

"Oh, come on. You know I don't want a damn relationship. What's wrong with having a little fun while we're out here touring?" She toed Anni's boot with hers. "I guarantee I can make you forget your sorrows."

Anni *almost* considered it. Since she had left to 'chase her dreams', she had been miserable. She had isolated herself from most of the crew, opting out of the frequent parties and outings. Anni had vowed to herself to figure out why she couldn't open up to Jasmin, but there was always some excuse not to think. That excuse was usually drinking beer by herself in her room. Cruz was not what she needed. Sex was not what she needed. Anni had tried to use sex many times with Jasmin in order to take Jasmin's mind off of talking – or anything else. *That* she was good at. And, Anni knew she couldn't use that anymore if she wanted a long, lasting relationship with the woman she loves.

"You're awfully sure of yourself," Anni responded dryly.

"I am," Cruz agreed readily. "I may not be great at a lot of things, but drinking and sex? I've mastered that."

"I don't think that's something to be proud of."

Cruz shrugged, not insulted in the least. "You do this long enough," she gestured wildly, and Anni knew she meant touring, "you realize that relationships are shit. The only thing you can count on is that there will always be booze, and there will always be someone willing to be 'the one' for the night."

Well. If that wasn't depressing, Anni didn't know what was. What good is a successful life without someone there to share it with? Not a different stranger every night, but someone who really knew you, and could be genuinely happy for you.

"*I'm an idiot*," Anni grumbled to herself.

"Huh?"

"Nothing, talking to myself."

Cruz shrugged again. Anni was beginning to think it might be a nervous twitch or something. "Whatever. I'm going to the club. There's a really great one here. Full of women that just love throwing themselves at rock stars. Even the crew."

## Committed

“Sounds great,” Anni replied distractedly. She was now focused on what she had to say and do to get Jasmin back. Yes, that meant *talking*, and yes that will be hard, but Jasmin is worth it. She was so consumed by her own thoughts that she didn’t hear her phone ringing, or recall that Cruz had taken the phone away from her.

“Yeah?” There was a long pause at the other end, and Cruz checked the cell to see if the call had dropped. “Hello?”

“Who is this?”

“The woman that’s about to get laid. Who’s this?” There was no mistaking the dropped call that time. “Weird. Oh shit! This isn’t my phone. Um, Anni, some chick called for you.”

Anni’s head snapped up. “What?” She rewound the last couple of minutes in her head. She hadn’t been paying close attention, but she still heard what Cruz had said to the caller. “Oh God!” She clambered to a standing position, lunging for Cruz. “Give me my fucking phone!”

“Calm down! Here.”

*Please don’t let it have been Jasmin. Please, please, please.* It was the one and only time she wished that. Unfortunately, her pleas weren’t heeded, and Jasmin’s name came up as the last call. “Fuck!” It took Anni a couple of tries to hit redial with hands that were shaking violently. She cursed again when it went straight to voicemail. “Jasmin! Jasmin, please call me back. It’s not what you think! Baby, please, I swear it’s just a misunderstanding!” She hung up and tried again with the same results. “Goddamn it, Cruz!”

“Hey! It was an honest mistake!”

“Mistake? Mistake! I swear if you fucked things up for me with Jasmin . . .” After another attempt with the end, Anni seriously considered throwing her phone at Cruz’s face. *I’ll call Ayla. Or Elena. One of them can talk to Jasmin, and get her to talk to me*, she planned silently. When her phone buzzed and rang in her hand, it scared the shit out of her and she yelped. “Jasmin!”

“Andrea?”

Anni looked at the phone as though it grew legs. “Mom?”

“Andrea, you need to come home.” There was an urgency in her mother’s voice that Anni had never heard before.

“Mom, now is not a good time. I have to get back to . . .”

“Your father is sick.”

Anni sucked in a deep breath, a little shocked at the pain in her chest those four words caused.

“I’m sure he doesn’t want me there, mother. He would probably just blame me for making him sicker.”

“Andrea, you need to come home before it’s too late. Make amends before he . . .”

“Mom? What’s really going on?”

“Your father had a stroke, Andrea. They don’t think he’ll recover.”

Anni could hear the tears and panic in her mother’s voice, and she was torn between racing to *her* home to find Jasmin or going home to say goodbye to the father that hated her. God, she wished Jasmin was with her. She had never needed her as much as she did at this moment.

“I’ll get there as soon as I can.” She ended the call, tears threatening to spill over. *I can’t do this alone. Please, Jasmin. Please talk to me. I need you.*

# The Planning

(Part 5)

“FUCK, MAN!” ANNI threw her phone on the hotel bed, causing it to bounce off the other side. No one was answering their damn phones, and she still couldn’t get ahold of Jasmin. She grabbed her duffle from the closet, tossing clothes in it as she went, not bothering to fold them. Anni was leaving tonight, the tour be damned. She wasn’t even going to bother talking it over with the band. As far as she was concerned, she did enough by telling Cruz in passing that she was quitting.

She started planning in her head as she packed her shit up. Get a train, a taxi, pick up her car, beg Jasmin to go with her if she has to, explain what happened with Cruz while they were on their way to her parents, find out what’s going on with her dad, and then fix what she screwed up with Jasmin. Of course, all of that sounded simple in her head. *I can do this. I have to*, she brooded as she felt tears well up. *I can’t lose Jasmin.*

Anni was going to have to face her biggest fears, laying them all out for the woman she loves. It was worth it, right? Being on tour, having her freedom had taught her a lot. Mainly that success means nothing without someone to share it with. She wanted that someone to be Jasmin. The more time she spent alone, the more she realized how good Jasmin was for her. She was an amazing woman, and if Anni ever thought she could do better than Jasmin Flemming, she was dead wrong. She would fight any foe to keep Jasmin in her life, even her own demons.

Anni took a quick look around, deciding that whatever she left, she could live without. She retrieved her phone, hitched her duffle onto her shoulder, strapped her guitar around her, and walked out of the room, off tour, and into the unknown.



KIARA EASED HERSELF onto her couch, exhaling a long, somber breath. She set down her glass of wine just in time to be bombarded by a small black and white kitten. “Hey there, Figaro. Come to keep me company?” Kiara picked

the little furball up, holding him in the palm of one hand. “Why do I do this to myself, hmm?”

“Mew?”

“Yeah, I don’t know, either.” She peered into the eyes of her cute, little companion. The kitten yawned widely, letting out a little squeaking sound. “That about sums up my love life,” she chuckled wistfully. Figaro wriggled impatiently until he was let go, then scampered off to do whatever kittens do.

Kiara picked up her wine, sipping delicately. *Thirty-eight years old, and still looking for ‘The One’*, she thought bitterly. Everyone thought she would have no problems finding someone to be with. Problem was, Kiara was actually looking for love, not some insignificant fling. She had been told she was too choosy. However, no one really understood that being who she was, made it much harder to find a genuine woman. A woman like Jasmin.

“Damn it.” She swallowed another mouthful of wine, savoring the slightly acidic flavor on her tongue. *Another night alone with a good book*. It wasn’t so bad, really. At least she had Figaro . . . wherever he went. Kiara grabbed her book, and tucked her feet under her, ready to lose herself in some mindless lesbian romance.

A loud, urgent knock pierced the quietness of her apartment, startling Kiara. “Who the hell could be here at,” she checked her watch, “eleven at night?” Standing, she tightened the belt of her robe around her. Glancing out of the peephole, Kiara’s annoyance turned into surprise as she opened the door an extremely agitated Jasmin.

“Jasmin? What are you mmph!” Kiara’s words were forcibly cut off as Jasmin’s mouth crushed down on hers. White hot desire coursed through Kiara’s veins, burning even hotter when Jasmin’s hands frantically pulled at Kiara’s robe. It took every ounce of her willpower to still Jasmin’s hands, and push her away. “Whoa, whoa. What’s going on? What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk,” Jasmin panted, trying to reach for Kiara again, but stopped by the firm grip on her wrists.

Kiara somehow found enough brainpower to kick the door closed, while managing to keep Jasmin’s wandering hands immobile. She didn’t know if she would be able to deny her craving for Jasmin a second time.

## Committed

She searched her mind for what could possibly bring the young woman here in this state. When she had left Jasmin, she had been contemplating calling her girlfriend. *Obviously, the phone call didn't go well.*

"Jasmin, tell me what happened."

"I thought you wanted me, Kiara. I'm here, giving myself to you. Does it matter why?"

The question angered Kiara. Of course, it mattered! At least it did to Kiara. Knowing it didn't to Jasmin was a slap in the face. She spun Jasmin around pushing her against the wall, pinning her hands securely above her head. "You look me in the eye, Jasmin, and you tell me that you won't regret this in the morning. If you can do that, I will take you into my bedroom and fuck you until you forget everyone else's name but mine," she promised, passion and ire making her voice low and dangerous.

Jasmin swallowed hard, lowering her eyes from the stormy jade ones fiercely staring her down.

"No!" Kiara transferred both of Jasmin's hands into one of hers, using the other to lift Jasmin's chin. "Look at me, and tell me you won't regret this!" When Jasmin remained silent, Kiara let her go, pushing away from her. "That's what I thought."

Jasmin watched Kiara run a trembling hand through her hair. It shamed her that she had come here, toying with Kiara's emotions just because she was pissed off at Anni. "I'm sorry."

"Does it ever work for you?" Kiara asked quietly.

Jasmin's brows furrowed in confusion. "Saying sorry?"

"Meaningless sex."

Those two softly spoken words burned Jasmin to the core. "It wouldn't have been meaningless," she argued.

Kiara finally turned to face her. "Yes, it would have. For you. I won't allow you to do that to yourself."

Jasmin was stunned. "What do you mean?"

Kiara shook her head. "Come sit down."

Jasmin followed her into the spacious apartment. Unable to focus on her surroundings, she allowed herself to blindly be led to a large, comfortable couch. She felt Kiara nudge her, and she dutifully sat down. Every nerve was shot to hell, and Jasmin didn't know whether to cry, yell, or beg Kiara to do exactly what she had promised earlier. She could say she wouldn't regret it. But



would that be true? She didn't want to lie to Kiara. Not after everything she's done for her.

"I'll get us some water." Kiara picked up her wine glass and headed towards the kitchen.

"I could use one of those," Jasmin called after her, gesturing towards the wine.

"Alcohol is not a good idea. For either of us."

Jasmin watched as Kiara disappeared, wondering if she just fucked everything up with her. Not the contract, but the friendship. She knew Kiara was attracted to her, and if she were honest with herself, Jasmin felt the same way. But she was in love with Anni. *Fuck Anni*. She swiped angrily at the tear that escaped just as Kiara came back into the room.

"Here. Drink this and take these." Kiara handed her a glass of water and two aspirin.

"How did you know I had a headache?"

Kiara shrugged. "I always get them when I'm upset. I figured if you didn't have one yet, we could prevent it."

Jasmin swallowed the aspirin, drinking down half of the glass of water. "Thank you." She regarded the older woman silently. Kiara looked emotionally tired. *That's my fault*. "What did you mean when you said you wouldn't let me do that to myself?"

Kiara sighed deeply, taking a seat next to Jasmin, but far enough where she wouldn't be tempted to touch her. "What happened with Anni?" she asked, effectively avoiding the question.

Jasmin laughed mirthlessly. "She's screwing someone else."

Kiara's eyebrows raced towards her hairline. Surely Anni wasn't *that* stupid. "She told you that?"

"She didn't have to. The woman answered Anni's phone. When I asked who she was she said, and I quote, 'the woman that's about to get laid'."

*Ouch*. "So, you didn't talk to Anni at all?"

"I'm sure she was busy," Jasmin answered bitterly.

*I can't believe I'm about to defend a woman I don't even know and miss out on being with Jasmin*. Kiara sighed again. "There could be a perfectly good explanation, Jasmin."

"Are you serious?" Jasmin would never think Kiara would be that naïve.

## Committed

“Yes. Look, you obviously know Anni better than I do. Does this seem like something she would do?”

“Fuck other women? Yes.”

“Let them answer her phone, especially when it might be you, and say something like that,” Kiara clarified.

Jasmin hesitated. “I don’t know anymore,” she confessed. “I would have said no before, but since I set her free . . .”

Jasmin’s voice cracked, and tears pooled in her eyes. Kiara wanted nothing more than to take Jasmin in her arms and hold her tight. “Meaningless sex is a punishment to you, not Anni.” It was an observation rather than a question. “You weren’t looking to get back at Anni, you were looking to hurt yourself because you blame yourself for what you *think* happened.” Kiara put emphasis on the word think because she still couldn’t believe someone would be so stupid as to cheat on Jasmin.

Jasmin stared at her for a long moment. “It has to be me,” she whispered finally. “Everyone I’ve been in a relationship with has cheated on me.”

Kiara felt her anger begin to surface. *Assholes. Every single one of them.* “That’s not on you. It’s their fault.”

“I’m the common denominator, Kiara. I’m unlovable.”

“That’s bullshit!” Kiara uttered with vehemence.

Jasmin shook her head sadly. “I’m damaged. I’ve always known that. I don’t know why I thought . . .”

“Stop.” Kiara took a gamble and reached for Jasmin’s hand. “That’s why you use sex to punish yourself,” she ascertained. “It’s what you’re used to.”

Jasmin’s eyes widened almost comically. “How?”

“I used to be the same way,” Kiara answered matter-of-factly. “Whatever you went through, Jasmin, that doesn’t make you damaged goods. You’re a beautiful person, inside and out. Believe me, you’re the least unlovable person I know.”

“Tell that to Anni,” Jasmin muttered.

“Give her a chance to explain,” Kiara countered. “I have been cheated on many times myself. It fucks with your head enough that when you do find that one person who truly loves you, you can’t seem to trust fully. The accusations come, the communication goes, and you find yourself sitting home alone with a kitten who has better things to do, a glass of wine, and a good book.” She smiled wanly. “Did she try calling you back?”

"I turned off my phone. I'm not ready to talk to her, Kiara. I don't think it's a good idea knowing how I feel inside."

Kiara nodded amiably. "Does she know you've been hurt before?"

Jasmin hadn't told Kiara about her past. It unnerved her that the woman just seemed to have sensed there was something there. "Not all of it, no."

"Maybe you should tell her," Kiara suggested.

"I was going to. She's just not the type that likes all the emotional talk. Which is odd considering she writes music that is pretty emotional."

"Then perhaps she's capable but scared? Jasmin, you love Anni. The least you can do for yourself is talk to her face to face, without accusations, and see what happened. You'll never have to think 'what if.'"

"Maybe," Jasmin conceded. "I'm too tired to think about that right now. I think all of my adrenaline has evaporated."

"You can stay here if you like? No strings attached," Kiara added quickly.

"I'm sorry about before." Jasmin turned her hand that Kiara was still holding, palm up, linking her fingers with the long, graceful ones. "That was completely insensitive of me."

Kiara gave her a wry shrug. "Can't say I minded being kissed like that from you. Just do me a favor, don't do it again unless you can go through with it without regrets." She smiled, softening the harshness of her words.

Jasmin smiled too, wondering how Kiara made her want to smile even when she was feeling so much turmoil inside. "Deal." *Sleep now, turn on the phone tomorrow, maybe take Anni's phone call, and deal with stores stocking Tussi Attack. It was a terrifying list of things to do, and Jasmin found herself hoping she was up for the challenge. Especially with Anni.*



JASMIN WOKE UP in a bed that was not hers. Her head hurt, and she could feel the puffiness around her eyes. She was disoriented for a moment before it all came back to her. Rushing over here, throwing herself at Kiara, being rejected (which hurt), talking, crying, more talking, and more crying. Kiara had been amazingly sweet, and surprisingly familiar with the emotions Jasmin had felt most of her life. Kiara didn't offer any insight into her past, and Jasmin didn't ask. She was loath to bring up something that may be painful for her friend.

## Committed

“Good morning.”

Though the words were spoken softly, Jasmin flinched. Realizing she wasn't alone, she pulled the sheets to her chin. Her eyes landed on Kiara, who was sprawled on an over-sized chair near the only window in the room.

“Good morning.” Jasmin glanced around the room. *Was this Kiara's room? Did she give up her bed for me?* “Did you sleep there all night?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Kiara, I could have slept on the couch. You didn't . . .”

“It's okay,” she interrupted gently. “Did you sleep well?”

Jasmin blushed slightly. “Yes. Your bed is incredibly comfortable.”

Kiara grinned, looking beautiful even after spending the night taking care of an emotional Jasmin and sleeping in a chair. It almost wasn't fair. Jasmin self-consciously pushed a hand through her hair, which probably looked like a bird's nest. *And, I'm sure it goes perfectly well with my puffy, make-up stained face.*

“You look beautiful,” Kiara said, seemingly reading Jasmin's mind.

Jasmin scoffed at the tender sentiment. “I look terrible.”

Kiara shook her head, tossing the blanket off of her. Jasmin blushed again, taking in the short shorts and tight-fitting cami. In the weeks they have spent together, Jasmin had never seen her wearing anything less than long pants and loose-fitting shirts. *No wonder she was a model.*

“You'll feel better after a shower,” Kiara declared, oblivious of the scrutiny she was receiving. “My clothes may be a little long for you, but they should fit fine.” She picked up a pile of clothing from her dresser and set it on the foot of the bed. “I think I got everything you need. There are towels in the bathroom, and I set out a spare toothbrush for you. If you need anything else, just yell for me.”

“Kiara,” Jasmin called out before the other woman walked out of the room. Kiara turned back, an eyebrow raised in question. “Thank you. For everything.”



“SO, HERE IS the list of stores that will be getting shipments of *Tussi Attack* today. I know it doesn't look like much, but this is just the beginning.”

Kiara slid a printed piece of paper containing an alphabetized catalog of boutiques. Five were highlighted in fluorescent yellow, others were labeled with expectant delivery dates, and the rest were stores they would be campaigning

to win over. It was all very overwhelming, but Jasmin was determined to show only gratitude to the CEO, who was now all business. A far cry from the woman she saw after her shower. Jasmin had dressed in her borrowed clothes – which were a couple of inches too long - and padded out to find Kiara cooking them breakfast, dancing to music that pumped out of unseen speakers. The woman was full of surprises, and not for the first time, Jasmin found herself wondering why the former model wasn't already taken.

“Doesn't look like much? Kiara, this is amazing! I can't thank you enough for all you've done to help me.” She got an uncharacteristically shy – and quite endearing - smile in return.

Though they had busied themselves with preparations as soon as they got to the shop, Jasmin couldn't keep her mind off of Anni. She had turned her phone back on during breakfast, immediately besieged with countless missed calls, and voicemails from Anni. She hadn't been able to listen to them out of that 'useless' fear. Instead, she put her phone in the back room to charge and tried to concentrate on the tasks before her. It wasn't exactly working, but she was trying.

The intense conversation with Kiara the night before reminded Jasmin how much she genuinely missed the musician she loved deeply. She just wasn't ready to talk to Anni.

“Jasmin?” Kiara waved a hand in front of Jasmin's stoic face.

Finally, the young designer blinked, bringing the still slightly unfocused eyes to Kiara's. “Hmm?”

“You were a million miles away. Where did you go?”

Jasmin's attention finally clicked into place. “I'm so sorry! I just . . . I – ”

“Anni?” Kiara guessed.

Jasmin lowered her eyes apologetically. Here this woman was, helping her make her clothing line successful, sacrificing her time in order to make sure Jasmin was ready, and Jasmin was caught daydreaming. She willfully left out the part where Kiara was attracted to her – and vice versa. It just complicated things even more.

“Hey.” Jasmin felt the pressure of Kiara's finger beneath her chin and looked up. “You don't ever have to be sorry for the way you feel. Especially about someone you obviously adore. Have you talked to her yet?”

## Committed

Jasmin shook her head sadly. "That's what I was thinking about. I just don't know if I'm ready. I'm afraid if I hear her, or hear about this other woman, I'm going to go off."

"Come here." Kiara took Jasmin in a warm embrace. "Give yourself a couple of hours so you don't say something you'll later regret. Harsh, emotional words don't help anyone."

"Who the fuck are you, and why do you have your hands on my fiancée?"

Jasmin stiffened in Kiara's arms. Elation and fury battled each other as Anni's angry words hit her. First, Anni was there. For weeks she had hoped and prayed that every time the bell chimed, Anni would be the one to walk in. How fitting that she didn't even hear the chime this time. And, that's where the fury came in. How dare she barge in here, spouting off at the mouth when she was God knows where doing God knows what!

Kiara felt the tension in the air, and in an effort to defuse the situation, she turned to face their new visitor.

"You must be Anni," she stated mildly, hoping Anni would understand that the hug was strictly platonic. *Mostly platonic*, she thought wryly.

"Great. You know who I am. Now tell me who the fuck you are, and why you're groping what's not yours."

"Anni!"

"Jasmin," Kiara interrupted gently. "Do you think you could get those new designs you were working on? I think you left them in the back."

Jasmin wanted to argue. Hell, at this point, she didn't care who she was arguing with, she just wanted to yell at someone. Which is why she nodded tersely, turned on her heel, and got the hell out of there. Kiara had been right. She was too worked up, and would most likely say something she would regret later.

Anni made a move to follow Jasmin, stopping abruptly when the tall, beautiful woman stepped in front of her. It pissed her off. She didn't care how hot the woman was, she was standing between Anni and the love of her life.

"Get out of my way," she snarled.

Kiara stood her ground. "Why don't you give her a few minutes." She smiled at Anni's glare. "Do you think you intimidate me?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Kiara Adler." Kiara politely held out her hand, chuckling lightly when Anni ignored her. "I'm helping Jasmin get her brand into stores."

*Oh, shit! What if I screwed this up for Jasmin? Wait, why the hell was she hugging this woman?* “Do you always get so handsy? Or is that your payment for ‘helping?’” Kiara surprised her by laughing.

“I hug my *friends* when they’re having a hard time,” she allowed. “Jasmin and I have been working together for a few weeks now. I care for her.”

“You want to sleep with her, you mean.”

“Yes,” Kiara admitted honestly. “But I’m not the type of person that stands in the way of love.” She lost her smile, pinning Anni with a serious stare. “Get your head out of your ass, Anni. That woman in there loves you, but you’re going to lose her for good if you don’t change things.”

“What the hell do you know about any of this?” Anni’s anger faltered because she knew what the audacious woman was saying was true. It hurt that Jasmin was confiding in someone new, but could she really fault her for it?

“Enough to know that if you screw up again, I won’t back down another time,” she promised. Anni’s face fell, and Kiara couldn’t help but feel bad. “Anni, listen to her. *Talk* to her. Whatever you’re scared of, I assure you, losing someone like Jasmin is worse. You know that, don’t you?”

Anni didn’t answer. Inside she was seething that this stranger had more insight into her girlfriend’s state of mind than Anni did. Of course, she had no one to blame but herself. Doesn’t mean she had to like this woman throwing herself into their lives.

“What are you doing here?”

Both women turned to find Jasmin standing close by. Her eyes were rimmed red, and Anni’s heart dropped. She hated hurting her lover. As much as she loathed admitting it, this Kiara chick was right. It was time to stop being selfish.

“I tried calling you.”

“I’m not ready to talk to you yet.” From the corner of her eye, Jasmin saw Kiara retreat, giving them space. Part of her was grateful for the privacy. Another part of her wanted to feel the security she had started to feel when Kiara was around.

“Jasmin.”

“I’m sorry, Anni, but . . .”

“My father is dying, Jasmin.” Anni felt the shock of that all over again. It was the first time she had said it out loud, and it was still hard for her to believe.

“What?”

“My mom called me in the middle of me trying to phone you back. She said it was a stroke.” Anni shuffled her feet a little and started picking at a non-existent piece of fuzz on her shirt. She knew the fashion lady was still there, and it was making her really uncomfortable to feel this vulnerable in front of a stranger. “She wants me to come and make amends before it’s too late.”

Jasmin’s heart went out to Anni. She followed her first instinct, and went to Anni, wrapping her in her arms. “I’m so sorry.”

Anni sank into the embrace. This was home to her. *This* is what she was missing the past few weeks. “I need you to come with me,” she murmured into Jasmin’s hair. “I can’t do this alone.”

Jasmin froze. Of course, she wanted to go and support Anni. But spending four hours in a closed space with someone she was upset with? *‘There could be a perfectly good explanation, Jasmin’*. Kiara’s words filtered through her doubt. Kiara. Shit! They still had work to do to get *Tussi Attack* to the rest of the boutiques on their list. Jasmin couldn’t just take off. *Anni needs me. What do I do about my obligations?*

“I – I don’t know if . . .” She pushed away from Anni a little, catching the anguish in her expression.

“I traveled all night to get here, Jasmin,” Anni said quickly. “Mom wanted me to go there right away, but I couldn’t. Please? Look, it’s a long drive. We can . . . talk. I’ll explain the misunderstanding. You can tell me what’s been going on here.” She looked pointedly at Kiara, who continued to look busy doing whatever she was doing. “Please?” she pleaded again.

“It’s not that I don’t want to go with you, Anni. But my *Tussi Attack* campaign has just started. I don’t think I can leave now.” Jasmin chanced a brief look in Kiara’s direction. After all of their hard work, how could Jasmin abandon her line *and* Kiara and take off?

“Go, Jasmin,” Kiara said tenderly. “I’ve got things covered here.”

“Kiara, that’s not your job.”

The former model gave her a droll smile. “I’ve done this long enough to know what my job is, Ms. Flemming. I also know that family trumps business. Every time. Go.” Kiara’s expression told Jasmin there was no use in arguing.

Jasmin nodded. She didn’t think she would have been able to concentrate anyway if she had stayed. Anni would have constantly been on her mind. “Thank you. I just need to get my things from the back.”



Both women watched her go with interest. One would fight to get her back. The other would sacrifice her own happiness in order to keep Jasmin happy.

"Thanks," Anni muttered. Even though she really was grateful the other woman pushed Jasmin to go, she couldn't get her warning out of her head.

"I didn't do it for you," Kiara assured her. "I did it for Jasmin. Use this opportunity wisely, Anni."

Before Anni could respond, Jasmin hurried out. "I need clothes."

"We'll stop by the apartment and get the car, too."

Jasmin agreed with a slight nod. "Thank you, again." She called to Kiara on their way out. "I'll call you."

"Don't worry about anything, Jasmin. Just concentrate on what you're going for. Be careful." She smirked before tossing out, "Nice to meet you, Anni."



"NICE CLOTHES," ANNI remarked. "Are they new?"

Jasmin looked down at herself, totally forgetting that she had borrowed some of Kiara's clothing. "Um, no." She didn't offer anymore, grateful that Anni didn't press her. If it came down to it, Jasmin would tell Anni the truth. For now, she didn't feel the timing was right.

The rest of the walk to the apartment was made in awkward silence, making both women sad. It had been such a long time since they've felt uncomfortable with each other. Jasmin wanted it to end, but couldn't bring herself to say any words. Anni was too afraid to find out if Jasmin had moved on while Anni was gone.

"Do you need help? I wanted to go to the store, and get a few things for the road."

Jasmin eyed Anni warily. "No. I'll just pack a bag really quick. I'll meet you at the car." She paused, clearing her throat. "Do you need me to get you anything from the room?"

Anni perked up slightly. At least Jasmin hadn't moved her out of their room while she was gone. "Maybe some clean underwear?" She shrugged sheepishly. "Laundry day was supposed to be tomorrow. And, maybe some shirts?"

Jasmin's lips twitched. "Okay."

## Committed



JASMIN STUFFED THE last of her and Anni's clothes in a bag, grunting a little as she fought to close the zipper. She had no idea how long she would be gone, but she was determined to stay for as long as Anni needed her. Estranged or not, she loved Anni and did not want her to have to go through this alone.

A glint caught Jasmin's eye from the dresser. She hoisted the bag and trudged over to the sparkle. Her ring sat there innocuously. One of the first things she noticed when she first saw Anni was she was still wearing her ring. The thought of that made Jasmin's heart light with hope. With a small smile, she picked up her ring and slipped it in her pocket.

Anni was leaning against the car by the time Jasmin made it back down. She hastily pushed away from the car, taking the overstuffed bag from Jasmin's hands.

"Thanks." Jasmin rolled her shoulders. *Four hours. Hopefully, it won't be this awkward the entire way.*

"I really appreciate you coming with me. I got us some licorice and drinks." Anni threw the bag in the hatch, then rushed over to open Jasmin's door for her.

Jasmin paused before getting in, looking Anni in the eye. "I want to be there for you," she said softly, then slid inside the car.

Anni closed the door and took a deep breath. *Four hours. Hopefully, I don't screw this up. Shit, hopefully, I haven't already screwed this up.*



THEY HAD BEEN on the road for at least thirty minutes, and neither one had enough courage to start a conversation. Every once in a while, Anni would fiddle with the radio, only to have her hand slapped away, and be told to keep her eyes on the road. Strangely enough, it made Anni feel a little better to know Jasmin was still doing things with her she normally did.

Jasmin waited for Anni to start talking. She had made that first step by calling her the night before – *Jesus, was it really just last night?* Now it was Anni's turn. However, as time passed, she began to wonder if Anni was hesitating because something really did happen with whoever it was that answered her phone.

Anni waited for Jasmin to begin asking her questions. She knew she had to explain what happened last night, but she was more interested in what was happening with the fashion lady that had been holding her woman earlier. As time went on, Anni became increasingly agitated not knowing exactly how this Kiara Adler fit in Jasmin's life.

"Did you sleep with her?" they both asked at the exact same time.

They glanced at each other not knowing whether to giggle, weep, or be infuriated.

"You first," Jasmin insisted. "Who answered your phone, and did you sleep with her?"

"Her name is Cruz, well that's her nickname," she began to explain. "And, no, I didn't sleep with her."

"Why did she have your phone?" Though she was trying to give Anni the benefit of the doubt, her reluctance to believe her was filling the car with even more strain.

Anni sighed hearing the accusation in the words. "She found me sitting around, looking at my phone. She took it from me, and started making fun of me." She risked a glance at Jasmin who was frowning. "I was looking at pictures of you," she told her self-consciously.

The confession charmed Jasmin, but it didn't explain why this Cruz person answered Anni's phone or said what she said. "I need more, Anni."

Anni took a deep breath, letting it out slowly between pursed lips. "I've been pretty pathetic on this tour," she disclosed. *God, this is hard.* "When the band would go out to party, most of the time I wouldn't go. I kind of separated myself from the group. Cruz is one of the only other women in the crew, and she sort of made it her mission to figure out what was wrong with me."

Jasmin wanted to ask if *Cruz* wanted more than that, but Anni was finally talking.

"Before you called, after she saw your pics, she thought I should go out with her, and . . . forget about you," she finished in a low voice.

"By having sex with her?" Jasmin finally asked.

"No. Well, not at first. She's all about finding someone new each night, or each city. She thought I should find some stranger to 'help' me."

"Charming," Jasmin muttered.

## Committed

Anni shrugged. “She doesn’t think relationships work in that line of work. Thing is, she was saying all this shit, and all I could think was how pathetic it all sounded. If I’m going to be successful in life, no matter what I’m doing, I would want that one person that really got me to be there for me. I would want to be able to come home to someone that loves me for me, and forever. Not someone who will love me for the night because I’m ‘with the band’. That one person is you, Jasmin.”

It was the most open Anni had ever been with Jasmin. Besides the songs Anni had written for her, Anni was usually very sparse with her words. The last time she had said something so romantic and loving had been when she had asked Jasmin to marry her. Touched, Jasmin wiped a tear from her eye. She wanted to trust that Anni wasn’t with anyone else those weeks she was away. Could she? And, after what happened with Kiara, could Jasmin really condemn her if she had?

“You just happened to call right when I was thinking how much of an idiot I had been,” she continued, interrupting Jasmin’s thoughts. “I forgot she had my phone. Apparently, she did, too. She answered it thinking it was hers. *She* was going out whether I went or not, and that’s why she said what she said. But it wasn’t going to be with me.”

Jasmin took in everything Anni had said. *‘There could be a perfectly good explanation’. I guess Kiara was right. However, . . .* “Has there been anyone else, Anni?”

“No,” Anni answered immediately. “I won’t lie and say there hasn’t been temptation. But when it all came down to it, no one was you.” Anni brought up her hand still adorned with the ring Jasmin gave her. “I never took it off, Jasmin.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

Anni thought about that for a moment. “Pride,” she answered finally. “And, fear. I thought you would call me when you weren’t upset with me anymore. When you didn’t, I was afraid I had blown it, and I didn’t want to hear the reality of that.”

Anni’s candor shocked Jasmin. It certainly left little room for doubt. She believed in her heart that what Anni had just told her was the truth.

“Your turn,” Anni said, a hard edge creeping into her tone. “Did you sleep with that woman at your shop?”

She would be candid with Anni. She deserved nothing less. “No.”

“But?”

“I was close,” she said quietly.

Anni gripped the steering wheel so tight, her knuckles turned white. She pressed her lips together to avoid saying anything she wouldn’t be able to take back. And, to keep the bile down that was threatening to come up.

Jasmin felt the tension coming off of Anni in waves. “It was last night when I thought you were . . .”

“So you thought you’d get back at me by sleeping with her?” Anni spat.

“Not you.”

Jasmin responded with such sadness that Anni felt chills cover her body. *We have so much to talk about*, she thought sorrowfully, and hoped like hell she wasn’t too late. She didn’t think she could survive losing Jasmin’s heart to another woman.

# *The Planning*

*(Part 6)*

“WHAT DO YOU mean?” Anni whispered. There was so much sorrow filling the air, she felt she couldn’t catch her breath. She didn’t understand it. And, when she didn’t understand things, she had a tendency to become belligerent. That’s not what Jasmin needed now, and Anni fought to keep her emotions in check.

“I mean,” Jasmin began, just as quiet. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I thought you had already moved on. I was dying inside, Anni.” She stopped. Was this really a conversation to be had in a car, on the way to possibly say goodbye to Anni’s father? Then Jasmin thought of how open Anni had just been with her. It was more than she had ever expected, or even hoped for. But to get to the point where Anni would understand what she meant, she had to tell everything. “Did you know that I used to . . .” she swallowed, hesitant to actually say the words out loud to someone she wanted to be perfect for.

“Used to what, Jasmin?” Anni asked after several silent moments.

“Cut,” she managed finally. When Anni’s eyebrows furrowed, she clarified, “Myself.”

Anni sucked in a sharp breath, swerving a little when she turned to look at Jasmin. She fought to find something to say to that, but what do you say to someone you love who just told you they used to hurt themselves? “Why?” she whispered.

Jasmin shrugged even though she knew Anni wasn’t looking at her. How do you explain something like that? Especially to someone who didn’t understand your past? She took a deep breath, holding it for a moment, then letting it out in a steady stream. “You know there’s something in my past.”

Anni nodded slightly, alternating looking at Jasmin and watching the road. She was torn. Part of her wanted to pull over, take Jasmin in her arms, and give Jasmin her full attention. She just didn’t know if that would be accepted by Jasmin at the moment.

“We haven’t talked about it,” Jasmin continued, looking out the passenger window. She hated this. Hated that it affected her. Hated what it had done to her, and how it made her feel about herself. Most of all, she hated that after all

is said and done, Anni may not look at her the same. Even if Anni didn't blame her, would there still be pity? "Mostly because I just want to forget."

"What really happened, Jasmin?" Anni asked quietly. She wanted so much to hold Jasmin's hand, but she still didn't know what they were to each other anymore. *I'm still her friend if nothing else*, Anni thought. With a trembling hand, she reached for Jasmin's, twining their fingers together. To her relief, Jasmin didn't pull away. Her heart beat a little faster when she felt a faint squeeze.

"I didn't know Katrin was my mother until a few years ago. At first, I thought she was my sister." She risked a glance at Anni. Her brows were furrowed, but she remained quiet. "She had left when I was little, and then Child Protective Services came in and took me away from the person I *thought* was my mother. I was then adopted by the Nowaks." Jasmin felt the bile rising in her throat, and slipped her hand away from Anni to grab a bottle of water.

Anni had felt the cool, clamminess of Jasmin's hand before she pulled it away. Whatever was coming was going to be hard to hear. She couldn't imagine how it was going to be for Jasmin to say.

"Take your time," Anni encouraged softly. *I should have known this stuff. I should not have been a damned coward about my feelings and talked.* "I'm listening, Jasmin." *And, after this, I'm not going to hold back from you anymore.*

Jasmin took another long pull of water. Even though she was driving, Anni was being very attentive. Holding her hand, squeezing it every once in a while, rubbing her thumb across Jasmin's hand in a loving manner. It was how Jasmin always hoped Anni would be when Jasmin told her story. She just wished it hadn't taken a break up, an almost mistake with Kiara, and family tragedy to sit down and actually talk.

Jasmin sighed. "When I was fourteen, my foster father . . ." her voice broke, and she felt Anni's hand take hers again. She cleared her throat. "He began sexually abusing me." Anni's hand squeezed hard. It would have been painful if Jasmin weren't already feeling the pain of the memory. "I won't go into details. I can't. But it only got worse when I got older. When I turned sixteen he raped me."

"*Jesus.*" Anni couldn't stand it anymore. She couldn't just keep driving while Jasmin's heart was bleeding. Anni craned her head, looking for a place to pull over.

"What are you doing?"

## Committed

“Pulling over.”

“Please don’t. I don’t know if I can keep going if you do,” she continued hastily at Anni’s sharp look. “I’ll break down, Anni, and I need to get this out. Plus, we need to get to your dad.”

Anni blew out a frustrated breath. “Can I at least pull over for a minute? I . . .” Unfortunately, she thought about the tall woman in Jasmin’s shop, with her arms around Jasmin. It was *Anni’s* job to comfort her fiancé, not some stranger. “I just want to hold you. Just for a minute,” she pleaded.

Jasmin nodded mutely. The need in Anni’s voice matched the need in her heart. It had been so long since they’ve seen each other, much less touched. She didn’t know if her and Anni’s relationship was repairable, especially after what happened with Kiara, but she had hope.

Anni finally found a quiet, private place, and she pulled off the road. She was nervous. More than nervous, and that shocked her. She and Jasmin had been together for over a year, had been through so much. And, yet now it felt as though she didn’t really know the woman sitting next to her. Despite that, Anni’s love for Jasmin never wavered.

“Come here.” Anni awkwardly reached for Jasmin across the console. “This isn’t very comfortable is it,” she murmured once Jasmin was in her arms.

“Actually it comforts me quite a bit.” Jasmin smiled genuinely for the first time when Anni squeezed her.

“I had no idea.”

Anni’s breath caressed Jasmin’s ear, making her shiver. She had always wanted – needed – this kind of closeness with Anni. Although she knew they still had a lot of things to talk about, namely Anni’s issues, this was like a soothing balm to Jasmin’s soul.

“You couldn’t have known. Not many do.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Anni.” Jasmin pulled away slightly. “We’ve never had these types of talks. It’s just not who we are.”

“Were,” Anni stated with certainty. “That may not have been who we were, but that changes now.” Though it hurt her heart to ask, she couldn’t help herself. “Does she know?”

Jasmin frowned in confusion. “Who? Katrin?”



“Kiara.” The name tasted sour coming from her mouth, and Anni fought the urge to grab the bottle of water to wash it away. When Jasmin lowered her eyes, Anni got her answer and pulled away. “You told her.”

“Technically, she guessed,” Jasmin corrected softly. She hated that Anni was hurting because of something that happened out of anger and despair. “Anni, I love you. When I thought you were with someone else . . .”

“I got it the first time. You went to Kiara to sleep with her,” Anni snapped. She knew in her heart she shouldn’t be acting this way, but it hurt. It hurt like hell to know that Jasmin could be with someone else.

“This is why we never talk, Anni.” Jasmin pulled even further away, turning to face the windshield. “You’re always so quick with an insult, or get so angry before letting me explain things to you.”

“How am I supposed to feel, Jasmin? I find you in that woman’s arms today, and then you tell me you almost slept with her!”

“Can you stop saying that, please! I know what happened, I was there! *I’m* the one she pushed away!” Jasmin’s eyes slammed shut. She hadn’t meant to say that, knowing it would only hurt Anni more.

“That’s the only reason you stopped?”

The agony in Anni’s voice ripped Jasmin’s heart out. “I was angry, Anni. I thought you were sleeping with someone else.” She took a breath. “She told me to tell her that I wouldn’t regret it. I couldn’t. *That’s* what stopped me.”

Anni stared ahead, not saying anything. Just as Jasmin thought she wouldn’t say anything, she spoke.

“I’m sorry.”

Jasmin couldn’t believe her ears. Anni rarely apologized, especially if she thought she was being wronged. And, even though they were broken up, Jasmin still felt she had wronged Anni.

“I have no right to get upset with you,” Anni continued, lifting a hand when Jasmin opened her mouth to argue. “I don’t. You broke up with me, and it was my fault. You’re an amazing woman. I shouldn’t be surprised that others would be lined up to be with you.”

“It wasn’t like that, Anni.” Still, Jasmin blushed a little at the compliment. She appreciated the fact that Anni was trying to understand and take some of the responsibility for their problems. “I wasn’t looking for anything, and neither was she,” she said, opting not to say Kiara’s name again for Anni’s sake.

## Committed

Anni nodded, still not really understanding. Perhaps if Jasmin finished what she needed to say, she would be able to comprehend everything better. “Will you tell me more about your past?” she asked, wincing inwardly when Jasmin’s eyes suddenly clouded with pain.

“Can we start driving again? You really need to get to your dad.” Anni nodded sadly, and Jasmin couldn’t help herself. She slipped a hand behind Anni’s neck and pulled her close. “No matter what happens, I’m here for you,” she whispered against Anni’s lips, then brushed them lightly with hers.

It was a chaste kiss, but Anni felt it deep in her soul. She needed to curb her jealousy. She could do that for Jasmin. She wanted - *needed* - to be the one Jasmin could turn to. Once they were both settled, Anni carefully pulled back onto the road.

Jasmin struggled to find a way to get back to a place mentally where she could continue talking about her hurtful past. She wished she could take a simple way out, but she owed it to herself, and to Anni, to finish.

“What did you do after he . . . hurt you,” Anni asked carefully, giving Jasmin a place to begin again. “Did you tell someone?”

“I ran away. I told child services that I wanted to go back to the person I thought was my mother.”

“Who was she really?”

“My grandmother. Katrin’s mother.”

Anni shook her head, mumbling something that sounded like ‘unbelievable’. Jasmin knew she wasn’t doubting her just that the story was hard to believe. Jasmin couldn’t argue. If it hadn’t happened to her, she would find it quite incredible.

“It wasn’t an ideal situation. My mo – grandmother drank a lot. But it was better than what I endured with my foster family. It’s during that time I learned how to be a seamstress.”

“That’s when you got into fashion?”

Jasmin nodded. “It kept my mind occupied. It wasn’t until after my grandmother died that I decided to move to Berlin.”

“And, got back in touch with Katrin?”

“Mhmm. Who I thought was my sister.” Jasmin laughed a little, the sound had nothing to do with humor. “It’s so fucking ridiculous, isn’t it?”

Again, Anni reached for Jasmin’s hand. “It’s pretty crazy,” she agreed. “Can you tell me what you meant now about not wanting to hurt me? And, the

cutting?” Anni loathed thinking about Jasmin hurting herself. She was such a beautiful soul, it was unfathomable that someone could hurt Jasmin. Including herself. Anni took a moment to recognize that *she* had hurt Jasmin more than once, and she hated herself for it even more so now.

“I – I thought of myself as unlovable.” Jasmin’s voice shook as much as her hand did. “I would find someone to have sex with, not because I wanted it, but because I was punishing myself.”

“Why did you need to be punished?” Anni asked incredulously. If *anyone* needed punishment, it was those who hurt Jasmin.

“I played a lot of ‘if only’. If only I could have been strong enough to stop him. If only I didn’t look the way I did. If only my foster mother had loved me enough to protect me. If only my *mother* would have loved me enough to acknowledge me.”

“None of that was your fault, Jasmin. You were just a child.”

“It never feels like that when it’s happening to you. You think about all of the things you should have done differently. Maybe if I had been a good girl, I wouldn’t have gotten hurt.” A tear trickled down her cheek, and she angrily swiped at it.

“Oh, Jasmin. Baby, it wasn’t your sin. It was theirs.”

Jasmin sniffled. She knew – mostly – the truth of that now. But she still had those fears of being unlovable.

“Maybe.” It was a very non-committal answer, she knew, but it was all she had. “Anyway, it was why I punished myself. Having sex with strangers made me feel a mixture of being wanted and being nothing. I hated myself. I had no way of getting all of those emotions out. They would build up inside until I felt like I was suffocating. When I would cut myself, it felt like those emotions were able to escape. When I saw the blood, felt it running down my arm, I could breathe just a little.”

Anni didn’t know what to say. She didn’t think there was anything *to* say. Jasmin didn’t need words to placate her, she needed someone to listen. Of course, she couldn’t help but wonder if Jasmin’s new friend was able to give her the words Anni couldn’t. Or the understanding that Anni couldn’t possibly possess.

“I love you.” It was all Anni had that offered any kind of comfort. The truth.

## Committed

Jasmin felt the truth in those words, but as thinking about the past usually does, she suffered from insecurity. “Then why can’t you talk to me? Why do I always feel like I’m not enough?”

“Oh, baby! You *are* enough! More than. Most of the time I feel like you’re *too* good for me.”

Jasmin’s head whipped around to stare at Anni. “What?”

Anni shrugged self-consciously. “It’s true.”

“That is so . . . Anni, how could you even think that? You’re the most amazing person I know.”

Anni gave her a small smile. “I’m glad you think so. That’s all that matters to me.” She squeezed Jasmin’s hand, bringing it to her lips for a light kiss.

“Can you tell me why you feel that way?”

Anni’s eyes widened. She should have been prepared for this. The entire time she was traveling the night before, she knew this moment would come. She had told Jasmin that they would talk as a way to get her to come with her. But thinking about it, and actually doing it were two totally different things.

“Y-yes,” she stammered.

Jasmin turned in her seat as much as her seatbelt would allow. “This really scares you doesn’t it?”

Anni nodded.

“Why? You should know that after everything I’ve been through, I’ll understand.”

Anni shrugged again, and Jasmin could feel the dampness on her hand. *She’s sweating. God, she really is panicking.*

“Do you know why I haven’t pressured you into talking?” Jasmin asked, not unkindly.

“Because you know I’m a coward?”

The self-deprecation was strong, and it caused Jasmin to frown.

“Because you were having nightmares,” Jasmin corrected. “I tried holding you, whispering to you that it would be okay. Once you were in my arms, you would begin to relax. But I couldn’t bear bringing it up after those nights. I was scared. For you having anxiety about it, and for me. You’ve accused me of being clingy many times before. Maybe I am,” she confessed. “But I have never loved anyone like I love you, and it scares me to think I could lose you.”

Anni glanced at Jasmin longer than was considered safe before bringing her eyes back to the road. “You mean that.”

It wasn't a question, but Jasmin heard the wonder in the words. "Of course I do. How could you even question that?"

"Because no one has loved me that much," Anni confided, her voice almost childlike.

"That's not . . ."

"Please don't say it's not true. I thought my parents would love me unconditionally. But as soon as they realized I wasn't what they thought of as 'normal', well, you know how that went."

"They still love you, sweetie. They just don't understand."

Anni let the endearment wash over her. It had been months since she's heard the sentiment from Jasmin, and she cherished it. "Not enough," she muttered.

It was then that she understood that the two of them had more in common than she had realized. Jasmin felt unlovable, just as Anni did. Of course, they didn't have the same problems growing up, but the outcome was the same. Suddenly, she felt a kinship with Jasmin that she wasn't aware was missing.

"When my father caught me kissing Judith, he began telling me that no one could love me. I was too unnatural." Her breath caught in her throat, and she had to concentrate just to breathe again. *You can do this*, she chanted silently and hoped Jasmin would still love her after her tale. "I kept seeing Judith for a little while behind my father's back. I was so sure I could prove him wrong, that someone *could* love me.

"I became the clingy one. I needed her to tell me she loved me, or she needed me all the time. I needed to be with her or to know where she was if she wasn't with me. We began to fight a lot. Finally, she told me she wanted to go away to University. I told her she couldn't go. How were we supposed to have a relationship if she moved away?"

Anni's hand shook violently, and Jasmin grasped it tighter. Her heart ached for the woman she loved, but she stayed silent, waiting for Anni to continue.

Anni cleared her throat, feeling a bit parched, but was reluctant to take her hand away from its safe harbor in Jasmin's. In the end, Jasmin made the choice for her, loosening her grip to pass the bottle of water to Anni.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you okay to go on?" she asked softly.

## Committed

Anni took another drink before answering. "Yeah. I want to finish this before we get there. I don't know what's in store for me when we arrive."

Jasmin nodded solemnly. "Whatever it is, I'm right here with you," she stated, earning a tremulous smile.

Anni capped the bottle, and set it down before taking Jasmin's hand again.

"Okay." She blew out an explosive breath, then launched into the story she never thought she would ever tell anyone. "When I told Judith we couldn't possibly have a relationship with her being so far away, she told me that's exactly why she was going. She didn't want to be with me anymore. That my father was right, no one could love me because I was smothering. She couldn't breathe around me, and every day we were together, she felt like a part of her was dying."

"*Bitch*," Jasmin whispered vehemently under her breath. If Anni had heard her, she made no indication. She just continued on.

"For a split second," Anni's words faltered, and she coughed. Driving gave her a good excuse to keep a lid on her emotions, and she was thankful for at least that distraction. "For a split second, I wished she would die. That way I wouldn't have to worry about her not loving me or think about her with someone else. I know it was selfish, and I immediately regretted the thought, no matter how fleeting it was," she said hastily at Jasmin's gasp. "When she left me that night, we were still angry with each other and had said many things that shouldn't have been said. Things that we'll never be able to take back."

Jasmin watched, mesmerized as a tear slid down Anni's cheek.

"She died that night. She lost control of her car, and ran off the road."

"*Oh my God*," Jasmin held Anni's trembling hand in both of hers now, her heart aching for Anni's inner turmoil. She knew Anni blamed herself, even though it wasn't her fault. "I'm so sorry that happened. But you must know you didn't cause the accident, Anni." Jasmin prayed that her words got through to Anni, and silently apologizing for the 'bitch' comment before.

"Intellectually, I know that. But my soul will never let me forget that split second."

"Baby," Jasmin murmured, kissing Anni's hand. She wished she could offer more, but she instinctively knew Anni wasn't finished yet. Besides, words weren't going to change the sorrow in Anni's soul. Only love would do that. Jasmin could tell Anni over and over again how much she loved her. But it would take *showing* her that she was worthy of love to get past the barrier.

Anni gripped Jasmin's hand with a firm grasp, as though letting go would mean losing Jasmin. Or losing herself.

"I ran away after that," she began again, and let out a harsh laugh. It struck her, then, how ironic it was that there were so many parallels between her and Jasmin's lives. "Traveled some. Decided that one night stands were all I was capable of. It meant not having to fall for anyone who I knew wouldn't fall for me. I was fine with it. Casual sex with strangers, one night, no repeats. If it meant I would never have to go through that kind of pain again, I was all for it."

She tugged her hand free, then glided her fingers across Jasmin's soft cheek. Anni captured the tears there, wiping them dry. "Then I met you. Oh, you annoyed me so much! You were such a tussi!" she laughed a genuine laugh, causing Jasmin to laugh. It felt good, being able to let go of some of the tension, if just for a moment.

"I was not a tussi! You were just arrogant!"

Anni thought about that for a moment before nodding. "I was. Still am, I suppose. But you scared me," she said seriously.

"Scared you?"

"Mmhmm. The moment I saw you, you took my breath away. I fought it, oh how I fought my feelings. You were just so beautiful, and the more I got to know you, the sweeter I realized you were. You weren't always a tussi." Anni winked.

"Thanks so much," Jasmin said sarcastically. She chased the words with a smile, making sure Anni knew she was joking. "Why fight it? You know, even though I was with Kurt when I first met you, I felt . . . something. I just didn't know what *it* was."

"I knew," Anni confessed. "That's why I fought it. I knew I was falling for you. *That* was breaking my biggest rules! Never fall for anyone, and especially never fall for straight girls!"

Jasmin chuckled. "I'm apparently not that straight," she pointed out.

"Well, you were then!" Anni smiled when Jasmin laughed a little harder. "I didn't want to want you," Anni uttered seriously. "I didn't want to fall in love with you only to have you say you couldn't love me back."

"But I *do* love you back, Anni. I'm not pushing you away, you keep pushing me."

## Committed

“Because I’m scared! I know it’s not logical, but if I push you away for being too needy if *I* leave first . . .”

“Then you’ll be in harm’s way?” Jasmin finished for her. At Anni’s confirmation, Jasmin blew out a frustrated breath. “Anni! You aren’t to blame for Judith. And, you can’t prevent anything from happening to me just by changing the order of your past.”

“I know. It’s just . . . how do I begin to feel worthy of being loved?”

“Oh, sweetie. If you ever find out, you let me know, yeah?”

Anni had to laugh. If she didn’t, she would cry, and that would be dangerous for the both of them while she was driving. “We’re a pair, aren’t we?”

“Are we?” Jasmin asked seriously.

Anni flicked a glance over, thanking whoever was listening above that they had made it to their destination safely. She pulled into the driveway but made no attempt to get out. They needed to address this before she dealt with her parents. She unbuckled her seatbelt and turned to Jasmin.

“I want to be.”

“But?”

It hurt, so much, having to ask this question, but Anni needed to know. “Do you have feelings for this Kiara person?”

“Not like that,” Jasmin answered carefully. “I care about her.” Anni looked away, and Jasmin grasped her chin, turning her head back until they were eye to eye. “But I’m in love with you. Do you understand that, Anni? I *love* you. There is no one else.”

“We still have work to do, don’t we?” Anni asked.

“Oh yeah. But we can do it, don’t you think? We’re strong enough. Together.”

Anni reached up, taking Jasmin’s hand, and rubbing her thumb where her ring should be. “I wish you had your ring on.”

“Then put it on me,” Jasmin smiled.

“But I don’t . . .” her words trailed off as Jasmin produced the ring in her free hand. “You brought it?”

“Yes. I was hoping we would get to a point where I could wear it again.”

“Are we? At that point, I mean?”

“I think we’ve made a lot of progress today. Yes, we still have work to do, but I love you. I know I want to be with only you. If that’s how you feel about



me, and you don't think I'm too clingy, then put the ring back on me. However," she closed her hand into a fist, "if you have any doubts, keep the ring until you're sure. Don't make us go through this again, Anni."

Anni shook her head vigorously. "I have no doubts! I can't promise that I won't get into moods, but I *can* promise to talk about it now. It helped, Jasmin. Knowing more about you. Telling you more about me. I want to keep learning. I want to keep growing. With you." She gently unfolded Jasmin's fingers and slipped the ring back where it belonged.

"I want that, too." Jasmin's eyes brimmed with tears.

"*I love you*," Anni whispered, pulling Jasmin closer.

"I love you, too."

The promise that the ring symbolized was sealed with a kiss. It was neither demanding nor passionate, but it was filled with hope for the future. They both trembled as they broke apart.

"Are you ready?" Jasmin asked, gently pushing Anni's bangs out of her tear filled eyes.

"No. But with you by my side, I think I can do this."

Jasmin smiled. "I'll be here."

After a deep breath, Anni resolutely got out of the car, joining her lover. She took Jasmin's hand, and they walked slowly to her childhood home, and the father who had told her he no longer had a daughter. Was their relationship repairable? Anni stole a glance at Jasmin. Anything is possible. Right?

# *The Planning*

(Part 7)

“ANDREA.”

Anni’s mother greeted the two women in the driveway. As Anni took her mom in her arms for an awkward hug, she felt how frail the older woman had become. Since the last time they saw each other, the elder Brehme had aged significantly. Puffy, red eyes and worry lines adorned a much older face. That fact alone caused Anni to feel sorrow.

Jasmin stood quietly by, watching the interaction. She could see the uneasiness of both of them, but Jasmin was proud of Anni for being sensitive to her mother’s needs.

Anni pulled back, gesturing towards her fiancée. “You remember Jasmin?”

Mrs. Brehme smiled slightly at Jasmin. “Yes, of course. It was nice of you to accompany Andrea.”

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be, Mrs. Brehme.” Jasmin took the older woman’s outstretched hand with a sympathetic smile. “I’m just sorry it’s under these circumstances.”

Mrs. Brehme glanced at her daughter before settling her gaze uncomfortably on Jasmin again. “You can’t be in there with Andrea,” she announced shakily.

“Then we’re leaving!” Anni answered angrily. “Jasmin is my . . .” She trailed off when she felt Jasmin’s hand caress her back.

“It’s all right,” Jasmin murmured softly.

“No, it’s not, Jasmin. You came all the way here with me, and I’m not going to allow *anyone* to treat you like you don’t belong.”

Jasmin caught the faint sniffle from Anni’s mother, and from the corner of her eye, she could see the tears begin. Stepping closer to Anni, she lowered her voice. “She’s not doing this to be mean, or to not include me, sweetie. This isn’t about me. It’s about your dad. Go. Visit him, talk to him. I’ll be okay.”

“I’m sorry, Andrea. I’m not trying to be mean.” Mrs. Brehme’s hand shook as she nervously pushed a strand of hair off her face. “I know your father can hear me when I speak to him. I’m just afraid of what it might do if he hears that your girlfriend is here.”

Anni caught the slight catch in her mother's voice when she said the word girlfriend. She had thought that at least her mother had come around to being okay with her lifestyle.

"I don't want to leave you alone," Anni told Jasmin, ignoring her mother's words for the time being.

"I won't be alone. I'll be here, keeping your mom company." Jasmin smiled brightly, giving Anni a wink. "I'll be okay."

Anni sighed. She really didn't want to give in. Jasmin was her family now. It hurt knowing that her possible final moments with her father would *still* be denying herself. She wouldn't be able to tell him that she's marrying the woman she loves. How does she reconcile the fact that in the end, her father may die never accepting her? With a small nod, she took Jasmin's hand, squeezing it lightly. "I love you."

Jasmin's heart beat a little faster at Anni's loud and clear declaration in front of her mother. "I love you, too. I'll be here if you need me."

*I need you now*, Anni thought silently. She gave her fiancée a small smile before walking into her childhood home to see her father for possibly the last time.



JASMIN FOLLOWED MRS. Brehme into the house after Anni disappeared inside. Discreetly, she took in her surroundings, trying to imagine Anni growing up here. Jasmin spied photos of a young Anni, smiling at the camera. In a few of the photos, she stood with her father, their arms around each other with obvious affection. *So it wasn't always bad*, Jasmin observed. *Maybe it can be good again before it's too late*. She immediately felt a sadness wash over her at the thought that it may already be too late.

"Mrs. Brehme?" The older woman seemed to be disoriented, and unsure of what to do with herself. Taking pity on her, Jasmin guided her to the couch. "You look exhausted. Why don't you take a nap?"

"Oh no. I couldn't possibly. What if Rainer needs me?"

"Anni is with him now," Jasmin soothed. "If he needs anything, she'll be there."

The older woman shook her head. "What if . . ."

## Committed

Her trembling voice trailed off as if she couldn't bear to finish the thought. Jasmin's heart broke for Anni's mother. She knew deep down that Anni's parents were good people. They just didn't understand the lifestyle. While Jasmin could understand that, she *didn't* understand the conditional love. A parents' love should be *unconditional*.

"All right. How about you just rest here, and I'll make you some tea? I'm sure I can find my way around the kitchen for that." Jasmin offered Mrs. Brehme a smile and was elated to see it returned. Even if it was a bit tremulous.

"Thank you. The cups are in the cupboard on the left, and the tea is on the shelf," Mrs. Brehme called out as Jasmin walked away.

*This should be easy enough.* Jasmin took the tea kettle from the stove and filled it before returning it to the burner. She worked on autopilot as she thought of Anni. It amazed Jasmin – despite their current situation - how much lighter her heart felt after actually *talking* with Anni. Their relationship was never particularly communicative. At least not verbally. Jasmin knew that Anni preferred to *show* her feelings rather than speak them. Whether that was in the form of making love or closing off completely, depended on the situation. However, in the four hours that just spent on the road, Jasmin felt she knew Anni better than ever now. And that caused her love for Anni to grow.

The whistle of the tea kettle brought Jasmin out of her musings. As she fixed the cup of tea, she hoped Mrs. Brehme had fallen asleep. The poor woman certainly looked like she could fall over at any time. Unfortunately, as Jasmin took the hot beverage back to the living room, she noticed the older woman was still awake, staring at the far wall. Jasmin tracked her line of sight and noticed Mrs. Brehme was staring at the same photo that had captured her.

"He loves her, you know?" Mrs. Brehme said softly, still staring at the photo of Anni and her father.

"I know." Jasmin carefully set the beverage down in front of Mrs. Brehme, then took a seat.

"He just doesn't understand."

"Neither do you. And that's okay." Jasmin hesitated for a moment. "What's not okay is how he treats Anni. The things he's called her, or the things he's said to her. He's her father. Anni deserves his love and respect, as well as yours."

Though Jasmin's tone was gentle, her words rang with disapproval. The older woman's eyes left the photo and locked on to Jasmin's. Sorrow and shame caused them to fill with tears that threatened to spill over at any moment.

“You love her.”

It wasn’t a question, but Jasmin felt the desire to answer anyway. “Yes, I do. Anni means everything to me.” She laid a hand over her heart in an attempt to punctuate the love she felt for this woman’s daughter.

“A – are you two married?”

Jasmin looked at the ring that Mrs. Brehme was staring at, and smiled. “No, not yet. We’re engaged.” She hoped Anni was okay with Jasmin announcing it without her like this. She just didn’t see the harm in telling the truth.

Mrs. Brehme frowned. However, it seemed to Jasmin that it was more in thought than in disapproval. At least she hoped so.

“Are you not afraid of what others think? You’re a nice-looking woman. I’m sure you can have your choice of men.”

“I’m not looking for a man, Mrs. Brehme,” Jasmin stated firmly. “I love your daughter. I used to care what others thought of me. Of us. But it did nothing but make me almost lose Anni. I can’t live my life in fear of what others think. It’s a waste of time.”

“What about your parents, Miss Flemming? Are they supportive of your decisions?”

“Please, call me Jasmin. And my mother and I are coming to terms with each other,” she answered vaguely. Not wanting to insult the older woman, she continued amiably. “I understand that parents only want what is best for their children. Sometimes they can’t see that we’ve grown up, and need to make our own decisions. For better or worse. The best thing a parent can do is be in their child’s corner.

Anni is a strong woman, Mrs. Brehme. She doesn’t need yours or Mr. Brehme’s approval of her choices. But deep inside, she hurts because of your estrangement. She loves you both. All she ever wanted was for you to love who she is in return.”

“I – I wanted Andrea to come here to see her father in hopes it would help both of them,” Mrs. Brehme confessed. “I’ve tried to get them together. I’ve tried talking to Rainer. He’s such a stubborn mule sometimes.”

“Well, we know where Anni gets it from.” Jasmin chuckled lightly when Mrs. Brehme cracked a smile.

“You’re good for her.”

## Committed

Jasmin was surprised by the sentiment. “She’s good for me,” she responded sincerely.

“A marriage of your . . . type is not legal here,” the older woman declared.

“We know.”

“What will you do?”

“There are plenty of places we can go to get married. Legally. But we can still have a ceremony here with our friends. We can also be registered as life partners here. What matters the most is that we will be married in our hearts.”

Mrs. Brehme said nothing, and Jasmin was happy to keep quiet and let the woman contemplate everything that had been said.

“I would like to be there,” she said abruptly, making Jasmin jump a little from the break in the stillness of the air.

Jasmin studied Anni’s mom, looking for sincerity. What she found was a timid mother that looked terrified of losing her whole family. Jasmin nodded. “As long as you’re there to support Anni and our love, you are always welcome. But I will not allow you to hurt her. She’s had enough hurting in her life.”

Mrs. Brehme gave Jasmin the first genuine smile since showing up. “I like you . . . Jasmin. You fiercely protect my daughter, even from her own parents. I’m glad she found someone like you.”

Tears filled Jasmin’s brown eyes. What an emotional day it’s been. From opening up to Anni, having Anni do the same to her, and now Mrs. Brehme giving Jasmin what could only be her blessing, it was pretty overwhelming. And beautiful.

“Thank you, Mrs. Brehme. You have no idea what that means to me. I promise to always do my best when it comes to protecting Anni’s heart.”

And with that, Jasmin’s thoughts immediately went to her fiancée, and where she was now. She wondered desperately how Anni was doing with her father. Was she hurting? Did she need Jasmin? *I love you, Anni. I’m here. I will always be here.*



ANNI STOOD AT her father’s door willing herself to go in. She could hear her mother’s and Jasmin’s voices in the distance, but couldn’t concentrate on the words. She could only hope her mother was being nice to her fiancée.

*"I don't want to do this,"* she whispered to herself. She was already reeling emotionally from the drive here. Learning everything she learned about Jasmin, revealing her own past, left her drained. But she was here now. She promised her mom she would try this reconciliation thing. Problem was, it was her father that didn't love her. Not the other way around. Anni wasn't about to change herself, or deny Jasmin, just to appease her father. She couldn't live with herself if she did that. Despite what her mother said, Anni decided to be honest with her father. If he could hear her, he was going to know exactly how she felt. Anything less wouldn't be making amends, it would be amending herself to his needs.

*"Just go in!"* she ordered herself harshly. Reluctantly she pushed her way in. Anni's breath caught in her throat as she studied the man lying in the bed in front of her. He looked gaunt and weak, nothing like the father she remembered. Though she knew he was unconscious, it made her feel better to think he was just sleeping. Quietly, she sat in the chair next to the bed and just stared.

"How am I supposed to do this?" she asked him softly. "What am I supposed to say to you? I can't change who I am. I don't want to." Tentatively, Anni placed her hand over her father's. "All I've ever wanted was for you to be proud of me. I know you wanted the conventional life for me. Find a man, fall in love, get married, have children. You couldn't you see that *that* isn't who I am. But I have found love, dad. I didn't think it would ever happen. You made it so hard for me to believe I was able to be loved."

She paused, wiping a tear from her cheek. Years of learning to keep her emotions in check have pretty much dissipated in the span of one day. Anni wasn't sure if she was capable of handling these feelings. She just had to believe that Jasmin would help her through all of this.

"Jasmin," she whispered reverently. "You've met her, dad. I know that if you had given her a chance, you would love her. But you were so intent on being embarrassed by the fact I was with a woman." Anni sighed. Part of her wanted her father to be able to hear her. And part of her hoped he couldn't. She was making herself too vulnerable. Nevertheless, she forged ahead, needing to get this out just in case he never woke up again.

"I almost lost her. I wanted so much to blame you for that. Oh, you have no idea how much I cursed you for making it impossible to open myself up to

## Committed

the love of another. But I never meant for this.” Anni began to cry harder at the idea that she may be responsible for her father’s current condition. “I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want mom to be alone. I only wanted you to love me.”

Anni rested her forehead on his shoulder and cried. She couldn’t bring herself to say anything more. Not yet. She needed to purge herself of this guilt, and she didn’t know how. She whispered an apology before giving in to the exhaustion she felt pulling her under.



“*SWEETIE?*” JASMIN SHOOK Anni softly. She didn’t dare raise her voice above a whisper. Mrs. Brehme had finally succumbed to her fatigue, and getting concerned about Anni, Jasmin decided to look in on her. She loathed to disturb Mr. Brehme or cause him any distress, so she woke Anni as quietly as she could.

“Jas –”

Jasmin placed a finger on Anni’s lips and leaned close to her ear. “*Don’t speak loud enough to agitate your dad. I just thought you may want to take a break? Get something to eat?*”

“*I’m not hungry,*” Anni responded just as quietly. “*I need a little more time.*”

Jasmin caressed Anni’s cheek. She wanted to argue with Anni, knowing how tired she must be. But Jasmin realized, looking in Anni’s eyes, how much she needed to finish whatever she started with her father. So she nodded and kissed Anni sweetly on the cheek before leaving her alone once again.

Anni watched the woman she loves walk out the door and once again she was alone with her father. She could have taken the easy way out, and joined Jasmin. A good chunk of her heart wished she had.

“Wake up, Dad.” She took his hand again, wondering if she could possibly give him strength just by touching him. “I want you to know Jasmin. You’ll understand why I love her. It would be impossible for you not to love her, too.” Guilt stymied her words once again before she shook it off.

“I was lying to myself when I blamed you,” she confessed. “I know that better now after hearing what Jasmin had been through. She’s the most loving, caring, generous woman I know, and she shouldn’t be. The things that happened to her should have jaded her. And maybe they did in the beginning, but you would never know it by looking at her now. She loves me, dad. She loves me enough to marry me. If I were on the outside looking in, I wouldn’t



believe it. She's so beautiful and talented. Has so much to offer. *Anyone* would be the luckiest person in the world to be loved by her. And she chose to be with me.

"Lord knows I haven't made it easy on her. We've had to work hard to stay together. And maybe that's how relationships are. I don't know. I've never had a real relationship before Jasmin. As much as I thought I loved Judith, it was nothing like the love I feel for Jasmin."

Emotions are hard. Anni scrubbed her face roughly, using the gesture to try and stop more tears from falling. She thought about the last few months without Jasmin, and how empty it made her feel. She made a vow to herself as she traveled back home to get Jasmin. If she were fortuitous enough to get Jasmin back in her life, she would do everything she could to keep her. And to make her happy. That vow was reinforced when she saw the woman she loves in the arms of another. Anni shivered at the image that entered her mind.

"I was so stupid," she continued finally. "I almost lost the best thing that ever happened to me because I thought I needed 'freedom'. At least, that was the excuse I used with Jasmin. In reality, I'm just scared. I'm scared she'll figure out I'm not enough for her. I'm scared that I won't be able to get past my own issues to make her happy. I'm scared that I won't be able to provide for her." Anni exhaled sharply with a mirthless laugh. "She doesn't need me to provide for her. She's successful. Did you know she's a designer? She's good at it, too. Great, in fact. Kiara would be able to give her more than I could."

Anni stood abruptly and started to pace. "I pushed her into another's arms. That's not what I want. I don't want *Kiara* to be the one that's best for Jasmin. I want to be that person. I can't blame anyone else anymore. I can't blame you." She came back to her father's bedside, taking his hand once again. "Wake up. I don't expect you to understand, dad. I just want you to love me, and accept who I am. Accept my love for Jasmin. Accept *her*. Wake up, and come to our wedding. I want you to stand by my side as I pledge my life to the person I'm in love with. It's not perverted, it's not sick. It's love. Pure and simple, dad. The way I feel for Jasmin is no different from how you felt for mom when you married her. It *shouldn't* matter that Jasmin is a woman. What should matter is that your daughter is happy, and loved by an amazing person. Wake up, dad. Please."

## Committed

Anni thought she had imagined it, but the pressure was constant. She stared at her father's hand that was currently squeezing hers. It was weak, but it was there. At that moment, she wished they were in a hospital so she could call a doctor in to examine him. But she knew her father. He wouldn't want to be in a hospital. He would want to be comfortable at home.

"That's it! Come back to us. You're strong, dad. I know you can do this." She watched for any other sign that he was waking up, but it was only the feeble squeeze on her fingers that gave any indication that her father was still there with them. "I'm going to go get mom and call the doctor. Keep fighting, dad. Keep fighting." She hesitated on her way out of the room. "I love you," she said quickly, then went to inform her mother of the change.



"ANNI? SWEETIE, WHY don't you come over here and sit down?" Jasmin sat on the bed and patted the spot next to her. It had surprised her that Anni's mom suggested they both stay in Anni's old room. Jasmin had almost declined, but the weariness in Anni's eyes when she finally came out of her father's room, changed Jasmin's mind. Anni needed her close, and Jasmin promised to be there for her.

"I know he squeezed my hand," Anni said in lieu of an answer. She kept up her vigilant pacing, biting her thumbnail nervously.

"I believe you."

"But the doctor didn't see any significant change."

"That doesn't mean anything, Anni." Jasmin grabbed Anni's hand on her next pass. "Come here." She pulled Anni down next to her, wrapping her arm around Anni's shoulders. "Your mom said that was the most responsive he's been. That means you being here and talking to him is helping."

Jasmin felt Anni's shoulders shrug slightly and pulled her closer.

"I just wish there was more I could do. I never wanted this to happen," Anni confided quietly.

"Of course you didn't."

Anni laid her head on Jasmin's shoulder, relishing in the feel of just having her there. "What if it takes him days to come out of this?"

"Then we stay until he's out of the woods," Jasmin stated with conviction.

“And if he . . .” Anni couldn’t bear to finish the thought. No matter how estranged they were, she didn’t want to lose her father.

“Anni, we have to think positive thoughts. He responded, and that’s hopeful.”

“I know. But we just don’t know how long this is going to take, and you just started this campaign with Tussi Attack.” Anni was reluctant to talk about the campaign. It just meant Jasmin possibly thinking about Kiara.

“I’ve already spoken to Kiara,” Jasmin disclosed, and Anni’s heart dropped. “She says to take all the time we need. I have enough designs to last for a while, and she can stand in for me when needed.”

Anni stood, walking to the window. She wished to hell it didn’t hurt so much hearing Jasmin talk about Kiara. She only spoke of business, and there was no inflection in her voice that gave any indication of more. But still . . .

“Maybe you should go back,” Anni said softly.

Jasmin frowned at Anni’s back. “Absolutely not. I said I would be here for you, and I will be. Besides, I just told you Kiara . . .”

“Kiara has it all handled. Yes, I heard,” Anni snapped.

Jasmin joined her fiancée, standing close, but not touching. “Anni, what’s going on? I thought we were past this.”

“It’s going to take me a little bit longer than a few hours to get passed you almost sleeping with someone else.” Anni cursed under her breath. She was doing it again. Pushing Jasmin away, and for what? The heartbreaking idea that Kiara may be better for Jasmin than Anni is?

“Hey.” Jasmin turned Anni to her, lifting her chin until they were eye to eye. “What happened? Why are you doing this?”

“Because I’m scared,” Anni confessed, tears forming in her eyes.

“Of what, baby?”

“Losing you!” She tried to pull away from Jasmin, but her love refused to let go. “I’m scared that I’m not good enough. I’m scared that Kiara is! I’m scared that one day you’ll figure that out. And I’m scared that I’m going to screw up again because look at what I’m doing right now! She warned me that she would pursue you if I fucked up again. I’m giving her what she wants,” Anni finished, trying unsuccessfully to choke back a sob.

## Committed

Unchecked tears began to flow down Jasmin's cheeks as she watched the love of her life break down. She took Anni in her arms, letting all of the love she felt flow through her.

"Anni, I know it's going to take more than a few hours to fix everything." Jasmin pulled back. "But you should know that there is *nothing* between me and Kiara."

"I saw you in her arms today." Anni could hardly believe that it was just this morning when she walked in Jasmin's shop and saw the two of them.

"I was upset. It was nothing more than a friendly hug."

"Not on her part," Anni mumbled.

Jasmin sighed heavily, taking Anni's hand in hers, and placed it over her heart. "Do you feel that?" Anni nodded. "My heart beats for you, Anni. No one else. No one could possibly get in here because you fill it completely. I had a weak moment, but only because my heart was broken thinking you had moved on. I know the truth now. We're together, and I love you. This," she tapped her heart with Anni's hand, "belongs to you, and only you. It doesn't matter what Kiara feels or wants. *I want you.*"

Jasmin leaned closer and kissed Anni's lips lightly. "You are my best friend." She kissed Anni again, lingering a little longer. "You are the love of my life." Another longer kiss. "No one could take your place in my heart. I want to marry you. We're not going to 'screw up' again because I think we know each other better now, don't you?"

Anni nodded, leaning in for another kiss. The moment she felt Jasmin's lips on hers, Anni's fears began to vanish. She wanted more, so she held on to Jasmin, deepening the kiss. When their tongues touched, both of them moaned at the sensation that had been missing for the last few months.

Using every ounce of strength she could muster, Jasmin pulled away. "We can't do this here."

"But I need you." Anni winced a little at what was perilously close to a whine. "I just . . . I feel alive when I'm with you. I haven't felt alive in months, Jasmin."

Jasmin groaned with need. "I feel the same way, Anni. But I wouldn't feel comfortable making love here with your mother in the other room."

"She did put us together," Anni grinned, pulling Jasmin back to her.

Jasmin laughed softly. *This* was the Anni she knew. Cocky and bold. But as brazen as Anni professed to be, Jasmin knew it was all talk this time. Surely

Anni recognizes that, here in this house, it wouldn't be appropriate to do the things they would want to do to each other. Especially after being apart for so long.

"Yes, she did. However, I doubt it was so we could have hot monkey sex."

A genuine laugh flowed easily from Anni. It was the first time she had felt even an ounce of true levity given the situation. "Hot monkey sex, huh?"

Jasmin grinned and shrugged. "Like you said, it's been a long time. I've missed you."

Anni tucked a strand of hair behind Jasmin's ear. "I've missed you, too." She rested her forehead on Jasmin's. "I told Dad I'm going to marry you. I told him I wanted him there. That I just wanted him to love me. That's when he squeezed my hand."

Tears seemed to be in endless supply today. "It's a great start, baby," Jasmin murmured. "Your mom told me she wanted to be there, too."

Anni looked up in surprise. "She said that?"

"Mmhmm."

"Wow." Anni released a long, tired sigh. "I should go check on mom. Make sure she doesn't need anything."

Jasmin nodded. "Then you need to come to bed. You're exhausted, sweetie."

"Will you hold me? I know we can't do anything, but could you just . . ." Anni trailed off with a sheepish shrug of the shoulders.

Jasmin gave Anni a gentle smile. She knew being vulnerable was difficult for Anni. This was a huge step for both of them in keeping their relationship going in the right direction.

"Yes."

# *The Planning*

*(Part 8)*

JASMIN PUT THE finishing touches on the sketch she had been working on. The design was different than what she normally would do. But being here in Anni's hometown for the past couple of weeks has given Jasmin a different outlook on life. Anni's father, though still in a coma, has shown significant improvement since Anni got here. It had inspired Jasmin to watch Anni being so caring with her parents. She always knew her fiancée had it in her, but never really had an outlet for it. With the way things were between Anni and her parents, it was only normal for Anni to shy away from too many emotions.

Jasmin held the design up and studied it. A grin tugged at the corners of her mouth. It was good. Really good, if she said so herself. Her happiness was showing through. There was a bit of guilt, of course, feeling so happy given the situation. But Jasmin couldn't help it. Being in Anni's parents' home, it forced the two of them to use something other than making love to communicate. Even though she knew it made Anni uncomfortable at first, Jasmin had to admit her fiancée was getting better and better at opening up to her.

"That looks great, babe. Is it new?"

Jasmin jumped a little, dropping the sketch to the floor. "You scared me!"

Anni chuckled. "Sorry." She picked up the sketch, looking it over before handing it back to Jasmin in exchange for a kiss. "So? Is it new?"

"Yep. You inspire me," Jasmin smiled, kissing Anni again, lingering a bit longer.

Anni wrapped her arms around Jasmin's waist, melting into the kiss. It was getting harder for her to deny herself – and Jasmin – of what they really wanted. To be able to show each other *fully* the love they still share. After everything that happened between them, it was something Anni needed. She *needed* to know that things with Jasmin were truly steady.

"Do I now?" Anni smirked. "Can I inspire you to get away from here for a little while? Get a little alone time?"

"Hmm. Where exactly were you thinking of taking me?"

"It's a surprise."

Jasmin lifted a brow. Obviously, Anni had put some thought into this. But Jasmin was torn. What if they went somewhere, and something happened to Mr. Brehme? She didn't think Anni would forgive herself for that.

"Are you sure about this, sweetie? I know your father is getting stronger, but . . ."

"Jasmin, I need to get out of here for a little while. I need you. We won't be gone long. Please?" She knew she was practically groveling, but for some reason, it didn't bother her like it would have before. Being open and honest with Jasmin was proving to be extremely freeing. Anni had never felt lighter, even with the stress of her father being in a coma.

"Okay, baby." Jasmin brought her lips back to Anni's, only to break away abruptly at the soft clearing of a throat at their door. "Mrs. Brehme, is everything all right?"

Anni's mother fidgeted at the door, a deep flush covering her embarrassed face.

"I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You didn't, mom. Is something wrong? Is it dad?" Anni was aware of her mother's discomfort, but she refused to step away from Jasmin. She had the right to show love for her fiancée as any heterosexual couple did. Her parents were going to have to get used to that. She just hoped that her dad would get the chance.

"No, no. I just wanted to ask if you wanted me to cook dinner. I know I haven't been much of a hostess . . ."

"You've been wonderful, Mrs. Brehme. We know you're going through a lot right now. Please don't think we expect anything."

"That's right, mom. We're big girls, we can take care of ourselves." Anni felt Jasmin rub small, soothing circles on her back. "What I mean is, we've decided to go out for a bit. Get some fresh air. But we can bring you back something? Or make something for you before we go?"

"Oh, that's a marvelous idea. I know Rainer wouldn't want you cooped up here worrying about him." Mrs. Brehme waved her hand dismissively. "Don't concern yourselves with me. I'm not very hungry. I'll just get a light snack, and sit with your father for a bit."

## Committed

“Mom, you need to take care of yourself for when dad wakes up. Let us bring you back something. Soup? In fact, we’ll pick up some groceries on our way back.”

Jasmin readily agreed when Anni gave her a questioning look. “Absolutely. And I’ll be happy to help out in the kitchen.”

“Really?” Anni chuckled, then laughed outright when Jasmin bumped her hip. Jasmin wasn’t the greatest of cooks, but she definitely made up for it with her enthusiasm. “We’ll *both* help out.”

“You’ve done quite enough,” Mrs. Brehme objected. “Jasmin, you’ve been very helpful with the housekeeping and keeping me company while Anni sits with Rainer. I couldn’t possibly ask our guests to do anymore.”

“Mom, we’re not guests. We’re family.” Anni stressed the word, hoping her mother would finally see Jasmin as part of the family. She certainly was Anni’s. “Families help each other out.”

A small smile formed on Mrs. Brehme’s lips. “Thank you. *Both* of you. Now go.” She shooed them out of the bedroom. “Go out, and have some fun. I can take care of things here for a few hours.”

*I wonder if I should tell her I need my shoes,* Jasmin pondered as Mrs. Brehme pushed her gently out of the house. *Oh well. I’ll just have Anni run back in and get them.*



“STILL NOT GOING to tell me where we’re going, are you?” Jasmin squeezed Anni’s hand with a smile. They had been driving for a few minutes – after Anni covertly retrieved Jasmin’s shoes – and Jasmin was already anxious to know what Anni had up her sleeve.

“Nope, just that it’s special to me. We’re not going very far, though. You can wait for another ten minutes or so.”

“Ugh! You’re so mean!” Jasmin lifted Anni’s hand to her lips to let her know she was just teasing her.

“I’ll show you mean,” Anni muttered good-naturedly. She was nervous. Not only because she and Jasmin will be alone – not counting driving – for the first time since they got back together. But also because this is the first time she had ever brought anyone to her ‘special place’. It was hers, and hers alone. Somewhere she could go to be completely alone with her thoughts. She never



even thought of taking Judith there. But she wanted to share everything with Jasmin. It was a different sensation than what she was used to, as she always preferred to be alone. Everything was so much different with Jasmin.

"I think your mom is warming up to me," Jasmin said to get her mind off of the anticipation. She was nervous. She and Anni had been apart for months, and though they're sleeping in the same bed now, there's a part of both of them that is holding back. Jasmin wanted to believe it was because of the respect they were showing Anni's parents. Of course, there's a small, insecure part of her that worried they had lost their intimacy.

It was silly, really. She had never felt closer to Anni. Jasmin just hoped that Anni was completely over her insecurities where Kiara was concerned. And, if Jasmin were honest, she had her own insecurities when it came to what Anni had been doing the months she was gone. Anni said there had been no one. The past made Jasmin question that. But this was a new beginning for them. She would be damned if she let her doubts get in the way of that now.

"I got that feeling, too. I'm just worried if dad ever comes out of . . ."

"He will."

Jasmin's confidence made Anni smile. She never once wavered in her faith that Anni's father would wake up. It was that conviction that kept Anni going this past couple of weeks. Jasmin didn't have to stay. She had a life, a flourishing business back in Berlin. But she would hear nothing of it when Anni would give her an out.

"Well *when* he does," Anni continued. "I just hope he can learn to accept us, too. It's all I want, Jasmin. For him to love me for who I am, and support me. Support *us*."

"I know, baby. It may take some time, but he'll come around. Just like your mom. I *am* quite irresistible." She gave Anni a cheeky smile.

"You certainly are. And we're here." Anni gestured ahead of them.

*Here. Where is here? All I see is wooded area.* "Oookay."

Anni laughed. "Don't worry, Tussi. I'm not going to make you sit on the dirty ground."

"Well, that's a good thing. Because I seem to recall you wanting to do more than just sitting."

## Committed

“Oh yeah. There will be some laying down.” Anni hopped out of the car and brought a blanket out of the back. “Could you grab the flashlight out of the glove box?”

“Flashlight? Where are you taking me?” Jasmin opened the glove box, and a piece of paper fell out. She leaned down to grab the paper at the same time getting light. A glimpse of Anni’s writing made her pause. She debated whether she should read it, recognizing the scribble as how Anni writes her songs. With a deep breath, she began reading.

**You think that I don’t love you  
You think that I don’t care  
You think that I don’t think of you  
Every time that I’m not there.  
That couldn’t be further from the truth.  
How could you think I don’t love you?  
I think about you, dream about you.  
That couldn’t be further from the truth.**

**Attitudes change, but the love remains  
The harsh words and slam of the door,  
It doesn’t mean I don’t love you anymore.  
Space is all we need sometimes, time apart.  
It doesn’t mean I don’t think of you, darling.  
It doesn’t mean I don’t care.  
That couldn’t be further from the truth.**

**Maybe, baby, we say things we don’t mean,  
And, things aren’t as perfect as it seems.  
But I do love you, I know it’s hard to believe.  
Please trust in me, without you, I couldn’t live.  
You think I don’t want you, that there’s someone new.  
Well, that couldn’t be further from the truth.  
No, that couldn’t be further from the truth.**

“Hey. Are you going to get out of the car?” Anni stopped short when she saw the paper in Jasmin’s hand. Her song. She remembered stuffing it in the glove box after a particularly rough night. She had been frustrated with the lack

of progress with her father and had walked in on Jasmin talking to Kiara. Only business was being discussed, but Anni didn't let that stop her jealousy. She had reverted back to her brooding ways, storming out with her songbook, to sit alone in the car. It didn't take her long to figure out she was being an ass. Especially after reading the song a few times. Anni was grateful that Jasmin quickly forgave her when Anni sheepishly came back.

"I – I wasn't snooping," Jasmin stammered. "It fell out, and I just . . ."

"Jasmin," Anni interrupted gently. "It's okay. I want you to read it."

"When did you write this?" Jasmin gave Anni a shaky smile when Anni wiped a tear from Jasmin's cheek.

Anni hesitated for a moment. "The day I left for the tour," she confessed. Jasmin's eyes widened. "Why?"

Anni frowned. "I - what do you mean? I write songs when . . ."

"No, I mean why did you go without telling me how you feel? We lost months, Anni. *Months*. All of that could have been avoided, *mistakes* could have been avoided if you had just told me." Jasmin worked hard to keep her voice even, and her emotions in check.

"I wanted to," Anni admitted. "But I thought I had already fucked things up with you. You took off your ring. I was too afraid that you would reject me again." Anni shuffled her feet awkwardly.

More tears flowed from Jasmin as she stepped out of the car, and rushed into Anni's arms. "Oh, Anni! I *waited* for you to come to me. Every day I would watch the door – at home, at the store – *hoping* it was you. I fought myself, forcing myself not to call you and beg you to come back to me."

"I would have," Anni sniffled. "If I knew that you would welcome me back, I would have been there as fast as possible."

"It had to come from you, Anni." Jasmin pulled back slightly so she could look Anni in the eye. "*You* had to make the decision to come back to me without my input."

Anni nodded. She knew that's exactly what needed to happen, or she would have tried to blame Jasmin if things went bad again. It was her M.O. *Not anymore*, Anni vowed.

"We can't keep apologizing for the past, Jasmin. The jealousies, the blaming, the non-communication? All of that has to stop, and I think we're doing a good job at that." Anni shrugged a little with a self-deprecating smile.

## Committed

“I’m working on the jealousy thing, but I think I’m getting the other stuff down.”

“You’re doing great with *all* of it, baby.” She brushed Anni’s bangs out of her face. “Now that all of that is cleared up, take me to this special place of yours.”

Anni grinned. “As you wish, Tussi.” She took the flashlight, hoisted the blanket over her shoulder, and grabbed Jasmin’s hand. She stumbled to a stop when she felt Jasmin tug her back. “Yes?”

“Will you sing the song for me?”

Anni blushed lightly. She didn’t think she would ever get the opportunity to sing the song. Especially *for* Jasmin. “Uh, sure. Like I said, as you wish, Tussi.”



“YOU OKAY BACK there?” Anni smirked when Jasmin cursed under her breath.

“Yes. I know you think I’m a Tussi, but I’m perfectly capable of hiking through the overgrown jungle.”

“It’s hardly a jungle, Tussi,” Anni snickered. She would admit that the trek to her little hideaway was a little treacherous, but it will be worth it. She hoped. Anni hadn’t been here for years. Maybe she should have scoped it out before bringing Jasmin here. Suddenly they were at a clearing – well, mostly.

It was untended since Anni had stopped going. She had always made sure to keep it somewhat cleared, but not enough to alert anyone of what lies beyond.

“Not much further,” Anni mumbled, pushing her way through the brush. To her surprise, Jasmin never once complained. It was becoming extremely clear to Anni that she had a habit of underestimating Jasmin. Something else she will need to work on.

*There it is. Still standing.* “I can’t believe it.”

Jasmin followed Anni’s line of sight, up a thick, interesting tree. A treehouse. A slightly decrepit treehouse, but it looked sturdy enough to Jasmin’s untrained eye.

“Wow. Did you build this?”

“Yeah. Took me forever, hauling wood and shit down here without anyone seeing me. But it was worth it.” Anni tested the rungs of the ladder and was delighted to see they were still solid. “This gave me a place to go when things weren’t always so great. I could write my songs, play my guitar.”

“Bring all the girls?” Jasmin teased.

Anni turned to Jasmin. “You’re the first person I’ve ever brought here, baby.”

Jasmin loved Anni’s charming smile. It was a rare sight these days with everything that was going on, but now it was given to her in full force. It never ceased to turn Jasmin’s insides to jelly.

“Think it will hold us? Along with a bit of movement?”

“Just a bit?” Anni wiggled her eyebrows. Just being out of her parents’ house for a little while has given her room to breathe. To think of something other than the possibility her father would never wake up.

“Well, get on up there and see how much it can take,” Jasmin said coquettishly. “But be careful!”

Anni chuckled at her love’s protective streak. “Yes, dear.” She handed Jasmin the items she held and started up the ladder. *The structure seems sturdy enough*, Anni thought with glee. *Let’s see*. She began to jump up and down.

“Anni! Stop that!”

Anni poked her head out of the doorway of the treehouse. “How else am I supposed to make sure it can stand the test of . . . us. It’s been *months!*”

Jasmin couldn’t help but laugh at Anni’s tactics. “Yes, but if you hurt yourself, we’ll have to wait even longer.”

“Logic,” Anni scoffed with a lopsided grin. “Throw that stuff up, and get up here. It’s safe.”

“You sure?”

“Do you think I would jeopardize your well-being? Now get your fine ass up here!”



“UM, LET ME just clear some of this stuff up.” Anni began brushing debris aside frantically with her foot. She should have cleared things before letting Jasmin up here. There could be critters or other things that could harm Jasmin.

## Committed

“Anni?” Jasmin watched as Anni moved quickly, using her foot as a broom. She was mumbling something about how dumb it was not to check things more thoroughly. “Anni!”

Anni stopped. “Huh?”

“Stop. Breathe.” Jasmin dropped the items she was carrying. The sun illuminated the interior enough to see the chagrin on Anni’s face. “Baby, come here.” She wrapped her arms around Anni’s neck when she complied.

“I wanted things to be perfect for you.” The pout Anni gave Jasmin was pitifully cute.

“If I’m with you, it’s perfect.”

Anni’s pout blossomed into a happy smile. With her hands on Jasmin’s hips, she began to sway in a small dance. She felt a tremble, not knowing if it was her or Jasmin. “I’m nervous,” she confessed.

“Me, too.”

Anni’s eyebrows raised in surprise. She had no idea Jasmin was possibly feeling the same way she was. She had so many questions and insecurities when it came to the months she was away from Jasmin. And, unfortunately, it all came down to thinking of Jasmin with Kiara. How far had they gone? Was there affection? Maybe on Kiara’s part, but what about Jasmin’s?

“Ask me, Anni.”

“A-ask you what?” Could Jasmin read her mind?

“Whatever it is that’s making you frown like that.”

“I don’t want to ruin anything,” Anni mumbled. Maybe it’s too late for that. She *knew* she should have tried harder not to think of the past.

“Anni, sweetie. It’s already bothering you. I’d rather you talk to me than let it fester.”

“You know what this is about, don’t you?” At Jasmin’s nod, Anni sighed. “I don’t *want* to know, but I need to Jasmin.”

“Okay. What exactly is it that you need to know?”

“How – how far did it go with her?” Anni’s voice broke, and Jasmin tightened her hold.

“Nothing happened, Anni. I told you that.”

“You said she stopped. Not you, but her. I need to know how far she let it go on, Jasmin.”

“We – we kissed. That’s as far as it went, I swear. Nothing else happened.” It was the truth. It served no purpose to tell Anni the things that were said that night. The point is, she didn’t sleep with Kiara.

Anni nodded slightly. “The clothes you had on the day I came back? They were hers.” *Please let me be wrong. Or give me an explanation.*

Jasmin sighed. “Yes. But it’s not what you think,” Jasmin said quickly when Anni’s face fell into a deep frown. “I was so exhausted and undone that she thought it was best if I stayed.”

“Of course she did.” *Damn it! Rein in your damn jealousy, Anni!* To her shock, Jasmin gave her a smile. “Why are you smiling?”

“Because you’re cute when you’re jealous.” She gave Anni a quick kiss. “I know what you think of Kiara, but if you got to know her, you’d see she’s a good person. Anni, it’s because of her, Sophie and even Emily that I’m able to be here. She gave me an amazing opportunity, and didn’t take it away when I couldn’t be there.” Jasmin pulled Anni even closer. “But you should know that I would have given it all up to be here with you anyway.”

Anni grumbled half-heartedly. It was the small smile that made Jasmin feel she had gotten through to Anni about how much Jasmin loves her.

“I’m glad you didn’t have to give it up. Yeah, she’s cool for giving you this opportunity. And, I *guess* I’m grateful she’s giving you this time to be with me. But, I still don’t like her.” Anni smiled and shrugged at Jasmin’s chuckle. “She wants you. I can’t blame her for that, but I don’t have to like it either.”

“Enough about that,” Jasmin demanded lightly. “You brought me out here so we could be alone, right?” Anni nodded. “Then I don’t want *anyone* interrupting our time together. This is about us. We’re together again, and I want to celebrate that. *Finally.*”

That was something Anni could get behind. Of course, she was still nervous, but knowing that there was no one else – for her or Jasmin – helped.

“This feels like our first time,” Anni noted softly.

Jasmin smiled. “It does. But remember how amazing that was.”

“As I recall, I’m pretty sure all you were able to say was ‘wow.’” Anni gave her a smug smirk, making Jasmin laugh.

“That’s true. Every time we’re together is *wow*. Galactic.” Jasmin leaned in and kissed Anni deeply. When they finally came up for air, they were both panting. “Want to see if we still have it?” she whispered.

“Oh yeah.”



FOR AS LONG as they'd been apart, Anni thought their first time back together would be fast and furious. Instead, they slowly undressed each other, savoring the moment, the feelings flowing between them, and the smoldering desire that was just below the surface. Slow didn't mean less passionate. That was one thing Anni learned with Jasmin.

One night stands were all about frenzied sex. Sometimes it was great. Other times it was a great disappointment. But basically, they were all the same. No emotions, just a need to get off. When Anni and Jasmin made love for the first time, it was unlike anything Anni had ever experienced. She knew it was because of how they felt about each other. Whether they were 'fast and furious' or 'slow and sensual', it was *always* an exhilarating experience.

Jasmin let out a quiet whimper when Anni's hot mouth closed around a very hard nipple. This was familiar, and yet it felt so new. Perhaps that was because of the new closeness they have now. Whatever it was, Jasmin was *loving* it.

Anni reluctantly left her task of giving attention to two of her favorite body parts to lay out the blanket on the wooden floor. She spared a moment to wish there was a soft bed here in her old tree house, but she and Jasmin never shied away from doing anything *anywhere*.

“Come here.” Anni knelt on the blanket, coaxing Jasmin over with a seductive smile. She didn't have to work hard. Jasmin was very willing and *very* ready.

“It's been a while,” Jasmin whispered against Anni's lips.

“Yes.”

“I'm scared.”

“Don't be. The only way we've changed is to get better,” Anni decided confidently. She had felt the way Jasmin responded to her touches, her kisses. From the first moan and shiver, all of Anni's insecurities left her.

Both of them moaned when their naked bodies touched. Anni moved over Jasmin, situating her thigh against Jasmin's hot center. Her confidence grew exponentially when she felt how wet Jasmin was for her. Feeling her own abundance of excitement, she knew neither of them would last long, but that



was quite all right. Anni was determined to show Jasmin how much she missed her a few times.

“You feel so good,” Jasmin murmured, lifting her own thigh between Anni’s undulating hips. She grabbed Anni’s hand that was traveling down between them. “If you touch me now, this will be over,” she warned.

“It’s just the beginning,” Anni replied with a smile. She continued her journey and dipped her fingers into Jasmin’s copious amount of wetness. “I missed you so much.” She slipped inside Jasmin, loving how Jasmin raised her hips to pull her in deeper.

Jasmin responded with a deep, throaty moan, digging her nails into Anni’s shoulder blades. Their moves became faster, needier. As much as they both wanted to drag this out, the need to get over that first hurdle was too great.

“Anni!”

“I’m right there with you, baby,” Anni panted. She added a third finger, using her thigh to push herself deeper, harder into Jasmin. Having her fingers gripped by Jasmin, and grinding her own sex on Jasmin’s smooth thigh brought her to the edge. “Now, Jasmin! Please!”

“Yes!”

Their mouths crashed together, swallowing each other’s cries of ecstasy. They rode the waves of their simultaneous climax, holding onto each other tightly. Anni was right. It was better. Neither really thought that was possible, but it had been proven right here, right now. And as soon as she was able to move again, Jasmin would prove it over and over.



“THAT WAS AMAZING.” Jasmin was still slightly out of breath, and both of their bodies were sweaty. Neither cared. They were content just holding each other. Truth is, they were both exhausted, but completely sated. It took them four tries to be sated, but that was hardly a hardship.

“That was fucking awesome,” Anni amended with a smug smile. “I should have thought to bring a second blanket, though I’m enjoying the view.” She looked pointedly down at Jasmin’s naked body. All the good parts were covered by the way Jasmin was positioned across Anni’s body, but the parts that were visible were perfect.

## Committed

“It’s okay,” Jasmin chuckled at Anni’s ogling. “Good thing it’s warm today. Besides, as much as I’m enjoying being here like this with you, we should go soon. We still need to get groceries.” They had been gone longer than either of them had expected.

Anni sighed. “Give me a few more minutes before we have to get back to reality?”

Jasmin propped herself up on her elbow so she could look Anni in the eye. “This *is* reality, sweetie. You and me together. That includes moments like this, but also the good and bad of everyday living.”

“I know,” Anni gave her a sad smile. “I just don’t know how much longer we’re going to be able to stay here. I need to get my job back, you have important things to do with Tussi Attack, and most importantly, money doesn’t grow on trees.”

“You don’t have to worry about money, baby. My designs are selling well.” Jasmin couldn’t resist lowering her head for several little kisses. “Multiple stores are stocking my brand. I’ve got us covered.”

“I’m not going to live off of you, Jasmin.”

“Stop with the macho stuff, Anni,” Jasmin warned, not unkindly. “What we’re doing here, getting married? That means we support one another in times of need. It says so right in the vows. For better or for worse.” Jasmin brushed her lips against Anni’s. “For richer or for poorer.” Another kiss. “In sickness and in health.”

“We haven’t said those vows, yet,” Anni reminded her in a weak attempt to ‘win’.

“It doesn’t matter. Anni, what’s happening with your father devastates me, too. So let me do my part in being there for you in any way I can. Let me feed you, love you, support you in any and every way.”

Anni thought about that, looking at the situation through Jasmin’s eyes. She couldn’t fault her for wanting to help. If the tables were turned, Anni would be the same way. So, even though it was difficult to let go of her pride, Anni agreed with a prolonged, probing kiss.

“Thank you.”

Jasmin smiled softly. “I’m pretty sure in the very tiny fine print of the wedding vows it states you don’t have to thank me for doing something I’ve vowed to do.”

Anni snorted with laughter. “Does not say that. And besides, I’m becoming more open and honest, remember? So when I say ‘thank you’, just say ‘you’re welcome’.”

“You’re welcome,” Jasmin obeyed cheekily.



THEY WERE BOTH laughing at some cheesy joke Anni had just told Jasmin as they walked into the house. Each was still riding the high of finally being alone together, and knowing they still had their strong connection. Even stronger now. The laughter died as soon as they saw Anni’s mother’s stricken face. Anni clutched the bag she held with one hand and sought out Jasmin with the other.

“Mom? Are you okay? Is it dad? Is he . . .” She couldn’t even bring herself to say the words she feared the most.

“No! No, he’s fine. He – he woke up earlier, just for a minute. Andrea, he asked for you.”

Anni stood there motionless, eyes wide with fear and anticipation. She wasn’t sure whether to go to her father or flee.

“Go, sweetie. I’ll take care of this stuff,” Jasmin said, indicating the bags of groceries they had hauled in.

“A-are you sure? I could help you.”

Jasmin could sense Anni’s internal struggle. Instinctively, she knew that Anni was afraid that he had heard everything she had said to him.

“I’m sure. Everything will be fine. I promise.” She gave Anni a reassuring smile. “I’ll just get this situated, and then I’ll make some tea and soup for your mom. Go on.” Jasmin pushed Anni gently towards her father’s bedroom.

“Thank you,” Anni said softly, the words barely audible.

“Yes, thank you,” Anni’s mom echoed once Anni left the room. “You’ve kept both of us sane this past couple of weeks. I don’t know what we would have done without you.”

Jasmin waved off the unexpected compliment. “Anni is my family. I would do anything for her. And, you.”

“I know this is taking time away from your work, and your wedding. You shouldn’t have to postpone any longer.” Her hand trembled as she pushed hair

## Committed

back from her face. “I’m sure when Rainer wakes up, he’ll need a lot of care and time to recover, but . . .”

“Mrs. Brehme,” Jasmin interrupted gently. “It would make Anni so happy to have you *both* at our wedding. We would be more than willing to wait until that can happen.” Jasmin gave Mrs. Brehme a bright smile. “Now, let me make you some tea and something to eat so you can get some rest.”



“*SWEETIE?*” JASMIN WHISPERED close to a sleeping Anni’s ear. Anni was sitting in her usual chair, holding her father’s hand, and dozing off. “*Anni?*”

“Huh?”

“Shh,” Jasmin chuckled, and placed a finger over Anni’s lips. “*I brought you something to eat. No arguing.*”

“*Thank you, baby,*” Anni mouthed with a smile.

Jasmin gestured that she was going to leave father and daughter alone again, kissing Anni gently.

“Jasmin?”

Anni bolted upright, and whipped her head towards Jasmin, then back at her father.

Jasmin had stopped dead in her tracks when she heard the soft, hoarse voice coming from the bed.

“Dad?” Anni’s voice cracked with emotion.

Jasmin wasn’t quite sure what to do. She knew he had called out for her, but why? Would it do him more harm than good to go to him? What if he wanted to tell her to get out?

“Jas-min?” Mr. Brehme repeated with difficulty.

Anni gave Jasmin a desperate look. Her father was awake and calling for her fiancée. She had absolutely no idea what to think, or what to do. At that moment, she was afraid that her father heard everything she had said to him. And she was afraid he didn’t. There was only one way to find out why he called out for Jasmin. Finally, she motioned for Jasmin to join her.

With reluctance, Jasmin made her way to Mr. Brehme’s side. The *opposite* side of Anni.

“Mr. Brehme?” Jasmin cleared her throat, hoping that the next time she spoke it would be stronger.

Mr. Brehme was too weak to hold out his hand, but he spread his fingers out, palm up, silently beckoning Jasmin. Once she – dazedly – took his hand, she felt him faintly tug. She looked to Anni, who looked just as bewildered as Jasmin felt.

Anni shrugged, then locked her eyes on her father. She should be getting her mom. Or calling the doctor. But the situation was so incredibly . . . well, incredible, that normal brain function seemed to be disabled at the present time.

Jasmin bent until she was close enough to hear a slight wheezing coming from Anni's father.

"Good . . . for . . . her."

He slowly turned his head from a stunned Jasmin to an even more shocked Anni. He moved his hand towards his daughter, and she immediately took it. His was frail, and that worried her. But, again, logic flew out of her mind when he brought the two women's hands together.

"Heard. Know . . . now."

"Daddy?" Anni's tear filled eyes met Jasmin's – also wet with unshed tears. "Go get mom?"

"Of course! I'll get the doctor here, too." She just hoped they weren't saying goodbye. When Anni distractedly nodded, Jasmin left father and daughter staring at each other.

Anni barely noticed Jasmin leaving the room. Her father was awake! He looked tired, and she couldn't help but find that silly since she pretended he was sleeping when she couldn't handle reality.

"Do you need something? Water? Are you cold?"

"Anni?" Rainer's voice was barely a whisper and sounded rough to Anni's ears. But it was also the most wonderful sound. "I . . . I'm sorry."

"Shh, dad. I'm sorry, too, but we can talk about all of that when you're stronger."

"Heard," he repeated.

With trembling hands, Anni brought a cup of water to her father's lips, and he sipped slowly. She knew he was still watching her, but she didn't know how to respond. Obviously, he had heard *everything* she had said while he 'slept'. Some of those things were said in anger.

"Dad, I'm so sorry. I . . ."

"Love . . . you," he interrupted tiredly. "Everything . . . okay."

## Committed

Just then, Anni's mother burst into the room. After that, chaos ensued. Doctors showed up, her mom wouldn't leave her husband's side, and words like miracle were thrown around. Anni spent the time crying on Jasmin's shoulder. She was elated, relieved, confused, and completely overwhelmed. But the one thing that stood out in her mind was how he said he loved her, and everything was okay. For the first time in her life, Anni truly believed that everything – family, Jasmin, and anything else she and Jasmin will face together – would be just fine.



RAINER BREHME GREW stronger every day. Anni's mother credited Anni's daily vigil at his bedside. It didn't matter to Anni *why* her father was still here, and getting better. She was just glad he was.

Jasmin had – as usual – been a godsend. She would speak to Anni's father for long periods of time, laughing, crying, and basically not giving him any choice when it came to loving her. They even spoke about the wedding, with Anni's father vowing to be strong enough to walk Anni – *and* Jasmin – down the aisle.

Plans for the wedding were now in full force. Even Anni's mom, along with Katrin, were getting in on it. That was fine with both Anni and Jasmin. It freed them up to spend more quality time together without any wedding drama. Hell, they would be happy with just a small little ceremony that they could share with their closest friends. Of course, the mothers did not feel the same way. So unless they choose something outrageous, Anni and Jasmin are happy to delegate.

"Are you happy?" Jasmin traced one of Anni's tattoos on her chest. They had just made love, so if Anni wasn't happy right now, Jasmin had some work to do.

"Never been happier, baby."

"Me, too." Suddenly Jasmin noticed something different about the tattoo that she had seen many, *many* times before. She lifted her head to get a better look. Integrated into one of her existing tattoos was a flower. A jasmine. Each petal housed a letter, spelling out Jasmin's name. Jasmin's eyes snapped up. "Anni?"

## Jourdyn Kelly

“You asked me once if you would ever be one of my tattoos. From the moment I met you, you were tattooed here,” Anni said, placing a hand over her heart near the ink. “Now, you’re able to see it.”

It was a very long time before they left the bedroom again. Jasmin showed Anni – in very many ways – just how much what Anni said and did meant to her.

# The Wedding

“HELLO!” ANNI POKED her head around through the doorway of Tussi Attack just in time to see Kiara and Emily push Jasmin behind them.

“Out! Shoo!” Emily exclaimed bitchily.

“Excuse me, but since when am I not allowed in *my* fiancée’s store?” Anni hid her smirk. She knew exactly what they were doing in there. Jasmin had warned her to stay away that morning. Of course, Anni being Anni, she finagled some sweet sex out of Jasmin in order to agree. Best. Negotiation. Ever.

“You promised me!” Jasmin called out from behind her friends. “And, after what I did for you this morning, I expect you to keep that promise!”

Anni held up her hands and laughed. “Okay, okay. I’m going. But, how long are you going to be? I’m kinda bored. I thought maybe we could hang out. Get some coffee or something.” *Or something sounds much more interesting*, Anni thought with a smile.

“I could use some coffee,” Kiara said kindly.

There was just something about that voice that made Anni cringe. Not that it wasn’t pleasant. It was. But Anni couldn’t forget how Kiara had warned her with *that voice* that she’d be there, fighting for Jasmin, if Anni screwed up again. Spending time with the woman was *not* what Anni had planned or wanted.

“Um . . .”

“That’s a great idea, sweetie! Kiara has been here for hours. She needs a break. Would you mind?” Jasmin peeked between Kiara and Emily, giving Anni a sweet, pouting look. She wanted desperately for the two to become friends. She knew that if Anni would just give Kiara a chance it would happen. Unfortunately, Anni couldn’t get past the fact that Jasmin and Kiara had gotten close.

Anni sighed. She knew this was important to Jasmin. Why she had to be friends with the woman, she didn’t know. But she would do it. Love was all about compromise, right? “Yeah, sure. I’ll, um, meet you at Vereinsheim.” Without another word, she left.

“That went well,” Kiara chuckled.

“It’ll be fine,” Jasmin said, a bit unconvinced of that fact herself.



"I don't know," Emily chimed in. "I mean, you two almost slept together. I can't imagine Anni getting over that."

Jasmin shot Emily a look as Kiara raised an eyebrow at her. She had told Emily that in total confidence. She couldn't believe Emily was bringing it up right in front of Kiara!

"Well," Kiara cleared her throat, "I don't want to keep Anni waiting and give her more ammunition to hate me. I'll be back in a bit. If not, perhaps you should send a search party out for me." She winked and grabbed her purse on the way out.

"I can't believe you said that!" Jasmin hissed.

"What?" Emily shrugged. "I assume she *knows* she almost slept with you."

"That's not the point." Jasmin huffed, then turned on her heel and stomped to the back room.

Emily blinked. "Was it something I said?"



"WOULD YOU MIND if I sit here?" Kiara spotted Anni tucked away in a secluded corner as soon as she walked into the coffee shop. The "stay-the-fuck-away-from-me" aura around Anni kept everyone at bay. Everyone except Kiara. *Jasmin wants us to be friends, so that's what we're going to do.*

"I invited you, didn't I?"

Kiara took a seat and crossed her long legs. "Actually, I invited myself. I'm sorry about that, but apparently it's important to Jasmin that we get along."

"And, you'll do anything for Jasmin," Anni said sarcastically.

"Yes." Kiara sighed softly and leaned in. "I won't pretend not to care, Anni. We've become close friends. I intend on keeping that friendship."

"Close," Anni scoffed. "Too close."

"What happened, happened. There's no changing the past." Kiara sat back when Tuner walked up and asked for her order. After requesting a simple black coffee, she turned her attention back to a sulking Anni. "I'm sure there are things in the past that you would like to change."

Anni glanced up sharply. "What did Jasmin tell you?"

"It doesn't matter, Anni. This animosity you have towards me is misdirected. I told you, as long as Jasmin is happy with you, you have nothing to worry about from me."

## Committed

“I bet you’re just foaming at the mouth, waiting for me to screw up, aren’t you?”

“Actually, I’m rooting for you.” She smiled at Tuner as he handed her the cup. The look he exchanged with Anni was not lost on her. It would seem her and Jasmin’s indiscretion — as brief and non-existent as it was — had become common knowledge. “Look, I know the last thing you want is my advice. But, I’m going to give it to you anyway. It’s time to grow up. This grudge you’re holding against me is petty and childish. And, whether you believe it or not, it will harm your relationship with Jasmin.”

Anni snorted. “You think she’s going to take your side over mine if we don’t become best buds?”

“No. I think *you* will let this consume you until you convince yourself that you can’t trust Jasmin,” Kiara answered evenly.

Anni frowned. Was she right? There were moments when Anni knew that Jasmin was at the store with Kiara and she would feel that awful feeling of jealousy and fear. She *knew* Jasmin would never cheat on her. It wasn’t her style. *No, it’s just your style isn’t it, Anni?*

Of course, Anni being Anni, she let her pride speak for her. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know that you’re not living up to your potential,” Kiara countered defiantly. “I know that you have the talent to be standing on that stage singing your own music, yet you stay in the background. I know you can offer Jasmin much more than anyone else can because of the love you two have.”

Anni sat there speechless. Obviously Jasmin had talked quite a bit about her and their relationship. That knowledge did a lot to ease Anni’s insecurity. She took a deep breath and looked squarely at Kiara. “Thanks,” she said sincerely and saw the slight flicker of surprise in Kiara’s eyes. “I don’t want to dislike you. You seem pretty cool. But, you still want Jasmin. How do I get past that?”

“By knowing that I would never do anything to threaten a relationship that means so much to both of you.” Kiara took a sip of her coffee. “If it helps, I won’t be in Berlin much longer.”

This time, the surprise was Anni’s. “What?”

“I have a business to run. Tussi Attack is not my only client.”

“Does Jasmin know?”

Kiara nodded. “I told her this morning that I would be leaving for the States after your wedding,” Her coffee cup made a small clinking sound when Kiara set it on the saucer. “I, admittedly, should have waited for a better time to tell her. She’s already stressed with designing her dress. I think she’s a tad overwhelmed at the prospect of handling the business side of Tussi Attack.”

“Isn’t that what Emily is for?” Anni inquired genuinely.

“Yes, and I have gone over everything I can think of to help both of them keep their footing when I’m gone. I’m sure you can take care of Jasmin if she becomes a little too strained,” Kiara grinned.

For the first time since she met the woman, Anni felt a bona fide like for Kiara. Maybe it was because she knew Kiara was leaving. Or, maybe it was the innuendo. Either way, it was a step in the right direction.

“I can’t believe Jasmin is insisting on designing her own dress now,” Anni confided, speaking of Jasmin’s stress. “She had been against it before.”

Kiara shrugged a shoulder. “I would have tried to talk her out of it if I thought it would make a difference. But, ever since the two of you came back from visiting your parents, she said she knew exactly what she wanted. You can’t argue with a bride-to-be.”

“What if you’re the other bride?” Anni asked with a lopsided grin.

“Stale-mate?” Kiara chuckled.



“HONEY, I’M HOME!” Jasmin kicked the door closed behind her, arms full of “wedding stuff” as Anni called it. To Jasmin, it was all of the materials she needed in order to have the perfect wedding with the one she loved.

“Hey, babe.” Anni set her laptop aside and got up to help her fiancée. She gave her a sweet kiss before relieving Jasmin of her burden. “More wedding stuff?”

Jasmin shrugged. “Just some samples. We have most of the things we need. All of this is just extra. She smiled secretly when Anni groaned. Actually, everything was set for their wedding — thank goodness since it was less than a week away. She only brought more and more things home because it drove Anni crazy.

“We don’t need extra, babe,” Anni whined. “I thought we decided to have a small wedding.”

## Committed

“We did. That doesn’t mean it can’t be nice.” Jasmin laughed when Anni threw everything on the couch. “Besides, you owe me. Big time.”

Anni’s eyebrows shot up. “Owe you? What did I do now?”

“You totally broke our agreement from this morning. I got on my *knees* for you to make sure you wouldn’t show up at the shop. But, you did it anyway.”

Anni grinned roguishly thinking of Jasmin on her knees earlier. *So worth it.* She sauntered over to her lover and pulled her close. “So? Are you going to punish me?”

“Oh, you would like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, I mean, I *did* break the agreement,” Anni shrugged. “It’s only fair. For you, of course.”

“Mmhm.” Jasmin dipped her head and kissed Anni. “Punishing you sounds like a really good idea.” Just as she deepened the kiss, the front door opened and half of their roommates – which seemed to change every other week – walked in.

“Ugh! We really need a place of our own,” Anni complained, shooting dirty looks at everyone who dared interrupt them.

Jasmin’s eyes sparkled. She grabbed Anni’s hand and dragged her to their bedroom.

“Hey!” Tuner – a temporary new addition to the WG since Nele, Mesut, and Ayla moved out – called out. “Your stuff is all over the couch!”

“Move it! We’re going to be busy for the rest of the night,” Anni grinned.

“Just put it to the side,” Jasmin said. “Sorry!” She pulled Anni through the door and closed it, locking it.

Anni rubbed her hands together with anticipation. *This punishment is so going to be worth it!* She started undressing, but stopped abruptly when Jasmin picked up her laptop and opened it.

“Are you researching ways to punish me?” Anni asked, shivering a little with expectation.

Jasmin glanced up. The peek of Anni’s smooth skin almost had her abandoning her plans. Then she heard the loudness coming from the common room and patted the bed beside her.

“Nope, we’re going to find a place to live.”

“*Now?! But I thought we were going to, you know.*”

Jasmin smiled. "You're so cute. We'll get to that. Listen to that." She gestured towards the door. "We're getting married soon. *Very* soon. Wouldn't you like to come home from our honeymoon to our *own* place? No roommates, no interruptions. We could walk around naked, make love on the kitchen counter, or do whatever the hell we wanted whenever the hell we wanted."

Anni sat next to Jasmin and plucked the computer from her lap. "Give me that thing. What's our budget?"



JASMIN AWOKE TO two conflicting sensations. Her body jerked involuntarily and she winced at the pain in her neck. Then moaned at the pleasure she felt quite a bit lower. She raised her head as much as she could and cried out at the touch of Anni's tongue on a particularly sensitive part of her.

"Anni," she breathed. It was a beautiful way to wake up even if it was from sleeping on the floor all night long. She had no idea how long Anni had been doing what she was doing, but Jasmin was ready to explode. "Don't stop!"

Anni felt the change as soon as Jasmin woke up and amped up her efforts. They had, unfortunately, fallen asleep while searching for their new home. That meant no sex for Anni. Or, more importantly, no making it up to Jasmin for breaking their deal. When Anni woke up with Jasmin snoring softly beside her, the sight was so beautiful she couldn't help herself. So, she helped herself to a taste of her favorite thing ever.

Jasmin's moan came from deep down as the long, slow climax coursed through her body. Her body trembled from the aftershocks and she shivered when Anni slowly kissed her way up to her lips.

"Good morning." Anni kissed Jasmin fully, knowing Jasmin found it erotic tasting herself on Anni's tongue.

"Very good," Jasmin agreed with feeling. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. Literally." Anni kissed Jasmin again, pulling away when Jasmin tried undressing her.

"Where are you going?"

"That was for you to make up for yesterday. No reciprocation needed." Anni held out her hand to help Jasmin up.

"What if I want to reciprocate?" Jasmin asked sensually. "Which I really, really do."

## Committed

Anni groaned. “You’re killing me, babe. I want that, too, but we have an appointment.”

Jasmin frowned, mentally going through her schedule. “What appointment?”

“We’re going to check out that apartment we agreed on last night.”

Jasmin looked at her watch. “Just how long have you been awake?”

“Before I had you for breakfast?” She chuckled at Jasmin’s cute blush. “About fifteen minutes. I called the real estate agent, made an appointment, and put together some of the papers we’ll need if we really like it.”

Jasmin took Anni’s face in her hands, gazing into her deep brown eyes. “You really are amazing, you know that?”

Anni shrugged sheepishly. “You were pretty into that place and I thought it was cool. Might as well go see it before someone else snatches it up.”

“I love you.”

Anni smiled. “I love you, too, Tussi. You have thirty minutes to get ready.”

“Thirty minutes!” Jasmin pushed Anni away, almost tripping on her clothes that were around her ankles. She bent to pull them up, yelping when Anni slapped her ass. “I have to shower and get ready. We don’t have time for fooling around.”

“Ha! That’s what you think. Race you to the shower!” Anni took off with Jasmin hot on her heels. They both shouted a quick good morning to whichever roommates happened to be in their path before locking themselves in the bathroom. Thirty minutes was plenty of time for a little fooling around.



“WHAT ARE YOU laughing at?” Anni side-eyed Jasmin who sat in the passenger seat, snickering.

“Nothing,” Jasmin snorted.

“I will turn this car around,” Anni warned, causing Jasmin to laugh even harder.

“You sound like a parent!”

Curiously, Anni didn’t balk at that thought. In fact, it intrigued her. “Yeah, well, I will. Come on, what are you laughing at?”

“Now you sound like the kid,” Jasmin teased at Anni’s whining. “I was just thinking about how flexible you are.”

Anni winced, still feeling the aftereffects of their little adventure in the shower. "That was totally your fault!"

"How was it my fault? I told you not to spread your legs so far. I was doing just fine in the position we were in."

"You didn't listen when I told you I was slipping."

"I was focused on something else," Jasmin countered.

"Yeah, well, we need something on the bottom of that damn shower so we don't slip when we're trying to defy gravity the way we were," Anni mumbled.

Jasmin laughed again. "We'll be sure our *own* shower has everything we need. Deal?"

Anni glanced at Jasmin, then smiled. "Deal." She heard the directions coming from her phone and made the turn onto what could possibly become *their* street. "Almost there."

"Excited?"

"Oh yeah. You?"

"Absolutely. Having our own place is going to be amazing." Jasmin peered out the window, taking in the neighborhood. It was quaint. Quiet. Beautiful. She was so caught up in her surroundings that she didn't notice when Anni stopped.

"Jasmin?" Anni waited until she had Jasmin's attention. "You're sure about this, right?"

"Of course I am. Why? Are you having second thoughts?"

"Not even one," Anni answered immediately. "It's just, there are probably better choices for you than me."

"Stop right there. I love you. And, you show me more each day how much you love me. There is *no* better choice."

There was not an ounce of doubt or hesitation in Jasmin's voice. No deceit in her warm brown eyes. Only pure love. Anni smiled as she reached out and caressed Jasmin's cheek. "We're here. Let's go check out our new married life digs."

"Don't get your hopes up, honey. There's always a possibility that we won't get it."

"Nope," Anni shook her head. "I have a good feeling about this. It's ours."

Jasmin shook her head with a chuckle. "All right, then. Let's go see our 'new married life digs'."



THE APARTMENT WAS perfect. The soon-to-be-married couple couldn't have been happier with *everything* that came with it. Two extra bedrooms — “for our future kids” Anni explained — a balcony, large kitchen, and a master bedroom that was to die for. Though the price caused a bit of a disagreement when they first fell in love with it while searching online, Anni finally relented. Jasmin made it perfectly clear that the money she was making through Tussi Attack wasn't just hers. It was Anni's inspiration and support that helped Jasmin get to this point. Tussi Attack's success was just as much Anni's doing as it was Jasmin's, Sophie's and Emily's.

“When did the agent say we could move in?”

The childlike enthusiasm in Anni's voice moved Jasmin. It had been a long time since she heard Anni be so carefree and happy.

“We could start moving in as little as a week. That's how long she said the paperwork should take.”

“So, just in time for our wedding night?” Anni wiggled her eyebrows.

Jasmin laughed. “We're going to be on a plane on our wedding night, sweetie. But, I'm sure Katrin could, um, supervise some of our friends in setting it up for when we get back.”

“She seems happy for us these days,” Anni said carefully. It wasn't *that* long ago that Katrin tried her damndest to get Jasmin and her ex-husband back together. Not for Jasmin's happiness, but for pure selfish reasons. Anni was still on the fence about forgiving her for that.

“She is.” Jasmin knew Anni still had ill feelings towards Jasmin's mother. She couldn't blame her for that after everything that happened. But Jasmin truly believed Katrin had changed and was remorseful for her part in the whole “Kurt fiasco”. “I know it's hard, baby, but you need to forgive her. She's doing everything she can to show us she supports us. She's even paying for the wedding and the honeymoon!”

“I know,” Anni sighed. *I just hope she's doing it out of love for you and not some other greedy reason.* “I'll make sure to be extra nice to her. I promise.”

Jasmin laughed. “How about you just be you. She'll see through any of your fake niceties.”

“Hey! I can fake it!”



“No, baby, you can’t. And, you better not be faking anything with me,” Jasmin said, raising an eyebrow.

Anni leered at her fiancée a little too long to be safe while driving. “Baby, I do *not* need to fake anything with you. Our sex is too damned good for that.”

“Better believe it,” Jasmin muttered with satisfaction as she finished her text to Katrin about the apartment.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Anni tapped her thumbs on the steering wheel, hoping her question wasn’t going to start an argument.

“Sure.” Jasmin tucked her phone away and focused on Anni.

Anni hesitated for a beat. “How do you feel about Kiara leaving?” she asked finally.

Jasmin studied Anni for a moment trying to judge the reasoning for the question. She decided it was just curiosity and answered honestly. “I’ll miss her. And, I don’t say that to hurt you, sweetie. It’s just that we’ve become good friends and I’ll miss our talks. And, of course, I’ve learned so much from her about the fashion business.” She shrugged. “But I think I’m ready to show that I can stand on my own with Tussi Attack. Well, with Emily, of course.”

“You can always talk to me,” Anni offered and received a sweet smile in return.

“I know.”

“I’m sorry she’s going.”

“Are you?” There was no malice in the question, just natural interest.

“Yeah. We had a nice talk when we had coffee,” Anni confessed. “She doesn’t sugarcoat anything, does she?”

“Nope, not at all,” Jasmin chuckled. “Kinda like you.”

“Yeah, well, we came to an understanding. A truce, I guess. I learn how to be less insecure and she doesn’t try to steal you away from me.”

“You know she couldn’t do that, right?”

“I know. I was joking about that part. Sort of. But, she said some things to me that made me think.”

“Always scary,” Jasmin teased.

Anni stuck her tongue out at her fiancée. “*Anyway*. I’m going to do something with my life, Jasmin. I’m going to make you proud of me.”

Jasmin placed her hand on Anni’s thigh. “I’m already proud of you, Anni.”

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Anni patted Jasmin's hand. "But, I have the potential to be more. I want to do that. Not just for you, but for me, too."

"Whatever you decide, sweetie, I'm right beside you. Every step of the way."

"I was hoping you'd say that. I don't think this is going to be an easy road. And, I'll probably lose my temper more than once." She pulled into a parking space and cut the engine. She turned to Jasmin. "But I swear to you I will *never* do anything to hurt you or jeopardize us and our relationship. You are the most important person in my life. I fucked up before and almost lost you for good. I *know* I can't live without you now. I don't want to."

A tear ran down Jasmin's cheek. "Then we don't let careers or people or anything else come between us. If we start to feel overwhelmed, we tell each other. If we need a little time alone, we tell each other. If we feel any kind of temptation," she paused when Anni muttered 'never going to happen', "we discuss it. There's no one else in the world I want to be with Anni. I've told you that many times. In order for this to work, love, trust, and communication have to be foremost in our relationship."

"I agree." She took Jasmin's hand in hers. "Less than a week, baby. Then you're all mine."

"I'm all yours right now."



"FOR THE RECORD, I do *not* agree with this," Anni gruffed.

"So you've said, sweetie. Many times," Jasmin said patiently. "It's just for a few hours."

"But why can't we go out together? We're *both* the brides. You're going to go see strippers . . ."

"We are not going to see strippers," Jasmin interrupted with a laugh.

"Right. I don't trust Emily."

Jasmin pulled Anni to her. "Then trust me. I'm not even going to drink that much."

"Ha! Since when?"

"Funny." Jasmin kissed Anni's pouting mouth. "I'm serious. Tomorrow is our big day and I don't want to have a hangover. I want to be of sound mind and body when I marry you."

Anni relaxed at the sincerity in Jasmin's voice. "Me, too. Maybe we should just stay in. We could watch TV." She began to push Jasmin towards the bed. "Or, we could cook dinner together." Closer. "Or, you know, get in bed and stay there until the very last minute before we have to get up in the morning to get married."

"Tempting."

"I can be even more tempting," Anni said sexily. She began unbuttoning the shirt that Jasmin had just put on. She was encouraged when Jasmin didn't stop her. "Wouldn't it be more fun to stay in and let me worship your body?"

"We're leaving the country in two days for a couple of weeks, sweetie. Shouldn't we spend time with our friends before we go?" It was a half-hearted argument and they both knew it.

"They'll still be here when we get back." Anni stopped disrobing Jasmin for a second. "Then again, I don't know who will be living here in the 'rotating roommates' WG by then. And, we'll be in our *own* apartment." She shrugged. "But, they'll be around. There will only be one night before our wedding. We need to take advantage of it." Anni smiled at her own cleverness.

Jasmin shook her head with a grin. "Just think of that one, did ya?"

"Maybe, but it's true." Anni feathered her finger down Jasmin's cheek. "Stay with me?"

What could be more important than spending the night before their wedding together? Their friends would understand. And, if not? To hell with them. This was her and Anni's time.

"Are you going to finish undressing me or do I have to do it?"



ANNI STRETCHED LANGUIDLY. Her body ached in places she didn't know she had and it was awesome! Last night was indescribable. Her and Jasmin's love life had always been incredible, but there was a difference last night. Something shifted again. A peaceful sense of belonging washed over Anni when Jasmin made love to her. Something she had never fully felt before. Oh, she knew for a fact that Jasmin was the one for her. Now, she was certain she was the one for Jasmin. And she would spend the next fifty plus years proving that if she had to.

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She rolled over and spent the next few moments staring at the woman she was about to marry. She felt like the luckiest woman in the world. Jasmin was everything anyone could ever ask for. Beautiful, talented, intelligent, funny, caring. Perfectly imperfect. Not only did she have Jasmin, Anni had her family back. Her parents had gotten into town a couple of days ago, and the time they spent together was fantastic. Her father was feeling much better, and he doted on Jasmin as though she were his own daughter. Anni supposed now that was going to be true.

Her mother got rid of her own insecurities and became much more open with both Anni and Jasmin. There was no sense of dread with them. No hiding who she was anymore. Just an open, loving relationship. She had Jasmin to thank for that. Her support and love helped Anni knock that damned chip off her shoulder and tear down the walls around her heart.

“*Baby?*” she whispered in Jasmin’s ear. She smiled when Jasmin swiped at her ear and grumbled in her sleep, trying to roll over. *Oh, no you don’t.* “Oh, baaaby. It’s time to get up,” she singsonged.

“Go away.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want. Guess I’ll have to find someone else to marry.”

Jasmin’s eyes popped up and she sat up abruptly, bumping heads with Anni. “Ow.”

“Geez, babe, I was just kidding.” Anni rubbed her forehead. *Hope that doesn’t bruise.*

“Sorry.” Jasmin rubbed her own head. “What time is it? Are we late?”

“Nope, we have plenty of time to wake up, eat, take a shower.”

Jasmin eyed Anni. “Remember what happened the last time we took a shower?”

“You bet I do. I’d do it all over again. Every morning.”

“You’re very chipper this morning,” Jasmin grinned.

“Yep. I’m about to put on an old ball and chain.” She oomphed when Jasmin hit her in the stomach. “It’s a good thing I’m seeing how abusive you can be before we get married!”

“Oh, poor baby. Here, let me kiss it and make it all better.” Jasmin proceeded to kiss Anni tenderly on the forehead, then moved down to kiss her naked belly. “Better?”

"Oh, yeah. But, I think you missed a spot." She nodded to the "spot" a little further south.

"Fiend. Didn't you get enough last night?"

"Did you?" Anni shot back playfully.

"Never."

"Hey, did last night feel different to you?"

If she hadn't felt something different, Jasmin would have been worried about Anni's question. "Yes. At the risk of sounding too corny, it was pretty magical."

"That's not corny, baby. Just don't say it in front of anyone else," Anni teased. She dodged Jasmin's attempt at swatting her again. "*I'm whole now*," she said softly.

The words were said so quietly that Jasmin almost missed them. But quiet or not, the words were burned into her soul. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Anni looked at her watch. "I wish we had time to make love again. However, I think — *think* — I can wait until tonight to make love to my wife."

Jasmin shivered with happiness. "I don't know if I can, but I'll do my best," she confessed with a blush.

Anni hopped out of bed before she reneged on her "no time" comment. It didn't help matters that both she and Jasmin were still completely naked. "Do I get to watch you get dressed?"

"Nope." Jasmin threw the covers off her body, knowing exactly what affect she had on Anni. It was only fair since Anni was causing havoc on her hormones, prancing around in the buff. "I'll take my shower first, then I'll get dressed when you're taking yours."

"Wait, we're not even showering together? Such a waste of water," Anni shook her head.

"Sweetie, we use more water when we're in there together." Jasmin put her robe on and kissed Anni's pout. "Ready for today?"

The pout turned into a huge grin. "You know it."

"Good. In just a couple more hours we'll be official!"

Anni looked at her watch again. "Couple hours, huh? You best get that sweet ass in the shower then." She tapped her watch. "Time's ticking!"

"You're a brat!" Jasmin called over her shoulder as she ran out of the room.

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“That just means you’re marrying a brat!” Anni called back, smiling when Jasmin’s laughter floated back to her. She loved that sound. She wanted to hear it for the rest of her life.



JASMIN PACED EAGERLY as she waited for Anni to come out of the bedroom. They hadn’t seen each other in their wedding outfits, yet, and she was anxious. She just knew Anni was going to look incredible. What was worrying her was what Anni would think of her dress. She had worked hard on it, wanting it simple, yet elegant. Something that would represent both her and Anni as they officially joined their souls.

It wasn’t conventional, but then, neither were they. Though it wasn’t her first marriage — sadly — she chose traditional white. Tradition stopped, however, when the buttery silk satin flowed into a gradient of rich red. A little tussi on top, a little rocker on the bottom. Jasmin was pleased with how it turned out. Now, if Anni would just hurry up and . . .

“You look . . . amazing.”

The sheer awe in Anni’s voice gave Jasmin goosebumps. She turned slowly and gasped at the sight before her. While Anni stared, taking everything in, Jasmin did the same. Her eyes roamed from head to toe. There her fiancée stood in a white silk button-down shirt with matching slacks. What blew Jasmin away was the untied bowtie she wore around her neck. The deep red matched Jasmin’s dress perfectly.

“God, you’re beautiful,” Jasmin whispered reverently. She walked up to Anni, taking the tie in her hands. “Did you know about my dress?”

Anni shook her head, clearly in a daze. “I had no idea. I just saw this color and thought it was,” she shrugged, “I don’t know, right, I guess. The white was for you. For us. The red was for me.”

“That’s exactly what I thought when I designed my dress.” Jasmin gently brushed Anni’s hair off her face. “We were meant to be.”

Anni smiled. “Then let’s go make it official!”



THEY STOOD IN front of friends and family, beaming at each other. They were so lost in each other that they barely heard the *Standesbeamtin* recite the

words she had prepared for their union. When it came time to exchange their own personal vows, Anni insisted Jasmin go first. Her vows required a little more preparation.

Jasmin cleared her throat, trying to shrink the lump that had formed when the *Standesbeamtin* spoke of love and devotion. Her voice cracked when she had to respond to the question of loving Anni until death parted them. Not out of fear, but out of pure, unadulterated happiness.

“Anni.” Jasmin smiled tremulously when Anni reached up to brush a tear off Jasmin’s cheek. “I didn’t know who I was until I met you. Our first impressions weren’t so great.” She paused, laughing lightly at the thought of walking in on Anni in the bathtub as a camera crew followed. “Well, mine wasn’t. Yours was quite memorable. There was no way of knowing how important you would become to me, but that moment changed me forever.

You have been my rock. Challenging me like no other. Forcing me to grow and to become my own person. Inspiring me to live my dreams. It hasn’t always been easy for us. But the things in life that are truly worth fighting for never are easy. I will always fight for you and stand with you no matter what life hands us. Together, we can face anything. I think we’ve proven that we are stronger when we are united than we are apart. This world is ours to conquer. I couldn’t think of a better person to have by my side. Forever.”

Anni’s hand trembled as she wiped tears from her face. “I, uh, guess it’s my turn. I’m, um, not really good at this emotional stuff like you are. I’ve spent most of my life trying to turn the emotions off to avoid being hurt. You’ve taught me that loving and being loved is worth the risk and the payoff is awesome. Um, I kinda wrote something that I wanted to sing for you, if that’s okay with everyone.”

“It’s your day!” Emily called out, causing their loved ones to chuckle softly.

“That’s right,” Anni grinned. “Tuner?”

Tuner quickly left the room, returning just as fast with Anni’s guitar. He handed it over, smiling at the couple before taking his seat again.

“Okay, um,” she cleared her throat, “here goes.”

She began strumming a slow, beautiful melody and sang.

**Take my heart in your hands**

**Take me away in sweet romance**

**Kiss me, show me we have heaven**

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As the moonlight washes over our souls  
Show me the sweetest love I'll ever know

I wanna be one with you  
To feel you bringing paradise to me  
Leaving nothing to desire  
Doing things only you can do  
I wanna be one with you  
To feel your breath with mine  
Our hearts beat in time  
Giving my love solely to you  
I wanna be one with you

I see no one but you  
You have my love for eternity  
No one can love you like I do  
I've opened my heart to love you unselfishly  
Your love is all I need

We'll be safe in our love  
Believe in me and you will see  
The truth inside of me  
Become one with me



THE MURMURING OF voices around them held no distraction for the newlyweds. They were well into the reception; having had all the congratulations they could stand. It wasn't that they didn't appreciate it, just that people were cutting into "we-only-want-to-be-in-each-other's-arms" time. When they were finally able to get a moment, Anni pulled Jasmin in her arms and began to sway to the soft music that filled the room.

"That song was beautiful, baby," Jasmin said, still floating on air with joy.

"Thank you. Seems I'm not the only inspiration in this relationship," Anni grinned. "Say, when do you think would be an appropriate time to duck out of here."



Jasmin laughed. "It has only been an hour. Jo spent a lot of money on this party."

"But it's our wedding night! I wanna get started!" Anni wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Unless you want to join the mile-high club, that's going to have to wait, sweetie. We're off to the airport from here."

"Mile-high club, huh? I could totally get on board with that. So? How much longer?"

"You have the patience of a five-year-old!" Jasmin kissed her wife to take the sting out of her words. "A little more mingling and thanking everyone for coming, and then we can find Katrin to tell her we're leaving. Deal?"

In her mind, Anni calculated how long that could possibly take. "Good enough," she agreed finally.

"Look at that. Our first compromise as a married couple," Jasmin winked. "How about we make it even less time by thanking everyone at once instead of individually?"

"You mean, like, make a toast?"

"Exactly like that."

"Um, only if you're making it. I'm really . . ."

"Not good at this emotional stuff," Jasmin finished with a chuckle. "I seem to recall you saying that somewhere before."

"I can get everyone's attention, though!" Anni took glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, clinking them together. "Excuse me! Jasmin has something she wants to say," she called out when everyone gave her their attention. "From the both of us."

Jasmin shook her head at Anni's antics, patting her discreetly on the backside. "Yes, ahem." She took a champagne flute from Anni. "*We* wanted to thank you all for being here to witness our wedding. Those of you who have been there from the beginning of Jasmin and Anni know that this journey was not smooth. But your continued love and support of us was never taken for granted. You rooted for us when we didn't know if we should root for ourselves. You fought for us when we fought each other. You believed in us when we lost hope. Without you, we may not have been able to find our way back to each other. You all were our light when it was too dark for us to see our way. I — *we* — will be eternally grateful for that. There are no words, no

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actions that could possibly thank you enough. Except maybe one. We pledge to live our lives the best we can together. To support each other, love each other, and trust each other always. We gave each other our hearts, you gave us your blessing. We're lucky to have you all in our lives. Thank you. Prost!"

"Prost!" Everyone called out in return, toasting the couple.

Anni downed her champagne. "Perfect toast, babe. Now can we go?"

Jasmin locked eyes with her mom in the crowd and received a smile that illustrated pride and happiness. Katrin raised her glass once more, this time for Jasmin's benefit, and placed her free hand over her heart.

Life. It was a curious thing. Heartbreaking and soul-crushing at times. But, then there were moments like this. Heart-soaring and soul-mending moments of love that urged you to understand that every little moment, good or bad, was worth it in the end.

"Now we can go."

*The End*