



# Hooked on Marshall (Hooked #9)

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Marshall Jones is enjoying his newfound success as a bar owner in the city when tragedy calls him back to his hometown.

One week is all he needs to realize how much his brothers bar means to the small town.

To his sister-in-laws relief, he takes over, determined to do all he can for her and his young nieces.

Little does he know that one of his new employees has also just returned home, but as a means of escape.

And when Marshall finds out why, he wont hesitate to help while also unexpectedly laying his heart on the line.

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

“Congrats, Marshall,” my big brother says. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, man,” I say with a smile. “And a year earlier than I had hoped, too.”

“Right,” he laughs. “So, now that you own the building free and clear, what’s next? You finally going to start dating so my girls can have some cousins?”

“Jesus, Mark,” I laugh. “You’re as bad as mom.”

“I can’t help it,” he sighs. “Your bar has been your life for the last six years. Now that you’ve got nothing but profit ahead of you, you should enjoy it.”

“Who says I can’t enjoy it on my own?”

“You know as well as I do that life is sweeter when you-”

“Share it with someone you love,” I finish. “I know, I know. But I can’t help that I didn’t meet my dream woman in high school like you.”

“You can say that again,” he sighs dreamily. “I am one lucky man.”

I smile and shake my head. Because he’s right.

I take a breath to tell him so when the sound of tires squealing, and glass breaking, and screeching metal makes me pull my phone from my ear.

It seems to last for an eternity as my heart stills in my chest. As soon as its quiet on

his side of the line again, I say his name.

When I get no response, I say it again, but louder.

Then I scream his name until the call disconnects.

And my life is forever changed in that moment.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

Two and a Half Weeks Later

The only light in the bar is from the streetlight outside. The rest of my immediate family is on their way back to my sister-in-laws home to finish celebrating my brother's life. They all helped clean up here from the public celebration.

And now I'm at a crossroads.

Jace, Mark's bar manager, shut down his bar early that night.

It remained closed for three more days until a longtime friend of the family suggested opening it as a way for people to commune and remember Mark in the place that has become a staple in our small town.

Having the same skill set as my brother, I happily made myself at home in his office to ensure things were as they should be.

I was relieved to see that Mark was as meticulous about his paperwork as me.

At first, I figured I would stick around long enough to hire a finance manager and show them the ropes so it could still provide a source of income for Gina and her daughters.

Then she found out that she was to receive a handsome settlement from the company of the truck that ran into Mark.

As it goes, the driver was drunk, and the company didn't want the hassle of a court

case.

Even though Gina would certainly prefer to have Mark alive and well instead of the money, we could all sense that she was relieved for it. And after another day or two, I felt as though she would be even more relieved to let go of the bar, too.

Gina supported Mark when he bought the vacant restaurant space that was a pizza parlor when we were kids.

She even helped him with the remodeling when she wasn't teaching.

But it was Mark's dream, not hers. So, I can't say that I'd blame her for wanting to let go of it now that he's gone.

Too much of a reminder of his absence, I suppose.

The problem is, I'm not sure I want to let it go.

Sure, the place was jumping with people in the weeks after Mark's death as a means of comfort and solace and a form of closure.

But I knew it was more than that. What he's done with this place is nothing short of amazing.

A part of me wishes I'd have agreed to partner with him on it instead of opting to open my own place in the city.

A sound from the back of the house snaps me out of my musings. I push through the door and pull up short when a woman screams.

"Who the fuck are-"

I stop short as I slap on the light and find one of the servers and key holders with one hand on her heart and the other on her head. Her eyes are closed, and her breaths are labored.

“Shit, Lana, I’m sorry,” I sigh. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she mutters as she nods. “I just...I forgot my phone.”

I nod and step back as she walks into the bar to look for it. She’s back in less than a minute. As is the norm for her, she makes little to no eye contact with me. I’m not sure why, but if I decide to stay here and take over, I’d like to find out.

“Let me walk you to your car,” I say lightly. “It’s dark out now.”

She nods and waits by the back door. I turn off the lights and gesture for her to step outside.

While not a bad area, the back lot where employees park has just one streetlamp on a far corner.

But as soon as we step outside, the motion light comes on.

I keep pace beside Lana as she heads for her car.

Then I stand by while she unlocks her door.

Before she gets in, she looks at me more directly than she has ever before.

I am briefly stunned by her beauty. Even more so when I watch her eyes moisten as she speaks to me in a voice full of emotion.

“I really am sorry about your brother,” she half whispers. “He was a very good man.”

“Thank you,” I say softly. “I appreciate that.”

She holds my gaze for a beat longer. Then nods once and slides behind the wheel.

I step back as she closes the door and watch her drive away.

I’m rooted to the ground as my brother’s voice rolls around in my head about life being sweeter when it’s shared with someone you love. For whatever reason, the sight of Lana’s face just now has finally made me consider the merit of those words.

I’m not saying that it’s going to be Lana. But she’s the first woman who’s made me pause in quite some time. Maybe it’s my still emotional state about Mark’s death.

Or maybe it’s something else?

I sigh heavily and head for my Jeep. A vehicle that was a bit out of place in the city, but sure fits in here at home.

I stop again at that thought.

For the past six years, I’ve considered the city my home. And this place as simply my hometown.

“Wow,” I breathe.

With a small smile, I head to Mark and Gina’s house, intent on doing whatever I can for them for tonight and for as long as they need it. And maybe I can figure out what I need for myself while I do that. Wherever it may be.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

When I'm around the corner and down the street, I finally release the breath I've been holding since I looked Marshall Jones dead in the eye for the first time.

And I felt like he was seeing into my soul.

Yes, I am thoroughly crushed about his brother's death, but something about that extra moment that we stared at each other did something to me.

Something that I don't trust myself to handle anymore.

Not after the fiasco I suffered with Jonas.

That was the day before he was killed.

"Jesus," I sigh.

Just when I thought things were looking up for me again, I'm back to square one.

And if I don't get something going for myself soon, I'm sure to lose my mind living in my childhood bedroom under the same roof with not just my parents, but my grandfather, too.

All throughout college and the first year and a half at my dream job, I was on my own.

I loved it. But thanks to my stupid romantic heart and Jonas' sweet-talking ways, I lost it all.



I curse under my breath at my stupidity for the bazillionth time. Then I take several deep breaths to calm myself. The only way to get back on track is to find a job doing what I do best. Which probably isn't at Brick Oven Alehouse anymore.

Yes, Mark gave me the go ahead on my ideas.

But he's gone now. And I have no idea what's going to happen when his brother Marshall goes back to his own bar in the city.

I know my ideas are good, but I can't go to the next owner and explain that Mark liked them and gave me a green light.

Because it won't be Mark's bar anymore. And the thought of trying to pitch my ideas to Marshall before he leaves is just... not possible.

Why?

Because while Mark was handsome in his own right, Marshall is the same, but with a bad boy glint in his eye. And that's exactly what got me in trouble with Jonas. I can't afford to let a man in a position of authority take advantage of me again.

Been there, done that.

In less than ten minutes, I'm home. My parents and grandfather greet me when I walk in and ask about the last celebration of Mark's life, but I wave them off and head to my room.

As I climb the stairs, I cannot get Marshall's face out of my mind.

When I jump into the shower, I'm hard pressed not to relieve the ache between my thighs that's been residing there since I locked eyes with him less than a half an hour

ago.

Damn, that man.

Intent on sating my personal needs, I rummage through my nightstand for my favorite toy.

Then I settle in bed and turn off the light.

When I do, my phone lights up. And I lean over to look.

My heart stalls in my chest at the words.

Because even though I deleted Jonas' number, I know from the first two words that it's him.

Steeling my nerve, I pick up my phone and open the message.

Lovely Rose – I did it. I left Emily. These last two months without you have been unbearable. Please, come back to me.

Bile rises in my throat, and I rush to the bathroom, certain that I'm going to vomit.

Instead, I just dry heave for a few minutes.

But it's long enough and loud enough to lure my mother upstairs.

I tell her I'm just over exhausted and emotional from the last few days and thankfully she buys it and leaves me be.

When I've gotten myself back together, I splash some cold water on my face and

head back to bed.

I ignore Jonas' text and settle in for some much-needed sleep.

Unfortunately, it eludes me for several hours.

Instead, my mistakes with Jonas replay in my mind, causing me to finally cry myself to sleep.

When I wake on Sunday morning, I feel hungover.

I check the time and see that it's past eleven.

Thankfully, that means I'm here alone because everyone else is at church.

I take another shower and spend some extra time with my hair and makeup.

Sure, I don't go in until three today, but my mom always told me that when you look better you feel better.

It usually works like a charm, but today it feels like I've fallen short.

I find some leftovers in the fridge and heat them up for lunch and eat them out back on the deck.

It's early October and the weather is still surprisingly warm, so I decide to enjoy it while I can.

By the time my family gets back home, I feel a little better.

It's been hell these last two months hiding the truth from them.

Sure, they know Jonas' name and they know that he was helping me with my promotion, but they don't know the rest. Or the fact that he's the reason I lost my dream job.

I catch up with them for a bit before changing to go into work.

On my ride in, my phone rings. I don't recognize the number, but I have a feeling it's probably Jonas.

It goes to voicemail and a minute later, I get a notification that one has been left. When I park behind the Brick Oven Alehouse, I have a few moments before I need to clock in. So, despite my better judgement, I listen to the voicemail. Then Jonas' voice booms through my car.

"Hey, Lovely Rose."

I stab the disconnect button on my screen so hard that I hurt myself.

Then I curse as I try to shake the pain away.

Pissed off all over the again, I grab my things and head in the back door.

After I let myself in, I head for the break room where there are lockers.

On the way, I pass the door to Mark's office. When I do, Marshall walks out.

I bounce off his shoulder and fall flat on my ass. A pained grunt leaves me. As I shake my head and take a breath, Marshall kneels in front of me. I meet his concerned features when I look up.

"Jesus, Lana, I'm so sorry," he says quickly. "Are you okay?"

When he asks the question, he places a gentle hand on my shoulder. I want to nod my head and tell him I'm fine. But I don't. Instead, I break down in tears.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

The moment she bursts into tears, I move without thinking.

While everyone looks on, I scoop her into my arms and carry her into Mark's office.

Kicking the door shut behind me, I settle her on the loveseat and kneel beside her.

Great sobs rack her body as I pull her purse from her grasp and set it on the floor.

She immediately covers her face with her right hand and attempts to turn away.

I grab her left hand and hold it in both of mine, rubbing my thumb across her soft skin.

As I watch her curl into herself, my chest burns with...

something . I can't really place the emotion now, but I do know that I will do whatever I can to take this pain away from her.

While I don't know her that well, I recall Mark telling me about her when he first hired her and then promoted her to a keyholder position.

He was obviously impressed with her, as I have been in the short weeks I've been here.

If someone has done something to hurt her, I'll be hard pressed not to-

"I'm sorry," she gasps as she bolts upright. "I'm...shit, I'm sorry."

She tries to pull her hand away, but I don't allow it.

I grip it firmly and adjust my position so I'm directly in front of her.

On my knees. Her legs slightly parted in her work pants.

For a moment, I imagine us in this position in a much more intimate setting.

But I quickly slap that thought out of my mind and get back to the problem at hand.

"There's no need to apologize, Lana," I say gently. "I'm here to help. Whatever you need, okay? What can I do to help?"

Her entire body shudders as she sucks in a shaky breath.

When her eyes open and lock with mine, the normal hazel color has brightened to a light green.

And my body reacts once again to her beauty.

This time, with an uncomfortable twitch behind the zipper of my jeans.

Somehow, I cover my reaction from showing on my face. And Lana finally starts talking.

"I'm sorry," she says again. "I'm not normally that clumsy."

"It's fine," I tell her. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

“Okay, then,” I nod. “Tell me what’s going on so I can help.”

She closes her eyes and purses her full lips together. Then she lets out a breath through her nose as she shakes her head.

“I’ll be fine,” she says quietly. “I just need a minute.”

I take her in for another moment and decide not to press her. Instead, I pat her hand and nod my head before I stand.

“Take all the time you need,” I tell her. “We’re fine out there right now.”

She nods, too. Then I turn and walk out of the office, closing the door softly behind me. I’m two steps toward the front of the house when Sherri stops me.

“What’s up with Lana? Is she okay?”

“I think so,” I nod. “She’ll be out in a bit.”

She nods, taking my explanation well enough and walking away.

I get back behind the bar and stew for a bit while I force a smile and take care of some customers.

Ten minutes pass and I’m about to head back to the office to check on Lana when she finally walks out.

And fuck me, if it isn’t some kind of sight to behold.

Whatever had upset her earlier seems to be ancient history.



There's a beautiful smile on her face and she's walking with her head held high as she approaches a high-top table that has just been seated.

As is her way, she makes conversation with the couple before she goes about taking their order.

I'm smiling before I consciously realize it.

Even more so when she approaches with her ticket for drinks.

"Two Sam Adams, please."

Her voice is light, but she's back to not making eye contact with me.

And if I'm being honest, I suddenly miss it even though I've only been blessed with the sight of her gorgeous eyes a handful of times recently.

With practiced ease, I grab two pilsner glasses and head for the taps.

As soon as they're poured, I set them on the bar for Lana to pick up.

She does so in less than thirty seconds after giving me another drink order.

And so goes the afternoon.

Lana is the perfect server to all her tables. She's distant from me. But every time she's checked her phone, something has passed over her features that makes me wonder what's really going on. And if that same trouble is why she was so upset when she came in.

Unfortunately, I have no time to question her before we're locked up for the night and

she's out the back door to her car before I can catch up to her.

Uncertain what else to do, I swing by to check on Gina and my nieces to make sure they're ready for their return to the real world tomorrow.

Luckily, Audrey is in third grade and Nina is in kindergarten in the elementary school where Gina works, so at least Gina will be close if either of the girls has a breakdown.

As far as Gina goes, she's been stronger than anyone could have expected her to be.

Her own family went back home earlier today, but they only live one town away.

And just before I head to my childhood home, where I've been staying with my parents since Mark's accident, Gina follows me onto the porch and gives me the opening I didn't know I wanted until this moment.

"I need your help," she sighs.

"Anything," I tell her with a smile. "You know that."

"I know," she nods. "I just...don't want any of you upset with me for it."

"We're all here for you, Gina," I tell her earnestly. "Whatever you need, we've got you."

"God, I hope so."

She looks down when she says this. So, I step forward and grip her shoulders until she looks up at me.

“Spill it, Gina,” I say. “What do you need?”

Tears fill her eyes as she barely whispers the words.

“I want to sell the Alehouse.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

When I go into work on Monday, Marshall isn't there.

Thank God. After the last two days, I need a reprieve from him.

Not just his good looks and his apparent concern for me, but from his touch, too.

Being in his arms yesterday afternoon was far too comfortable.

And I can't afford to make the same mistake twice.

Not that I could with Marshall because he's not married. And he's also not my boss. But I feel like he's off-limits for some reason. As if being Mark's brother means he's not available, much like Mark's wife Gina will be, too, while she continues to mourn his loss.

But after I clock in, set my purse in a locker, and tuck my phone behind the register, Jace calls us all together for a quick meeting. In less than a minute, we're gathered at the bar. Waiting for what feels like the other shoe to drop.

And it does.

"Well, there's no way to sugarcoat this, so I'm just going to shoot you all straight," he sighs. "Gina's selling the Alehouse."

Most of us suck in a sharp breath first. Then the questions come flying.

What if the new owner fires us all? What if they make it into something else?

What if they tear the place down? As expected, Jace doesn't have any answers.

And I make a mental note to get moving this week to find a job in my desired field.

Part of me wonders if I could just set up shop here in my hometown.

But I'd have to establish myself first with one or two businesses before I could make it my full-time job.

I had intended on doing that with the Alehouse, but with the future full of uncertainty, that might not be possible anymore.

After shaking off the shock, we all go about getting ready for the day.

The rest of the week passes easily enough.

I spend my time off applying for jobs in my field while also visiting the businesses in my hometown to offer my services.

By Friday of the following week, I've got nothing to show for my efforts.

On Saturday morning, the entire staff is asked to come into the Alehouse for a meeting before opening.

I'm not too keen about it because I'm working a double so another waitress can attend a wedding, but since it's more than likely about the future of the business, I suppose I better be there.

To my surprise, Gina Jones is also in attendance. She's smiling as she chats with Jace and greets everyone when they walk in. When everyone has arrived, she asks for everyone's attention. The tension in the room is heavy. Even as Gina turns her

beautiful smile to us, no one seems to relax.

“First of all, I want to apologize if my decision to sell has caused any of you undue anxiety,” she says softly.

“But I need you to know that I didn’t come to this decision lightly.

It’s just that...as much as I helped bring this place to life, it was Mark’s baby.

Not mine. And something about keeping my hand in it just didn’t seem right without him here. ”

She pauses, and sniffs. Fighting back tears. Several others do as well. Then she takes a deep breath and continues.

“That being said, I think I’ve made the best decision I can for the future of Brick Oven Alehouse,” she says brightly. “So, let me introduce you to the new owner.”

She turns her head just as Mark’s brother walks out from the kitchen.

The reaction is instant and overwhelmingly positive.

There are gasps of shock quickly followed by shouts of approval and a lot of applause.

I’m smiling without realizing it. And my hands seem to clap on their own.

But my heart is twisting in my chest as my traitorous body warms at the thought of working for one Marshall Jones.

I mentally slap myself at the thought and do my best to focus on what he’s about to

say as he gestures for us to cease applause.

“Thank you,” he says, his voice choked with emotion. “I was hoping all of you would accept me taking over. Although I won’t be changing the concept Mark created here, I would like to rebrand. And I want everyone’s input as to how that will happen.”

From there, he goes on about how Mark had originally asked him to partner on this place.

But he respectfully declined because he wanted to try his hand opening his own alehouse in the city.

And while he was extremely successful with that, something about the feel of this place when he came home after Mark’s death made him question his decision.

“So, when Gina told me she wanted help selling the place, I knew what had to be done,” he says. “I sold my place in the city so I could buy Mark’s dream and make it...ours.”

There’s some more chatter before he explains that he wants to change the name from Brick Oven to something else that will memorialize Mark in a subtle way while also recognizing their familial connection.

As he continues to talk about that, my mind whirs and spins as I try to come up with a name that will lend itself to some minor changes inside as well.

I’m so lost in thought that I miss whatever he says that makes everyone cheer again. My head snaps up as I refocus and clap for...something. Then Marshall gives Gina a hug and she waves goodbye to all of us. When she’s gone, Marshall has one more request.

“So, before we open for business, I want to spend a few minutes with each of you,” he says.

“I know I know all of your names already, but now that I’m officially your new boss, I’d like to know a little more than what I may have gleaned through my conversations with you over the last few weeks, okay? ”

Everyone nods and he turns for the kitchen and probably Mark’s office.

Well, I suppose it's his office, now. Jace follows him along with a few of the younger staffers who only work a few days a week. Instead of lining up to talk with Marshall, I go about prepping for opening at the front of the house. With a few extra hands, it doesn’t take long.

Before I know it, Jace is calling my name.

“Yeah?”

“Go on back and chat with Marshall,” he says. “Everyone else has been in already.”

“Sure,” I nod.

I take in a deep breath and head for the office. When I step into the doorframe, I expect to see him seated behind the desk. But he’s not. Instead, he’s leaning back on the front of it. When his eyes meet mine, he gives me a smile that’s both warm and...I don’t know.

“Come on in, Lana,” he says. “Have a seat so we can get to know each other.”

My stomach flutters and my heart trips. But somehow, I move to one of the chairs in front of his desk. When I sit down, he shuts the door and takes the seat beside me.



And I pray that this is quick.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I purposely avoided looking at Lana while I was talking to my new staff earlier.

I was afraid that my face would give me away.

But now that she's right here in my office, I'm fighting like hell to control my physical reaction to her.

While she sits, I take a deep breath and settle in the chair beside her.

Then, I lean forward and brace my elbows on my knees.

Mostly to keep this casual, but mainly to hide my growing arousal.

"So," I sigh. "Tell me a little about yourself."

"What do you want to know?"

Everything .

"Well, where are you from?"

"Right here in Willow Point," she laughs.

"What? You're kidding."

"No," she says. "Why would I be?"

“I just...how did I...”

“How did you what?”

I take a deep breath and try to express myself in a way that won't sound...creepy.

“I just can't believe I've never seen you before,” I tell her.

“We were never in high school together,” she says. “Mark and I chatted about it. I wasn't a freshman until two years after you graduated.”

Okay. So, she's five years younger than me. I can work with that.

“Okay,” I nod. “What did you do after you graduated?”

“I earned a bachelor's in marketing with a minor in digital design,” she says almost painfully.

“Wow,” I smile. “That's great.”

“Except I'm not employed in my field right now.”

“Why is that?” I ask without thinking.

Something passes across her features. The same pained expression that I saw when she came in upset on Sunday. I'm about to apologize and ask her what I can do to help when she shoots to her feet and checks her watch.

“We're about to open,” she says as she squeezes past me. “I need to get out there.”

Without thinking, I grab her wrist and rise. When she turns to glare up at me, her

breast presses against my arm. Which further complicates the issue behind my zipper.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” I say softly.

Her eyes glisten with tears just as she nods.

“I know,” she whispers.

And with that, she pulls away from me and walks out of the office. I curse inwardly and walk behind the desk. I groan as I flop down into the seat. And since I’m probably not going to get much more from Lana today, I decide to see what I can find out on my own.

I open the file cabinet in the corner and pull out the employee file for Lana Rose.

Then I set it on my desk and open it. I scan her application and notice a previous address in the city.

Frowning, I look at her previous employers.

My eyes widen when I see the name of a well-known firm.

But when I look at her reason for leaving, it simply says ‘personal reasons.’

Unsatisfied, I put her file back and wake the computer.

Within a minute, I’m looking at a digital copy of her application, which also includes notes from Mark.

If there are any. When I hover my mouse over the hyperlink, I take a deep breath before clicking it.

A split second later, there's a half page narrative.

I let out a soft sigh and start reading the first entry made two weeks after she was hired.

Still unsure of her reason for departure, but after reaching out to a personal contact at the company, I was informed that she was very good at her trade.

After only a year and a half, she was up for a big promotion that would put her in charge of her first client account.

For reasons known only to upper management, she resigned without notice.

No one would answer my calls of inquiry.

The next entry is...the day before Mark was killed.

Lana approached me about some new marketing strategies for the Alehouse today.

She had already done some preliminary work and damn if I wasn't impressed.

I gave her the go ahead to move forward with her ideas.

Still don't know why she left such an established firm, but I have a feeling that their loss will be my gain.

And if I can, I'll see that she can put her talents to use around town, too.

I'm smiling as I read this last bit. Because I want to do the same for her.

My only problem is finding a way to bring up this conversation without her thinking I

was doing any digging.

Of course, I could just admit that I was going over Mark's files and tell her that he was impressed enough to make a note of his conversation with her.

That won't be as bad as admitting I was desperate to know more about her.

Satisfied with that course of action, I spend the first hour of business running through the books and inventory.

Once that's done, I hit the front of the house to check on business.

As I expected, things are hopping for a Saturday afternoon.

Especially since the fall weather is still hovering at the perfect temperature where only a sweater or sweatshirt is necessary.

What I don't expect is for Lana to keep up with her continued avoidance of me.

Something that I would like to put a stop to sooner rather than later.

In order to at least exchange a few words with her, I put myself behind the bar.

Making sure to be at the side counter almost every time she is.

By the time she took her break, I could tell that she was frustrated.

But she never let it affect her interactions with the customers.

Something that I've quickly come to appreciate.

Along with almost every other thing about her.

Just before she has to get back to work, I walk out back to toss some trash.

I'm about to walk back inside when I hear a soft sob.

I pause and wait until I hear it again. When I do, I walk around the corner of the building only to find Lana there.

She's squatting down, her back against the wall, and her face buried in her left hand while her right has a death grip on her phone.

Instantly furious that someone has put her in this state, again, I step forward. Determined to get to the bottom of this. Today.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

You can't ignore me forever, my Lovely Rose. As soon as the paperwork is final, I'm going to find you. I'm losing my mind not being with you. I miss you so much.

I sob and slide down the wall until I'm squatting. Then I hold my head in my left hand and let go again. I'm so lost in my misery I don't realize anyone else is out here. Until I hear his concerned voice.

"Lana?"

I suck in a sharp breath and shoot to my feet. When I do, I stumble, and my phone slips out of my hand. Before I can reach for it, Marshall does. I close my eyes and shake my head.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

I wait for him to say something. When he doesn't, I slowly open my eyes. He's right there in front of me. His face etched with concern. Slowly, he hands me my phone. I take it and quickly slip it into my back pocket.

"Sorry," I say again. "I'll get back-"

"Stop it, Lana," he says. "Tell me what's going on."

"I'm fine," I almost growl out. "I just need a minute, and I'll get back to work."

"Work can wait," he snaps. "I'm more concerned about you and whatever is making you so upset."



“It’s nothing,” I snap. “And since it’s not affecting my job, it’s really none of your concern.”

He flinches at this. But when he takes a breath to say more, I rush around him and back into the building.

I clock back in and go against policy by leaving my cell phone in my back pocket.

Mark always required us to leave them behind the bar.

And I can only assume that Marshall will follow that protocol.

But until I know for sure, I’ll take the risk.

Because the last thing I need is for Marshall to catch wind of who Jonas is and the fact that he won’t leave me alone.

I tried to block his number earlier this week, but once he figured it out, he changed his number, too.

At this point, I’m just doing my best to ignore him.

I don’t want to read his messages, but I also want to know if he’s figured out that I’ve come back home.

If that’s the case, then I need to be prepared for one of two things: facing him or running from him.

Somehow, I manage to keep my interactions with Marshall to a minimum for the rest of the night.

But not without noticing his annoyance with me because of it.

I take another break just before nine in the evening, and I make sure to walk to my car to check my phone.

When I do, I find a half dozen more messages from Jonas.

His frustration is evident at my lack of response. And while he wasn't the type to resort to bursts of anger or violence, he was very good at manipulating people. Which is how I ended up ruining my career for him.

At a loss for what to do, I finally respond. I keep my reply short and to the point. And I pray that it's enough to end this.

I want nothing to do with you anymore, Jonas. Please stop texting and calling. I've moved on with my life and want to enjoy it. You should enjoy yours as well. Without me.

I reread it three times before hitting send.

Then I close my eyes and rest my head back on my seat.

In less than thirty seconds, my phone is ringing.

And it's Jonas. I decline the call. Twenty seconds pass before it rings again.

Still Jonas. I decline the call again. Ten seconds and he calls again.

I let it ring until it goes to voicemail.

I watch and wait. Sure enough, I get a notification that he's left a message.

Steeling my nerve, I tap my screen to listen.

“Lana, you can’t do this to me,” he chokes out.

“Everything I ever said I wanted with you was the truth. And I still want it. I’m sorry things worked out the way they did, but my feelings for you were so strong that I allowed us to break the rules.

I want you back here with me. I’ve spoken with my Uncle Josh at length about my feelings for you and he’s agreed to rehire you as long as we can keep things professional on the job.

And I’ll admit that was my fault. Please, please don’t let us be over. I’ll...be in touch again soon.”

With that, he hangs up.

And all the shame and regret I felt when we were discovered comes flooding back.

I check the time and see that I still have ten minutes left on my second break.

I need that time to get myself back together, so I don’t get questioned by Marshall again.

Saturday nights are always busy, and I need to bring in the tips so I can get myself back on my feet.

When it’s time, I get back to my job, still keeping my phone in my back pocket.

As busy as it is, I don’t even have to think about my interactions with Marshall when they happen.

But as the night wears on, it becomes clear that a group of men at a high top in the bar have overindulged.

They are loud and rowdy and have come on to every waitress that has passed by their table.

At last call, they voice their disdain but quickly call over their waiter to order another round.

He walks over to Marshall to put the order in, but Marshall refuses.

And that's when things get ugly.

To my surprise, Marshall gives the subtle signal for the police to be contacted.

Since I'm closest to the landline, I handle it.

As Marshall approaches the angry men, I give the dispatcher a quick rundown of what's going on.

She tells me there's a unit close by and should arrive in less than five minutes.

I thank her and hang up. Then I head to the door to look for them.

Many of the other customers in the bar have gone quiet as they wait for things to escalate.

Some, who are regulars, have risen and moved into a position to assist if necessary.

As diplomatic as Mark, Marshall quietly explains to the men why he will not serve them anymore more alcohol.

And politely asks them to pay their bill and leave.

Unaware that the police are already on their way, there's a brief episode of pushing and shoving.

But the combatants are quickly outnumbered and wisely decide to do what's asked of them.

When their bill is paid, a brief round of applause follows their departure. I push open the door to allow them to exit, smiling when I see a police vehicle enter the front lot. Just as the last of the group walks outside, he turns to get in one last dig at Marshall.

Or so I think.

"Since we can't get served alcohol, maybe we can get served something else."

Before I realize what's happening, he yanks me off my feet and tosses me over his shoulder.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I stiffen when the last of the group, and the most aggressive, turns around as soon as he steps out the door. The look on his face has me worried. And I hate that Lana is only inches away from this asshole.

“Since we can’t get served alcohol,” he slurs, “maybe we can get served something else.”

With that, he grabs Lana and tosses her over his shoulder.

She screams for help. Then punches at the mans back with her fists as he takes a hard right into the parking lot.

My legs move without thinking as I dart after them.

I yell for them to stop just as blue and red lights illuminate the parking lot.

Lana is still screaming when her captor reaches a large SUV.

My stomach sinks at the thought of them getting her inside before I can reach her.

“Lana!”

I watch the man drop her to her feet, where she loses her balances and collapses to the pavement.

He pulls her back to her feet, and she’s fighting with him while he yanks open the back door.

Just as he goes to manhandle her inside, I slip my arms underneath his and put him in a headlock.

The sudden loss of his support means Lana drops to the pavement again, a painful sob leaving her that has me seeing red.

I'm aware of voices behind me as I pin the man against the back of the SUV.

He's spewing curses at me while his friends grab at Lana and start to argue with the police officers. One of them, Ryland James, is a high school classmate of mine. He listens as Lana tells him what just happened. His partner then pulls Lana away from the other asshats while he walks over to me.

"Is this the one who carried off your employee?"

"Yeah," I say as I continue to struggle. "He's pissed because I cut them off."

The guy starts running his mouth again and Ryland just smiles while he explains that they're all going to take a ride to the station to sort things out.

A third officer arrives and helps with the handcuffs, so I immediately walk over to Lana.

Her arms are crossed over her stomach and she's shivering.

I grip her upper arms and lean down into her line of sight. The fear in her eyes pains me.

"Lana?"

Her eyes meet mine. Then she loses it. Without thinking, I scoop her into my arms

and carry her toward the back of the restaurant.

There's no need for everyone to see her like this.

I'm vaguely aware of someone walking with me and smile when Jace steps forward to open the way.

I walk straight into the office and settle her on the loveseat.

She's still shivering, so I root around in the closet and happen upon a blanket.

I yank it out and pull it over her shivering form as she curls into a fetal position.

I'm rubbing her arm when Jace walks back in with a mug of coffee.

"Thanks, man," I tell him. "Let the police know we're in here. I'm sure they'll need to talk to us."

"You got it, boss."

He nods. Throws a concerned glance at Lana, then leaves.

Softly closing the door behind him. I settle on the edge of the loveseat and try to get as close to her as I can without making her uncomfortable.

After a hard shudder, she inhales deeply through her nose, holds it for a moment, then exhales slowly through pursed lips.

She does this two more times before she pulls her hands down from covering her face.



When she finally turns to look at me, I curse.

“Shit,” I hiss. “You’re bleeding. Stay right there.”

I rush into the bathroom and pull out the first aid kit.

When I get back to Lana, she’s sitting up, staring down at her blood-stained hands.

I settle beside her and do what’s necessary to clean her up.

She says nothing, which I both love and despise.

After she flinches for the half dozentime, I sigh and shake my head.

“I think we need to get you to the ER.”

“Okay,” she nods.

Her instant acquiescence, given her coldness toward me as of late, worries me. Very gently, I touch my fingertips to her cheek and tilt her face toward mine. Once again, I hate the look I see in her eyes. There are a myriad of emotions swirling in them, but the most prominent is fear.

“You’re going to be okay,” I tell her. “I’m going to stay with you until I know you’re okay.”

She nods. Then there’s a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I say.

Jace pushes the door open and Ryland walks in. I rise and shake his hand. Lana

simply pulls the blanket tighter around her. Ryland glances her way and sighs.

“So, all four of the men are on their way to the station for questioning,” he explains. “They’ll all be charged with disorderly conduct.”

“What about the man who tried to run off with Lana?” I snap.

“I’ll have to talk to my supervisor,” he sighs. “Kidnapping seems like a bit of a stretch. But depending on the extent of her injuries, we can possibly hit him with aggravated assault.”

I grit my teeth. Then Lana sniffs. I’m kneeling in front of her in the next second. Slowly and gently, I place my hands on the outside of her knees and wait for her to look at me.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “You don’t have to-”

“Yes,” I snap. “I do.”

Her eyes fill with tears. I almost lift my hand to caress her face, but I restrain myself. Even if I’m ready for that, I know she’s not. Especially not after what just happened to her.

“The ambulance is here,” Ryland says. “I can take your statements after she’s been treated.”

I rise and pull Lana up with me. When she sways on her feet, I tuck her into my side and follow Ryland out the back door.

She stiffens when she sees that the stretcher has been pulled out.

But she barely resists when I walk her to it and help her get settled.

The paramedics lift her inside and Ryland gestures for me to follow.

I sit on her right side close to her head.

My eyes ping pong all over the place as the paramedics do what they need to do to check her out.

She already has some bruises on her arms in addition to the gash over her left eye.

When they tend to that, she tenses and sucks in a sharp breath.

I close my eyes and lower my head, hating that she's in pain right now and there's nothing I can do to help.

Then, for the first time since I met her, she says my name.

“Marshall.”

Slowly, I lift my head. When our eyes meet, I lose my breath. Then she lifts her hand toward me. As quickly and gently as I can, I take it in both of mine. Delighting in the fact that her body instantly relaxes.

In that moment, I know that I'm going to do whatever I can for her. Tonight, and for as long as she'll let me.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

As I try to breathe through the pain, I turn my head and look at Marshall. Even though his head is down, I can tell that his face is pained. The sight of it does something to me. So, for the first time since I met him in the days after Mark's passing, I say his name.

"Marshall."

Very slowly, he lifts his head. When his eyes meet mine, something breaks free inside me.

And against my better judgement, but because I need someone in this moment right now, I lift my hand toward him.

As soon as he wraps both his hands around mine, my entire body relaxes.

And even though I could very easily get lost in his dark chocolate eyes, I let mine close.

The feel of his skin against mine is all I need right now.

Several minutes later, someone announces that we've arrived at the hospital. My eyes fly open in a moment of panic, but Marshall is still there. Holding my hand and watching over me.

"I'm staying right beside you," he says. "Okay?"

I nod and give him a weak smile. His brow only furrows a bit in response.

Then the back doors of the ambulance open and I'm being taken out.

Somehow, Marshall manages to keep hold of my hand as I'm led through the double doors into the emergency room.

Once I'm wheeled into an available space, Marshall and a nurse help me off the stretcher and onto the hospital bed.

Marshall thanks the paramedics and they take their leave.

The police officer named Ryland walks in just as my cell phone rings.

When I reach for it, a dark look passes over Marshall's face. I'm not surprised considering what he's witnessed after my interactions with Jonas recently. And as I start to look at my screen, I pray that it isn't him now.

No.

It's worse than that.

It's my mother.

After I touch my screen to answer, I lock eyes with Marshall.

"Hey, mom."

"Lana!" she shrieks. "What's going on? Ellen came over and said she saw some drunk man carry you out of the Alehouse and the police had to be called! Are you okay?"

Marshall's expression has just barely relaxed. So, I speak as gently as I can to calm

my mother.

“I’m fine, mom,” I sigh. “I got a little scraped up, but they brought me to the hospital as a precaution. It’s just procedure.”

She starts in with her twenty questions again, but I don’t answer anything just yet because the doctor arrives to look me over. When I tell her that, she offers to come pick me up. And although I love her, that is the absolute last thing I need right now.

“No, mom,” I tell her. “I’ll call you when they release me and let you know what’s going on, okay?”

She doesn’t like it and tries to argue, but I tell her the doctor is here, and I need to hang up.

She allows it after another promise to call her as soon as I’m released.

After I set my phone beside me, I answer the doctor’s questions about the incident while Marshall explains how things started and what he saw once the man picked me up.

All the while, Ryland takes his own notes.

Thirty minutes later, I’ve been treated for bruising and some mild scrapes, and the gash over my left eye has been sealed with some type of medical glue.

I’m given a prescription for a low dose pain reliever and sent on my way.

Marshall keeps his arm firmly around my waist as we walk out.

Ryland takes down my personal information and tells me he’ll be in touch tomorrow.

I start to thank him, but someone starts talking from his radio and he rushes off.

Leaving Marshall and I alone outside the emergency room without a ride.

Something that has obviously not escaped his attention either.

“Jace is on his way to pick us up,” he says as he leads me over to a bench. “They just finished closing up.”

I nod and sit a little too heavily on the bench. Exhaustion is settling in on me now. Fast. So, when Marshall wraps his arm around my shoulders, I close my eyes and let my head rest against his shoulder. Then I startle when he whispers my name.

“Lana?”

“What?” I gasp as I sit up.

Then I press my hand to my forehead as the world starts to spin with my fast movement.

“Shit,” Marshall mutters. “Come here.”

I let out a groan as he pulls me into his chest. Eager to regain myself, I go willingly. Then I find myself in his arms once again as he carries me to Jace’s car. Somehow, he gets me into the backseat. And it feels so good beside him, I speak without thinking.

“I don’t want to go home,” I whisper. “I...don’t want to talk to my family right now.”

“But you need to call them,” he reminds me. “You promised.”

I nod and pull out my phone. My mother answers on the first ring. I tell her that I'm fine but also exhausted.

"Do you want us to come pick you up?" she asks.

"Um..."

"You can stay with me," Marshall whispers. "I'm only five minutes away from the Alehouse."

"No, mom," I say through a yawn. "One of the other employees is going to let me crash with them."

"Are you sure baby?"

"Yeah, mom," I sigh. "There's no way I can drive, and I don't think I'd last long enough for you to come get me anyway."

After several more minutes of reassurances, she tells me she loves me and signs off.

At that point, we're back at the Alehouse.

Marshall and I thank Jace for the ride. Then I'm helped out of Jace's vehicle and into Marshall's Jeep.

I let my head fall back on the seat. The next thing I know, Marshall is undoing my seatbelt.

I practically fall into his arms I'm so tired.

After he shuts his Jeep and locks up, he carries me one last time into his home.



Once inside, things happen in a blur. I'm laid in a bed.

Then I'm moved around quite a bit until I'm under a soft blanket.

I start to protest about sleeping in my work clothes, but my brain registers that I'm only wearing a soft cotton shirt.

More concerned about comfort and sleep, I don't even wonder how that happened.

And just before I slip off, I swear I feel someone press a soft kiss to my forehead.

I sigh and breathe a name.

"Marshall."

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

After I kiss her forehead, she breathes my name.

My heart clenches in my chest. And my cock thickens once again. I sigh and brush my fingers over her cheek before turning off the bedside lamp and leaving the room.

What I need is a cold shower. While I was already attracted to her physical appearance, getting her out of her work clothes and into one of my old t-shirts only compounded that attraction.

And added to my mental list of things I want to do to her.

With her. For her. To make her come and scream my name .

Not Jonas'.

I scrub my hand over my face and bite back a growl of frustration.

I have absolutely no claim to this woman.

At all. And while I had my suspicions that it was a man who was giving her trouble, seeing proof of that when she left her message thread open after setting her phone on the hospital bed damn near sent me into a fit of rage.

Jonas.

And old flame of some sort based on his desire to reconnect with her.

Not that I can blame him, but if his contact with her now is what's causing her pain, then I hope she rebuffs him.

What's more, I'd love nothing more than to become a part of her life so I can be the one to handle him.

A smile lights my face at the thought. While I'm not a physical person by nature, running a bar does require some basic knowledge of how to defend yourself and handle others when necessary.

Like tonight.

"Shit."

The memory of that fucktard carrying Lana off to do God-knows-what with her is something that I won't soon forget.

No matter how much I wish I could. Frustrated again and knowing I won't sleep anytime soon, I head to the kitchen in my small house and pour myself some whiskey.

At first, I stand on my back deck while I sip it.

Enjoying the cool fall air and the rustle of the trees in the breeze.

Eventually, though, I end up in the doorway of my spare bedroom.

Watching Lana sleep.

She's supposed to work tomorrow, but I already asked Jace to call someone in to cover for her. I don't want her on her feet all day. Not after working a double today

and ending up in the hospital with injuries. Thank God they were minor.

Sometime past one in the morning, I wash up and crawl into bed after making sure everything is locked up.

My sleep is restless at best. I'm up before seven, but Lana looks to still be sleeping peacefully.

Wanting, no, needing to do more for her, I decide to make some breakfast. Then I curse when I realize I have no food because I just moved in on Friday.

I stew for a few minutes before I remember that another high school friend of mine owns a small diner a few blocks away.

I search it up and make a call to see if they deliver.

Luckily, Thomas is the one that answers.

"Hey, man," I say. "Marshall Jones."

"Marshall," he laughs. "I hear your back in town."

"That I am," I tell him. "And I hate to do this so soon, but I need a favor."

"Name it."

I sigh in relief and explain what happened with Lana last night.

Then I ask for two of their best breakfast platters.

He tells me its no trouble at all, and he'll deliver them personally within a half an

hour.

I promise to return the favor sometime and he tells me not to worry about it.

While I wait, I go about making some coffee.

It's one of the few things I brought with me from my apartment in the city that's actually consumable.

I'm pacing my kitchen while I wait for it to brew. Then I'm rooted to the floor when I turn and find Lana in the doorway. Wrapped in the blanket I pulled over her last night. Her bare feet and legs peaking out from beneath. She looks fucking perfect.

"Hey," I breathe. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Well enough," she nods. "But I'm a little sore and I have a headache."

"Then get comfortable in the living room and I'll get your pills for you."

I start to gesture her in that direction, but she holds up a hand to stop me.

"What?"

"I...ah...do you have some other clothes I can put on?"

"Shit," I hiss. "Yeah, sure. I'll bring them to you in the spare bedroom. Just give me a minute."

She nods and makes her way back to where she slept last night.

I follow after her and then head into the master bedroom to grab her a pair of

sweatpants and some socks.

As an afterthought, I also grab a sweatshirt in case she's cold.

While I don't think it's too cold in here, the memory of her shivering last night makes me want to err on the side of caution.

When I get back to the spare bedroom, she's seated on the bed, the blanket still tightly wrapped around her.

She keeps her eyes downcast as I set them beside her.

"Take your time," I tell her. "But breakfast should be arriving soon."

"Thank you."

She doesn't look up and I try not to let it bother me.

I just shut her in the room and go about making myself a cup of coffee and pouring a glass of water so she can take her meds.

After a few minutes, I hear her move into the bathroom.

I'm leaning against the counter when she finally appears.

Her hands are clasped in front of her as her gaze travels around the kitchen.

Landing on everything but me. I breathe deep, loving how she looks in my clothing, and do what I can to set her at ease.

"How do you take your coffee?"

“Black.”

“Okay,” I nod. “I got you a glass of water so you can take your meds.”

“Thank you.”

She walks over to the counter where the glass and the prescription bottle are sitting. When she takes the bottle, I notice that her hands are shaking. And I hate the thought of her being nervous around me.

“Lana?” I ask.

“Yeah?”

“Do I make you nervous?”

A soft gasp leaves her, and she drops the bottle. It rolls off the counter and onto the floor. I smile and pick it up.

“Thankfully it wasn’t open yet, yeah?”

She nods but stays quiet. After I set the bottle back on the counter, I chance a look at her. Her arms are folded across her stomach, and she’s backed up against the door jamb. And I hate the distance between us.

“Lana, there’s no need to be uncomfortable,” I tell her. “I just want to make sure you’re okay. I don’t want to make things worse.”

“You’re my boss,” she says quietly. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“I own an alehouse,” I laugh. “It’s not like I need to have rules about employees

fraternizing.”

Her eyes widen at my words. Then she bolts from the kitchen.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

As soon as I'm in Marshall's spare bedroom, I slam the door and lock it. Two seconds later, he's there.

"Lana, I was kidding."

But was he? Does he know about what happened between me and Jonas? And if he does, why would he even joke about something like that?

"I need to go home," I tell him.

"I'll take you home," he says firmly. "After you've had breakfast and after we clear things up between us."

"It's okay," I tell him. "I'll be fine."

"Maybe I won't."

This stills me. And I wonder what he means. Several minutes pass before he speaks again.

"Lana, please," he says softly. "Open the door."

I don't want to face him again. But when my stomach growls, I figure I might as well get this over with.

He's obviously hell bent on figuring out why I'm so hot and cold with him.

I'm just not sure if I can tell him the truth yet.

So, I take a deep breath and pull open the door.

Once again, the look of concern on his handsome face gives me pause.

"I'm sorry," I tell him.

"And I'm sorry I upset you," he says.

I nod. Then he offers me his hand. I slowly slide my palm over his and delight at how my body instantly warms because of it.

He gives me a small smile and leads me back into the kitchen.

When he pulls a chair out at the small table, I let him help me sit.

In a matter of seconds, he hands me the glass of water and one of the pain pills.

By the time I've downed it, he's setting a mug of coffee in front of me.

I thank him and hold it between my palms so I can enjoy the aroma and continue to warm myself.

Before he can sit down, his doorbell rings.

He leaves me to answer it. It's a man. Judging from the extended conversation, I'm assuming they know each other.

After I've had a few sips of coffee, he returns with a large bag.

I lean back as he sets it on the table and pulls out two covered plastic platters.

He sets one in front of me and the other in front of the chair opposite.

Then he hands me the plastic cutlery and does what he can to make this a little less awkward for me.

“Sorry about the plasticware,” he grins. “But I just moved all my things in on Friday. I haven’t had much time to get settled.”

“It’s fine,” I say. “Thank you for breakfast. I can pay you back.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” he says. “I want you to be comfortable, okay? Here...and with me in general.”

“Why?” I ask without thinking.

He smiles at this. And asks a question I’m not prepared for.

“Do you want my professional response to that? Or my personal one?”

“Professional, of course,” I say quickly.

He barely masks his flinch at this. But he doesn’t hesitate to continue.

“A business like mine thrives on personal interactions,” he shrugs.

“When people come in to have a drink or a meal, they expect to interact with the staff. You’ll ask them how they’ve been and listen and then you’ll return the favor.

A place like Brick Oven Alehouse is much more than a place to eat and drink.

It's a place to let go and unwind. On both sides.

"But if you're uncomfortable with me, the owner, the patrons will pick up on that. Which means it could make them uncomfortable and less likely to come in. And if that happens, then word will spread and less and less people will come in. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

I bite my lip and nod my head. Because I totally get it. And I want to kick myself in the ass for thinking that Marshall felt more than just friendship for me. Something that dims my spirit for a moment. Until he keeps talking.

"However, I'm going to answer your question personally as well," he says in a low voice that makes my toes curl.

"Because I refuse to hide my feelings from you. So, let me just put it out there that the moment I met you, I felt something I hadn't felt in a very long time.

Meaning that the entire time I was building my business in the city, I didn't want to be distracted by anything.

Including a relationship with a good woman.

"But what I didn't realize until I met you is I had been missing out. Everything I had gained through my business would have felt so much better if I had been able to share it with someone. And I want that someone to be you."

"You've known me for a few weeks," I snap.

"That doesn't matter," he says. "What I do know of you is enough."

I shake my head. Then I lift the cover off my platter and focus on eating. Because I'm

hungry. And also because I want to nix any further conversation with Marshall.

Do I want a meaningful relationship with a man?

Of course, I do.

But not only am I gun-shy about getting involved with a superior, I also can't be sure that he isn't feeling some kind of way toward me because of what happened last night.

Plus, I still can't be sure that he isn't aware of what happened between me and Jonas.

After his remark earlier, I know I can't be sure unless I ask.

And the last thing I want to do is ask just in case he isn't aware of what happened between us.

So, I just continue to eat until I've had my fill.

After I finish my coffee, I go about cleaning up my mess and the leftover trash from the to-go order.

Marshall continues to eat and leaves me to it, which eases me a bit.

I'm just finishing up when he steps beside me and starts cleaning up his own mess.

Not wanting to be in another uncomfortable position, I pull back and dry my hands.

Then I go into the spare bedroom to gather my things from last night.

Once I have them in a neat pile, I go into the living room and settle on the couch.

The next thing I know, a gentle hand is shaking me awake.

“Lana?”

I bolt upright and then groan at the sharp pain in my forehead. When I open my eyes, I see that Marshall is rubbing his forehead.

“Shit,” I breathe. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he chuckles. “But it’s time to get you home.”

I smile. Then my mood darkens because...I’m not ready to leave him.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

The smile she gives me is small, but I'll take it. Then I offer her my hand, desperate for the feel of her skin against mine again. Just before her hand touches mine, she turns her wrist to look at her watch.

“Shit!”

With that, she jumps up and attempts to rush past me.

But she trips. I break her fall easily, but when I pull her upright, her hands land on my chest as I hold her body close to mine.

Our eyes lock and I watch with delight as her pupils dilate.

Then I tighten my hold on her, enjoying how well she fits against me.

“Marshall,” she breathes.

My cock twitches in response. Her eyes lower and her hands fist my shirt.

“God, I love hearing you say my name,” I growl.

Her body goes lax in my arms. And when her eyes drop to my lips, I take that as an invitation for more. So, I happily give it to her. I bend my head as I slide my right hand up her back and into her hair. A soft moan leaves her and her eyes close.

Then I gently press my lips to hers.

This moment is everything.

Even though I've not had a steady girlfriend in the last six years, I've been able to sate my needs when necessary.

But this?

Even if I only have this one kiss with her, it will have been worth it.

And since she hasn't pulled back yet, I take a chance.

Very gently, I coax her lips apart with my tongue.

When she opens for me, I force myself to be gentle as I taste her.

When our tongues meet, she moans again. My cock thickens.

I kiss her for several long, delightful minutes.

When I finally pull back, I smile as I wait for her eyes to open.

"Oh, my God," she breathes.

"You can say that again," I tell her.

"Marshall," she sighs. "I...we can't..."

"We can't what?"

She grimaces and shakes her head. But she's still in my arms. So, I'll take it.



“You barely know me.”

“I’m trying to change that,” I counter.

“But you’re my boss.”

“That’s irrelevant,” I tell her.

“But-”

“Are you in a relationship with someone else?”

“No.”

“They why can’t you be with me?”

She sighs and looks down. I wait for her response. But when she speaks again, it’s not an answer to my question.

“I need to get to work,” she says softly.

“Your shift is covered for today,” I tell her. “I wanted you to have the time off after what happened last night.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“If you need the money I’ll still pay you for the hours,” I say. “It’s more important to me that you’re okay.”

She shakes her head again. Then she steps back, and I reluctantly let her go.

“I really should get home.”

I nod. Then she goes into my spare room for her shoes and her work clothes from last night. When she’s ready, I lead her out to my Jeep. In just five minutes, I’m at the Alehouse. But I put my hand on Lana’s arm to keep her from getting out.

“I want your number,” I tell her.

“Why?”

“I have everyone else’s number, you know,” I explain. “But I never got yours.”

She nods. Then she pulls her phone out and curses under her breath.

“It’s dead.”

“Fine,” I say as I pull mine out. “Just put your number in and I’ll send you a text later.”

She nods and does what I ask. When she hands my phone back, I try a different approach.

“Can I take you to dinner tonight?”

“Why?”

“Fine,” I sigh. “I’ll spell it out for you again.

I like you, Lana. I want to date you. I want to be your boyfriend.

I want another kiss like we shared earlier.

And I want to know that you're okay. And since you haven't come right out and said that you're not interested, I figured we could start with dinner.

I'm willing to take things slow, if that's your issue. "

"That's not it," she says.

"Then let me take you to dinner tonight," I say. "Please."

She looks down for a moment. And again, I just wait. And hope for the best.

"What time?"

"Whenever is good for you."

"Okay," she nods. "I'll text you later."

"Promise?"

She smiles at this. Then she looks back up at me.

"If I told you I wasn't interested, would you back off?"

"Yes," I nod. "I wouldn't like it, but I'd leave you alone."

She nods again. And I have to question her.

"Is that what you want?" I press. "For me to leave you alone?"

"No," she says softly. "I'll be in touch later."

“Good,” I smile.

Then she turns and climbs out of my Jeep. I climb out as well and head into the Alehouse while she heads home. I send her a text so she has my number and pray that I can make some progress with her tonight.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I am an absolute bundle of nerves as I drive home.

And not just because of Marshall, either.

I'm not looking forward to facing my family.

As an only child, they have a tendency to overreact when something bad happens to me.

Which prompted my decision to stay with Marshall last night.

But now, I wonder if perhaps I should have just sucked it up and let my mother come and get me.

The only thing I'm grateful for right now is the fact that my phone is dead.

That way I don't have to look at the text from Marshall, or see anything else from Jonas, either.

When I pull into the driveway, I can see movement in the front window.

And by the time I reach the door, my mother pulls it open.

She gasps, and then I'm in her arms. I reassure her that I'm fine while she cries and frets.

By the time I get inside, my father and grandfather have appeared.

It's another round of hugs and reassurances before the real questions start. And I know better than to lie to them. Because when you live in a small town, you never know what people see and who they'll tell. So...

"Whose clothes are those?" my grandfather chuckles. "You look like you had a sleep over at your boyfriend's house."

My parents chuckle, too. But my face flames with heat. And when they see it, their laughter stops.

"Lana?" mom asks. "Who did you stay with last night?"

She's frowning. As are my father and grandfather.

"Marshall Jones," I sigh.

My mother's eyebrows almost fly off her head at that. Then my grandfather pats my shoulder and walks away. My father looks...amused.

"He's still here?"

"He just came back," I explain. "He sold his bar in the city, bought the Alehouse, and moved back here."

"Oh, how nice," mom says.

"Yeah," I say.

There are a few moments of weird silence and then I excuse myself to take a shower.

Before I do that, I plug in my phone. I spend longer in the shower than I should, but it

feels good to wash the grime of my double off, as well as the slight hospital smell.

Then I pull on a comfy pair of sweats and do some laundry so I can wash Marshall's clothes, too.

At the thought of him, I touch my fingers to my lips.

The memory of his kiss warms me even more than my shower just did.

His kiss was...perfect. And the feel of my body pressed against his made me want to do more.

But I can't. Well, it's not that I can't, but I shouldn't.

Even though he doesn't see an issue with him being my boss, I don't know if I can get past it.

A small part of me wants to, but a bigger, more rational part of me doesn't want to take the risk.

Jonas has me gun shy.

I will never forgive myself for not being able to resist him.

And the sad part is, we weren't even that good together.

What I really loved was the thrill of being with him because it was against the rules.

Not to mention the risks we took by having our trysts in his office.

I was so caught up in the excitement, I didn't care about what it was going to cost me.

As if the memory of him was a summons, my phone rings with an unsaved number. I silence it. Then I see that I have a text message. Also from an unsaved number. But when I see the first two words, I quickly open it.

It's Marshall. Let me know when you'd like me to pick you up. I'm looking forward to seeing you again.

I'm smiling at his words until another text comes through. From Jonas.

I need you, Lana. I've taken care of so much so I can have you back in my life. Your job is waiting. And so am I. In a new apartment. And Emily is out of the picture. Please get back to me or let me know where you are so I can come to you. We need to talk and plan.

"I don't fucking think so," I whisper.

Needing a distraction, I go back to the message from Marshall after I save him name in my contacts.

Any time is fine with me. What did you have in mind?

I set my phone down and head to my closet. Fall is my favorite season because I love nothing more than wearing jeans with tall boots and comfy sweaters. In less than five minutes, I'm changed and somewhat excited for my evening. Then Marshall gets back to me.

I'm leaving the Alehouse now. I need a shower first, then I'll come pick you up. Text me your address and I'll let you know when I'm headed your way. We'll keep things simple tonight. If things go well, I'll wine and dine you next time.

I'm laughing after I read his text. Then I send him my address and decide to give my



family a heads up.

When I explain that Marshall is picking me up for dinner, I can tell by the twinkle in their eyes that I'm going to have to warn Marshall, too.

I enjoy my family's company until he texts me that he's on his way. So, I send my warning.

BTW, I'm still at my parents house. Be prepared for the third degree when you pick me up. Let me know if you want to cancel.

I hope he doesn't, but I figured I should give him the option anyway. In less than a minute, he gets back to me.

I look forward to it. But not as much as I'm looking forward to spending more time with you.

I shake my head and sigh. In ten more minutes, I see his Jeep pull up in front of the house.

I start to stand so I can get the door, but my father gestures for me to stay where I am.

When the doorbell rings, he moves to answer it.

And my mother and grandfather are grinning like loons.

I shake my head at them and rise as well.

Positioning myself so I can see Marshall when the door opens.

And hopefully be close enough to intervene if necessary.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

When I pull up in front of the Rose house, I smile.

Then I take a deep, cleansing breath. Because it's been years since I've had to endure the third degree from the parents of the woman I'm dating.

Well, the woman that I hope to start dating, anyway.

I grab the flowers I picked up earlier today and head for the door.

After another deep breath, I ring the doorbell.

Thirty seconds pass before it opens. The man before me doesn't look happy. I focus on him and smile, but I can see Lana behind him, too. Which sets me at ease a bit.

"Hello, Mr. Rose," I say with a nod. "I'm Marshall Jones."

I offer my hand, and he takes it. Firmly.

"I'm Ben Rose," he says. "I understand you're here to take my daughter to dinner."

"Yes, sir," I say with a nod.

"What are your intentions with her?"

"I'd love nothing more than to be her boyfriend," I say honestly. "But I think she needs to get to know me a little better first."

He makes some sound of acknowledgement. Then he looks at the flowers in my hand.

“And who are those for?”

“Your wife,” I tell him. “If that’s okay with you.”

He takes me in for a long moment. Almost too long.

Then he steps back and gestures for me to come inside.

I thank him and enter. Lana smiles at me.

Then Mr. Rose gestures for me to walk into the living room.

Mrs. Rose rises to greet me, smiling a little more when I offer her the flowers.

After a quick hug from her, and elderly man steps beside her. When I look at him, I gasp in shock.

“Mr. Riggin?” I ask.

“Good to see you again, Marshall,” he chuckles. “It’s been too damn long.”

I offer my hand, but he pulls me in for a hug instead.

And I return it wholeheartedly. He was the head janitor at our high school.

And I befriended him when I was a freshman, and a senior prank went wrong, and I stuck around to help with the cleanup.

He retired the next year, but he showed up when I graduated.

And I had no idea he was Lana's grandfather.

"Yes, sir," I tell him. "You look good."

"No ass kissing just to date my granddaughter," he chuckles as he pulls back. "It will get you nowhere."

"Yes, sir."

We continue to chat until Lana comes over and threads her arm through her grandfather's. He looks at her with nothing but love in his eyes. She leans up and kisses his cheek. Then says what's necessary to get us moving.

"Well, we need to get going," she says. "I haven't eaten since breakfast and I'm starving."

Hearing that, her family practically shoves her out the door. I gently take her elbow and lead her to my Jeep. Opening the passenger door for her and helping her inside. When I'm behind the wheel, there is a delightfully shy smile on her face.

"Sorry about that," she says.

"Don't worry about it," I say as I reach for her hand. "It's a small price to pay to spend time with you."

"Stop," she sighs.

"Stop what?" I ask.

"With all the sweet talk," she says shortly. "I...I don't like it."

I take a deep breath and give her hand a gentle squeeze. Then I tell her the truth of things.

“It’s not sweet talk, Lana,” I say softly. “It’s how I feel.”

She says nothing more. So, I just drive us to one of my old favorite pizza joints one town over. When we’re in the parking lot, I sneak a look at her and find her smiling. Okay, that’s good. Once I’m in park, I question her.

“Is this okay?”

“Yes,” she giggles. “My friends and I used to come here all the time in the summer after we got our license. Best pizza in the county.”

“Maybe then,” I say with a smirk.

“Maybe,” she concedes. “Let’s go. I really am starving.”

I laugh and we both hop out. When I reach for her hand to walk with her, she allows it.

And I feel ten feet tall as a result. It’s pretty busy inside, but we get seated right away in a booth near the back.

The waitress arrives in minutes, and we opt for a half pitcher of beer.

Then comes the tough part, deciding which pizza we want.

“Do you want a whole pie for yourself?” I ask with a smirk.

“I could probably eat one today,” she smiles. “But I’m fine sharing.”

“We’ll order two,” I shrug. “I don’t mind leftovers.”

“Have you even had time to grocery shop yet?”

“No,” I chuckle. “I’m lucky I’ve had time to make my bed. When I got back here, all I wanted to do was dive in headfirst at the Alehouse.”

“You don’t have to make all the changes right away,” she says. “And you’ve seen firsthand how well the place runs itself. You should take the time you need to get settled.”

“I know,” I nod. “But I’m no good at that kind of thing. I usually enlist the help of my mother and Gina, and I don’t want to bother them after everything that’s happened.”

“Do you really think they’d be bothered to help you get settled here?”

“No,” I sigh.

“Then why not take the time you need and ask for their help?” she presses.

I grimace and exhale a slow breath. Because I’m going to give her my honest answer. I just don’t want it to spook her.

“Because right now, being at the Alehouse is the only way I can see you.”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I suck in a sharp breath at his words. And as I take in his expression, I know that he's telling the truth.

I'm just not sure how to handle it. I've been running from a man I made the worst mistake of my life with for over two months now.

Not only am I afraid to get involved with someone else, I also don't want anyone caught in the crosshairs if Jonas manages to find me.

"Lana? You okay?"

"Yeah," I nod.

His expression softens a bit. I think he's about to question me some more when the waitress comes back with our beer.

We tell her we need a few more minutes before we're ready to order and manage to focus on only that until we've made a decision.

Once our order is in, Marshall grabs the pitcher and pours for us.

When he's finished, he raises his glass, and I follow suit.

"Here's to coming back home," he says. "And finding happiness."

Tears prick my eyes at his words, but I manage to smile and tap my glass to his. Then we each take a long pull. I close my eyes and sigh after I swallow. Enjoying the taste.

“Wow,” I breathe. “I haven’t had a draft beer this good in a long time.”

“Not a big drinker?”

“I’m more of a wine girl,” I shrug. “But when I do drink beer, I prefer tap beer. Drinking from cans or bottles makes me burp something terrible.”

“You know that’s why you’re supposed to pour beer into a glass, right?”

“No,” I smile. “I didn’t.”

He laughs and explains how it releases some of the carbonation that causes beer bloat.

And it also releases the aroma which can improve the taste.

It’s obvious he knows his trade, just as his brother did.

So, for most of our meal, talk revolves around his bar he just sold in the city and the changes he wants to make at the Alehouse.

“I want to change the name,” he sighs. “I want it to be a tribute to Mark, but in a subtle way. I just haven’t come up with anything I like yet.”

“What was the name of your bar?” I ask.

“Pour Decisions,” he grins.

“Seriously?” I laugh.

“Yeah,” he nods. “There were too many places around that felt the need to elevate the



bar experience. I chose that name because I wanted mine to...remind me of home."

"I wish I could have gone there," I tell him.

"You still can," he says. "The new owner said he wasn't going to change much."

I shake my head, and my marketing brain starts asking questions about his old bar so I can possibly help him with the changes he wants to make with the Alehouse.

Our discussion continues until our pizzas arrive and long after we're done.

After I drain my beer, I sit back and think.

Something is tickling the edge of my brain that I think could work.

It's just not coming to me yet. Too many quiet minutes must pass for his liking before he breaks my reverie.

"Lana?"

"Yeah?" I ask as I look up at him.

"You're quiet."

"I know," I nod. "Just thinking."

"You know," he starts as he leans forward, "I was going through Mark's files, and he'd made a note about you wanting to help with marketing. He was obviously impressed."

"He told me he was," I say as I fight back tears. "But after what happened, I didn't

feel right bringing it up to you.”

“Well, now that I’ve brought it up, I’d love to see what you were going to do first,” he says. “Then, if we can settle on the perfect name, we can take it and run with it.”

I can’t hold back my smile at this. I didn’t get much more done with my ideas after speaking with Mark because he was gone the next day. But now that Marshall is giving me a green light, I’m ready to set myself to task again.

“Thank you,” I tell him. “I’ll start pulling things together as soon as I get home.”

“There’s no rush,” he says quickly.

“Okay.”

“Damn,” he sighs.

“What?”

“You’re ready to leave now, aren’t you?”

I bite my lip and nod my head.

“No?”

He laughs at this. Then he flags down our waitress to ask for the check.

While I’ve enjoyed my time here with him, I can’t help the need that I feel to get started on this.

Hopefully I’ve not offended him. He’s quiet while he signs the check.

After he sets down the pen, he reaches over and covers my hand with his.

“I’m going to make you a deal, Lana.”

“Okay.”

“You have to know that I wasn’t ready for our date to come to an end yet,” he says.

“But since I’m the reason you’re ready to go home, I’ll concede. This time. On one condition.”

“Okay,” I say again slowly.

“Actually, two conditions,” he smirks.

I nod and he continues.

“The first condition is that I get to take you out again. Soon. As in sometime this week.”

My stomach flutters with excitement at that. And I smile.

“Okay,” I nod.

“And second,” he says in a low voice. “You allow me to kiss you goodnight.”

My entire body flushes with heat at his words. My free hand lifts as I press my fingers to my mouth. Once again reliving our kiss from earlier today. No doubt causing me to blush. But I don’t give a response right away.

“Well, Lana? What do you say? Do we have a deal?”

What choice do I have? If I want to get started doing what I love, I need to agree. My body is on board, and my logical brain is, too. I just don't know how much longer I can keep my heart out of this.

“Yes,” I finally say. “We have a deal.”

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

When we pull up in front of her parents' house, I'm probably more excited than I should be to kiss her again.

Sure, I had to play a lame version of 'Let's Make A Deal' with her in order for it to happen, but I'm hoping she'll start to come around the more time we can spend together.

After I put my Jeep in park, I turn off the engine.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"I'm going to walk you to your door," I chuckle.

"Then are you going to kiss me now?"

"No," I say with a smile. "I'm going to kiss you at your door."

She closes her eyes and shakes her head. I reach for her hand and hold it in both of mine.

"Are you ashamed to be seen with me?" I ask her.

"No, of course not," she snaps. "But...my family is in there."

"Is your father going to come after me with a shotgun if I kiss you at the door?"

She rolls her eyes and growls. It's fucking adorable.

“Of course not,” she sighs. “Just...come on.”

She yanks her hand from mine and jumps out.

I’m quick to follow but I have to rush to catch up with her.

When I do, I place my hand on the small of her back to guide her along.

Not that she needs it, but it’s the gentlemanly thing to do.

And my father might come after me if I didn’t behave as such.

She’s fishing for her keys as soon as we mount the steps, but I gently grip the inside of her elbow and turn her toward me.

I have got to figure out why she’s so hot and cold with me. Because I’m going to get whiplash at this rate and we’ve only been on one date.

“What can I do to make this easier for you?” I ask.

“It’s not you,” she sighs. “It’s me.”

“Cliché, much?”

“I’m serious,” she says. “But I’m trying.”

“Are you really?”

“Fine, no, I’m not,” she grumbles. “But...I think I want to.”

This makes me smile. And when she sees it, she smiles, too. A real, genuine smile

that makes her look...

“You’re so beautiful,” I say.

“Marshall,” she sighs as she looks down. “I told you to-”

“I know,” I say quickly. “But I’d rather you’d just get used to my compliments, instead of asking me to stop.”

She sighs again and shakes her head. I touch my fingers to her chin and tilt her face toward mine. Something is reflected in her eyes right now that I can’t name. But whatever it is, I don’t like it. And I want to find a way to make it disappear. Maybe then, she can let this, let us , happen.

“Do you want me to leave without kissing you?” I ask.

Tears fill her eyes. Then the doorknob turns. She rises up and presses a hard kiss to my lips before turning and running inside. Almost knocking her father over in the process. I keep my eyes on her until she’s out of sight. When I turn to look at her father, I do the only thing I can.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I don’t know-”

“We don’t either,” he says gruffly. “She’s hiding something.

We think it has to do with her supervisor from her job in the city.

His name was Jonas. All we know is that he was helping her with a promotion and they seemed to have gotten close.

Then a few weeks later, she resigned and came home. She hasn’t been the same

since.”

Lightbulbs start to go off in my head. Maybe that’s why she freaked when I joked about a fraternization policy at the Alehouse.

“Don’t tell her I said anything to you,” he says softly. “I just thought you should know given your intentions.”

“Yes, sir,” I nod. “I won’t say anything. But I’m damn sure going to try and find out if he’s the reason she’s been so upset lately.”

“When she checks her phone?”

“Yes, sir,” I nod. “She’s had a negative reaction more than once while she’s been on her phone. And I don’t like it.”

He gives me a small smile at this. Then he nods.

“Well, maybe my father-in-law was right about you,” he says. “You’re welcome here time anytime, Marshall.”

“Thank you, sir,” I nod.

I offer my hand, and he takes it. After we shake, I head home.

And I decide to do some digging on this Jonas motherfucker.

If I disliked him before, then I’m running full tilt toward hate right now.

The fact that her parents are suspicious is fueling my emotions in the worst way.



As soon as I get into my house and lock up, I grab my tablet and get to it.

Since I don't have a last name for Jonas, I look up the marketing firm first. As I had hoped, there's a staff listing. It's large, but when I come across one Jonas Freeman, I click on his name. There's a picture of him. A shit-eating grin on his perfect face with blonde hair and blue eyes.

I hate him even more now.

There's a short paragraph about him and how long he's been with the company. And the worst part is that it mentions his wife.

"Shit," I breathe.

Now that I have his last name, I enter it and his wife's name in a search.

And what comes back makes my blood run cold.

I guess this Jonas Freeman comes from money, because there's a brief article about him filing for divorce from his wife of ten years.

There's speculation about the reason why, but no solid leads.

"Oh, my God," I breathe.

If he was with Lana, and she left him, and he's now divorcing his wife, I can only assume that he wants her back. And if that's the case, and he's the reason she's been so upset lately, then she obviously doesn't want him back.

And I want to make sure it stays that way.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

When I get into my room, I climb into bed and cry.

Time passes without my knowledge until my phone buzzes with a text.

I don't want to look at it, for fear that it's Jonas.

But part of me hopes that it's Marshall.

Several minutes pass before I muster up the courage to look.

A breath of relief leaves me at the sight of Marshall's name.

I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable tonight. Please let me know what I can do to make this easier. I don't want to push you, but unless you tell me you're not interested, I'm still going to want you. Get a good night's sleep and I'll see you tomorrow.

More tears fall. I manage to wash up for the night without having to explain anything to my family. Then I crawl into bed and pray that tomorrow is an easier day.

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When I wake on Monday morning, I feel only marginally better.

After handling my immediate needs, I head into the kitchen for a large cup of coffee before settling down with my laptop to get started on something for the Alehouse.

Knowing he wants to keep Mark connected somehow, I think about their names first.  
Both of their initials are MJ.

And the first three letters of both of their first names are MAR.

I ponder that and think about using something with 'double' or 'squared' but nothing strikes me.

Nor am I sure how I could connect it to the menu.

Then I think about Marshall's old bar, Pour Decisions.

While a bit cliché, it obviously worked.

But could I carry it over to the Alehouse?

My first thought is about a double pour, but that just doesn't sit right with me.

A few other terms race through my brain that are bar related, and I start to type them into my notes.

My fingers can barely keep up with my thoughts at this point.

Wait a minute.

Keep up.

As in 'keeping up with the Joneses.'

The Joneses.

Mark and Marshall Jones. The plural of their last name would be Joneses.

So, why not simply Joneses Pub? Then we could use a catchphrase like ‘can you keep up?’ Maybe a pizza or wing eating challenge that would earn the patron their name on the wall and a free shirt.

Or we could rotate specials during the year either by holiday or sports season and challenge patrons to keep up.

We could create some type of loyalty rewards system where they earn points every time they come in to eat.

A wide smile lights my face as I start running with the idea.

I make a note of every idea that pops into my head, not caring in the slightest if it gets used or not.

Because the more ideas I have, the better.

I’m so absorbed in my task that I lose track of the time and before I know it, I need to get ready for work.

I hop in the shower, taking care with the gash over my eye as I wash, and get dressed in record time.

Since I’m day shift, I plan on getting in a little early so I can show Marshall what I’ve come up with so far.

I’m so excited to share my ideas, my family even comments on my improved mood.

“Marshall wants to change some things up at the Alehouse and I think I’ve got an

idea that will really work,” I tell them. “I can’t wait to show him.”

They ask me what it is, but I tell them I want to wait until I know for sure if he likes it.

Then I say my goodbyes and head out. I’m a good twenty minutes ahead of schedule and I wonder if Marshall is even there yet.

If not, I can use that time to organize my random thoughts a bit.

When I pull into the parking lot, it’s empty.

So, I let myself inside and head for the break room.

I stash my purse in a locker and settle at the table.

Once again, my creative brain runs wild.

I’m so lost in my own mind that I never hear Marshall come in.

Nor do I realize he’s standing in the doorway watching me until my phone buzzes and breaks my concentration.

I snatch it up and frown at the first few words of the text.

Emily and I are officially separated. Please tell me where you are. I need to see you, Lana. My life won’t be complete unless you’re in it.

“I don’t fucking think so, asshole,” I mutter.

“Excuse me?”

I yelp in surprise and jump out of my chair. There is a bemused smile on Marshall's face. I sigh and press my hands over my heart.

"You scared the shit out of me," I say.

"Sorry," he chuckles. "You looked like you were super focused on your work, and I didn't want to distract you."

"Yeah," I nod. "Yeah. I was a little too focused, I guess."

"Too bad someone else disrupted you," he says quietly.

"It was nothing," I say quickly.

Too quickly. He frowns and walks over to stand in front of me. And I feel a bit cornered.

"Lana, is the person who's been reaching out to you these last few days the real reason you won't commit to being with me?"

"What do you mean?" I breathe.

"Come on, Lana," he says. "More than once, you've gotten a message on your phone that has upset you. And I'm not going to lie about what I saw in your message thread when you were in the hospital, either."

"What?" I gasp. "What did you see?"

He takes a step closer as his face darkens. And I have a feeling that my dirty little secret is about to be a secret no more.

“Who is Jonas? And why do you want him to leave you alone?”

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

She visibly pales. When she shakes her head, she sways on her feet.

I reach out to steady her but end up catching her when her legs give out.

Yet again, I lift her into my arms and carry her into the office.

Even with the lights off, I'm able to settle her on the loveseat.

Then I flip on the light on the desk so I can keep a hand on her.

When turn my attention back to her, she's curled into herself and turned her body away from me.

"Lana," I say gently. "Talk to me."

She shakes her head. I sit on the edge of the loveseat and rub her shoulder. She's shivering.

"Lana, please ," I beg. "I don't like seeing you like this. You don't deserve it. Let me-"

"I do deserve it," she chokes out. "We knew the rules. And we broke them. I thought we...I thought he was..."

She breaks down crying at this point. So, I pull her up into my chest so I can hold her and give her some kind of support.



No, I don't like what I just heard. But judging what I know of her character, she wouldn't have engaged in such an affair without some type of coercion.

Which is all the more reason for me to make sure Jonas Freeman doesn't get to her again.

"Just take a deep breath," I tell her. "We'll figure things out, okay? Whatever you need, I'm here for you. Please believe that."

She nods against my chest. Still sobbing quietly. I caress her back and rock her slightly until she settles. Then I offer her an outlet that I think she needs.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I...it's so embarrassing," she whispers.

"We all make mistakes, Lana," I say gently. "All we can do is learn from them."

"I'm trying ," she moans. "That's why I'm so scared to..."

"To what?"

"To be with you," she chokes out.

"Tell me why," I offer. "So, I can understand. No judgement."

She inhales a sharp breath and shudders. So, I say that magical word.

"Please."

She inhales another deep breath. Then she sits up, just barely putting some distance

between us. I wait, and she finally starts talking.

“I was hired by Mass Marketing straight out of college,” she says.

“It was an entry level position that required more grunt work than marketing, but I knew I’d have to start somewhere.

I worked hard and managed to snag every promotion that became available.

Just after the new year, I was made a team leader.

One of many who reported directly to Jonas. ”

She takes a shaky breath before continuing. She won’t look at me, but at least she’s talking.

“Jonas has one of those giant personalities that draws you in from the moment you meet him,” she mutters.

“And it just so happens that his uncle owns the company.

At first, I thought the flirting was all harmless because he seemed to behave that way with the other females underneath him as well. Plus, we all knew he was married.

“Even so, there were still rumblings about him having trysts with several woman not under his direct supervision. Apparently, that wasn’t against company policy.

So, I just kept with the playfulness and did everything I could to keep advancing my position.

Three months ago, one of the senior team leaders retired.

And despite my short time with the company, I decided to go after the promotion.

“I had forged a great relationship with several of my co-workers at this point and many of them supported me in my quest. When Jonas caught wind of it, he offered to give me some pointers for my presentation. Since the other three team leaders who were after the promotion were under someone else’s supervision, there was no conflict of interest.”

She shivers again. Then she pulls back some more and finally meets my eyes. Her emotions are like a neon sign reflected in her gorgeous hazel eyes. As I watch them harden, my anger toward Jonas multiplies.

“More than once, we stayed late so he could help me. He was very much all business at first. But one Friday afternoon, he seemed distracted. Finally, I gave up on our task and asked him what was wrong. He told me it was something personal and he didn’t feel comfortable telling me.

I took that as face value but still offered an ear if he needed it.

He broke down then. I didn’t hesitate to offer him some physical comfort.

I wrapped him in my arms and just held him.

When he finally regained himself, he lifted his head and thanked me. Then he kissed me.

“The next thing I knew, I was sprawled across his worktable. He kissed me with such passion I didn’t realize what he was doing until he was inside me.

But...my emotions were in overdrive at that point, so I let him take what he needed from me.

I figured it would be a one and done thing.

I figured after the weekend, we'd forget it ever happened.

Until it kept happening. Until his uncle caught wind of it and came within minutes of catching us in the act. ”

She barely chokes out those last words and lowers her head once again.

“His uncle was ready to fire me on the spot, but Jonas demanded that he allow me to resign so I could continue my career elsewhere. His uncle agreed but only if he could keep all the work I had done with the company. So...that's what I did. And I came back home.”

At this point, my anger has reached its boiling point. And all of my rage is directed at Jonas and his uncle. Because it's obvious that Jonas received no type of disciplinary action for breaking the rules. Nepotism at its finest.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I spit out. “Why didn't you go after them?”

“What?” she gasps as she looks up at me again.

Her face reflecting both fear and confusion.

“You weren't the only one who made that mistake,” I snap. “Jonas' uncle protected him and used you as a scapegoat. No doubt to squelch any kind of scandal that might hurt the company. Plus, they robbed you of all your work. I have no doubt that some or all of that is illegal.”

“But...”

“I’m a businessman, Lana,” I snap. “And I know all about business ethics. What they did to you was shameful and dirty. And just plain wrong. You didn’t deserve what happened to you, and if you want to go after them, then by God, I’ll help you.”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I am absolutely stunned by his words. For the last two and a half months, I've been dreading telling this story because I didn't want anyone to tell me how stupid I was.

Not only did I sleep with a married man, I slept with my supervisor in his office .

I was prepared for a barrage of name-calling and more.

But not Marshall.

"What...did you just say?" I breathe.

"You heard me," he says slowly. "All you have to do is say the word, and I'll find a lawyer to get the ball rolling."

"But...why?"

He exhales heavily as his eyes close, and he drops his head. Then he scrubs one hand over his neck before he cups my face in his hands. His handsome face is as serious as I've ever seen it. But the intensity in his eyes right now is heart stopping.

"Fine," he says in a low voice. "I've told you before, but I'm going to tell you again.

From the moment I met you, I felt something for you.

And the more time I spent around you, the more I liked you.

No, that's not right. The more I wanted you.

And now that I know what's holding you back from starting a relationship with me, I am fully prepared to do whatever is necessary to eradicate that situation, so you'll never have to worry about Jonas or his uncle ever again. Is that clear enough for you?"

I heard every word he just said, but I still have one question to ask.

"You...still want to be in a relationship with me?"

"Yes," he says. "I do."

"But-"

"Stop right there and answer me one question, okay?"

"Okay," I nod.

"Why don't you want to date me?" he asks.

"It's not that I don't want to," I whisper. "But like I said before, you're my boss."

"Do I have a no fraternization policy here at the Alehouse?"

"No."

"Do you intend on making a career of working here?"

"No," I say again.

"Then there is no reason we can't be in a relationship, Lana," he says. "Unless, of course, you don't want to be."

“I didn’t say that,” I say quickly.

“Then what do you say? Do you want to give us a try?”

Tears fill my eyes at his words. Because everything he said about me is exactly how I felt when I met him.

But it was such an emotional time, and I was still reeling from what happened with Jonas that I tried to put up a wall.

A wall that Marshall has single handedly crumbled in the last two minutes.

“Okay,” I breathe.

The corner of his mouth twitches, but no smile erupts.

“Say the words, Lana,” he growls. “I want to hear them.”

I giggle, then give him what he wants. What I want.

“Yes, Marshall,” I smile. “I want to give us a try.”

“Thank fuck,” he sighs.

I start to laugh, but he cuts off the sound with a deep, searing kiss.

A pitiful moan leaves me as my hands fist in his shirt.

As soon as he swipes his tongue into my mouth, he drops his hands from my face and pulls me into his lap.



Then he bands his arms around me and pulls me tighter against him.

I relish in the feel of him. Not to mention this kiss.

But when the back door opens, I pull back and scramble off his lap.

But he catches my hand to keep me from bolting completely.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he says in a low voice. “Sit down and let me get your laptop so you can show me what you’ve been working on.”

“Oh,” I breathe. “Okay.”

I sit. Then he presses a soft kiss to my lips before going to the break room to get my things. He chats with someone for a few minutes before he comes back in. Then he sets my things down on the worktable and waves me over. I settle in a chair beside him and log back in to open my file.

Then I start in with the explanation.

The reference to the Joneses and keeping up and the possible eating challenges we can do along with the menu changes and a loyalty rewards system for customers.

I’m rambling, I know, but I’m really excited to take this and run with it.

If he likes it. So, when I’m done talking, I just sit back and wait.

Several minutes pass before he says anything.

“Wow,” he breathes. “I didn’t expect anything like this.”

“Is that a good thing?” I ask.

“Hell, yeah,” he laughs. “This is far beyond what I was expecting. I love it. And I want you to run with it.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he says with a sexy smile. “Really.”

“Okay,” I squeak. “I’ll get started as soon as my shift ends today.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” he grins. “You’ll get started now. If we get too busy, I’ll call someone in to cover. From now on, I want this to be your focus.”

“You can’t do that,” I say. “I’m a server.”

“Not anymore,” he says as he leans forward. “From this moment until you finish reworking this brand, you’re my marketing expert. That’s what I’m going to pay you for.”

“Marshall,” I sigh. “What are people going to think about that now that we’re...together.”

“There’s not a damn thing they can say,” he laughs. “And if they do, I’ll handle it.”

“This is why I didn’t want to date the boss,” I grumble.

“I’m not your boss anymore,” he smirks. “You are now a consultant to this business for the purposes of marketing and rebranding. So, if I were you, I’d start worrying about a company name for when you need to take on new clients.”

My jaw drops at this. Because it’s like he literally read my mind about what I wanted to do. And he’s giving me the opportunity to make it happen.

“Marshall,” I breathe.

“God, I love hearing you say my name,” he growls.

Before I can say anything else, he crushes his lips to mine. When he pulls back, he gives me a wicked smile and a wink.

“I’ll check on you later,” he says. “Now get to work.”

I laugh and he walks away. And then I happily do what he wants.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

When I walk out of the office, I feel better than I have in years. I finally got Lana to talk about what was bothering her and on top of that, she finally agreed to give us a chance. So truly, thank fuck for that.

I make my rounds with the cooks that are here to prep and the servers who are in to prep the front of the house. All of them seem to be in a good mood, too. So, I tell them what's going on so there's no questions about Lana's absence off the floor.

"So, if we start to get too busy today, I need someone to let me know so I can call someone in."

"Where's Lana?" Shelly asks.

"Lana has taken on a different role for the Alehouse for the time being," I smile. "Remember when I told you I wanted to rebrand?"

They all nod. So, I explain.

"Well, Lana has a degree in marketing, and she's come up with a fantastic idea," I tell them. "She had actually spoken to Mark about some new ideas the day before he passed. So, I've set her to task already so we can get things going as soon as possible."

They seem delighted. But when they ask what the idea is, I tell them I'd rather wait until Lana has things finalized. They understand that and go back to getting ready for our day. By the time we open, I'm smiling like a loon. And I don't give a damn.

An hour after opening, things are running smooth. So, I take a minute to check in with my girlfriend. And I smile at what I see. She has printer paper all over the table with a myriad of sketches on each one. God, I love this woman.

“Hey,” I say softly.

She doesn’t startle at my voice. So, I take that as a win.

“Hey,” she smiles. “I’m on a roll. But...I’m kind of hungry.

“Tell me what you want and it’s yours,” I grin.

“I want you,” she says in a husky voice.

“You have me,” I growl. “Whenever you want me.”

Her pupils dilate. But Jace calls out to me and breaks the moment.

When I turn back to her, she’s buried in her work again.

So, I ask what she wants to eat. She tells me and I go about taking care of her.

When I set the plate of food in front of her, she barely takes her eyes off her laptop before she starts eating.

That doesn’t sit well with me, so I pick up her plate and wait for her to look at me.

“What are you doing?”

“You need a break,” I tell her. “Come sit at the bar so I can enjoy looking at you while I work.”

She takes a breath to protest but when I start to walk away, she calls out for me to stop. When she's beside me, I give her a sweet kiss and take her hand in mine as I lead her out to the bar. Once she's settled, I pour her a pint of my favorite craft beer and set it in front of her.

"Am I allowed to drink on the job?" she asks with a smile.

"You're allowed to drink on your break," I tell her. "But only one. Until later."

Her eyebrows fly up in surprise. But she quickly settles in to enjoy her meal. I keep my eyes on her while I tend the bar, my smile never leaving my face. But I'm startled when I hear a familiar voice say my name.

"Good to see you, Marshall."

"Mr. Riggin," I chuckle. "What are you doing in here on a Monday afternoon?"

"Sometimes an old man needs to feel young again," he says as he settles next to Lana. "And I can do that at a bar that makes me feel at home."

"Very well, sir," I nod. "What can I get you?"

He orders a pint of beer and a couple slices of pizza.

I walk away to pour his drink as he leans over to kiss Lana on the cheek.

She's almost done eating, but if she sits to chat with her grandfather a bit, so be it.

I have complete faith in her abilities so I'm not going to get pushy with her.

When I deliver her grandfather's pizza, she's just finishing her beer.

“Okay, grandpop,” she sighs. “I need to get back to work.”

“Go ahead, sweetheart,” he says. “I’ll see you later.”

She kisses his cheek and slides off her barstool. When she starts to walk into the back, I catch her by the waist and steal a brief kiss. She hums against my lips. Then giggles as she walks away. When I get back in front of her grandfather, I’m not surprised that he questions me.

“I take it things are well with you and Lana?”

“Yes, sir,” I smile. “She’s agreed to be my girlfriend.”

“Very good,” he says. “I like the effect you have on her. She’s happier today than I’ve seen her since she moved back home.”

Damn. That’s a hell of a compliment.

“Thank you.”

“Just make sure you keep it that way,” he says firmly.

“Yes, sir.”

I chat with him intermittently while he eats and I serve customers. When he leaves, I insist on paying for his meal myself. He tries to argue, but I don’t budge.

“You already have my approval, son,” he chuckles. “You don’t need to buy me.”

“I don’t intend to,” I laugh. “Chalk it up to my happiness about being with Lana.”

“Now that I can work with.”

“Enjoy the rest of your day, Mr. Riggin,” I say as I shake his hand.

“You as well,” he nods.

Then he’s gone. And I need a short break of my own. I leave Lana to her work when I first get into the office so I can use the restroom. But when I come back out, I lean on the back of her chair to see what she’s got going.

“Wow,” I tell her. “This is going to be great.”

“You really think so?” she asks.

“I know so,” I say as I wrap my arms around her shoulders. “You definitely have a knack for this kind of thing. I’m lucky to have you.”

“Reserve that thought for after we launch this,” she laughs. “Then we’ll see.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I whisper. “As long as I still have you.”

She giggles and turns her head. So, I kiss her.



## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I'm still smiling when I walk through the door of my parents' home.

Hell, I haven't stopped smiling all damn day.

And it's all because of Marshall. Not only because he's now my boyfriend, but because he's giving me the opportunity to do what I love.

All that on top of allowing me to spill my secret about what happened between me and Jonas.

We talked about that in the parking lot before I left and I explained that going after Jonas now isn't worth the aggravation to me. But if he does manage to find me and try to convince me to come back to him, I'll use it as my bargaining chip. Marshall didn't like it, but he agreed.

"Hey, honey," my mom calls out. "How did it go with Marshall? Did he like your ideas?"

"He did," I say brightly. "I'm going to his place after I change to keep bouncing ideas off him and to help him settle in a bit."

"You're going to help him settle in?" she asks with a smirk. "That's a little beyond the call of duty, isn't it?"

"Not at all," I laugh. "Wouldn't you do the same for your boyfriend?"

She gasps. Then she jumps up from her chair and rushes over to hug me. When my

grandfather walks in, he just smiles and shakes his head.

“Oh, honey, that’s so wonderful,” she sighs. “I think he’s a very good man.”

“Indeed, he is,” my grandfather chimes in. “And he seems quite smitten with you already.”

“Stop, grandpop,” I giggle.

“Just calling it how I saw it this afternoon,” he grins. “There was no mistaking the expression on his face when he looked at you. And you certainly deserve to be with a man who looks at you like that, Lana. Enjoy it.”

I give him a hard hug and a kiss on the cheek.

Then I rush into my room to change. I also pack a small bag with another work shirt in it and some toiletries.

Because I’m not fooling myself about what I want to happen tonight.

Before those short weeks of idiocy with Jonas, I hadn’t had sex in almost a year.

And considering my physical reaction to Marshall so far, I know that I’ll be satisfied when he takes me to bed.

And I’m very much looking forward to it.

Ten minutes later, I’m heading for the door. My grandfather doesn’t miss the fact that I’m carrying an extra bag, either.

“Should I tell you goodnight now?”

“Maybe,” I shrug.

He shakes his head. Then my father walks in the front door as my mother comes in from the kitchen. He takes me in and just quirks an eyebrow. I let my smile speak for itself as I speak.

“Hey, daddy,” I say as I hug him. “I’m heading over to Marshall’s place.”

“What for?”

“To keep working on my marketing ideas for the Alehouse and to help him settle in a bit,” I say calmly. “And to spend more time with him since we’re now officially dating.”

His face barely masks his surprise. Then he looks at the backpack on my shoulder before hitting me with a hard look.

“Don’t you think it’s a little soon to be sleeping over?”

“Ben,” my mother says. “Marshall’s a good man. And she seems happier now than she’s been since she came back home.”

“Last night you couldn’t get away from him fast enough,” he says. “And now you’re ready to shack up? What’s going on, Lana? I want to know the real reason you came back home.”

My jaw drops at his words. And my anxiety returns with a vengeance.

“I told you,” I choke out.

“You fed us a line, and you know it,” he snaps.

“Ben,” my mother says again. “Let’s talk about this another time.”

“It’s been over two months,” he says to her. “I think we deserve the truth.”

My father hasn’t been this hard with me since I was in high school. Which causes my anxiety to morph into anger. And the words leave me before I can stop them.

“Fine,” I hiss. “When my supervisor offered to help me prepare for a promotion, we ended up sleeping together. And not only was that against company policy, he was married, too. So, when we got caught, I resigned. Happy now?”

His expression has turned ashen. And I can’t look at him anymore.

So, I rush out the front door and run to my car.

I hear my mother calling for me, but I ignore her.

Instead, I make the short trip to Marshall’s house with tears streaming down my face.

When I get to his door, he opens it before I can knock.

As soon as he sees me, I’m in his arms as he carries me inside.

“Lana,” he breathes. “It’s okay, baby. I’ve got you. Whatever it is, we’ll fix it together, okay? Just let me hold you. Relax and let it all out and then we can talk.”

His kind words and his strong embrace make me cry harder. Because I hate disappointing my parents. And I’m pretty damn sure I’ve done that today. When I’m able, I take a deep breath and sit up. Marshall gently brushes the tears from my cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I swear I don’t always cry.”

“It’s okay,” he smiles. “Because I certainly don’t mind holding you.”

I giggle a little at this. Then I press a soft kiss to his lips.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“You don’t need to thank me,” he says. “Just...tell me what’s wrong so we can fix it.”

“I don’t know,” I sigh. “I didn’t plan on telling my parents about what happened with Jonas. But when my dad started giving me shit about shacking up with you, I kind of lost it.”

He arches an eyebrow and chuckles.

“I didn’t know we were shacking up,” he says.

“We’re not,” I grin. “But since I was carrying an extra bag with me, he made the assumption.”

“I see,” he says.

“If you don’t want me to stay the night, that’s fine, too,” I tell him. “Since you didn’t even ask me to.”

“Lana,” he says softly. “I’d love nothing more than to wake up with you beside me.”

I smile wider at this. Then I kiss him again. Properly.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

We kiss for a long time. Long enough for my cock to thicken against her. When she feels it, she palms it, and I break our kiss.

“Fuck,” I breathe.

“Yes,” she moans. “Let’s fuck.”

“Lana,” I pant.

She smiles and rises. Then she straddles me, pushing me back against the couch as she grinds herself on my arousal. I grip her hips to try and stop her, but she just laughs. A very sexy laugh that makes me even harder.

“Marshall,” she breathes. “I want you.”

“And I want you,” I growl. “But we should wait.”

“Why?”

“You were upset when you got here,” I say. “I don’t want to have you for the first time like that. I want your focus solely on me. On us, the first time we make love.”

She stills at this. I just smile and brush my hand over her cheek. Her smile is small as she shakes her head.

“No one has ever made love to me,” she whispers.

I smile wider at this.

“Then it will be my pleasure to be the first,” I tell her.

Her entire body loosens, and I pull her toward me for another kiss. This time, I keep things soft and gentle. When she finally pulls back, she sighs and rests her forehead on mine.

“Is this crazy?” she asks.

“No,” I laugh. “I’d call it pleasantly unexpected.”

She laughs, too. Then she pulls back and slides off my lap. After I adjust myself, I take her hand and help her stand. Without being asked, she grabs her laptop bag and follows me to my small dining room table that I’ve managed to clear of boxes so she can use it to work.

For the next hour and a half, she bounces ideas off me about how to connect the name to some of the food items currently on the menu, and some we could possibly add.

Plus, we decide to create two different eating challenges, one with pizza and one with wings.

Both of which are some of our best-selling items. She keeps track of all her ideas on her laptop, but I use my tablet to try and figure out some new cocktails.

“I think I’ll make a run to the liquor store so I can experiment and figure out what works,” I say to her. “Are you okay being a taste tester?”

“Sure,” she smiles. “As long as we have a decent dinner, too. I don’t particularly want to get drunk tonight.”

I'm sure I can guess why, but whether or not we make love tonight remains to be seen.

Even so, I promise to bring back some takeout, too.

I leave her with a sweet kiss and make sure I lock up.

When I get to the liquor store, I buy more than I probably need, but once I start experimenting, I don't like to be limited with my ingredients.

After that, I head to a long-standing Italian restaurant to grab some takeout.

As I drive, I realize I don't know Lana's tastes. So, I give her a quick call.

"Hello?"

"Hey," I say. "Will you eat Italian food?"

"Yes," she says excitedly. "I love pasta and seafood but not mushrooms."

"Got it," I chuckle. "I should be home in about a half an hour."

"Okay," she sings. "How about I organize your kitchen a bit then?"

"You don't have to."

"I know. But I don't mind."

I agree and sign off. But I'm smiling like an idiot.

Because something about Lana being in my home organizing my things feels so



incredibly right.

I chat with one of the bartenders while I wait, passing on having a beer since I'll be tasting my own concoctions later.

Once I have our food in hand, I head back home.

As I walk up to my door, I can hear Lana's voice. She sounds upset. Not worrying about the box of alcohol in my Jeep, I rush inside and find her pacing the kitchen while on her phone. There are tears in her eyes, so I set down the bag and take her in my arms.

"Okay," she sniffs. "I'm sorry."

I hear a man on the other end of the line, and I pray that it's her father and not Jonas.

She apologizes again and then a third time before she finally ends the call.

Then she buries her face in my chest. I hold her close and just wait for her to explain.

All the while my blood is rising to a boil as my imagination gets away from me.

Finally, after a shuddering breath, she pulls back. But she doesn't look at me.

"That was my father," she whispers.

"Okay."

"Jonas...he just called their house and asked to talk to me."

My entire body tenses and I curse under my breath. Lana looks up and places her

hand on my cheek.

“I don’t want him anymore, Marshall,” she says quickly. “Please believe that.”

“I do,” I say with a nod. “So, what else happened?”

“When my father said I was at my boyfriend’s house, Jonas kind of flipped out,” she sighs. “My father didn’t take that very well and had a few choice words for him. But when he told him his name, my father threatened him. Then Jonas just hung up.”

“Okay,” I nod. “What does your father want you to do?”

“He wants me to come back home so I can tell him everything and we can make a plan in case Jonas finds me here.”

I curse again and close my eyes. Lana pulls herself closer to me and kisses the underside of my jaw. I shiver, but I don’t relax.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I didn’t want this.”

“I know you didn’t,” I grit out as I open my eyes. “But we’re going to handle it. Right now. The food can wait.”

She nods. I kiss her head and place the takeout containers in my fridge.

Then her hand is in mine as I lead her out to my Jeep.

When we get to her parent’s house, her father answers the door.

And I make sure I have Lana’s hand in mine as a show of support.

But when her father lets out a sob and pulls her into his arms, I know that things will work out for them.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

When my father pulls me into his arms, the tension I didn't realize I was holding on to finally lets go. And so do I. Again. I feel the brush of Marshall's hand across my back as he walks inside. And I know that everything is going to work out.

Several long minutes later, my father grips my shoulders and separates us. The apology is there in his eyes. He doesn't need to say the words. But he does anyway, the same time I do.

"I'm so sorry, baby."

"I'm sorry, daddy."

We laugh. Then he kisses my forehead and leads me inside. Marshall is already in the kitchen talking with my mother and grandfather. And I'm greeted by them before I take Marshall's hand again.

"I would like to get to the bottom of this tonight," my father says. "Because if I'm being honest, Jonas Freeman does not sound like he's very stable. Something that could be very dangerous if he comes here looking for you."

Marshall's hand tenses in mine. So, I nod and take a seat. Marshall sits close beside me so he can keep his arm around me. I welcome the physical support and place my hand on his knee.

"Just explain to me how it all happened, and ended, please," my father says. "And we'll go from there."

I look at Marshall first. This pains him as well.

But after he kisses me softly, I begin my story.

I tell my family what happened exactly the way I explained it to Marshall.

When I finish, I swear I can almost see steam pouring out of my father's ears.

And grandpop doesn't look much happier either.

"And Jonas still works for the company?"

"He does," I nod.

"You know that's bullshit," he snaps.

"I know," I say. "But I don't want that job back because I don't want to work there anymore."

"That's not the point."

"Then what's the point of bringing this up now?" I ask. "It's only going to upset me and remind me of that dreadful mistake I made."

"You both made that mistake," he hisses. "And he should have had consequences as well."

I nod and look down as I lean on Marshall's shoulder. Then he finally adds to the conversation.

"My lawyer in the city would surely offer his advice on this," he tells them.

“Even if Lana sees no need to go after them for it, I agree with her that it might be a good bargaining chip if he does track her down. Something that is more likely to happen given the fact that he has your home phone number and probably your address.”

I shudder upon hearing this. My father and grandfather curse under their breath. Then Marshall makes an offer that stuns us all into silence.

“If you feel it would be safer, Lana is welcome to stay with me,” he says. “I have a spare bedroom. She slept there Saturday night.”

When I look up, the expressions on the faces of my family are downright comical. My mother is sporting a bright smile. My grandfathers' eyebrows are almost off his head. And my father is scowling. But not as much as he could be.

“You expect me to believe that you’d sleep in separate beds if she stays with you?”

“I’m saying that I wouldn’t be upset if that’s what happened,” he continues. “What I do know is that I want Lana to be safe. And if she does decide to stay with me, I want her to be comfortable as well.”

He eyes him hard for a minute. Then he rises.

“Come out back with me, Mr. Jones,” my father says. “Let’s have a private chat.”

I’m surprised when Marshall doesn’t hesitate. But he doesn’t follow after my father until he kisses me again. When they’re on the back deck, I release a long, slow breath.

“Don’t worry about a thing, sweetheart,” my grandfather says. “They both have your best interests at heart. The problem is that your father realizes that it will be safer for

you to stay with Marshall...and he doesn't like it."

"But Marshall is a good man," I say quietly. "He's been good to me even though I tried to keep him at arms length."

"We all know that," my mother says. "So, just let your father have his chat with him and everything will be just fine."

"I hope so," I sigh.

We sit at the table in silence for what feels like an eternity.

Finally, Marshall and my father walk back inside.

I stand up and watch them. They're both smiling.

Then my father walks over to me and pulls me in for another hug.

I welcome it, but my confusion must be evident on my face because he chuckles when he pulls back.

"Don't worry, baby," he says. "Everything's going to be fine."

"Okay," I nod.

"So, Marshall says we interrupted your dinner?"

"Yeah."

"Well, since he has everything he needs in his Jeep to experiment with some new cocktails, why don't we order in so he can have a few more opinions on whatever he

creates?”

“Really?” I ask.

“Yes,” he nods. “Really.”

With that, he kisses my forehead and then asks my mother to grab our takeout menus. When he walks away, Marshall is right there. And I happily step into his arms. He rubs my back and leans down to whisper in my ear.

“Everything’s fine,” he says. “So, just relax and enjoy the night, okay?”

“Okay,” I nod. “Sounds good.”



## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

While we waited for dinner to arrive, Lana's mother helped her pack her things.

Or at least enough for her to stay with me for the week.

When dinner arrived, we all tucked in, obviously ready to eat after the stress of the evening.

Something that got worse when an unknown number that turned out to be Jonas called Lana's phone five times and left three messages.

At Lana's insistence, we ignored him for the rest of the night in favor of my creative abilities at the bar.

Something that the ladies took far too well to.

Judging by Mr. Rose and Mr. Riggin's reactions, Mrs. Rose must not get drunk often.

But she certainly did so tonight. With Lana.

Who is barely conscious as I drive us back to my house.

When I get there, I manage to get her to walk to the door.

But as soon as I get her inside, she's no more good.

So, I gather her in my arms and kick the door shut.

“Where are you sleeping, gorgeous?” I ask her.

“With you,” she sighs. “I want to sleep with...”

I chuckle as she gives up the ghost. Then I do what’s necessary to tuck her in for the night.

In my bed.

Once again, I manage to get her out of her clothes and into an oversized t-shirt.

As I did Saturday night, I leave her bra and underwear on.

But it still doesn’t keep my body from responding.

After I have her settled, I bring in the leftover alcohol from my Jeep and make sure the house is locked up.

When I’ve washed up for the night, I pause before I crawl into my bed so I can enjoy the sight of Lana there.

Thank God, she’s there, too.

My private conversation with her father was pretty much what I was expecting.

His first priority was her safety. And once I convinced him it was mine as well, he started to ease up.

But only because his father-in-law had gone on about me a bit on Sunday night. Something that I took as a compliment.

With a smile, I turn off my bedside lamp and crawl under the covers. Lana is on her back, so I gently wrap my arm around her waist and pull her close. Then I kiss her cheek and slip off to sleep. Happier than I've been in years.

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“Oh, my God .”

I bolt upright at the sound of Lana's pained voice.

Then I jump out of bed when I see her attempting to get to her feet.

Assuming the worst, I hook my arms under hers and carry her to the bathroom.

As soon as she's on her feet, I lift up the seat and help her as she all but collapses to her knees.

She manages to hold her face over the bowl while I hold back her hair.

For several minutes, I swear she brings up everything she's eaten in a week.

I actually give her a courtesy flush at one point.

When she's stopped retching for about a minute, I grab a washcloth and wet it with cold water.

Then I gently wipe her face. Her eyes flutter open, but she squints in the bright light.

“Sorry,” she sighs.

“Are you finished?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she nods. “Wanna brush my teeth.”

I smile and help her to her feet. She takes the washcloth and wets it again as she continues to wipe her face. I brought her toiletry bag in here earlier, so I leave her to it. As soon as she turns off the light, I’m there to help her.

“Sorry,” she says again.

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell her. “You’ve had another hell of a day. I think you needed to unwind.”

“I would have rather let you help me with that,” she grumbles.

“We’ve got all the time in the world for that, gorgeous,” I say. “Now get comfortable and let’s go back to sleep.”

“What time is it?” she asks on a yawn.

“Just past three.”

She grumbles and crawls under the covers.

As I walk around to the other side, she starts twisting and turning a bit.

Then, to my surprise, she tosses her bra and panties on the floor.

I smile and take off my shirt so I’m only in my boxers.

When I’m settled, she rolls over and nestles against me.

I welcome the feel of her, wrapping my arm around her shoulders so I’m not tempted

to... well, let's be honest...feel her up.

“Night,” she yawns.

“Night, gorgeous.”

She moves a little more to get comfortable, and within seconds, her breaths are deep and even.

After I take a deep breath, I hold her tighter and let myself drift off once again.

I sleep the sleep of the dead, or the ridiculously content, until my alarm goes off at seven.

Lana never stirs, so I quickly slide out of bed and leave her to sleep while I go about my morning.

I go to the garage for a workout. Then I shower and dress.

When I'm finished with that, I smile when I see that Lana still hasn't moved.

So, I start breakfast since I managed to go grocery shopping after I took her home yesterday.

But this morning when she walks into my kitchen, she's not wrapped in a blanket.

No.

This morning, she's wearing only the shirt I put her in last night.

And a sexy smile.

“I think you’re overdressed,” she says.

I shut off the burners and turn toward her. And I try to give her an out.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask softly.

“I am,” she nods. “As long as you are.”

“You know I want you, gorgeous,” I rasp. “But how are you feeling, though? After last night?”

She grins again. Then she takes a step back into the hallway and whips off my shirt. And I go rock hard in an instant at the sight of her naked body.

“I’m ready for you , Marshall,” she breathes. “All of you.”

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

As hot as I am for Marshall right now, my body ripples with chills across my naked skin.

But the look in his eyes quickly warms me from the inside out.

I lift my chin and wait for him to claim me.

Completely. And properly. His hands cup my face as he covers my mouth with his.

My hands fly to his wrists as he pushes me against the wall.

His arousal is evident as he rolls his hips against mine.

I moan into his mouth and drop my hands to his waist. Pulling him as close to me as possible.

We kiss for only a few more minutes before he tears his lips away.

Before I can ask him what's wrong, he lifts me into his arms and walks with purpose back to his bedroom.

Then, as if I'm the most precious thing in his world, he gently lays me in the middle of his bed.

"Just give me a minute," he breathes. "Then I'm going to make love to you."

"Hurry," I whisper.

He smiles, kisses me briefly, then moves away to undress.

I don't hide the fact that I am enjoying that sight very much.

It's obvious that he works out. His chest is well-defined without looking fake.

But what draws my attention is the small ridges of muscle that lead down to his cock.

Something that he bares to me in one swift movement as he drops his pants and boxers to the floor at the same time.

He's rock hard and gorgeous. My thighs clench together as I try to ease the ache there that is almost physically painful at this point.

Marshall sees it and smiles as he grabs a condom from his dresser.

A moan leaves me as he rolls it on. Then, finally, he crawls onto the bed.

I part my thighs in welcome, and he quickly settles between them, pinning his arousal between us as he drops down onto his forearms.

His eyes travel all over my face for a moment until he presses a soft kiss to my lips. I hum at the contact and run my hands up his arms and over his back. When he breaks contact, I make my plea.

"Marshall, please."

"I want to make this last, gorgeous," he smiles. "And I promise it'll be worth it."

I exhale and close my eyes. He drops his lips to my neck first. Then he kisses his way across my collarbone and then down to my breasts. As I slide my hands into his hair,



he feasts on them. When I can stand it no more, I make my demand.

“Take me now ,” I growl. “ Please .”

I expect him to hesitate. But instead, he lifts his head and his hips. I lock eyes with him as he thrusts forward. I cry out, but he swallows the sound with a deep kiss. After my body shudders and relaxes, he starts to move.

“Oh, God,” I pant into his mouth. “Oh, my God.”

“So, good,” he whispers. “So...fucking... good .”

Each word is punctuated by a deep thrust. And it feels fucking amazing.

“Marshall!”

“That’s it, gorgeous,” he pants. “You’re going to come for me. You’re going to come all over me.”

“Yes,” I moan. “God, yes. Give me more.”

He smiles. Then he slides his arms under my shoulders and rises up onto his knees, effectively parting my legs for him even more. When he pushes into me now, he’s deeper than ever. I whimper. He smiles and kisses me softly as he proceeds to love me slow and deep.

In moments, the world fades away until only he and I exist. Right now, nothing matters but the physical connection between us.

At some point, he stops kissing me and my eyes flutter open to find him gazing down on me.

My eyes prick with tears at the expression on his face.

No man has ever looked at me like he is now.

My body shudders without warning. An orgasm sparks to life where Marshall's body is joined with mine. A slow, soft moan leaves me. With a small smile on his face, he drops his right hand and slides it between us. As soon as his thumb presses to my clit, I come. Hard.

Sounds leave me, but nothing intelligible. When I float back down from my cloud of orgasmic bliss, Marshall is right there. Smiling down on me. And still loving me.

"Marshall," I breathe.

"One more, gorgeous," he grunts. "One more."

My eyes widen and I shake my head. I've never come more than once with a man. Hell, I was usually lucky to come at all. But it seems that Marshall holds the key to making that happen. Because when I shake my head, he smiles wider.

"I won't stop until you come again, Lana," he pants. "I don't care how long it takes."

And it doesn't take long at all. His words send me flying.

Pleasure like I've never known before rolls through me slow and easy.

Wrecking me one second at a time. At some point, I think Marshall calls out my name.

But I'm so lost in pleasure I can't be sure.

When I'm spent, my body relaxes, and I slip off to sleep.

When I wake, Marshall is right there.

"Hey," he smiles.

"Hey," I whisper.

"How do you feel?"

"Amazing," I giggle.

"Good," he nods. "Just stay here and rest while I finish breakfast."

I smile and nod. He kisses me and crawls off the bed.

He's wearing only his boxers, and I love it.

But my rest turns into another nap. He wakes me up in time to shower and dress.

And we head into the Alehouse together. Both of us with a large travel mug of coffee.

And me with a container full of the breakfast he made.

As it goes, a good breakfast is very helpful for my work mind. And I plan on thanking him for it later.

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I leave Lana in my office to work while I go about prepping for opening.

Since it's a Tuesday, we start out pretty slow.

As much as I want to check on Lana, I force myself not to as often as I'd like.

Mostly because I don't want to smother her.

And also so I don't bend her over my desk and take her from behind.

Something that I've been thinking about since the moment we got here, and she bent over to pick up a pen she dropped.

When I let out a low growl, she froze. Then she looked back at me over her shoulder before shaking her fine ass at me.

That earned her a quick slap on said fine ass, then I had her in my arms for a delightfully hot kiss.

Just past one, she comes out of the back.

I finish serving my customers and walk over to where she's waiting for me with a bright and beautiful smile on her face.

Since I'm dying to put my hands on her, I walk to the other side of the bar and slide my arm around her waist. She lifts her head for a kiss first. And I happily oblige her.

“Well? Do you have something for me, gorgeous?”

“I think so,” she giggles. “Take a look.”

I kiss her again first, then look at the paper she set on the bar. As soon as I see it, tears fill my eyes. Because I recognize the handwriting immediately.

“Oh, my God,” I breathe.

Somehow, she got a hold of Mark’s handwriting. Most likely from something in the office. And I always loved his penmanship because it was so unique. I called it consistently inconsistent. The shapes of the letters were always the same, but the variations in sizes made it look almost comical.

“Lana,” I choke out. “I love it.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” I nod as I pull her against my chest. “Really.”

“Good,” she sighs. “There was just something about Mark’s handwriting that called to me.”

“It’s perfect,” I tell her. “And I know my family will recognize it as his, too.”

She looks up and presses a soft kiss to my lips. I hum at the contact. When she pulls back, she gives me a crooked smile.

“So, I guess you’re okay with using this as the official script for the new name?”

“Absolutely.”

She lets out a quick hoot of delight. Then she kisses me again before disappearing back into the office.

When it's time, I take a break and eat lunch with her, delighting in how much progress she's making with the new menus.

She asks if there are any local businesses that could handle the signs on the building and the parking lot.

So, I go through Mark's files until I find the invoice.

She starts to take it from me so she can call them, but I insist that she finish eating first.

"I can multi-task, you know," she quips.

"I'm sure you can," I nod. "But I came in here to eat with you, not watch you work."

"Bossy," she mutters.

"Careful," I say in a low voice. "I might put you over my knee for a spanking."

"Maybe I'd let you," she fires back.

My cock hardens instantly at her response. And my palm itches to feel her under it. But not while she's dressed.

"If I'm going to spank you, you're going to be naked," I say softly. "Then when your desire is leaking from your sweet pussy, I'd fuck you fast and hard from behind until you came all over me."

“Jesus, Marshall,” she moans. “I could come just listening to you talk to me like that.”

Challenge accepted, gorgeous.

I rise quickly and shut the office door.

Sure, it’s usually open as is my policy, but I make sure my employees know that when it’s closed, it’s for a reason.

Normally, it’s a private conversation or phone call.

But right now, that reason is Lana. Her eyes are locked on me as I take my seat beside her.

The question is in her expression, so I put her out of her misery.

“Let’s test your theory,” I grin.

“Oh, my God,” she whispers.

“You like it when I talk dirty to you?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

“Do you want to come?”

“Right now?”

“Yes,” I say darkly.

“Please,” she whispers.

I slide closer, staying slightly behind her, and lean in so I can whisper in her ear. Taking care to make sure I don’t touch her. Because I’m going to give her what she wants. With only my words.

“I think I want you to help me close tonight,” I whisper.

“Then when we’re the only ones left here, I’m going to sit at my desk and watch you strip for me.

When you’re completely bared to me, you’re going to kneel between my legs and take my cock out.

I’m going to tangle my fingers in your hair and give you the best skull fuck of your life.

When you’ve swallowed every drop of my cum, like the good girl you are, I’ll return the favor. ”

She shivers at this, and her hands clench into fists on the table. So, I smile and keep going.

“You’ll lay on my desk and open wide for me.

Your pussy will already be wet, and I’m going to take my time tasting every inch of it.

I’m going to tongue your hole, lick every single fold, and suck your clit into my mouth.



You won't be allowed to touch yourself or me.

You're just going to lay there and take what I give you, however I give it to you. ”

She whispers my name as her eyes close and her head tilts back. I lean slightly closer, so my breath brushes the shell of her ear.

“When you're trembling with need, I'll kiss my way down your thighs and back.

Twice. Then I'll lick your pussy some more as I finger fuck you.

Slowly. Your opening will be swollen by now and dripping wet.

So wet that your own body will prepare you so I can easily penetrate your ass, too.

I'm going to finger fuck both of your holes while I tongue your clit.

I'll keep my pace slow and steady. In and out of your pussy and your ass while your clit throbs against my tongue.

When you finally come, it's going to cover my face. ”

A pained groan leaves her, and she shudders again.

“While you're still riding your orgasm, I'm going to shove my cock inside you and fuck you hard and fast, so you keep coming. I'm going to own that sweet pussy of yours, Lana.

I'm going to fuck you so thoroughly you'll never want another man.

Only me. Only my cock will pound into your pussy until I explode inside of you. ”

And that sends her over the edge. I wrap my arms around her and hold her close as she rides it out. When she goes limp, I kiss her cheek. She sighs heavily.

“I can’t believe you did that,” she says.

“Did you like it?”

“I loved it,” she smiles.

She turns her head for a kiss. But the moment is broken when her phone starts ringing. With a heavy sigh, she pulls back and picks it up. When she stiffens, I frown.

“I think it’s Jonas.”

## Page 27

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

Marshall's face darkens. And not in a sexy way.

"Ignore him," he growls.

"I know."

He kisses me briefly then opens his office door again while discreetly adjusting himself.

I wish I could do something to relieve him, but I doubt he'd allow it right now.

Instead, we finish our lunch in tense silence.

Neither of us wanting to listen to the voicemail that's waiting on my phone.

After Marshall takes our plates, I use the restroom.

When I walk back into the office, he's pacing.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"That same number has called twice more," he growls.

"Did he leave more messages?"

"Yes."

I cross my arms over my stomach, my delightful lunch threatening to reappear. Sensing my worry, Marshall takes two long steps and pulls me against his chest. I melt into him as I try to fight back my tears. He simply presses his lips to my temple.

“You don’t have to listen to them if you don’t want to,” he says. “But I need to know if he’s planning on finding you. So, I can warn your family.”

“I know,” I nod against him. “So...I want to know, too. I don’t want to be in the dark.”

“Okay,” he sighs. “But you’re staying right here in my arms.”

I nod again. Marshall leans away just enough to grab my phone from the table.

Then he hands it to me. My hand shakes as I hold it up to unlock it.

I tap on the phone icon, but my thumb hovers over the voicemail.

Gently, Marshall takes it from me. I turn and bury my face in his chest. He takes a deep breath first.

“This is the first one,” he says quietly.

My entire body tenses in anticipation of hearing Jonas’ voice, not to mention what he has to say.

“Lovely Rose,” he chokes out. “I need you. Please . Your parents wouldn’t tell me where you were. And now they won’t answer my calls, either. Please just talk to me... please , Lana.”

There’s nothing but breathing for a few minutes, then he ends the call. I wait about

ten seconds before he starts talking again.

“Just one more thing, Lana,” he growls. “If I find out who this supposed boyfriend of yours is, you’re both going to be sorry. I promise you that.”

“I’ll be damned,” Marshall growls.

As more tears flow, he guides me back to my seat and settles at his desk. I’m conscious of him talking to someone on the phone but I’m not sure who it is until a uniformed officer appears at the office door. I rise as Marshall moves to greet him.

“Thanks for coming, Brian,” he says as they shake.

“No problem,” he smiles.

Then Marshall turns and reaches for me. I take his hand, and he pulls me into his side.

“Lana, this is Chief Flood of the Willow Point Police Department,” he says. “Brian, this is Lana Rose.”

“It’s a pleasure,” I say as we shake.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think my presence here is a pleasure, according to Marshall.”

I grimace and he gestures for us to have a seat.

Without going into explicit detail, I explain that Jonas and I engaged in inappropriate relations that led to my resignation but no repercussions for him.

Then I explain that I came back here to get my life together.

And after Marshall took over the bar, and I a new role in the rebranding, we began dating.

“Since then, Jonas has called my parents home and found out about Marshall and me,” I say.

“And he’s made some threats?” he asks.

“Just today,” Marshall says.

He plays the two messages Jonas left today. When he asks about any others, I sadly tell him that I’ve deleted them. He’s not too upset about that, but he was upset about my one response to him.

“No more responding,” he says sternly. “That way we can nail him with harassment when he shows up.”

“When?” I ask.

“Possibly if,” he sighs. “But since he seems to be escalating, I’d rather be prepared for the worst, okay?”

“But...what about Marshall,” I ask softly. “I don’t want anything to happen to him.”

He squeezes my hand when I say this. The chief just smiles and chuckles.

“Let me do some digging into this Jonas Freeman,” he says as he rises. “Then we’ll know exactly what to do if he’s stupid enough to show his face here.”

I nod, but I’m not any more at ease. Marshall rises and walks him out. I start to pace. Then my phone rings again. I’m just leaning over to look at the screen when Marshall

reappears.

“Is it him again?”

“No,” I say with a smile. “It’s my mother.”

I answer as he stands behind me and slides his arms around my waist. He hears her ask if they can all come in for dinner tonight, and he nods. Then she asks if his parents can come as well so they can officially meet. I suck in a sharp breath, but Marshall responds so she can hear him.

“I’m sure they’d love to,” he says. “I’ll call them now and have Lana get back to you.”

Before I end my call, Marshall initiates his. In less than five minutes, our night is planned. He kisses me thoroughly. But before I get back to work, I make a simple request.

“I want to help you close tonight,” I say as he holds me close.

“Oh?” he smirks. “And why is that?”

“You know why,” I laugh.

“Maybe,” he chuckles. “But maybe I want you to tell me. Just so I can be sure I give you exactly what you want.”

My body thrums with desire. And even though I’m not prone to dirty talk, I find myself speaking the words easily.

“Because I want to do everything you said earlier,” I breathe. “I want to be naked and

at your command. I want to give you pleasure, Marshall. Then I want you to take your pleasure from me.”

“Lana,” he growls as he cups my face in his hands. “You’re forgetting something.”

“What?” I frown.

“I will never allow you to pleasure me and take my pleasure from you without also giving you pleasure,” he says firmly. “You will always find your pleasure with me. I promise you that.”

I smile. And he kisses me. And I’m already wet for later.



*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I'm not sure what lit a fire under Lana, but by the time our families arrived for dinner, she'd accomplished far more than I ever could have imagined possible.

She finalized the signage and even created a logo as well.

After contacting the sign company, she contacted the printers Mark used for our menus to find out when they needed to have our new final menus, so they'd be ready in time for our relaunch.

All in all, things are looking up. But I still can't discount that Jonas won't show up and try to ruin things.

And while I don't wholly believe that she would go back to him, I fully believe that he is capable of trying to force her into it.

Something that I want to avoid at all costs, especially after what happened to her here last Saturday.

Once a server has everyone seated, Lana and I go about introductions.

Sure, Willow Point is a small town, but it's still large enough for people not to know one another.

Especially since Lana and I are five years apart, which means we weren't in high school at the same time.

Conversation quickly turns to my ideas for rebranding.

But I'm quick to point out that the ideas are Lana's. She blushes at the recognition.

"Why don't you show them what you've come up with for the sign?" I ask.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," I say softly. "I think it would be a good idea for them to see it now."

What I'm not saying is that I don't want my family taken by surprise when they see Mark's handwriting on the building. Not that I think they'd be angry, I just want them emotionally prepared for it. After a sweet kiss, she heads into the office. Then, my own father dimes me out.

"You've fallen for her."

It's not a question. It's a statement. And a true one, at that. So, I smile at him, then at Lana's family.

"I have," I nod. "But I haven't told her yet."

Even though I've made love to her, I haven't said those three magical words.

"Why not, son?" Mr. Riggin asks.

"She's been through a lot in the last week," I sigh. "I don't want to freak her out."

"But you're the one that's been there for her through it all," he points out. "And she's accepted your presence in her life. A man should never hide how he really feels about his lady."

"Truer words have never been spoken," my father chimes in.

“Agreed,” Mr. Rose nods.

My mother and Mrs. Rose both smile at this.

Then Lana returns with a paper in her hand that shows the sketch for the front of the building.

Knowing this is going to get emotional, I rise and offer her my hand.

Then I lead her over behind my parents. Without any preamble, she sets it on the table between them.

In the next second, my mother sucks in a sharp breath and covers her mouth with her hand.

My father releases a short laugh that could be a sob, before nodding his head in approval.

“It’s perfect,” he says gruffly. “Absolutely perfect.”

Lana relaxes and sags against me. Then my father rises and pulls her close for a hug, thanking her for her sweet remembrance of Mark.

In seconds, my mother rises to do the same.

While she converses with them, I take the sketch and show it to her family, explaining why my parents' reaction was so emotional.

“Mark’s handwriting was very unique,” I say softly. “And that’s what Lana is using for the name Joneses.”

Their reaction is one of absolute pride. As it should be. When everyone's settled again, I walk Lana back to the office so she can put the sketch away. Then I pull her into my arms and kiss her with all I have. When I pull back, there is a beautiful smile on her face.

"I guess that went well?"

"You know it did," I smile back. "And it's only going to get better."

Her eyes dim for a moment, and I know she's just as worried about Jonas as I am.

But I once again kiss her fears away and lead her back out to finish this night with our families.

Surprisingly, they stay until a half an hour before closing.

Which is fine with me, because now it won't look so weird for Lana and me to have put in an entire day here.

After we say our goodbyes and walk them out, she shoots me a wicked look.

Then she goes about the closing routine with the staff without being asked.

As if I needed another reason to be in love with her.

Smiling at the thought of telling her so later, I jump behind the bar to do my part as well.

When everyone starts to gather their things to leave, Lana goes into my office to start gathering her own things. Before I know it, we're alone.

I double-check the locks on all the doors before turning off the lights. Then I take a deep breath and step into my office. The lights are still on, but Lana isn't doing any more work. No, she's leaning against my desk with a small smile on her face.

"Waiting for me?" I ask.

"You know I am."

I step inside and shut the door, locking it blindly. Then I ask just one more question.

"Are you sure you want this?"

"I'm sure I want you," she breathes. "And I trust you to take care of me."

"You know I will," I growl. "Now strip for me."

In less than a minute, she's completely bared for me. Her chin held high as I greedily devour her with my eyes. With a smile on my face, I make my way to my desk chair. She turns to watch me, but she doesn't move yet.

"Good girl," I smile as I sit down. "Now, come kneel between my legs."

She obeys, but she takes her time, drawing out the anticipation of what's to come. When she's on her knees before me, I give my next command.

"Take my cock out and suck it."

A low moan leaves her as she makes quick work of my belt and zipper. No sooner does my cock spring free, she deep throats me. My hands fly into her hair as I curse.

"Fucking hell, Lana," I grit out. "Your mouth is sinful."

Her only response is to nod her head as she grips my thighs. Then she teases me with tiny thrusts. No doubt waiting for me to take over.

“If it’s too much, tap my leg and I’ll stop,” I pant.

She nods and moans. Then I get to work.

I start out slowly, sliding her hot mouth up and down my length.

Curses continually falling from my lips as she caresses me with her tongue each time.

Without realizing it, I move her head faster.

Up and down, up and down. Her tongue stroking me on each pass.

Then she starts to moan, and her hands tighten on my thighs.

I’m about to ask if she’s okay, but my orgasm takes over and I shout out her name as my release explodes into her mouth.

My hands loosen in her hair, but I no longer control her movement. Instead, my head falls back on my shoulders as she continues to suck me. When I’m spent, I release her, and she slowly pulls her mouth off my very satisfied cock. After a shuddering breath, I look down and find her smiling.

“You’re fucking perfect,” I breathe.

Then I take her face in my hands and lean down to claim her mouth in a deep kiss.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I moan into his mouth as he kisses me hard and deep. My hands continually clench against his legs. My desire no doubt running down the inside of my thighs. Without warning, he breaks contact. I gasp and wait.

“Get your sexy ass up on my desk, Lana,” he growls. “I need to taste your sweet pussy.”

Another moan leaves me as I do his bidding. No sooner am I in place, he parts my legs and rests my feet on the arms of his chair. Then he wraps his arms around my thighs and buries his face between them. I scream out his name as my back arches and my hands claw at the surface of his desk.

“Marshall!”

He responds with a delightful growl and doubles down on his effort.

Plunging his tongue deep inside me while his thumb slides over to tease my clit.

In no time, he draws an intense orgasm from me that has my entire body shuddering in its wake.

As I’m left a panting mess before him, he just keeps going.

“More, Lana,” he says darkly. “I need more.”

I shake my head, but I’m unable to voice a complaint.

He's left me speechless, and yet still wanting more.

A pitiful moan leaves me as he starts in with what he described earlier.

He kisses his way down the inside of my thighs to each knee.

Twice. All the while, my pussy is left open and untouched. This only heightens my need for him.

So, I beg.

"Marshall, please."

"Tell me what you need," he whispers.

"You."

"You have me, and you know it."

"I need you to touch me," I mewl.

"I am touching you," he chuckles.

I growl in frustrating. Hating and loving that he's going to make me say the words.

"Marshall," I whisper.

"Tell me exactly what you need, Lana. And you know I'll give it to you."

"I want...I want you to...touch my pussy," I pant. "Make me come again."



There's a moment of pause. I wait for him to make another demand.

Then, as soft as a feather, his tongue gently caresses my clit.

And I come. Hard. Just as he wanted, my release covers his face as he leans in to taste me.

I hear the sweet crinkle of a condom packet.

Through my orgasmic haze, I prepare myself to be taken.

But apparently, Marshall still wants more.

Without warning, and while my orgasm is still riding high, he penetrates both of my holes and starts to finger fuck me.

Just like he said he would earlier. I scream again, but he doesn't back down.

My hands find the edge of his desk and I hold on tight, anchoring myself while also starting to work with him.

I've never experienced this before. But it's all I want now.

I feel him rise up as his fingers continue to thrust in and out of me.

He's murmuring his praise for me. I look down for a moment and his eyes lock with mine.

With a smile, he lowers his head and sucks my clit into his mouth.

The sight of him blurs as the onset of the most intense orgasm of my life crashes over

me.

His name leaves me once again. Then I groan when he pulls his fingers away.

Before I can protest, he's buried his cock deep inside me.

"Fuck, Lana," he grunts out. "That's it. Squeeze my cock with your sweet pussy."

My head falls back on his desk as I ride out the sensations once again. When I feel boneless, my eyes fly open as he pulls my ass just off the edge of his desk. Then he wraps his arms under my knees to grip the top of my thighs. When I look at him, his face is dark with want. And I love it.

"Who owns your sweet pussy?" he asks in a low, sexy voice.

"You do," I whisper.

"Whose cock do you want inside you, Lana?"

"Yours," I moan.

"Forever," he nods. "I'm claiming you and your beautiful body as mine, Lana. Right now. Forever."

My eyes cloud with tears and I nod. But when he doesn't start moving, I say the words.

"Yes, Marshall. I'm yours. Forever."

Something changes in his expression. The sight of it makes my breath catch and my heart skip a beat. Then he takes a deep breath and claims every inch of me. With each

powerful thrust, I become his. My body. My heart. My soul.

Whatever this man wants, I will give him.

And I know he will do the same for me. I'm as certain of that as I am of my next orgasm.

Which will most likely be the most epic of my life.

I grip the edge of his desk again, and despite my weakened state, I work with him. When he feels it, his smile widens.

"More," I beg of him. "Give me everything."

"Always," he growls.

He grits his teeth and pounds into me with the passion of a man possessed.

I let my legs fall further apart as I pull my body even closer to his.

Taking him deeper than ever. Without warning, I come.

Crying out his name as he continues to claim me.

I'm shuddering when he finally stills. His release so powerful that I actually feel it pulsing inside me.

We stay this way for several moments; bodies locked together in ecstasy while we struggle to regain our breath.

Finally, I feel him relax. As gently as he can, he moves my ass back onto his desk and

leans forward for a soft kiss.

Unable to find the strength to hold him, I simply hum at the contact.

When he pulls back, he presses his forehead to mine for a moment before rising up to meet my eyes.

I'm already smiling. And his face is once again filled with the same expression I saw just before he claimed me forever.

"Marshall," I breathe.

"Lana," he chokes out. "My God...I am so in love with you."

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

Her breath catches again, and I smile. Then tears fill her eyes as she laughs and shakes her head at the same time. My smile falters and she immediately takes my face in her hands and shakes her head even more.

“Oh, no, no,” she says quickly. “I’m not laughing at you, I’m just...this is crazy, right?”

“Lana,” I breathe. “I’ve never been more certain of anything before in my entire life. I love you.”

Her expression softens.

“I...oh, Marshall,” she breathes.

“Don’t say it if you aren’t sure,” I tell her gently. “I don’t want you to say it unless you mean it.”

“That’s just it,” she says. “I thought I’d been in love before but...it felt nothing like this.”

Now my smile widens again. And I press a soft kiss to her lips, enjoying the little hum she likes to make at the contact.

“That’s just fine with me,” I tell her. “As long as you want to be my forever.”

“I can’t imagine a forever without you in it,” she says softly.

I kiss her again. Thoroughly. But when I feel myself growing hard again, I pull back.

“We better get going or we’ll never get out of here,” I grin.

“I wouldn’t mind,” she giggles.

“I would,” I tell her as I pull out of her sweet body and right myself. “If I’m going to make love to you again, I want you in my bed.”

“I rather enjoyed being ravaged on your desk,” she says in a low voice.

“As did I,” I smile as she moves to get dressed. “But I’d rather not take any more risks tonight. If someone were to come back for something...”

“I know,” she says sadly. “One close call in my life is enough.”

I frown, remembering how she was almost caught in the act with Jonas. In two steps, I have her in my arms. There are tears in her eyes and I hate that I’ve put them there.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her quickly. “I didn’t mean to bring that memory back for you.”

She tilts her head and brushes her hand over my cheek.

“That’s a bad memory because I knew I was doing something wrong. Willingly,” she sighs. “What I’m doing with you isn’t wrong. And honestly? If someone caught us, I wouldn’t be embarrassed in the slightest.”

I kiss her again and then let her get dressed while I put my desk back to rights.

When I’m finished, she has her purse and her laptop bag over her shoulder.

I grab her third bag with her sketchbook and other materials, and then we're on our way.

When we get to my place, she sets down her things and heads straight for the master bathroom.

I make sure things are locked up and follow her lead of washing up for bed.

After I crawl in beside her, she pulls me toward her, and I happily make love to her for the next hour.

Tonight, however, we take our time exploring each other.

With our hands and our mouths. I've never known such incredible intimacy with a woman before.

Not to mention passion. When we're sated, she drifts off in my arms almost immediately.

I quickly join her, but only after I whisper my love to her.

Wednesday and Thursday pass in much the same way.

Lana works almost constantly on the rebranding while I run things and also bartend when necessary.

The only reason she takes a break is because I always insist that she stops for lunch.

But when Jonas calls, she ignores it. I can tell that it's ramping up her anxiety, but I do my best to calm her.

Both with my touch and my words. By the time I get her back home Thursday night, I can tell that she's looking for a reason to leave.

So, I grab her by her shoulders and ask her some hard truths.

"Do you still want Jonas?" I ask with as much calm as I can.

"No," she snaps. "I want nothing to do with him! You're the only man I want."

"Then why do you look like you're ready to bolt?"

Tears prick her eyes and her head falls forward. When she answers me, her voice is barely a whisper.

"Because I don't want you to get hurt because of me."

My heart soars. If that isn't a declaration of love, I don't know what is. Very gently, I touch my fingertips to her chin and force her eyes back to mine. When a tear slips down her cheek, I kiss it away.

"Lana," I say as I meet her eyes again. "I'm not leaving you to face him alone. I'm not leaving you for any reason. The most important thing to me in all of this is that you stay safe."

"But what if-"

I cut off her protest with a hard kiss. She moans and opens for me. In mere seconds, I'm hard. She feels it and roughly palms my crotch. I growl into her mouth as I slide my hand into her hair and pull her head away from mine.

"Marshall."



One name. Two syllables. Yet all I hear is her need. For me .

“Take your clothes off,” I demand.

She obeys without hesitation. When she’s naked, she stands as close to me as she can without touching me. Her eyes locked with mine as her expression begs me to continue. And I will.

“On your knees.”

She sinks to the floor in one fluid motion as her hands immediately start to undo my pants. I smile as I watch and offer her the praise she seems to crave.

“Such a good girl.”

She smiles and looks up at me from under her lashes. Her expression damn near enough to make me come on the spot.

“What if I want to be a bad girl?” she purrs.

“Then you’d be my bad girl,” I smirk. “So I could spank that sexy ass of yours until you were wet for me.”

“I’m already wet for you, Marshall.”

“Prove it,” I challenge.

At this point, she’s released my hardened cock.

With a moan, she wraps one hand around it while she drops her other to her pussy.

The sound of her wetness as she fingers herself hits me like a ton of bricks.

Before I can take this in a new direction, she lifts her hand and covers my cock in her desire.

Then, after another wicked smile up at me, she takes me into her mouth to suck off her taste.

“Fuck!Lana!”

She gives me the blowjob of the century, but only until I gather my wits about me again. With a Herculean effort, I reach down and pull her off me. She gasps, then squeals when I lift her into my arms and carry her to my bedroom.

“Marshall,” she starts.

“Don’t worry, gorgeous,” I grin. “You’ll finish me. But I’m going to finish you, too.”

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

In a flurry of motion, Marshall positions me on his bed so I can suck his dick while he eats my pussy.

Eager to please him, I dig my hands into his thighs and pull him into my mouth while he leans down to lick me.

At first, its awkward because I can barely concentrate on sucking him off while his mouth is on my pussy.

But after a moment, I make the decision to taste his release before he can taste mine.

Determined to own his pleasure, I ignore the pleasure he's gifting me between my thighs and concentrate on him.

I listen to and feel his reactions to what I'm doing.

And before I know it, I'm tasting his release.

I moan as I swallow all he can give. Then I'm shouting out in surprise as he flips me around on his bed so he can get back to my pleasure.

I scream out in shock and relief as he buries his face in my pussy.

And even though we haven't been intimate for long, he knows exactly what to do to make me come.

I fight him and pull him closer at the same time.

But when his tongue hits that special spot, I hold him there.

And he wastes no time in delivering. Mere minutes, or maybe even seconds pass before I'm screaming his name as my release claims me.

He stays on me until I've settled heavily into his mattress.

Then he's right there above me. Kissing me and declaring his love for me.

When I come back to life, I try to tell him how I feel.

"Oh, my God, Marshall," I breathe.

"I know," he says. "You're phenomenal. We're phenomenal. And I'm ready for more."

I take a breath to tell him I love him, but he fills me with his delicious cock, and I lose all train of thought.

I do nothing more than take what he gives.

And what he gives is more than I ever imagined I could find with a man.

Incoherent sounds leave me as he fucks me into another intense orgasm which quickly spurs another for him.

I chant his name over and over, desperate to reciprocate my love for him, but too delirious with pleasure to be sure of what I'm saying.

The next thing I know, he's kissing my temple as we settle in to sleep for the night.

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When my eyes flutter open on Friday morning, Marshall is no longer in bed with me. But as soon as I sit up, he walks in and crawls onto the bed to kiss me.

“Are we late?” I ask.

“No,” he chuckles. “You have enough time to shower and dress and then you can eat at the Pub.”

I smile at his use of the new name for his place.

Then I kiss him hard and go about getting ready for our day.

When I walk out, he pulls me into him for another deep kiss.

Then he grabs all of my bags for me as well as my breakfast and leads me out to his Jeep.

In minutes, we’re at the soon-to-be Joneses Pub.

I smile as he lets us in the back door and turns off the alarms. As soon as we’re in his office, he sets the breakfast he made in front of me first. Then he kisses me as he walks out to prep.

I dig into my breakfast, hoping the sustenance will give me another surge of creativeness for his rebranding. I’m just pushing the container away from me when he walks back in and wraps his arms around my shoulders.

“I love you, Lana,” he whispers.

“Oh, Marshall.”

I want to say the words back to him, but I’m not sure if they’re real yet. He said not to say them unless I meant them. And I’m still not sure if I do. Even so, he just squeezes me tighter before he kisses my cheek and settles behind his desk to get to work.

Time passes without my knowledge, and I make an insane amount of progress for The Joneses Pub. Just about the time we should be having lunch, Marshall is still at his desk toiling at something. I’m about to ask him if anything’s wrong when Jace, the bar manager, steps inside.

“Marshall.”

The tone of his voice sets me on edge. I look at Marshall just as he stands and walks over to him.

“What’s going on?” Marshall asks.

“Some guy at the bar is asking about Lana.”

Marshall growls as his eyes meet mine. My expression no doubt reflects my fear of who might be out there. That who being Jonas.

“What did you tell him?” Marshall asks.

“I told him I’ve never heard of a woman named Lana around here,” Jace says.

Marshall and I both relax at his response. Then Marshall straightens and gives his orders.

“Serve him as you normally would,” he says. “I’ll be out there in a minute.”

Jace nods and disappears. I rise in fear, but Marshall is quick to take me into his arms.

“Just relax, gorgeous,” he says warmly. “I’m going to take care of everything.”

I take a breath to protest but he silences me with a delightful kiss. As always, a moan leaves me as I melt into him. When he pulls back, he gives me his gorgeous smile.

“I’ll take care of everything, okay?”

“Okay,” I nod.

He kisses me again and then leaves to go to the front of the house.

I don’t know who is out there. It might not be Jonas.

It might be a friend of mine from high school who heard I was back here.

It won’t be an ex-boyfriend because I only have two of them.

One of whom married a hotel heiress and the other died during a bad heroine outbreak a few years ago.

So, considering the fifty-fifty chances of my exes, the reality that it’s Jonas makes me want to vomit.

So much so that I abandon my work and start to pace the office. Because if Jonas is out there, it means that he’s after me. And if he’s after me, then he’s going to be after Marshall. And the last thing I want is for Marshall to be in danger. I let out a choked sob. Then I hear my name.

“Lana.”

## Page 32

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I leave Lana and head out to the bar. My protective instincts are in overdrive right now, but I know I need to reel them in. I have no idea who is asking for Lana. Considering she's also from Willow Point; it could be anyone. A friend from high school. A former teacher. Or...a former boyfriend.

While the last makes me cringe, I know that I'll have to keep my cool to deal with this.

When I walk behind the bar, Jace gives me a half-hearted smile.

Then he nods his head to the corner of the bar where only one man stands out to me.

Having seen his picture on his company's website, I know that I'm about to confront one Jonas Freeman.

Before I can take another step, Jace grips the inside of my elbow.

"You okay, man?"

"No," I growl. "I'm not."

"Do I need to call the police?" he asks.

"No," I say again. "Not...yet."

Understanding my meaning, he simply nods his head and releases me.



After a deep breath, I move toward the man who has been harassing the woman I love.

I say nothing at first, I just do what I would normally do when I come out here to check on things.

But as I get closer to where he's seated, he speaks.

"Excuse me, sir," he says.

"What can I do for you?" I ask with a forced smile.

"I was wondering if you knew a woman by the name of Lana Rose."

I laugh a little. Then try for a bit of humor.

"It would be poor form for a bartender to give up the whereabouts of anyone to a stranger, don't you think?"

He has the good sense to look ashamed. Then he holds up his hands as if in surrender.

"Fair point," he sighs. "But I'm an old friend of hers."

"If you were an old friend of hers, why don't you know where she is?"

"You know how it is," he starts. "Life takes people in different directions, and you lose touch. I'd heard that she moved back home, and I was hoping to surprise her. You see, I'm only here for the weekend."

Thank fuck for that.

“Tell you what,” I nod. “Give me your name and number, and if I see her, I’ll let her know.”

“So, you do know who she is?” he asks hopefully.

“Yeah,” I nod again. “I do.”

“And she’s been in here?”

“A time or two.”

“That’s good to know,” he nods. “I’m Jonas Freeman.”

He offers his hand, and I take it, making sure my grip is firm but not overbearing.

“Marshall Jones.”

“Let me give you my card,” he smiles. “And maybe I’ll have some lunch, too, on the off chance she comes in. I just did get to town and I’m starving.”

“Sure.”

I take his card and put it in my back pocket. Then I hand him a menu. Not wanting to talk to him any longer, nor leave Lana in the office uncertain of what’s going on, I walk over to Jace.

“He’s the one that’s been harassing Lana,” I say softly. “Wait on him like you normally would but don’t talk about her or that she and I are together. All he knows is that I know who she is, and she’s been in here a few times. Got it?”

He nods. But his eyes harden as he glances over at Jonas.

I smile and pat his shoulder, thankful that he also wants to protect the woman I love.

Then I make my way back to my office. Lana is pacing and so distracted she doesn't notice I'm here.

Not wanting to frighten her, I softly speak her name just after she sobs.

"Lana."

Her head snaps up and her frightened eyes lock with mine. I take three long steps and pull her into my arms. She buries her face in my chest, her entire body trembling.

"It's him isn't it?" she asks on a whisper.

"Yeah," I sigh. "It's him."

"What are we going to do?"

"Right now, nothing," I tell her. "He knows that I know who you are and that you've been in here before. I have his card under the guise that I'd give it to you if I saw you. He's having lunch now."

"Should I leave?" she asks as she pulls back to look up at me.

"You're not going anywhere without me for the rest of the weekend," I tell her.

"That's how long he'll be in town."

"But what if-

"Stop," I say as I place a finger on her lips. "I'm going to call Chief Flood and tell him what's going on. We're just going to take this one step at a time, okay?"

She nods. I move my finger and give her a soft kiss.

Then I set her on the love seat and do as I said I would.

After I explain that Jonas is here, he tells me that he's going to come in to pick up some lunch and maybe engage him in some conversation to get a feel for him.

Then he'll get back to me. I thank him and send back his lunch order.

When I settle next to Lana and explain all this to her, she just nods numbly.

"Come here."

I open my arms, and she literally crawls into my lap. She's not crying, which I'll take as a win, but I know she's not happy with any of this. I'd be lying if I said I was anyway. I'm still holding her when Jace knocks on the open door. Lana doesn't move when I look up at him.

"Chief Flood is here," he grins. "He's asking to see you."

I nod and turn my attention back to Lana.

"Will you be okay back here for a few minutes?"

"Yeah," she says as she lifts her head.

Then her stomach growls and she giggles. I kiss her and she moves off my lap.

"Perhaps I'll put in our lunch order, too?" I ask as I pull her up into my arms.

"That's fine," she nods. "But not much for me, okay? When I'm stressed, I don't eat

well.”

I don't like this, but given our current situation, I don't argue. Instead, I kiss her thoroughly and head back out to the bar. I'm surprised when I find Brian next to Jonas, leaning in to look at something on his phone. When he sees me, I can tell that something's wrong.

“Marshall,” he says as I approach. “Always a pleasure.”

“Likewise,” I say as I shake his hand.

“This gentleman here says he's looking for Lana,” he says slowly. “Apparently they're old flames from high school.”

"Really?" I ask, knowing it's a lie. “He didn't mention that to me.”

“What can I say?” Jonas laughs. “Beer always loosens my tongue.”

“He even has a picture of them together,” Brian adds.

I furrow my brow. Without being asked, Jonas turns his phone toward me. I lean in to take a look. And my blood runs cold at what I see.

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

I'm pacing again when Marshall walks back into the office with Chief Flood right behind him. Neither of them looks happy. So, I know that something has happened.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Marshall shuts the office door as Brian approaches me.

"Did you and Jonas know each other before you worked together?"

"No," I say.

Marshall curses under his breath as Brian's brow furrows.

"What is going on?" I demand.

Marshall pulls me into his side while Brian explains.

"We're not sure yet, but Jonas has a picture on his phone of him and a woman who looks very much like you," he says.

"What?"

"Yeah," Marshall sighs. "For a second, I actually thought it was you."

"But...but what does this mean?"

"He's now saying that the two of you are old high school flames who lost touch and

he's trying to find you because he heard you'd come back home," Marshall says.

"Oh, my God, that's not true," I snap. "He's not even from here!"

"We know," Brian says calmly. "But my concern is that picture and how much you look like the woman who is in it with a very young Jonas Freeman. I'm going to do some digging and I'll get back to you about what I discover.

In the meantime, you stay out of sight, Lana.

And when it's time for you two to leave, make sure Jonas isn't around. Got it?"

Marshall and I nod. Then Brian pats my shoulder gently and walks out. I groan and flop down on the couch.

"This is ridiculous," I groan. "Why is he making up stories, now?"

"I don't know," Marshall sighs as he sits beside me. "But I'm going to trust Brian to do his job, okay? Until then, you're safe back here."

I nod and lean into him when he pulls me into his side. We stay this way until Jace walks in with a plate of food and sets it on the table. We rise and thank him. Then I question the single plate.

"Honestly, my appetite isn't the greatest right now either," he admits. "So, we'll just eat what we can, okay? As long as we eat something."

I smile and kiss him. Then we settle and pick at the plate while we talk about what's left to do for the rebranding of the pub.

If all goes well, we should be set by Thanksgiving, just a month away.

And we should only have to close for three days to make all of the cosmetic changes.

The cook staff is amazing and shouldn't have any problems learning the few new menu items. And Marshall will train the bartenders on the new drinks as well.

"I can't wait," he says with a bright smile. "This is going to be even better than I thought."

"I'm glad you think so," I say shyly.

"I couldn't have done this without you," he says. "You know that, right?"

"I'm sure you would have come up with something," I shrug.

"Don't downplay this, Lana," he says sharply. "You're amazing at what you do. And as soon as the rest of the businesses in this town see it, they'll be knocking down your door to get your help."

I giggle at this. Then tease him.

"I don't exactly have a door for anyone to knock down, you know."

He stills, and I immediately regret my words.

"Lana," he starts.

"I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I was teasing."

"I know the reason you're staying with me was initially so Jonas couldn't find you, but I don't want you to leave when this situation is sorted out," he says softly. "I want you to move in with me. Officially."



My eyes prick with tears, and I just nod my head.

“Okay,” I whisper. “I think I’d like that.”

“I’ll love it,” he smiles. “Like I love you.”

With that, he kisses me, and we manage to finish the plate of food. After another kiss, Marshall takes the plate away and I get back into my work. When he walks back in, he happily informs me that Jonas has left the building.

“Thank God,” I sigh.

He agrees and then takes another ten minutes to finish his inventory order before heading out to tend bar for a bit.

I smile when he walks out, loving that he likes to be hands on in his business.

Then my thoughts take a nosedive as I remember how hands on he was with me last night.

I shiver as my body warms at the memory.

Then I shake it off and get back to work.

Marshall checks on me periodically until it’s time for us to leave for the day.

Tomorrow, there’s an Oktoberfest festival at a local park, so we’ll come in for the closing shift.

I had initially agreed to help wait tables, but with Jonas in town, I’m not sure that would be a good idea.

More than likely, Marshall will refuse to let me do it anyway.

When we get to his house, I pull out what's necessary to make dinner while he still works on settling his things into the house. I help him while dinner cooks in the oven and just before its done, things look to be almost finished.

"Not bad for a weeks' worth of work," he smiles.

"I guess," I sigh. "But I think it needs a bit more of a woman's touch."

His eyes darken at my words. Then I find myself pinned against the wall as he presses his growing arousal against me.

"You know I'll never refuse a woman's touch," he growls.

"Just any woman?" I quip.

"No," he rasps. "You. You're the only woman I want touching me."

"Good to know," I smile.

He leans in to kiss me but the timer on the oven stops him.

"I better get that," I pant.

"Fine," he grumbles. "But we'll pick this up for dessert."

"Perfect."

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

We're just finishing clean up from dinner when my phone rings. I pull it from my pocket and see that it's Brian. I show Lana the screen before I answer.

"Hey, man. What's up?"

"Are you sitting down?" he asks.

"Jesus, is it that bad?"

"Bad enough."

"Hold on, I'll put you on speaker so Lana can hear, too."

He agrees and I take her hand to lead her into the living room while Brian starts talking.

"It turns out that the woman in that picture was Jonas' longtime girlfriend from high school," he starts. "During their freshman year of college, she was killed in a car accident."

"Oh, my God," Lana breathes.

"That's not the worst part," he says. "Her name is Jana."

We both suck in a sharp breath at that. Then Lana lets out a small sob.

"That explains it," she says.

“Explains what?” Brian and I ask together.

“More than once when Jonas and I first met, he called me Jana,” she explains. “He laughed about knowing a girl in high school named Jana who looked a lot like me, so I never thought anything was wrong with it.”

“Lana, I don’t want to pry, but did he ever call you Jana when you were...being intimate?”

“Yes,” she chokes out. “Just once. The last time.”

“Shit,” I curse. “Do you think he’s fixated on her now because of that? I mean, he’s divorcing his wife, for Christ’s sake.”

“That could be it, but we won’t know for sure until we talk to him.”

“Do you know where he’s staying?” I ask.

“There are only two hotels in town, I don’t think it will be hard to find him,” Brian chuckles.

Another call comes in on my phone and I frown when I see that it’s Jace. I tell Brian to stay on the line so I can take it. Because something tells me this isn’t going to be good, either.

“Jace?”

“That Jonas asshat is back,” he growls. “Some busybody he met tonight spilled the beans about you and Lana being together. He’s demanding to see you.”

“I’ll be right there,” I growl.

“See you in a bit.”

I end that call and get back to Brian.

“Jonas is at the pub,” I tell him. “Someone told him that Lana and I are together and he’s in there demanding to see me.”

“I’ll meet you there,” he says. “Lana, stay locked up there and don’t answer the door for anyone , do you understand?”

“Yes,” she chokes out.

He ends the call, and I rise. Lana rises with me and grips my hand to the point of pain.

“Marshall, please,” she cries. “Can’t you let Brian handle this?”

I take her face in my hands and kiss her. When I pull back, I try to ease her fears.

“Right now, his focus is on me, so I’m going to give him what he wants,” I say calmly although my blood is boiling. “And with Brian right there, maybe we can get to the bottom of this and get him out of your life once and for all.”

“But-”

I stop her protest with a deep, hard kiss. She gasps when I pull back. But she’s still afraid.

“I promise I’ll be fine,” I tell her. “Now, do as Brian says and stay locked up in here. I’ll text you when I get back, so you know it’s me, okay?”

“Okay,” she chokes.

“I love you,” I say with an honest smile.

“I love you, too,” she says quietly.

I kiss her again, delighted to have finally heard the words.

Then I rush out and wait to hear her turn the locks.

Since I’m only five minutes from the pub, I’m sure I’ll beat Brian there.

And that’s just fine. Because honestly, I’m hoping this asshat wants to go hands on with me.

Then Brian can arrest him and put him in jail for the night.

Maybe then Jonas will realize he doesn’t have a chance with Lana ever again.

I pull up at the back entrance and park. When I let myself in, I expect to hear a bit of commotion. But when I walk into the bar, Jonas is nowhere to be seen. And Jace’s phone is at his ear, but he hangs up when he sees me.

“He just bolted,” he grumbles. “I told him you were on your way up here and that settled him a bit. But then he just left without a word.”

“Shit,” I breathe. “I need to call Brian.”

Before I can do that, he walks in. His brow furrowed, no doubt because he doesn’t see Jonas.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“He left about a minute before Marshall got here,” Jace explains.

“That’s odd,” he says.

“I’ll say,” I nod. “I was hoping he’d do something to me so you could arrest him.”

Brian chuckles and shakes his head.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hoping for the same,” he grins. “But only because I know how well you wrestled in high school.”

I laugh with him until his radio goes off. A ten code is given and then an address.

“That’s my address,” I snap.

“Why do you need a property check at that address?” Brian asks the person on his radio.

When the response comes back, my blood runs cold for the second time today.

“We just received a 911 hang up from that location and no one is answering when we call back.”

Brian and I are in motion at the same time.

By the time I’m in my Jeep, I hear him turn on his sirens.

In five seconds, I’m right behind him. When he turns onto my street, he turns off his lights and sirens.

I'm parked and out of my vehicle just seconds after him.

As we approach my front door, we can see that it's been damaged.

But when I hear Lana scream, I pray that we've arrived in time.

And the next minute it takes to get to her feels like the longest of my life.



## Page 35

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

Less than ten minutes after Marshall leaves me, I hear a noise in the living room. And it's not the sound of a key in a lock, either. Then I hear the distinct sound of wood splintering and the voice of the last man I ever wanted to see again.

"Jana! Where are you?"

"Someone help me!" I scream into my phone.

As Jonas yanks it from my hand, I scream the address here. Then Jonas ends the call and throws my phone down the hallway.

"What do you think you're doing running from me?" he demands. "And not only that, you're living in sin with a bartender? What were you thinking Jana?"

"Jonas," I say as I raise my hands up in front of me. "I'm not Jana."

"You're mine," he says as he steps toward me. "You've always been mine. And you always will be."

"No," I say as I shake my head. "I'm not yours. I never was and I never will be."

He looks around the room and growls.

"Is this his bedroom, Jana?" he asks. "Is this where Marshall has been fucking my woman?"

"I am not Jana!" I shout. "My name is Lana Rose! And you need to get the hell out of

here!”

“Oh, I will,” he says with a sickly grin. “Just as soon as I remind you who you belong to; I’m going to take you home where you belong.”

In the next second, he’s on me. I scream for help.

I scream for him to stop. I keep screaming that I’m not Jana.

Hell, I even scream that I love Marshall.

But nothing seems to get through to him.

When he collapses us onto the bed, I start crying.

I don’t stop fighting him, but he’s so much stronger than I am, I’m certain he’s going to rape me.

“Jonas, no!”

He grips my button-down shirt and rips it apart.

Then he lowers his head to kiss me between my breasts.

A shudder of disgust runs through me, and I grab his head and pull on his hair.

He growls in pain. Then he rises up and slaps me.

I scream again as I place my palm to my heated cheek.

With all my fight gone for the moment, Jonas starts to undo my pants.

And just when I take a breath to fight back, I hear Chief Flood's deadly calm voice.

"Take your hands off her, Jonas."

I suck in a sharp breath and slowly turn my head.

Brian is at the side of the bed with his gun trained on Jonas.

And Marshall is in the doorway, his eyes deadlier than I've ever seen them as he stares at Jonas.

Instinctively, I pull the halves of my shirt together while Jonas turns his head.

He looks at Brian first and laughs. But when he sees Marshall in the doorway, anger washes over his features.

"You bastard," he growls. "I'm going to kill you."

He screams and lunges off the bed toward Marshall. I reach out and scream for him to stop. But Brian has things well in hand. In a blur of motion, he has Jonas pinned to the floor. When he starts to handcuff him, Marshall rushes into the room. I sob as he pulls me into his arms.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers. "I'm so sorry he got to you."

I nod and pull comfort from his closeness and his warmth.

I hear other voices I don't recognize as Brian tells them to take Jonas to the precinct.

Jonas still shouts out that I'm his and threatens Marshall, but his voice quickly fades as he's led out of the house. When it's quiet, Brian questions me.

“Are you hurt, Lana? Do I need to call for an ambulance?”

“I’m fine,” I sniff as I raise my head. “My wrists might bruise later.”

“Your cheek is red,” Marshall growls.

“He slapped me.”

“I’ll need to document that,” Brian says gently. “I’ll give you a few moments. I’ll be in the living room.”

I nod and Marshall thanks him. When he looks down at me, I hate the pain that I see in his eyes.

“I’m okay,” I whisper.

“I’m sorry,” he chokes out. “I shouldn’t have left you alone. I should have taken you with me and just let you stay in the office while I spoke to Jonas. If I had, you wouldn’t have been here when he broke in. God, Lana, I’m so fucking sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I sob. “He didn’t get what he wanted. He’ll never get what he wants from me.”

“Damn right he won’t,” Marshall growls.

“I love you,” I tell him. “I really, really love you, Marshall.”

“And I love you,” he says with a small smile. “Forever.”

“Forever sounds good to me.”

I smile and tilt my head up for a kiss. It is soft and sweet and perfect. When we break apart, I'm ready to put everything with Jonas behind me. Because I'm very much looking forward to my future. With Marshall Jones.

## Page 36

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 3:06 am*

After Jonas found out about Marshall and Lana, he happened to ride by Marshall's house on his way back to the Alehouse to confront him.

Spotting Lana's car in his driveway, that's when he decided that he wouldn't wait for Marshall to get there, that instead he'd leave and go back to Marshall's house to claim Lana once and for all.

In his declined mental state, he never once considered the consequences of breaking and entering and attempted rape.

Brian charged him with both as well as harassment and stalking.

Apparently, Jana Roberts had been Jonas' first love.

He had intended on proposing to her at the end of their freshman year of college, but fate never gave him the chance.

After her death, he spent some time in a mental institution to cope with his loss.

When he came out, he was a changed man. Or so everyone thought.

He met another woman and married her. Burying his lost love away until Lana Rose started working at his uncle's company.

Her appearance was all it took for him to slowly slip back into a reality where Jana was within his reach. Hence his affair with Lana and subsequent divorce. Now, he's serving his time in the same mental institution he was in after Jana passed.

As far as Marshall and Lana, it took them a few days to get over the severity of what could have happened that night.

But they got through it together, making their bond and their love even stronger.

Their families gathered often as the rebranding for the Alehouse came closer and closer to fruition.

When the day of their grand reopening arrived, everyone was more than ready to see the final results.

Even Gina, who had stayed away from the Alehouse since the day she handed it

over to Marshall, was excited to see this new reincarnation. Yes, it would be emotional, but it would also be another step in healing her heart.

The unveiling of the sign was met with a chorus of cheers from those gathered.

Then a sob of recognition from Gina. Both families gathered around her to offer comfort.

But she was quick to recover and shout out for them to cut the ribbon and let everyone inside.

It took a half an hour for the crowd to take things in as Marshall and Lana happily explained the new specials and challenges diners could partake in.

Not to mention the loyalty rewards that would surely keep diners coming back for years to come.

Just before they officially started serving, Marshall called for everyone's attention.

“If you wouldn’t mind, there’s one very important matter I’d like to take care of before we’re officially open for business today.”

After a few moments, everyone is settled and listening.

“Most of you know that this rebranding wouldn’t have been possible without the help of one incredible woman, Miss Lana Rose.”

The room bursts into applause as Marshall gestures for her to join him. After a sweet kiss, he tucks her into his side and keeps talking.

“I will never be able to thank her for what’s she done for this place,” he starts. “And even though the name was meant as a tribute to my dear departed brother, Mark, I’d like it to take on a second meaning as well. One that will make much more sense if Lana agrees to be my wife.”

She sucks in a breath and covers her mouth with her hands as Marshall drops to one knee and pulls a beautiful diamond ring from his pocket. The setting is shaped like a rose, with a round diamond mounted in the center of it.

“Lana Rose,” he says, his voice thick with emotion. “I was hooked the moment I laid eyes on you. It would make me the happiest man in the world if you would be my wife. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she chokes out. “God, yes, Marshall, I’ll marry you!”

A great cheer erupts from all around as he slides the ring onto her finger. With a bright smile, he rises and kisses her. When he pulls back, she brushes her hand over his cheek and sighs.

“I can’t believe you did that,” she says.



“Well, it was your idea to keep up with the Joneses,” he says. “And since all the ideas were yours, I figured you should officially be a Jones.”

“Oh, so this was a business move?” she teases.

“Hell, no,” he growls. “This was purely selfish of me because I want you to be mine and mine alone.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“And I promise you’ll like the feel of it later tonight when we consummate our engagement,” he growls.

“Oh, I know I will,” she breathes. “Because I am thoroughly hooked on you, Marshall Jones, and everything you do to me.”

Then they seal their commitment with another kiss.