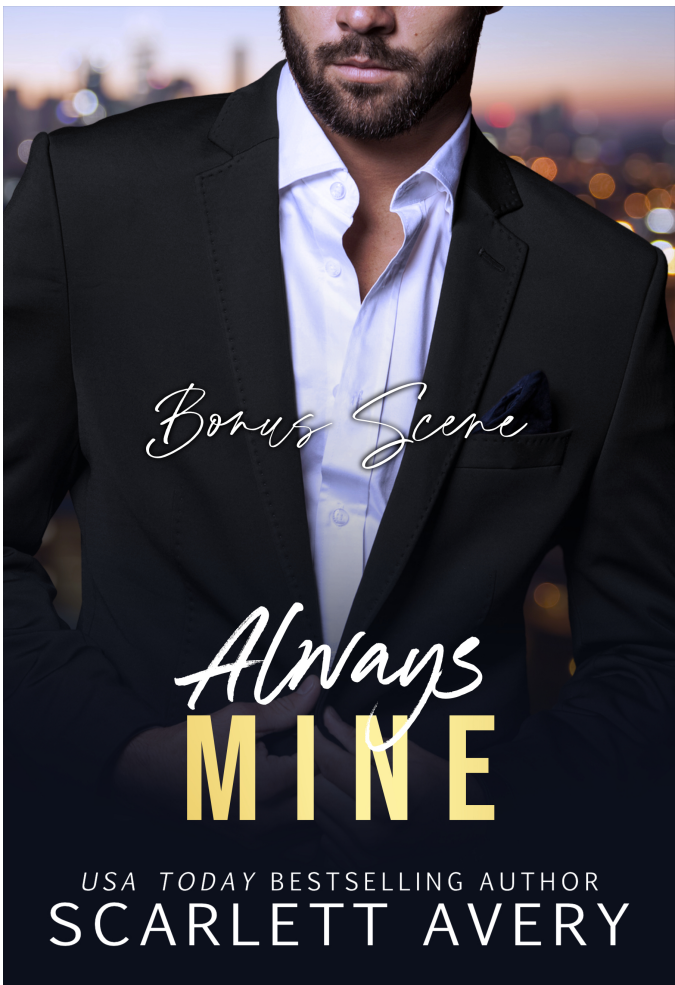


A man with a beard, wearing a black suit jacket over a white button-down shirt, stands against a blurred city skyline at dusk. The text "Bonus Scene" is written in a white cursive font across his chest.

Bonus Scene

Always
MINE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SCARLETT AVERY

About This Bonus Scene

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Scarlett Avery

Twelve years earlier at Carter Dyer High

Roderick

Most everyone is making their way to the cafeteria for lunch. I'm heading outside to scarf down my food in private. I don't have much, but I don't need to flaunt how desolate my life is. Nobody's rich around here and few are getting by. Still, I'd rather eat by myself.

Since Mom was passed out this morning—again—before I left, I prepared a couple sandwiches. Nothing screams welfare recipient like government cheese. I even brought some Kool-Aid in a recycled plastic bottle and a snack for later. One day, I'll be able to afford real juice, brand named cookies, quality cheese, and better bread than this cardboard-tasting shit Mom gets. I know I will.

Today's lunch is kind of bougie ass. Mom got her food stamps two days ago. Last night I treated myself to fried spam and generic mac 'n' cheese. I'll make Vienna sausages tonight with boxed mashed potatoes. Last week was bare bones. I rotated between mayo, ketchup, and peanut butter sandwiches. At night, it was buttered noodles prepared with no name margarine all week. The joys of growing up shit poor in America.

I'm about to turn the corner to escape—even for a few minutes—the shithole they call Carter Dyer High when I hear a bunch of idiots laughing.

“Hey, brown-noser. Did you kiss up to any teachers today?” A girl laughs.

I shake my head determined to resume my mission, but I freeze.

“Dumb Dom!” A bunch of kids starts shouting the insult like an anthem.

I may not have been at this school a long time, but I know who they're talking about. She's the shy and tiny blonde with the huge blue eyes I noticed last week. She was hugging her books so hard, it was obvious she was using them as armor. Kids have been making fun of her. Apparently, she's a brainiac. She's able to solve equations that stump most students. And from what I understand she has a pretty heavy accent. I think she comes from Russia or something like that. So far, people have been saying some pretty mean—and downright nasty—things about her. If you're looking for open-mindedness, you sure as hell won't find it in LA's Fashion District. People only like you when you're slumming it as hard as they are.

“Dumb Dom, what's for lunch today?”

I recognize that voice.

“Some slimy and disgusting food? You smell as bad as the garbage you eat.”

Slut Connie Washington.

I was dead set on minding my own business, but now I can't. I hoist my backpack over my shoulder and head straight towards the crowd huddled in a circle.

"No! Stop! You hurt me, the defenseless girl says.

What the hell?

I quicken my step.

"*'You hurt me'.*" A girl mocks her.

I elbow people left and right as I part the group of losers. When I get to the front of the crowd, the girl is already crying.

Fuck.

"Yeah, what are you even doing here?" Connie says. "When are you going to start speaking American? What fucking language do you speak anyway? Swahili?"

The crowd loses it.

Connie looks around, proud of herself. She gestures with her hands, fanning the cruel mocking.

Someone needs to teach that bitch a lesson.

"Hills, dump everything from Dumb Dom's backpack on the floor," Connie says to her best friend. "Let's see what shit she's eating today."

The crowd roars in laughter.

Many shout insults.

The blonde cries harder.

My blood boils.

Connie Washington leads a group of bitches who love bullying and terrorizing anyone who isn't a match. Hills, aka Hillarie-Ann Roneworth, is her right-

hand bitch. Just like any coward, they never go after some of the girls who could kick their asses and, just like hyenas, they travel in a pack. This blonde is easy prey.

The contents of the girl's backpack hit the floor in a clamor.

She drops to her knees to gather her things, but Connie's goons kick them around.

"You look pathetic." Connie's lips curl in a sneer. "Go back to your fucking country."

I've had enough.

I approach Connie. "Leave her the fuck alone."

Her head whips in my direction. She gives me a onceover. The disgust I read in her eyes must match mine. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm about to become a big fucking problem if you don't leave her alone."

"What? You think I'm scared of you? I'm not. You're a pee-on."

"I really don't care how you feel about me."

"I can have one of my guy friends kick your ass."

"Rich. You send other people to do your dirty laundry."

"I'm a girl. It's not like I can take you on."

"Then stop running your mouth," I say.

"This isn't about you, moron—"

"I just made it about me. You're intimidating someone who can't defend themselves."

“You just got to Carter Dyer High like yesterday and you think you can talk to me this way?” Connie places a closed fist at her waist and waves a threatening finger at me. “If I were you, I’d back off.”

“You’re really good at making empty threats—”

She slaps me.

Fucking bitch.

As much as I want to retaliate and slap her right back, I will myself to calm down. Nana taught me better. And getting in trouble—or expelled—won’t do anything to help the poor blonde.

“Did that seem like an empty threat to you, asshole?”

I pin Connie with a deadly stare.

“You’re wasting your breath.” Connie smirks. “I’ll make fun of Dumb Dom as much as I want. Nothing you can do about it.”

“I’m sure I can convince you to have a change of heart.”

Her eyebrows knit together. “Why are you defending Dumb Dom?” She smirks again. “Oh, I know. You’re into smelly foreigner girls. You want to plunk her Polish sausage cherry? Is that it? You want to get in her pants?”

The crowd loves Connie’s repartee.

Dom seems to shrink to nothing.

Poor kid. She doesn’t deserve this.

“Not my style.” I sneer. “I don’t take advantage of *underage* girls... like a certain assistant coach I know.”

Connie narrows her beady eyes at me.

I hit a nerve.

Good.

She gets in my face. “What did you just say, asshole?”

She isn’t tall, but she’s full of rage and attitude. I’m harvesting enough rage to cause a nuclear explosion.

“I *said*, I don’t prey on or corrupt underage girls *like* coach Yull.”

The crowd gasps.

Connie’s jaw drops.

Busted, bitch.

I add fuel to the fire. “From what I understand, you and the coach are... *close*. So close, you were servicing him on your knees.”

I reach inside my pocket and pull out trusted camera. I flash it to the crowd.

They gasp louder this time.

A few people start snickering.

“Con, what is he talking about?” Hillarie-Ann frowns.

“He’s just an ass wipe,” Connie says. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” The change in her tone is noticeable.

“I do,” I say.

“You’re a liar.” She spits in my face.

I wipe my face and smirk at her.

“What are you laughing about, asshole?”

“It’s funny how you’re accusing me of lying, when you’re the one who has something to hide.” My smirk stretches. “That dirty little secret of yours must weigh a ton.”

“I don’t have anything to hide.”

“Oh yeah?” I wave the camera in front of her face. “It’s all here.”

She tries to grab it, but I’m taller and faster.

“Don’t touch what’s not yours, bitch.”

“You’re lying.”

“Am I?”

“You’re a degenerate.”

“Oh, come on, Connie, you can do better than that.”

She opens her mouth to say something, but I shut her up when I press the play button. The sound is faint, but the images don’t lie.

Connie is as white as a ghost.

“Jesus!” Hillarie-Ann says. “That’s you and... and coach Yull?”

“Yup.” I nod. “The coach is twenty-something and you’re... underage.” I narrow my eyes at Connie. “I guess that makes the coach a pedophile.” I allow for a pregnant pause. “And you a slut.”

Shock and surprise rumble through the crowd.

“You let coach Yull take your cherry?” Hillarie-Ann is blinking so fast, you’d think she’s trying to take flight.

Connie shoots daggers at me.

I grin, proud of myself. “I think that pretty much sums it up, Hillarie-Ann.”

Connie mutters a string of curses before turning on her heel. Without even a goodbye, she runs off like a thief.

When I found this camera on the street not far from the community center where Nana works at night, I thought I was the luckiest person in the world. It’s the most expensive item I now own. After fumbling with it, I managed to figure out how it worked. Never in a million years did I think I would be capturing amateur porn on school property.

Last Thursday, as I was trying to read my comic book in peace, I overheard people whispering in the boys’ change room after practice was done and all the athletes had gone home. I ignored it at first, thinking it was the cleaning staff until I clued in on what a man was saying.

‘Be a good little girl, Connie. Suck on Daddy’s big fat cock like you did yesterday. If you do, I’ll reward you with my cum by fucking your tight pussy after I’m done fucking your pretty little mouth’.

That got my attention. In a flash, I pulled out my camera. No way was I going to let the moment pass.

There was Connie on her knees with her tits hanging, giving the assistant basketball coach a hell of a blowjob.

My attention moves to the blonde that was being bullied.

She looks as shocked as the rest of the crowd.

It's time for us to get the hell out of here.

I extend a hand. "Come over here. You're with me now."

She searches the crowd before her eyes land on me. The fear, worry, and hesitation I read in them makes me want to run after Connie and shake her.

Of course, she wouldn't know who to trust after being the victim of bullying. "I'm on your side, Dom." I wave her over.

With a shy smile, she runs towards me.

I turn my attention to the mean girls. "You losers pick up her things and put them back in her backpack and hand it to her." I point to Connie's bitches. "I want apologies with that as well. I have no problem knocking on your parents' doors to tell them what kind of low lives you are."

I have no idea where they live, but the threat works.

They pick up Dom's things and place them in her backpack. I snatch the backpack from Hillarie-Ann when they're done. They turn to leave, but I stop them.

"Oh, ladies, I think you forgot something," I say in a mocking tone.

The resultant apologies don't feel sincere, but it's better than nothing.

I turn to the crowd.

"Any of you assholes so much as look at her the wrong way and I'll rain hell on you," I say. "Oh, and if I hear Dumb Dom ever again, your ass is mine."

Most of them nod.

Many are still staring at me in disbelief.

With my hand interlaced in hers, I pull Dom behind me. "Let's get out of here."

"Thank you," she says before she bursts into tears again.

I do something I've never done before.

I wrap my arms around a girl.

I pull Dom's trembling body close to mine. *My God, she's tiny.* "It's okay," I say. "You don't have to be afraid anymore. I'll look over you from now on."

* * *

Once Dom found her composure, we sat under the sun and ate our lunch. We didn't talk much, but she kept stealing a few glances my way. I did the same.

Before the afternoon classes, I made a copy of her schedule and told her I'd pick her up at the end of the day to walk her home. I gave her a copy of mine so she knows where to find me in case Connie's friends come after her again. She kept thanking me. And hugging me. She even gave me a shy kiss on the cheek. I guess it's a European thing. I hate everything about Carter

Dyer High, but now I have a reason to care about being here.

When the door to her last class of the day flies open, a group of students bursts out.

I wait, and wait, and wait.

Dom doesn't come out.

I pull out her class schedule to make sure I'm standing in front of the right room. "Math. Room 612."

A few more students come out, but still no sign of the blonde.

What the hell?

I peek my head inside the classroom.

There she is, scribbling notes from the blackboard into her notebook. There are so many equations on the board, it's dizzying. Even though she's three years younger and this should be a piece of cake for me, it's not. I hate math. From the sparkle in her eyes, it's clear she loves this stuff.

"Hey, the class is over—"

"Can I help you, Mr. Wolfe?"

I look up at the teacher. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm here to pick up Dominika."

At lunch I found out her name is Dominika Lianna Jacek. Pretty name for a pretty girl.

"I see." The teacher nods.

I expect him to scold me, but instead, he approaches me with a hand already extended.

I step back, confused.

“I’m Mr. Carmichael. Even though you aren’t one of my students, I heard what you did today. Good job, Mr. Wolfe.”

I accept his hand and shake it.

I shrug. “I hate bullies.”

“So do I.” He pats my back. “Unfortunately, as a teacher, there’s only so much I can do.”

“I thought Principal Burkard was going to kick me out of school,” I say.

Dom’s eyes widen.

“I’m glad she didn’t.”

Her gaze softens.

I can imagine how pissed off my mother would be if I were. She’d fucking lose it on my ass.

“Principal Burkard doesn’t tolerate sexual predators, and that’s exactly what coach Yull is,” Mr. Carmichael says. “It’s shocking news to all the teachers.”

“It was for me as well. Glad I caught it on camera.”

He nods. “Thank God you did.”

Principal Burkard was waiting for me in front of the classroom door of my first class of the afternoon. She took me to her office to talk. I was shitting bricks. When she thanked me and congratulated me for what I did, I let out a sigh of relief.

Most of the teachers were MIA because they were at a celebratory retirement lunch for Doris Gainesville—a secretary who had worked at the school

for forty years. Principal Burkard asked for my camera as evidence and promised to replace it with a new one and a phone for my bravery.

Mr. Carmichael turns his attention to Dom.
“Miss Jacek, the class is over. Your bodyguard is here.”

“I go now,” Dom says, gathering her things.
She comes running to me with a huge smile.

“Ready?”

“Yes.” She nods. “Bye, Mr. Carmichael.”

“Have a good night, Miss Jacek.”

“You also,” Dom says.

With that, Mr. Carmichael closes the door to his classroom.

“Thank you, Roderick,” Dom says. “You good guy.”

“Rod. Call me Rod.”

“Okay. Rod,” she says with a firm nod.

“And I think you mean *you’re a good guy*.”

“Yes. *You’re a good guy*.”

“Maybe if I help you with your English, you might help me figure math out.”

“Math, chemistry, physics, and biology? Easy. English? Hard.”

I laugh. “We live in opposite ends of the scholastic spectrum.”

“The what?”

“English might be the only subject I can handle in school. I suck—I mean, I’m not good—at math, chemistry, physics, or biology.”

“I help.”

“I was joking. I’m three years older, Dom. My math is more advanced—I mean, it’s much harder—than yours.”

“Math in America for babies. Too easy.”

Wow.

We make our way through the hallway.

From the way people are looking sideways at us, I’m willing to bet everyone knows I mean business.

Fucking leave her alone.

I open the main doors, and the late afternoon sun greets us.

Free at last.

I glance down at her. “Where do you live?”

“Hartnett Street.”

“You don’t live far from me. I’m on Edberg Street.”

“Good?”

“Very good.” I pull a small plastic bag from my backpack. “Do you want a cookie?”

Her eyes drop to the bag before bouncing back to mine. “No.” She shakes her head. “Only two. For you.”

“No. You’re seeing it wrong. I have two—one for me and one *for you*.”

She considers me. “You know me just now.”

“So? I want to share.”

She holds my gaze for a long beat before accepting my offer.

She takes a bite and nods. "First time I eat this."

"You've never had Oreo cookies before?"

"No. Mom not buy American food."

"I see. Oreo cookies are my favorite. My grandma buys me some as a treat when she can. The ones I just shared aren't real Oreo cookies. They're the generic kind. Mom says we can't afford the real thing. We don't have money." Although I'm sure it's obvious, it's something I've rarely spoken out loud.

"We don't have money," she says.

Welcome to the club, kid. "One day, I'll be able to buy *real* Oreo cookies, *real* mac 'n' cheese and *real* juice made with fruits."

She looks at me like I have two heads.

"By that I mean, one day I'll make something out of myself and I'll have a lot of money. Then, I'll be able to buy anything I want."

"Oh."

"I'll also have enough money to buy a nice house."

"Oh."

"I'll even buy you a house."

She laughs her head off. "You funny, Rod. A house? No."

"Watch me, blondie."

"You know me just now."

"Yeah, but I have a good feeling about you. I like you."

She smiles. "I like you."

“There’s nothing wrong with me buying things for people I like.”

Is it a pipe dream?

No doubt.

It’s already an aspiration for me to believe one day I’ll be able to buy real orange juice. A house? I just don’t see it. A house for myself and someone else? Yeah, it’s a crazy dream.

She considers me. “Okay.” She responds with a firm nod.

“So, what does your dad do for a living?” I change the subject.

She stares up at me.

“Your dad. What is his work?”

“No dad.”

“He died?”

She shakes her head. “No,” she says in a low voice.

“Okay.” *Seems like that door is closed.*

I don’t push.

I know a thing or two about having skeletons in your closet.

“He forget me and Mom,” she says.

I frown my confusion. “He’s no longer in contact with you and your mom?”

“No.”

“He live in rich woman house. He clean pool for her when he come to America. Now she girlfriend.”

“How long have you been living in the US?”

“Mom and Dad come LA nine months. I finish school in Hungary and me come in June. After, Dad leave.”

Shit. “Got it.”

“Girlfriend—husband old. Too old. More old my *der Opa*.”

“What does that mean?”

“Dad of Dad.”

“That woman’s husband is older than your grandpa?”

She nods. “Husband rich. A lot. Big house. A lot cars. A lot diamonds. She young. She want young man—”

Whoa. “She wanted your dad even though she was married and he was also married?”

“Yes. Dad not want to be poor. Dad want to be rich like rich woman. He live with rich woman to be rich. Now divorce Mom. And me.”

Her English is limited, but that’s a pretty shitty story.

Her dad is as much of a deadbeat as mine. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No. You?”

“Two older brothers.”

“Ah. Me alone.”

“I guess I’m alone as well,” I say. “My brothers haven’t lived with me for a while. They’re older. They enlisted in the army to serve their country, so, for years we weren’t in touch on a regular basis. Now they’re

back, but since they hate my mother, they never come around the house. Not that I blame them. My mother is a piece of work.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, my family is pretty fucked up.”

She frowns.

I’m starting to understand that look.

“My family is broken. Not a happy family.”

That’s the best I can explain it.

She points at her chest. “My family is broken. Not a happy family.” There’s so much sadness in those words and in those huge blue eyes.

“I’m sorry to hear that about your dad, Dom. How’s your mom holding up?”

“What?”

“Is your mom okay since your dad no longer lives with you?”

“Oh, yes.” She nods. “Many boyfriend now.”

I have no business caring this much, but I don’t like the sound of that.

“And you, Rod?”

“And me, what?”

“Your dad. What work he does?” Her question catches me off guard.

“I don’t know my dad. He left when I was still a baby.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

An awkward silence passes between us as we keep walking.

“Seems like we share a lot in common. We have similar lives.” I rephrase in case she doesn’t understand what I said.

“Yes.”

“It’s a good thing we know each other now,” I say. “Since you don’t have brothers and your dad is gone, you need me as your friend.”

She shoots me an incredulous gaze. “Friend with boy?”

“Why not?” I arch a brow.

She bites her bottom lip and seems to mull it over. “Okay! Rod and Dom!”

I bump into her shoulder. Well, I bump into her because she’s so short. “Nah. You got it the wrong way around. It’s *Dom and Rod*. You come first.”

Her eyes shine bright. “Dom and Rod!”

“You’ll never be alone ever again, Dom.”

Her lower lip trembles and her eyes brim with tears.

I have no idea why I feel so compelled to play the role of knight in shining armor with someone who’s a stranger. I’ve never in my life felt like that about a girl. I just know it’s my newfound purpose in life. Other than my drums, not much else matters. All that changed today. Along with my brothers, Nana, and Aaron, Dominika Lianna Jacek is now part of my world.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading

www.ScarlettAvery.com ***Bonus Scene: Always Mine.***

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Rod and Dom's story.



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Thanks for being one of my sexy readers.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scarlett Avery". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and larger than the rest of the letters.

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