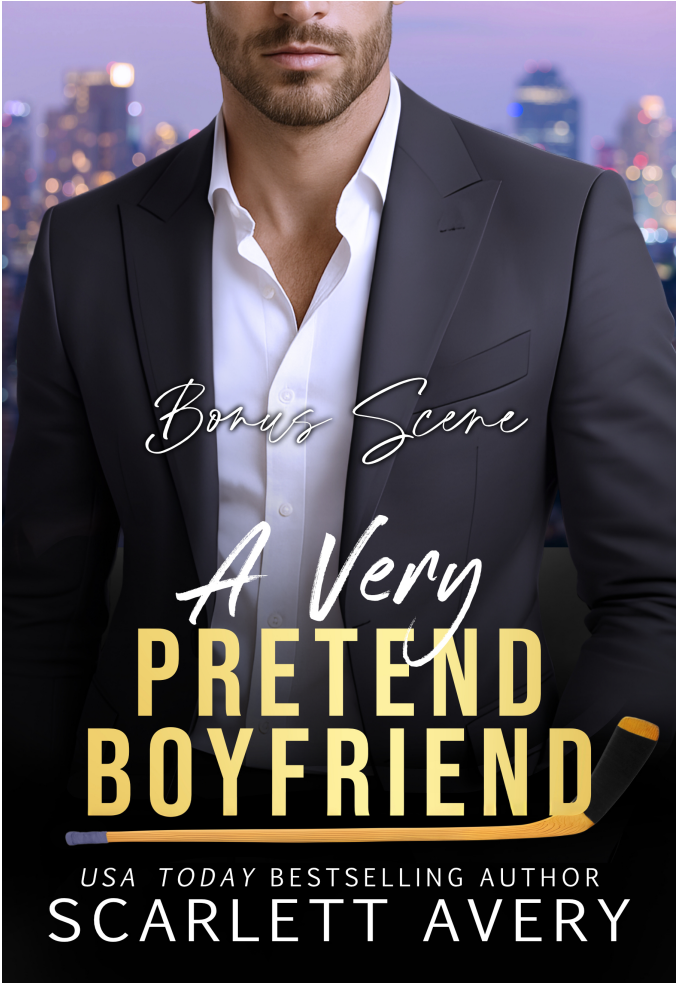


A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt, stands against a blurred city skyline at night. The text is overlaid on the image.

Bonus Scene

A Very
**PRETEND
BOYFRIEND**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SCARLETT AVERY

About This Bonus Scene

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Scarlett Avery

Kazimir and Harley

first time meeting in the Hamptons

I should focus on my conversation, but my eyes are on Harley Mackenzie Lancaster.

The pint-size blonde drops the dessert plate overflowing with untouched colorful cake and ice cream on the coffee table and escapes to the library.

I cock a brow.

She isn't enjoying herself.

I return my attention to the man who got recruited by the Long Island NHL team for the upcoming season.

“*Hvis du vil unnskyld meg,*” I say to the six-foot-six-inches New York Supersonics’ goalkeeper.

Translation: *If you'll excuse me.*

“No problem,” he says. “Your Norwegian is great for someone who grew up in America. Your *farfar* was Norwegian. Glad to see he didn’t allow you to forget your roots.”

Translation: *Grandpa*

“Just because I welcomed you into my home, no need to bullshit me.” I tap his shoulder. “My Norwegian is passable. Nothing more.”

“The rumors are true. On or off the ice, Number 22 will break your balls.”

“Breaking balls is my thing.”

He chuckles.

I give him a chin nod.

I drop my dessert plate on a console near the library. I reach the threshold, lean against it and lift my other hand and place it on the door frame. I admire the blonde who's captivated my attention from the moment I shook her delicate hand. As she studies the space, I drink in her pretty canary yellow dress and the bold contrast of her bright blue heels.

She's not my stepson's usual type.

His mother is having a coronary because she didn't handpick this woman.

I inch behind her.

This close, I'm keenly aware of her lovely floral scent. I caught a whiff of it when I first met her earlier, but in this confined space, I'm engulfed in it.

"You didn't touch your dessert," I say.

She whirls around and wide green eyes stare up at me.

She places a hand against her chest. "You scared me."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to."

She nods. "I didn't want to be rude. It's Chett and Devlyn's birthdays, so I accepted the dessert, but I'm not a fan of either their flavor of cake or ice cream."

I told my high maintenance soon-to-be ex-wife not everyone likes her and her son's favorite dessert flavors. That argument went in one ear, out the other.

"Don't worry about it," I say. "I hate mint chocolate cake, topped with mint patties." *A bit overkill, if you ask me.* "And I'm not a fan of the artificial taste of

the sprinkles in confetti cake.” The third option was a no go. No one over the age of twelve should eat cream soda confetti cake with strawberry-sour cream buttercream. “I suggested different ice cream flavors, but Chett’s mother was determined to enjoy mint chocolate ice cream with her cake, and since Chett can eat a pint of confetti ice cream in one sitting, she made sure he had some on his birthday.”

She leans into me. “I don’t like either of those flavors.”

“Same.”

“Thank God, I’m not alone,” Harley says.

“You’re not.” Judging from the number of untouched plates littering the living room, a lot of guests are in the same boat.

Typical Devlyn. My way or take the highway.

“It’s their shared birthday,” Harley says. “And it’s a milestone birthday for both of them. So, they’re king and queen for the day. What are the odds your son would be born on the same day as you?”

“When Devlyn told me, it blew my mind.”

“Chett mentioned she had him when she was a teenager.”

“She was fifteen.”

“I can’t imagine being that young and having the responsibility of a newborn.”

“She loves her son.” And her whole existence revolves around that boy.

"I'm sure she has many stories of woes, but on the plus side, she gets to turn forty on the same day as her son turns twenty-five."

I nod. "Speaking of birthdays, if you're not a big fan of mint chocolate and confetti, which flavor of birthday cake and ice cream do you prefer?"

"Inquiring mind?"

I have no idea why I need to know that about you, but yeah, inquiring mind. "As the host, it's important for me to know my guests' preferences."

She places a closed fist at her waist. "As if you're gonna throw me a birthday party?"

"You never know."

"All right, I'll play your game." She gives me a brilliant smile that nearly blinds me. "My birthday cake of choice is a classic moist white vanilla cake with buttercream frosting. No sprinkles. In terms of ice cream, I could live off coffee ice cream from my favorite ice cream shop. On a pinch, I don't even mind store-bought."

I stick my hands in the pockets of my jeans. "I prefer simpler desserts myself."

"You can't just give a general statement like that—not after I was so forthcoming with my preferences. What if I'm the one who has to throw you a birthday party one day."

She's a sassy little one for borrowing my words.

"You have to give me precise flavors, Mr. Lindström."

Thanks for making this aging athlete feel older than he already feels, sunshine. “It’s Kazimir, but please call me Kaz.”

“Bare your soul to me, Kaz.”

This girl doesn’t miss a beat.

“Fair enough. My favorite cake is tres leche—”

“Oh, that’s a close second for me.”

“In terms of ice cream, vanilla is my go-to flavor. Unlike you, I discriminate. I won’t consider store-bought even in a pinch.”

“Vanilla?” She tilts her head to the side. “That’s...”

“Underrated. The toppings possibilities are endless.”

“Thinking outside the box.” She wags a manicured finger in the same color as her lipstick at me. “You got me there.”

She holds my gaze for a beat, and a strange electric current crackles in the air.

My eyes drop to her mouth, painted in bright pink, and trace its shape.

She shifts her attention away from me and examines the posters on the wall.

“You’re a big fan of James Bond movies?”

“Busted. I only buy the black-and-white prints.”

“Which one is your favorite?”

“Harley, that’s like asking a parent which is their favorite child.”

She fights off a smile. “There are no flowers in your magnificent home.”

Of course, she’d notice such a thing. “Devlyn is allergic to pollen. I overheard you say you’re a florist.”

“I’m a corporate florist. High-end restaurants, lounges, and boutique hotels are my primary clients.”

“You don’t do weddings?”

“Other than one bat mitzvah and one wedding I did as a favor to a couple big clients, I don’t do those types of events. Same for *quinceañeras*.”

“You discriminate against bridezillas?”

“From that accurate assessment, it’s hard to believe we just met. It’s like you can read my soul.” She laughs. “You’re right on the money. As for bat mitzvahs and *quinceañeras*, I shy away from helicopter moms who hire experts, but deep down think they know better and aren’t afraid to express that sentiment every time they open their mouths.”

“It must be challenging when someone is demanding, but they’re paying your fee. In many ways, you’re at their beck and call—shitty attitude and all.”

“Not every bride is a nightmare to work with and not every Jewish or Latina mother micromanages, but when I got started in the industry, it’s as if those were the only types of clients my former boss used to get. During that first year I worked for a top New York florist, I’d end up going home and crying my eyes out. The stress was unbearable.”

“I assume corporate clients are easier to deal with.”

“Some are. Some are assholes. The difference is, when you work with corporate clients, it’s business. Brides, bat mitzvahs, and *quinceañeras*... it’s personal.

I nod.

“That said, I won’t be a corporate florist for long.”

“You’re considering a career change?”

“Yes and no. I’m going into business with a woman and her husband. They own a small flower shop in Greenwich Village. I’ve bumped into them at numerous industry conferences and events. And we always seem to get invited to the same art exhibits. Earlier this year while I was at a conference in Vegas, they were there, we got talking. I told the wife of my business idea. With the shaky economy and the hike in the minimum wage, a lot of my clients have cut back on their weekly orders of fresh flowers. As a result, business is way down. I’ve been toying with the idea of going into the artificial flower business for a long time, but the last few months have been so bad, I’m ready to make the switch.”

“Artificial flowers are a more profitable market?”

“Artificial flowers alone, no. But a monthly subscription to artificial flowers, along with developing the business to offer franchises, hell yes.”

I’m impressed. “That’s a solid business plan.”

She beams up at me. “My business partner is super excited. Most of the silk flowers are produced in China, and her husband is Chinese.”

“Good for you.”

“We’re not going with the low-end silk flowers. We’re going for high-end petals and leaves. The plan is to come up with arrangements that will force you to do a double take.”

“I love the passion in your voice.”

She’s intelligent, funny, driven, and beautiful.

A potent combination.

“I’m walking on sunshine.” She claps. “I’ve never done anything this daring. Not sure I would’ve gone for it on my own, but with two business partners as my allies, we can turn this into a massive success.”

“I have no doubt.”

“That means next year for your wife’s forty-first birthday, you’ll be able to offer her silk flowers.”

Since I caught her fucking the unexpected guest she invited, she won’t be my wife for much longer.

“Something to consider.”

“There’s no danger she’ll develop an allergy to artificial flowers, so you’ll be able to have bouquets all over your Southampton cottage.”

I purse my lips.

“Who knows? With enough franchises, in a few years, I might end up being your neighbor.” She laughs.

“It’ll be an honor to welcome you to the neighborhood. Is this your first time in the Hamptons?”

“I’ve been in this eastern part of Long Island where rich New Yorkers summer escape, but the cottages I stayed at were nowhere near this decor magazine worthy abode.” She opens her arms to encompass the library. “Chett gave me a tour, minus your office and the bedrooms because they were locked.”

I’m not surprised my stepson would disobey me.

“Your home is fitting of a pro athlete,” she says.

“Thank you.”

“I have limited cooking skills, but I’d be willing to enlist in a top culinary school if it meant I could live in a house with a kitchen with *two* refrigerators and a thirteen-thousand-dollar Thermador oven. The custom marble—everywhere—is a showstopper. And the customs chandelier I’m sure were flown in from the Château Versailles. The separate chef’s kitchen, complete with a second set of appliances and sink blew my mind. And don’t get me started on the Crawford ceiling in the living room, the giant fireplace, or the freaking elevator. And oh, I forgot about the Moët & Chandon champagne fridge. It’s good to be you.”

I cross my arms and cock an eyebrow.

“All that to say, your cottage is an entertainer’s paradise,” Harley says. “This is the definition of luxury.”

“It’s more house than I need, but it’s a great getaway when I want to escape Manhattan.”

“And now, you get to come here with your wife and stepson.”

Our days as a family are numbered.

This marriage has been a sham since my uncaring wife flipped her lid at my decision to retire from the sport that defines who I am as a person. She showed her true colors that day. It was never about me. It was about Chett rubbing off me to further his hockey career. No wonder Devlyn latched on to the captain of the Boston Bruisers. It's a calculated move. The bitch could've had enough respect not to fuck him in my home—

“Kaz?”

I blink. “Sorry.”

Harley frowns. “It's as if you were on another planet.”

“I have a lot on my mind. You were saying?”

“Chett mentioned it was his first time at your cottage.”

“That's right. I've only been married to Chett's mom for three months, and until a week ago, the front and back gardens and the pool were under renovation.”

“I see.”

“Did Chett take you to the beach?”

She shakes her head. “He gave me a tour of the mind-blowing rooftop, equipped with mini golf course, but we didn't go to the beach.”

“I won't allow you to leave my cottage without checking out my private beach.”

“Well, if you twist my arm...”

I point in front of me. We can get out from that door.” I extend a hand. “Ladies first.”

There's something so intriguing about this woman. Of all of Chett's hockey teammate girlfriend's, Harley is the only one who didn't bitch, grumble, or curse under her breath when requested by the hostess to hand over her phone when the waiters served the champagne to welcome them in the front lawn before they entered my home. I have zero interest in having snippets of my home posted all over social media. Devlyn and Chett had their knickers bunched up in a twist at that decision. I wasn't going to budge.

I'm right behind her as we step outside on this hot early June late afternoon via the back door.

She places a hand on her forehead to shield her eyes from the sun, causing a trio of gold bracelets to cling around her wrist, and she sweeps the horizon in a 180° angle. "This is... breathtaking."

I'm sure you're talking about the view. For me, that word defines the woman. "In the city, you don't get to enjoy 125 feet of ocean views."

"That's for sure. And in the city, you don't get as much parking space as you do." She flashes me a mischievous grin.

I rub the back of my neck.

The eight-bedroom—including a gym, nine-bathroom, sixteen-car garage compound spanning ten thousand square feet is overkill for three people. It's outrageous for one person.

I lift my eyes to the sky for a beat.

The Surfside Drive cottage is another impulsive decision I made the last time I was injured and benched for the rest of the season. My quickie Vegas wedding to Devlyn is another.

I rake a hand through my hair. "True."

"Had it not been for the fact I hooked up with Chett in Vegas last week, I wouldn't know what one-hundred-twenty-five feet of ocean view looks like."

Hooked up?

Interesting choice of words.

"Chett and you aren't dating?"

"He said we are, but..." She finishes her sentence with a one-shoulder shrug.

I cock a brow. "You say otherwise?"

Her green eyes hold mine. "Not sure Mommy Dearest likes me." She twists her lips. "After the frigid welcoming, I'm getting the distinct impression her opinions weigh heavy when it comes to Chett's dating life."

You have no idea.

Devlyn Frostburg comes across as warm at first... that's until she doesn't get her way. You butt head with her, and the woman's iciness could freeze all of New York just by snapping her fingers.

Harley brushes a strand of blonde hair behind her ear, forcing my attention to her perfect earlobe. "She doesn't seem easy to win over... I guess it's to be expected given how close her and Chett are in age."

“Yes, they’re close.” Too close. A grown man in his mid-twenties and a professional hockey player, to boot, doesn’t need a helicopter parent fretting all over him, every minute of the damn day.

“Chett is ambitious and has big dreams of winning the Stanley Cup and going to the Olympics,” she says. “Since his mom is his manager and she’s so invested in his career, I’m sure she doesn’t want him to be distracted.”

That’s partially true. But it’s really about control. “Are you a hockey fan?”

“I’m into *hockey romance*,” she says.

My brows hit my forehead. “Hockey romance?”

“It’s *huge*. Every hockey romance girlie dreams of meeting a real life hockey player. Until Chett, the only hockey players I knew were book boyfriends.”

“Book boyfriends?” *Jesus, Lindström, it’s like your vocabulary plummeted to the level of a four-year-old’s.*

“Men in books do it better.”

The inappropriate response is burning my tongue, but I swallow it.

“Men in spicy books... that’s a whole other category onto itself.” She fans herself. “Yes, please.”

“You’re building up men in books as the pinnacle of perfection. Sounds like real men end up being a disappointment.”

She shakes her head. “That’s the thing about being a hardcore reader—you immerse in a fantasy world

until you put your e-reader, book, or audiobook away. Then, it's back to reality, and your standards are different."

"Good to hear us mortals don't have to live up to unrealistic expectations."

"Nope. However, I think all men should read romance books. Just to know what women like..."

"I'll take your word for it. It's unlikely I'll ever read a hockey romance or a romance book."

"Never say never."

It's my turn to wag a finger at her. "Oh, I see what you just did."

"Glad you're able to keep up with me, Mr. Lindström." She flashes me a smile that takes over her gorgeous face.

I shake my head.

"Circling back to your question about me being a hockey fan, we were half way down our second bottle of champagne before Chett told me he was a defenseman for the New York Supersonics. I thought he was pulling my leg, but he grabbed his phone and showed me the list of players for the Long Island team. My jaw dropped."

"The romance girlie in you must've been jumping up and down because she was able to cross meeting a real life hockey player off her romance bucket list."

She tilts her head back and laughs.

My eyes zoom in to her delicate neck.

"Oh, my God. You don't miss a beat."

“If by that, you mean I’m paying attention. Yeah, I am.”

A hot breeze comes along and rustles Harley’s hair, and my fingers inch to brush it away.

I don’t want anything to hide that face.

“You’re right. The romance girlie in me was giddy. But she was also intrigued.”

“I’m dying to know why she was so intrigued, but instead of us standing here, let’s take a walk.”

“All right.”

We stroll down the wooden boardwalk in silence.

My eyes flick to her feet.

She steps on her tippy toes, so her heels don’t land between the planks.

The gentleman in me is dying to offer my hand to help her, but I don’t.

That’s dangerous territory.

When we reach the last plank, I toe off my loafers.

Big green eyes glance up at me.

I’ve never seen eyes that color.

There’s a faint golden ring circling her pupil, but the shade of green ranges between gray to bright green.

Enchanting.

“Might as well make good use of the fact this is a private beach,” I say.

“You’re the host. It would be rude for me to go against your suggestion.”

She removes one satin blue heel with a jewel buckle and grabs hold of my forearm to remove the other.

Her small hand is warm and soft against my skin.

The contact seers right through me.

Her eyes bounce up to meet mine. She narrows her gaze at me.

I'm not the only one feeling the electrifying zing still sizzling its way through my veins.

Her tongue peeks out to wet her lips.

Don't do that.

Unless you—

What the fuck am I doing?

Boundaries.

I clear my throat.

I'm not sure if her long lashes are natural or if like most of the other women here, they're fake. If she wasn't born with them, at least they don't look like spider legs opening and closing every time she blinks. Another plus in her book.

"God, you athletes are skyscrapers," she says.

Barefoot, she's half my size.

"That's exactly why I would never date a basketball player," she says. "The top of my head would reach his kneecaps."

"You don't have to worry about that since Chett is only five-eleven."

"You must be..."

"Six-four."

"I'm only five-two."

"Only?"

She blows out a breath. “My best friend is five-nine. When she wears heels, she’s taller than Chett—”

“They’ve met?”

She shakes her head. “No. She got married last year and spends most of her time between Paris, Copenhagen, and a few cities in Germany.”

“I see.”

“All that to say, she doesn’t have the same problems I do. I spent half my life on my tippy toes... even when I’m wearing heels.”

“You feel like you’re missing out?”

“Kind of. I’m the shortest woman here—including Chett’s mom. All these other hockey players are dating Amazonians.”

Her height, spunk, and that deep, husky voice are a few of the delightful characteristics that make Harley stand out from the other women at the party.

I give her a once over. “I hate to be cliché, but good things come in small packages.”

She responds with a warm smile.

“Come on, shortie, let’s go for that walk.”

She laughs.

I extend a hand, inviting her to step forward.

Her eyes drop to her heels.

“You can leave them there,” I say.

“Are there other people walking by?”

“Yes, but only residents of these cottages have access to the beach. It isn’t open to the public.”

Her eyes linger on her heels.

I scoop them up.

I read the label affixed inside the shoe. "Since you don't want to leave your Manolo Blahniks behind, let's take them with us."

"They were expensive and it took me months to be able to afford them. I'd hate for them to disappear. I'm sure your neighbors are honest, but why take a chance?"

I flip her shoes to check the size.

Compared to my giant size, this woman has doll size feet. "Don't worry about it."

We stroll down the beach.

"There's nothing like the sensation of sand between your toes," she says. "There's a sense of freedom that's unparalleled."

"Skating at warp speed on the ice is closest you'll ever feel like you're flying."

"Since I can't skate, I'll take your word for it."

"Your love for hockey romance wasn't enough to push you to lace up?"

She shakes her head. "It wasn't enough to push me to step inside an arena."

I clinch my heart. "Your words wound me."

"Sorry," she says with a sheepish expression. "It would've been great to watch you play..."

"But I had to hang up my skates after the last season." A decision that nearly killed me.

"One day I'll be able to tell my grandkids I had the privileged and honor to stroll down the beach with a hockey legend. Just because you're not the New York

Blazers' captain anymore doesn't erase what you did. Your name is still written into the sport's history. I'm sure your parents must be proud of your accomplishments." She smiles up at me.

And just like that, she stepped onto a landmine.

"My parents... let's not kill the mood." My lips press into a thin line, my jaw clenching.

Her eyes grow wide. "Sorry if I put my foot in my mouth."

"You didn't know."

She bites down against her lower lip and glances up at me from underneath her mile long dark lashes. "Okay."

Neither one of us speak for a long beat, choosing to let the crashing of the waves fill the silence.

"If it's any consolation, I have a disastrous relationship with my dysfunctional family." A veil of sadness washes over her eyes.

"No chance your parents would win parents of the year awards?"

"Not in this lifetime." She scoffs. "As for the next lifetime, they'd have to get a transplant of morals and conscience."

There's a lot to unpack in her confession, but asking more question would open the door for her to do the same. I'd hate to have to put an end to that kind of line of questioning by being rude. "In New York, unless you make a conscious effort, it's easy to miss this time of the day."

Harley's gaze lifts to the sky before fixing onto me.

Her eyes are the color of gem stones under the sun's warm color.

"Twilight is a magical time of the day," she says.

"Which do you prefer? The hours between dawn and sunrise or the ones between sunset and dusk?"

"I'm not much of an early riser, so in New York it's between sunset and dusk—and that's when I'm out and about. If I'm stuck working in my studio, I miss it." She worries her lips.

I shouldn't be this obsessed with those kissable lips.

"But every time I've been to an island retreat or in Mexico, I force myself to get up super early to catch the few hours between dawn and sunrise. The colors of the sky are unparallel and the combination with the harmony of the crashing of the waves—"

"Kaz!"

I swing my eyes in the direction of the voice that called out my name.

Chett is waving at me from the edge of the board walk.

He kicks off his Gucci slides and jogs towards us.

A prickle of guilt nags at me.

A disinterested, cheating wife and a sexless marriage aren't reasons to hog his girlfriend with the big green doe eyes.

Chett comes and stands in front of us. “Have you seen my mom? A while back, she told me she was going inside to show the captain of the Boston Bruisers your custom-built glass wine cellar. I’ve looked all over for them, but can’t find them. It’s like they disappeared. I was surprised my mom invited that guy.”

You and me both.

“I didn’t even know she knew him.”

Pretty sure you didn’t know she knows him in the biblical sense.

My nostrils flare. “Your mother left.”

He scrunches his nose. “Why would she leave without telling me?”

After verbally slapping them down, I kicked her ass and her lover’s out of my home. Only a degenerate without balls would have the audacity of fucking another man’s wife in the laundry room of his own home in the middle of a party, with fifty guests at an earshot. Happy fucking birthday to you, Devlyn. “Her and the captain of the Boston Bruisers had a few things to iron out.”

Chett’s head rears back. “On our shared birthday? Couldn’t it wait?”

I shrug. “You know your mom, she always puts you and your career first.”

I’m willing to bet my fortune, that’s why she was fucking that guy. Now that I’m a retired hockey player, she has no use for me. I can’t further Chett’s career. The captain of the Boston Bruisers can.

He laughs. “You know her well.”

Not well enough.

Chett saddles up next to Harley and slings an arm around her waist, pulling her towards him. “You don’t have to stress out any more about Mom not liking you. You can relax now.”

Harley glances up at him and offers a tight smile.

“Wanna jump into the steel jacuzzi on the rooftop?” Chett says.

Harley frowns. “I didn’t bring a bathing suit.”

“Neither did I.” He waggles his brows.

Over my dead body. “No.”

Chett’s eyebrows hike up. “It’s my birthday and you said the jacuzzi was ready for the season.”

I changed my mind. “People have been drinking. I have no desire to play babysitter or have the paramedics show up at my door.” *Or see a bunch of naked people prancing around my property. And no way will I be able to survive seeing Harley naked.*

“It’ll just be boo and I in the jacuzzi.” He taps Harley’s nose.

Boo?

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. “I said no.” There’s a bite to my tone.

Chett lifts his hands in a truce. “Okay. Okay. I got it.” He glances down at Harley. “Come on, boo, stepdaddy is being his grumpy self.”

Fucker.

“You’re a bit harsh, Chett,” Harley says. “This is his home. If someone gets hurt or slips because they’ve

had a few too many, Kazimir is responsible. An unscrupulous person might take it one step further and try to sue him.”

Chett narrows his eyes at her. “You’re taking his side.”

Grow up, you idiot. She’s right.

Harley pulls away from him and crosses her arms. “And who said I wanted to expose my body?”

“It would be just for me, boo.”

If he uses that stupid nickname one more time, I’m not responsible for drowning him in the ocean.

“Some of your friends might take that as an invitation to strip down to their birthday suits and get wild,” Harley says. “Do you want your twenty-fifth birthday and your mom’s fortieth birthday to be marred by an accident that could’ve been prevented?”

Her assessment is spot on.

Chett shifts his attention to me. “So, no jacuzzi, no pool, and you won’t allow me or my guests to spend the night? What’s the point of having this much space if you’re such a recluse?”

I take a step closer and stare him down. “My cottage. My rules.”

“But it’s my birthday, Kaz. A milestone birthday, at that. You’re taking all the fun out of it.” He pouts like the overprivileged man-child he is.

“The Luxury Beachside Refuge has a pool, a jacuzzi, and saunas. You and your guests can take the party over there.” I stand my grounds. “I already covered

the overnight stay, so no one needs to travel back to the city. My birthday gift to you.” Insurance strangers won’t overstay their welcome.

Chett slides his gaze to Harley. “Why don’t we do like Mom did and split?” He hooks a thumb toward the cottage.

I’m pretty sure your mother’s lover must be balls deep inside her by now in the additional room she requested just in case there were extra guests.

Just in case my ass.

“I don’t mind staying a little longer,” Harley says.

“Well, I do.” Chett’s cold eyes meet mine. “I’m bored. Can’t wait to clean out the minibar at the hotel.”

Jerk.

I glower at him.

He smirks.

“Incidentals are your responsibility, not mine.” I point at him. “The hotel has already been warned.”

“You’re no fun in your old age, Kazimir.”

Goddamnit, you’re asking for it.

I curl my fists to my side.

Decking an adversary because he’s being a jackass is one thing. Punching the lights out of your stepson on his birthday, is another. I’m okay being a beast on the ice. In real life, I’m not going to land in prison for this truculent prick. He’s not worth it.

“Chett, you’re being ungrateful.” Harley glares at the asshole. “Do you know how many people would kill

to celebrate their birthday in the Hamptons, let alone a magnificent cottage in the Hamptons.”

I liked Harley from the moment I met her because she gives off a non-stuck-up vibe, but the way she’s standing up for me, just elevated her to goddess level.

Chett smirks at me. “Thanks, stepdaddy, for opening your cottage for a few hours. Enjoy it... *all by yourself.*” He singsongs that last part.

I snarl.

I didn’t get along with him while I was married to his mother, but now, it doesn’t matter.

With that, he drags Harley towards the cottage.

“Wait!” Harley yanks her hand from his hold.

Chett grumbles. “What?”

“My shoes.” She runs towards me.

I hand them to her.

“Thanks,” she says, grabbing them. “And thank you for opening your lovely home, even if not everyone appreciates it. I had a blast getting to know you. Take care and... I hope to see you soon.”

My eyes sweep over her face, as if to commit her beautiful features to memory.

“Take care, Harley.” *I hope you’ll lose the man child. You deserve better.*

“Come on, boo, let’s go,” Chett says.

She waves at me. “Bye.”

I tip my chin at her.

“Bye, old man.” Chett waves over his shoulder. “Hey guys, we’re taking this party elsewhere.” He yells

that to a bunch of his teammates and their girlfriends who've gathered outside at the edge of the boardwalk. "My grouchy stepdad is kicking us out."

It only takes a few minutes for his friends to collect their belongings and get the hell out.

Home alone.

Good.

Just like I like it.

I exhale.

I would've preferred it if Harley had stayed back—

Get a grip, Lindström

I have no business pining after her even if the marriage that's been a sham for a while hit a cement wall today.

Until I serve my cheater wife divorce papers, my stepson's young, gorgeous girlfriend is off limits.

Kazimir's father's backstory

*I removed this chapter from the manuscript,
but I thought you might still want to know more
about Kaz's father.*

Kazimir

The ride back to my place takes forever. It had nothing to do with the light traffic on this Sunday early afternoon. Rather, it had everything to do with the urgency coursing through my veins.

I knew kissing Harley would rattle me to the core, I didn't expect it would short circuit my brain. It's as if the contact of my lips against hers unleashed a beast inside—one that's so fucking hungry for her.

My focus is trained on the streets of Manhattan as the car guns down the road towards Brooklyn, oblivious to the action unfolding in front of me. Harley is doing the same. I suspect, like me, she's reliving that kiss. At least, I hope so.

My heart is still galloping, mind racing alongside it from claiming her beautiful mouth.

Our hands are interlaced, resting on the seat between us.

I squeeze my hand around hers.

She responds in kind.

When we exit the Brooklyn Bridge, my eagerness kicks up.

I should have some reservations.

Harley is my ex-stepson's ex-girlfriend, my roommate, my soon-to-be employee, but none of that matters because right now, she's the woman I want more than my next breath.

Consequences be damned.

The chauffeured car parks in front of my carriage house.

I get out, circle the vehicle to Harley's door, open it, and help her out. I thump the roof of the car twice with my fist, and the chauffeur drives off.

With my fingers intertwined in hers, I drag Harley to the front door. When we reach the house, I stop, and turn to face her.

"I'm still disturbed by what went down between you and your father," she says. "It doesn't make sense. You followed in his footsteps. He should be proud."

This conversation wasn't on the program, but after the way she went to bat for me, I owe her that much. I sigh. "What I'm about to share stays between us—"

"Kaz, I'm not like Devlyn. I'd never break your trust."

I nod. "*Farfar* and Nana were never able to have kids."

"Oh."

"They were in their early thirties, and after four miscarriages, my grandparents were considering adoption, when *Farfar's* best friend and wife died in a mugging in Chicago while the couple were there at a

conference. My dad was staying at a friend's house. *Farfar's* best friend—who was an only child born in Norway and came to the US as a kid—had my grandfather as his next of kin. On the heel of the tragedy, my grandparents became parents to a ten-year-old boy.”

“Gosh.” She brings a hand over her heart.

“My grandparents were delighted to finally have a child, but devastated by the events that led them to becoming parents. Feeling blessed beyond belief, they doted on my father, never telling him no. When *Farfar* and Nana became my surrogate parents, they promised themselves they wouldn't make the same mistake with me. My father was unbearable and his disregard for them—and me—was a slap in the face. They were strict with me and didn't allow me to get away with murder.”

“After meeting your dad, I can understand why they would want to swing the pendulum the other way.”

“It's a guilt that weighed down heavy on them their entire lives,” I say. “The irony is, once the veneer of the marriage had cracked, it had crossed my mind many times that Devlyn and my father would've been a match made in heaven.”

“Your ex-wife and father both have an inflated sense of self-importance and suffer from grandiose delusions. Can you imagine two self-centered people teaming up to create havoc in the world? We all need a little more of that.”

“Yeah, like we need another World War.”

“Not.” She smiles up at me. “I’m sorry your dad was such a lousy father.”

“So am I.”

“Okay. Enough of your father,” she says, with a dismissive hand gesture. “Back to the program.” She winks.

“Back to the program.” I lift her hand and kiss each of her fingertips. “I need to warn you in advance. You’ve been a fantasy for a year. Claiming your lips blew everything I had imagined out of the water. Once we enter my place and I close the door, I intend on making you scream out my name until you lose your voice. I want to mark every sinful part of you.” I hold her gaze. “If that’s too much to handle, let me know now.”

I need her to know my desire for her is real, and not tangled under the guise of this fake relationship.

Big green eyes as mysterious as the depths of the Hanging Lake stare up at me.

Did I get it wrong? Is this one-sided? Did she change her mind during the ride?

She bites against her lower lip, now devoid of the red lipstick.

The way she does that is so distracting.

Vulnerability has never looked so alluring on a woman.

My cock, that had been on alert during the entire ride, hardens.

I dip my head down so our lips touch. “I’m waiting for your answer, Goldilocks.”

“Yes. I want it all.”

“You keep giving me good answers today.”

My tongue trails against the seam of her lips. She opens for me and for a few intense seconds, our tongues are involved in a wild, passionate dance. Harley matches me, tongue stroke for tongue stroke.

Christ.

She hums.

I’m not sure if it’s a pleasure or agony for more.

I savor every second of this kiss, as if I don’t intend on having my lips on her for the rest of the day and well into the night.

My hand lowers to the small of her back, but realization sets in, and I freeze.

For the sake of decency, I put an end to this over the top PDA.

She draws in a shaky breath.

Her eyes are glazed with searing desire.

She grips the lapels of my jacket, her expression indicating she disapproves.

The pad of my thumb traces her bottom lip. “Let’s go inside before I do something that causes my neighbors to call the police.”

She glances over her shoulder.

“You’re right. Let’s not give them something to talk about.”

* * *

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Harley's story.**



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