

## 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."

"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."

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"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 groused.

"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.

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Anni laughed at the woman's joke. She had been standing at the sound board when the petite, red head walked up to her, and started chatting her up about music. Anni could tell that the red head - *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 clinch.

The small red head 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 red head 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.

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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 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." *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 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.

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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 the 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.

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 judgement 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.

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"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."

"Man, I know." Anni's frustration at her own inability to be open with Jasmin was beginning 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.

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"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.

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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?"

"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.

"Mhmm. 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 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?"

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?* "Okaaay."

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."

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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 she said the words, she shivered at the thought of bringing her own past back 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. 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 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 stand-still. 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 Mauerwerk, 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.

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"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."

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 sooth 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 in 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 off her necklace.

"Katrin?"

"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."

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"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?"

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 3am 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 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.

"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."

"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."

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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 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."

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 the 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 in 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.

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"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 heartrate 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 sketch book 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 firm handshake.

"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 tint 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 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.*

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 sketch book 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."

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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 pizza, and discussing everything from 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?"

"Mhmm." 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."

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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.

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 birthdate 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.

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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, 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."

"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



you're 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 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 soul-mate. 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.

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"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?

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 make-up 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."

"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.

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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. "Woah, woah. 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.

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.

"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 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.*

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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.

"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?"

"Mmhm."

"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."

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"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 catalogue 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?"

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 diffuse 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."

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"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."

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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, the 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.*

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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 whomever 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.

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 on 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 have not 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?"

"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 reparable, 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 didn't love you. 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.

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 the 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 mother - 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 having 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.

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.

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?"

"Mhmm. 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."

"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 whomever 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 reparable? 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 snuffle 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.

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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 . . ."

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 site, 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."

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.*

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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 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.

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"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 was loathe 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."

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.

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"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 thumb nail 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 passed 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.

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?"

"Mhmm."

"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 home town 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."

"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 any more."

"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.*

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"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 these 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.* "Ookay."

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."

"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 song book, 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. "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."

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"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 lie 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 wellbeing? Now get your fine ass up here!"

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"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.

"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 know."

"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."

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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 treehouse, but she and Jasmin never shied away from doing anything *anywhere*.

"Come here." Anni kneeled 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.

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"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.

"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.

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They were both laughing at some cheesy joke Anni had just told Jasmin as they walked into the house. Each were 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 these 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 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."

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"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 to 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."

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.

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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?"

"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.