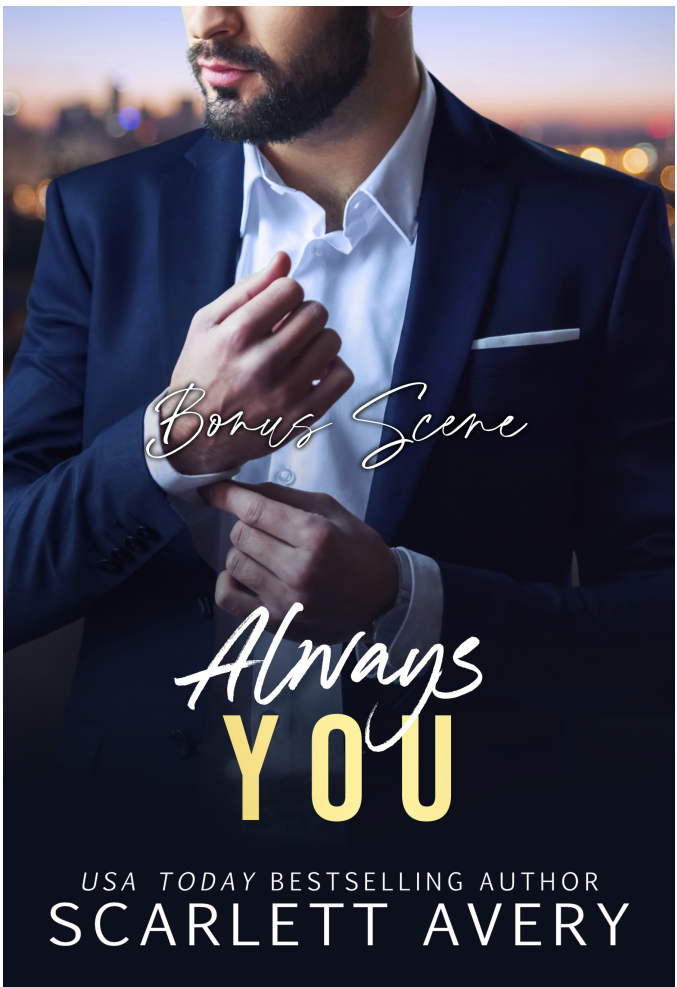




Bonus Scene

Always
YOU

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SCARLETT AVERY

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Scarlett Avery

Five years later

Levi

I pause for a beat at the threshold of the bedroom, admiring my wife as she paces the room, rocking our seven-month-old son as she sings a lullaby to him. Every time I steal candid moments like these, when I know she isn't aware I'm watching, it only intensifies my undying love for her.

I come up behind Jules and wrap my arms around her. "Ready to go?"

Worried green eyes meet mine.

She shifts her focus to the little bundle of joy she's cradling in her arms and pulls her lower lip between her teeth, her eyebrows creased as her gaze lifts to mine.

All is not well.

"Sweetness, he's going to be all right," I say. "He's in good hands."

I've been comforting her all week about this.

"I know." She sighs. "I'm just nervous. It's the first time I leave him with someone else. He's just a tiny baby."

Sidney responds with a coo.

To honor her father, we gave our boy his name as a middle name. Hamilton Salinger would be proud of baby Sidney Hamilton Aldridge. Auntie Sydney was beside herself when we made the decision to name our son

after the person who brought us together. We preferred the aristocratic British surname spelling.

“See!” Jules says. “He agrees.”

“He’s hardly old enough to understand a word of this conversation.” I chuckle.

She laughs a little.

I drop a soft kiss on her forehead and rest my chin on top of her head, looking down at our baby boy. “Do you think Linc and Elsie won’t be able to handle our tiny champion?”

Elsie is my brother’s wife. They’ve been married for three years and they have a rowdy family. Along with my nephew Micah, who’s now eleven, they also have Henry, Elsie’s nine-year-old son from a previous marriage. And two-year-old twin girls.

She lets out a long sigh. “No, that’s not it.”

My brother and Elsie have a lot of practice as parents. Their four kids are well-adjusted and happy. My wife knows that, but it’s still not enough to taper her new mom jitters. Jules is a fantastic mother, but she worries. As a first-time father, I worry as well, but I do a better job of hiding it.

Without my dad, my brother, and my sister-in-law, we’d be going at it blind. Neither of us has mothers to guide us. It’s particularly difficult on Jules.

I turn her in my arms so she’s facing me.

My eyes drop to our chubby son.

Big blue eyes fight to remain open.

My little champion is losing steam. If his heavy lids are any indication, he'll soon lose the battle.

"We'll only be gone for a few hours, Jules."

"You're right. This is silly. I'm being an overprotective mom."

"Stop that." I brush her blonde hair behind her ear. "You love this little guy so much. The trepidations are normal. Other than when you're sleeping or when he's out, you're his life line."

Not only is she leaving him in the care of someone else for the first time, but she's also weaning him off breast milk. A lot of changes in one go.

"Like you don't help," she says.

"I pull my weight, but there's a connection between a child and a mother, a father will never experience."

She nods.

Baby snores echo in the room.

"I guess I don't have to worry about him throwing a tantrum. I can escape undetected." Jules laugh.

"Let's make a run for it."

"You're on!"

She places our son in his bassinet, pulls the sheet to cover him, and we tiptoe hand-in-hand out of the bedroom while he's out like a light.

We trail down the stairs to the living room.

Linc and Elsie are seated on the couch, enjoying a merlot from France and an elaborate charcuterie board my brother prepared and brought over. Since they only

have one kid to worry about tonight, it's like a holiday for them.

The twin girls are with Elsie's parents. The boys are with my dad. He has tons of outdoor activity planned for them over the weekend.

It takes a village.

I'm so grateful so many people were willing to pitch in to make this evening perfect for my wife and me.

"I triple checked and the baby monitor works," Jules says. "I have bottles ready in the fridge. It's still all new to him, so if he fusses, just come and get us—"

Linc drops his glass on the coffee table, jumps to his feet, and points a decisive finger at the door. "Go, woman!"

Elsie mirrors her husband's move. "Yeah, you guys need to vacate the premise. STAT!"

"We got this, Jules," Linc says.

"Tell her, baby." His wife nods.

Their parent-like stance brooches no argument.

"Okay, okay, I get the message. You two are professionals." Jules laughs. "We're going now."

Linc and Elsie shove us out of the door, all the while waving us goodbye and wishing we'll have a great time.

With our fingers interlaced, we cross the street and head to Linc's house.

My brother and I left Venice right before he got married. We didn't even think twice and bought houses in Manhattan Beach. So many of our friends were already

living in a gated community in this safe neighborhood, so it made sense to join them. It means there's no shortage of babysitters. That makes a big difference for first-time parents—especially when Mom is also a boss lady.

Jules's father's vision caught on fire. Our little start-up grew to a colossal success, making us obscenely rich in the process. Fit Thonix has gone global with divisions in New York, Limerick, Ireland, and Melbourne, Australia. Neither Jules nor I can wrap our heads around it.

Money has never been an issue for me, but achieving this level of success is life-changing. And the blessings keep coming.

As of late, more and more big fish are approaching us. The money some of these companies are willing to put on the table to buy us out is eye-popping. Jules, Collin, Shane, and I haven't rule it out as a possibility, but we're not ready yet.

For the first two years, Hillary tried to find a way to get her grubby hands on a piece of our profit. It pays to be able to afford some of the best lawyers in LA. We haven't heard from her in a long time.

Good riddance.

Olive and Petula never won an Oscar. As a last-ditch effort, they both tried their hand at reality TV with disastrous results. When fame is the only thing you seek, it can come back and bite you in the ass. Both Twatt sisters fled to London to escape the media backlash following their last gig as wanna be reality TV stars.

I squeeze Jules's hand as we reach the gate to Linc's backyard. "Are you in date night mode?"

"I am now." She offers a dazzling smile. "So, what do you have planned?" Her voice is filled with excitement and it's infectious.

"You'll soon find out." I push the gate to Linc's backyard open and gesture for her to enter.

"Oh, this is romantic," she says of the candles lighting the way. "Music, too." She points to the sky. Soft music plays in the background. "You definitely know how to set the stage."

"Not bad, huh?" I trail right behind her.

"Don't quit your day job."

"Which one?"

She laughs.

I'm still juggling two businesses. These days Collin and Shane do most of the heavy lifting at Fit Thonix Sport Challenge Equipment since Jules is on maternity leave. Linc and I hired a couple assistants each to help carry the load at Lumen Opus Productions. Most days, everything runs smoothly, but sometimes, it's pure chaos. However, there's no way I'll abandon my brother and I refuse to be a silent partner at Fit Thonix.

Loud music resonates in the backyard and a group of dancers wiggle their hips to the beat.

Jules stops in her tracks.

She gasps and turns around. "What did you do?" Her eyes are as wide as saucers.

“I wanted you to enjoy our time together,” I say. “Whisking you away without our son wasn’t a possibility, so I did the next best thing. I brought the magical experience to you.”

“Oh, my God, you’re a wonderful man.”

“I try my best.” I wink.

She flips around and takes in the view. “Linc’s backyard is a near carbon copy of the backyard of our hotel in Hawaii.”

I stand next to her. “It’s not the same scale or level of luxury, but that’s the idea.”

As stage designers, it wasn’t too hard for Linc and I to enlist the right people to create a Hawaiian Luau night in LA. Lights strung all around us and torches add to the dramatic effect. I also hired a group of flame eaters and dancers in traditional costumes. A top-notch caterer ensures we’ll feast on scrumptious traditional Hawaiian cuisine and desserts. Animated Hawaiian music adds to the enchanting setting beneath the stars. Tonight, I treat my wife to an exhilarating voyage to the North Pacific Ocean without setting foot on a plane. No passport needed for this adventure.

“Do you remember what happened the last time we were in Hawaii?” I tap the tip of her nose

An epic smile stretches across her beautiful face.

“We made a perfect baby boy.”

“We did.” I nod. “A big one, too.”

“You’re telling me. On some days, I still feel it.”

I chuckle.

“You and my son mean everything to me, Jules. You take such good care of Sidney. You’ve given me so much. It’s my job to take care of you tonight, my queen.” I wrap my arms around her.

“God, I love you, Levi.”

I’ll never tire of hearing those words. “I love you, too, sweetness,” I say. “The countdown has officially started. Let’s get on with the fun... before we *get on* with the fun.” A wicked grin stretches my lips.

She frowns her confusion. “Was that German?”

I lean into her. “The show ends in three hours. The event coordinator will handle everything and make sure these guys get out of here while I take you upstairs to the guestroom and fuck you blind. Who knows? Maybe we’ll make another baby.”

“You’re a devious man, Levi Aldridge,” she says. “You lure me with promises of a good time, but you just want to impregnate me.”

“Can you blame me, Mrs. Aldridge? We make beautiful babies.”

“We do.” She smiles.

I cup her face in my hand and ravish her lips in an all-consuming kiss.

* * *

**Thank you so much for reading
Levi and Jules' story.**



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