

The Planning (Interrupted)

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

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

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

"Jasmin."

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

"Jasmin, baby, stop."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh God. He's okay, right? Oh no! Did he break something? We should get to the hospital! He's not in a coma is he?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

The air left Jasmin's lungs in a rush, and she collapsed to her knees. Sobs shook her uncontrollably, and she barely registered Anni's arms coming around her. Barely heard Anni's whispers of love and sympathy. Yet, even through her heartbreak, she could feel the love radiating from Anni, and she wanted to grab on to it. She wanted to feel the peace it gave her. Then Jasmin wondered who would give that peace to Elena now.

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

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

"But she . . . "

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Of course, Anni knew instinctively that it really hadn't hit Jasmin, yet. It won't until she sees Elena. Until she sees for herself that Dominik is no longer here. When that happens, Anni vowed to be there to pick up the pieces. She would put the love of her life back together as many times as she needs to. It made her heart bleed knowing Jasmin was hurting inside. And, it was about to get worse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anni heard the tremor in Tuner's voice, and wondered just how close he was to the edge. "I'm sure she understands that you're in pain, as well, Tuner."

He didn't respond, so Anni took a spot between him and Jasmin. Ready to catch either one when they finally fell over that edge.

"How could he be gone?" Elena cried. "We just got married. You were there, Jasmin. You saw how happy we were, right?"

"Yes. Dominik was so incredibly happy with you, Elena. He loves . . ." Jasmin faltered, knowing she should correct herself, but didn't have the heart to. Hell, she didn't even know how she was remotely able to keep it together right now. *Elena needs me*. She supposed that was what kept her from falling apart herself. "He loves you, Elena."

"We were supposed to grow old together. Have kids." Elena stood suddenly, effectively knocking Jasmin back onto the floor. "How could he do this to me!" Elena yelled angrily.

Anni hurried to Jasmin, helping her up. "Are you okay?"

Jasmin nodded, unable to find her voice when looking at Anni. She knew in Anni's arms she could break down completely, knowing that Anni's strength could put her back together. But she couldn't do that now. Elena needed them. She clutched Anni's hand for a moment, then released it and went to Elena who was yelling uncontrollably now. Ayla and the others were trying, in vain, to calm her down. Tuner just kept staring at the wall in front of him.

"Elena." Jasmin pushed past her friends to get to the heartbroken woman. "You know Dominik didn't mean to leave you," she said firmly. "Please, sweetie. You have to calm down. I know how hard this is for you . . . "

"You do, don't you?" Elena said unexpectedly. "You loved him, too."

A tear escaped, rolling down Jasmin's cheek. "Of course I did. He was a wonderful friend."

"You loved him as more than a friend."

Jasmin wondered why she didn't detect anger or jealousy towards her, until she understood that Elena was looking for someone who knew exactly how she felt.

"I did at one time, yes. But you, Elena, are his true love. As Anni is mine. Dominik and I both knew that. We talked about it some last night . . . "

Last night, Jasmin thought. It was just last night that Dominik was laughing and dancing. It was just last night when she and Dominik wished each other well, each knowing they were exactly where they needed and wanted to be. It was just last night when Dominik and Elena used the room their friends had decorated for that special occasion.

She didn't know what it was that warned her, but Anni felt the change in Jasmin. It was coming, she thought sorrowfully. It was finally hitting Jasmin that Dominik was truly gone. Anni hugged Tuner. "She needs you now," she said close to his ear. "And, Jasmin needs me."

Tuner snapped out of his trance, looking Anni in the eye. With a nod, he made his way to Elena, taking her in his arms.

Jasmin took a step back. Then another. And, another. Until she hit something behind her. The overwhelming feeling of grief

was abated, if even just a fraction, as Anni's arms came around Jasmin's waist.

"Let me take you home, baby," Anni whispered in Jasmin's ear.

Jasmin started to protest, thinking she should be here for Elena. But when she saw Tuner take Elena down the hall, she nodded. With one last look at the doors she knew Dominik was somewhere behind, she let Anni lead the way.

Anni was grateful that Jasmin agreed to go, since she could feel the emotions still rising. It would be a miracle if they made it home with Jasmin still able to stand on her own two feet. But Anni would carry her if necessary. She didn't know how, but she'd figure it out if it came down to it. From the corner of her eye, Anni caught Nele and Ayla stepping towards them. With a discreet shake of her head, and apologetic look that she hoped their friends would understand, she took Jasmin out of the sorrowful place and headed home.

Anni watched as Jasmin moved about the apartment in a trance-like state. *She's still trying to be strong.* Waiting patiently for Jasmin to finish her routine, she finally made her

move when Jasmin stopped in the middle of the room. Anni wrapped her arms around her, guiding her to bed. "Come on, love."

"He's gone, Anni."

"I know, baby. I'm so sorry."

"He was just here. Last night he was so happy. We laughed, we joked about how if we had gotten married all those years ago we'd be divorced by now." Jasmin shuffled slowly beside Anni, feeling as though her feet were stuck in mud, and each step was almost impossible. "He joked about how I would have cheated on him with you."

Anni smiled wanly, laying Jasmin down gently on the bed. She covered her, and kissed her on the forehead before crawling in beside her. She didn't have to wait long for the violent sobs that rocked Jasmin.

"Why?" Jasmin cried.

"I don't know, baby."

"Anni."

Anni was just able to make out Jasmin saying her name through the weeping.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere, Jasmin."

"Promise me. Oh God!"

Jasmin sat up unexpectedly, startling Anni.

"What is it?"

"We can't get married!"

Anni was dumbfounded. Surely she had heard that wrong. Reaching around Jasmin, she grabbed a tissue, and handed it to her love. "Say that again."

"We can't get married!"

Anni blinked. She really *did* say that. "Jasmin, why can't we get married?"

"What if this happens to us? We get married, we think everything is wonderful, and we're so happy. And then . . . "

"Jasmin, sweetie, this was an accident. It wasn't fate or destiny or because Dominik and Elena were happy together. It was an accident."

"But . . . "

"No buts, baby. Do you love me?"

"You know I love you, Anni. That's not the problem."

"Jasmin, the problem right now is you lost a dear friend who you loved very much. You're confused and scared. Later you'll be angry. Please don't make a decision like this when you're not thinking clearly." Anni brought Jasmin back down to lay beside her. "We love each other, baby. We're happy now. Getting married isn't going to change our fate. It's just going to change our status. I want you to be my wife, Jasmin. Please?"

The tears still flowed freely from Jasmin. She didn't think they'd ever stop, her heart hurt so much. But hearing those words coming from Anni felt like seeing a light in a very dark, very scary place. If she kept going towards Anni's light, maybe she'd make it out of this scary place.

"I want to be your wife, Anni. More than anything." She snuggled closer to Anni, feeding off her warmth, strength and love. "We should postpone the planning, though. Just for a little while," she said between sniffles. "For Elena's sake."

"I agree. She needs us." Anni tipped Jasmin's chin up so she could look her in the eye. "You need *me*. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere, okay?" Nod. "I promise." She kissed Jasmin gently, but thoroughly, pouring all of her love into the kiss.

"I love you," she murmured as she watched Jasmin's red, puffy eyes begin to droop with fatigue.

"I love you, too," came the sleepy, tearful reply.

"Sleep, baby." Tomorrow will be another hard day for Jasmin, Anni knew. A day of coming to terms with the enormous loss she just endured. Anni pulled Jasmin close, tucking her head under her chin and held her tight. And, she prayed to whatever entity that was listening to never take her love away from her.

To be continued. . .