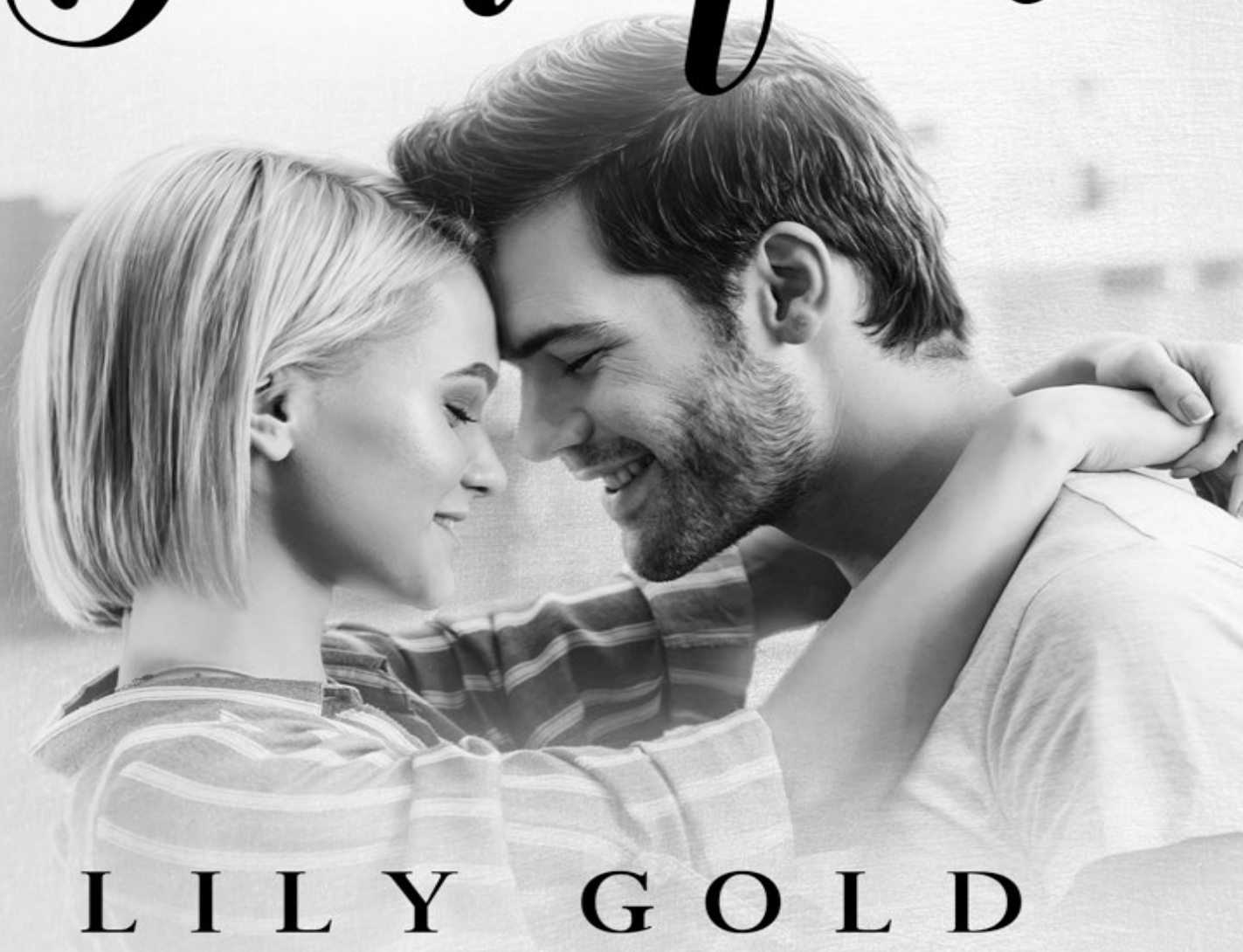




FAKING WITH *Benefits*



L I L Y G O L D

Faking with Benefits

NEWSLETTER EXCLUSIVE BONUS CHAPTER

LILY GOLD



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Chapter One

SEVEN YEARS LATER

NEW YORK FASHION WEEK

Three Single Guys @ThreeSingleGuysPodcast

Today, our wife is doing her very first NYFW show. We're so proud of her ♥ Send her love! - Josh

STANDING IN THE WINGS, I take a deep breath, staring out at the runway. It stretches out in front of me, impossibly long and lit up by spotlights. Music blares from the speakers in the hall, mixing with applause from the crowd, but I can barely hear it over my heartbeat pounding in my head. My hands are sweating. My mouth is dry as I watch the models do their final circuit of the runway all together, silky lingerie shimmering on their bodies as they strut in-sync under the sparkling lights.

The squat, dark-haired stage director looks at me, a hand pressing against his earpiece. "You're on in ten seconds," he tells me, and my stomach flips painfully.

I can't do this. I'm going to fall. Or throw up. Or have a stroke.

A big hand curls around my elbow, and I close my eyes as the warm scent of tea and books floods my senses. "You've got this," Luke says in my ear. "You're going to do great." He presses a kiss under my jaw. "Gorgeous girl."

I turn to look up at him, and he gives me a warm smile that melts my nerves away.

Ever since we got married, Luke has progressed into a full-blown silver fox. He's now pushing on fifty, and his thick hair is completely silver. Combined with his sharp jaw and pale grey eyes, he's drool-worthy. I just want to cuddle up in his pale blue jumper and disappear.

"I'm gonna puke," I whisper, as the stage manager starts to count down my entrance on the runway.

"You'll do perfect," he murmurs, nuzzling down my cheek. "So perfect. You deserve this." His hands slide down my arms, left bare in my plain black dress. "All you have to do is wave and smile." He kisses the nape of my neck. "I'll be right here."

I take a deep breath, nodding, and turn back to the stage. He's right. I'm just the designer. No one expects me to strut out there like a supermodel. All I have to do is take a quick bow.

In front of hundreds of people.

God.

The girls are all lining up on the catwalk now, standing and posing as the music comes to a crescendo, and the fashion photographers in the pit snap some last-minute shots. My heart feels like it's going to burst out of my chest.

"Five," the stage manager counts, staring at the stage. Luke squeezes my hip. "Four. Three. Two. And... you're off. Go, go, go."

I feel Luke's hand gently lead me forward as I step out of the wings and onto the runway.

Immediately, it's like walking into a wall of light and noise. I force a smile onto my face as I carefully walk down the narrow catwalk, picking my way through the line of clapping, smiling models, all dressed in my lingerie.

My latest collection is called *Nudes*, and it's a whole range of bras, panties, corsets and other underwear pieces in a bunch of skin tones. I used the softest, thinnest fabrics I could find: silk, brushed cotton, extra-fine cashmere. Some of the skimpier balconette bras are made of embroidered mesh so wispy, you can see the peaks of the models' nipples teasing through.

The collection is about celebrating the sexiness of the naked body. Not distracting from it with flashy colours, or decorating it with bows and glitter. Just showing off peoples' curves, skin texture and tone, and the softness of their body.

I think it's my best collection yet, and apparently, most NYFW-goers agree. When I reach the front of the catwalk and look around, the entire room is applauding. There are people on their feet. The photographers are zooming in on me, filming and snapping pictures. I wave at everyone, smiling so widely my cheeks hurt.

Today has been one of the most hectic days of my life. I've shown at fashion shows before, but this is my first time landing an official slot at New York fashion week. I've been up since four this morning, transporting all of the clothes to the venue, making sure that the outfits are put together nicely, pinning pieces tighter, tweaking models' hair and makeup.

And now I'm here. Standing on a runway, surrounded by models wearing my clothes, as hundreds of people clap and take pictures and cheer for me.

It's what I've always wanted. And it's happening right now. Tears fill my eyes.

I glance across the crowd, my gaze automatically falling to three people in the front row. Josh is on his feet, beaming as he claps for me. At his side, Zack is still seated. Our oldest daughter, Lavender, is sprawled on his lap. She's fast asleep,

her dark hair spilling over his shirt. Zack winks up at me, clapping very delicately so he doesn't wake her up.

My heart clutches. I blow them all a kiss, then turn to the rest of the crowd and bow, happiness surging through me like light. Then I finally turn and make my wobbly way back up to the wings. As soon as I step behind the curtains, Luke pulls me into his arms, holding me tight.

After the fashion show, there's a press party. It is absolutely insane. I huddle in a huge, chandelier-filled hotel room packed with hundreds of journalists and radio presenters and photographers. Over the past few years, I've given a lot of interviews; but I've never had this many people surrounding me, excited about my designs, asking me questions about my clothes. It's incredible. I talk over and over again about my inspirations, my career path, my colour palette.

As the evening goes on, though, I start to get more and more tired. My back is aching and my eyes want to fall shut. And I know why.

I always get fatigued right at the start of the first trimester.

My mind flicks back to the pregnancy test I took this morning. I still have it in the pocket of my jacket, carefully wrapped up in tissues.

I've been feeling washed out and achy and weird for days, but New York Fashion week is so hectic I didn't really think anything of it. We've been here for five days now, and I don't think I've gotten more than half an hour to myself in that whole time. The entire trip has been a blur of shows and mixers and afterparties. I've met more people in the last week than I think I've ever met in my life; designers, supermodels,

celebrities. It's hardly surprising that I'm exhausted. So it was only this morning, as I was overseeing the runway lighting setup, that it suddenly hit me. I was standing and directing the construction crew on how to change the angle of the set's spotlights, when all of a sudden, a wave of exhaustion hit me like a brick wall. I had to sit down. And then I knew.

I got one of the assistants to run to the local CVS and pick me up a test. In between finding a model's lost earring and frantically lint rolling clothes, I managed to find a few seconds to take it in one of the tiny little backstage toilets. It was a strong positive.

I'm having a baby. A third kid. I'm so happy I'm struggling not to cry.

Or maybe that's just the hormones. As I talk to a reporter about my inspirations for the collection, I feel myself start to well up.

She gives me a sympathetic look. "It must be emotional," she says. "I bet this has been a dream for you for a long time."

"Yeah," I say. It is emotional. But for more reasons than she realises.

All at once, the lights and the people and the talking seems too loud. Too much. All I want to do is curl up in bed with my men wrapped around me. I was expecting them to come and join me for press, but I haven't seen them yet.

Suddenly, a warm hand touches the small of my back.

"We're gonna take Lavender back up to the room, honey," Josh says in my ear. "We just wanted to say well done before we go."

I turn and look up at him. "Where have you been?" I ask quietly, leaning into him.

He frowns. “Oh, baby, were you waiting for us? Sorry. We wanted to give you the spotlight for a bit. Didn’t want to draw any attention.”

I nod, suddenly understanding. I guess it makes sense. The guys are famous now, after all.

Three Single Guys has gone from strength to strength in the past few years. The podcast is doing better than ever, and each of the men now has their own side project. Zack runs a sports podcast. Josh has a podcast about running a business, that I occasionally guest-star on. Luke, hilariously, has a podcast where he does in-depth literary analysis of a bunch of popular books — Harry Potter, Twilight, The Hunger Games. Amazingly, it’s incredibly popular. It’s not odd for people to recognise us in the street and come up to us, so the guys are just trying to be respectful. They want tonight to be about me.

But I don’t care. I take Josh’s hand and wrap it around my waist, leaning back into him.

He kisses my earring. “You were amazing.”

I smile, tipping my face up for a kiss. “I know.” I wrap an arm around his neck. “I’m done here. Take me to bed, too?”

Sadly, it’s not that simple. It takes almost half an hour for me to extricate myself from the crowd of designers and models and press. By the time I finally pull myself away from the last over-enthusiastic Instagrammer, I’m stumbling with exhaustion. My head is all floaty. I need to lie down ASAP. Josh stays by my side, his arm around me as I say my final goodbyes and turn to leave. He’s watching me closely, his eyes fixed on my face as I stumble back to the corner of the room, where Luke and Zack are waiting with Lavender.

“Are you okay?” He murmurs in my ear, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “You look exhausted, love.” His fingers trace over my cheek. “You’re all white.”

“Just tired,” I mutter, turning to Zack. Lavender is still asleep in his arms, her little purple dress crumpled as she lolls tiredly against his chest. I can’t help but smile when I see her.

Lavender is adorable. Luke’s biological daughter, she just turned six - but she’s absolutely tiny. I’m not sure how, since all of her parents are tall, but she’s just a little pipsqueak.

I push back some of her dark hair, stroking it off her face. “You could’ve taken her back to the room.”

“We tried,” Luke says drily. “Three times. She wasn’t having any of it. She said she wanted to stay up.”

I laugh. “Well, I’m sure she tried her best.”

Lavender rouses as I stroke her little pink cheek. “Mummy,” she mumbles.

“Hey, baby. Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up. Did you like the show?”

She nods, yawning, and curls up tighter against Zack’s chest.

Josh kisses my cheek. “Let’s go back to the room. You should both get some rest.”

We’re silent as we all sit in the taxi back to the hotel. I’m nervous. I think about the pregnancy test stick tucked into my jacket pocket. I don’t know when’s the right time to tell the guys. I don’t think I should do it tonight — but I also really don’t want to keep the secret any longer than I have to.

I glance across at Zack. He's sitting in the backseat next to me, looking out of the window. Slats of amber streetlight roll over him as he stares out into the black night. He looks tired. Exhausted, even. Like all of the energy has drained out of him. He catches me looking at him and forces a smile onto his face, but it doesn't touch his eyes. I reach out and take his hand, and after a moment, he curls his fingers between mine, gripping my hand hard.

By the time we get back to the hotel, Lavender has perked up. She looks around as we head back to the suite, her bright eyes taking in the long hotel hallway. "I liked your clothes, mum," she announces, kicking her legs in Zack's arms.

I smile across at her. "Yeah? Did you see them, or were you napping?"

"I didn't sleep at all!" She declares, outraged. "I stayed up the whole time, didn't I, Daddy?"

"No comment," Zack says easily.

She scowls. "Dad? Pop?" She looks expectantly between Josh and Luke. When they don't back her up, she gasps in fury. "I did. *All night.*"

"Okay, honey. I believe you."

She nods, appeased, then looks between the four of us. "Is it embarrassing to have three dads?" She asks, her voice casual.

Luke stops walking, staring at her. Shock jolts through me. Where the Hell did that come from? "That depends," I say carefully. "Do you feel embarrassed?"

"No." She looks down. "I like it."

I exchange a look with Luke. “Then it’s not embarrassing at all, is it?”

Josh clears his throat. “Why do you ask, baby? Did someone say something mean?”

Zack growls. “Is this about that idiot kid at your school? Hamish?”

I pat his arm. “Sugar, don’t call six-year-olds idiots.”

“He’s pickin’ on my daughter, I’ll call him whatever I bloody well want.” He jogs Lavender in his arms. “Was it Hamish, Lav?”

Lavender nods slowly. “He said *his* mum said mummy should be ashamed. And that I was going to grow up like a...” She thinks. “A, um, don’t remember the word.”

I feel sick. One of my biggest fears is that openly dating three men will reflect badly on my kids. If she’s getting made fun of because of who *I’m* sleeping with — I don’t know how I’ll be able to handle that.

“That little bitch,” Zack mutters. I glare at him, and he puts up his hands. “What? Hamish’s *mum* is a full-grown adult, I can call her a bitch if I want.”

“And, and, and he threw chicken nuggets at me at lunchtime,” Lavender announces. “And I don’t even like chicken nuggets! And he called me stupid. But I got eight on the spelling test, and he only got three, so he’s more stupid than I am.”

I force myself to take a deep breath. “Did you tell a teacher, honey?”

“I told Miss Edie. And she said that he probably just *likes* me. She says sometimes when boys like girls, they’re mean to

them.” She heaves a weary sigh. “So I guess he must like me a lot.”

Anger flashes through me. “That’s bullsh—that’s rubbish,” I correct myself. “All of your dads love me. They’re not mean to me, are they?”

“That’s what I said!” Lav agrees, wide-eyed.

“When people like you, they care about how you feel,” Josh adds. “They won’t want to hurt you. Ever.”

“Ever,” she says solemnly. “Yeah. That’s what I thought, too.” She looks down. “But the teachers never listen to me.”

I rub the bridge of my nose. “Has Hamish done anything else?” I ask.

“Oh, yes,” Lavender says. “I have a whole list.”



Chapter Two

FIVE MINUTES LATER, she's still going. I'm getting more and more pissed off as she tells us how this kid has been calling her names, stealing her tennis shoes, making fun of her school lunches. They're just little things, but she's just a little girl. Five years old. She shouldn't have to put up with this crap every day, just because her lazy, sexist teachers think that boys harassing girls is the peak of primary school romance. It's ridiculous.

Luckily, she seems to be standing up for herself pretty well.

"Then he stole my nice pen," she bemoans in Zack's arms as we walk down the corridor. "It was my favourite pen, and I *told* him he could have any of my pens apart from that one."

"And then what did you do?" Josh asks.

"I took it back and tried to stab him in the hand with it."

"*Lavender*," Luke starts, and she interrupts.

"I only wanted to stab him a *bit*," she argues. "Just to give him some ink poisoning. But not *bad* ink poisoning, Pop. And it didn't work anyway, because he moved."

Luke shakes his head, looking at me. "All of the violent genes are yours."

I just shrug. "Honey, we talked about this. If you get in an argument, you can't get violent first, okay? That's how you get put in jail."

She considers, running her fingers through Zack's beard. "But I can stab him if he stabs *me* first?"

"Yes," me and Zack say, right as Luke and Josh chorus "no." Luke glares at me. I smile at him as sweetly as possible.

Lavender looks between us, her eyes crinkling mischievously. “*Mummy* said yes. So that means yes.”

“Mummy has anger management issues,” Luke mutters under his breath as we turn the corner — and narrowly avoid slamming directly into Anna Bardet.

“Christ!” The designer almost trips in her stilettos as she stumbles back from us, catching her balance. She looks just as chic as usual, in a long black coat, her silver-streaked hair pulled back into a chignon at the base of her neck. I smile at her apologetically as she huffs, smoothing an invisible wrinkle off her dress.

It’s not surprising that she’s in the same building as us. Most of the upmarket hotels in this part of New York are currently crammed full of designers and models and fashion influencers. And really, the world of couture lingerie is pretty small. I’ve been to shows with her before.

The last time we attended a fashion show together, we were sat next to each other in the audience. She fastidiously ignored me the entire time, then left the show early and posted a cryptic tweet about ‘*Instagram influencers using their boyfriends’ fame to try and get into the fashion industry.*’

So she’s obviously not my biggest fan.

I don’t have any bad blood towards her. She, on the other hand, has taken my refusal to collaborate with her very seriously. She might have been a fan of *Three Single Guys* before — but now, she’s looking at the three guys like they’re a bit of dog crap she’s stepped into.

To be fair, the last time they met, Zack did keep accidentally calling her *Anna Bidet*. Which probably didn’t help.

“Layla Thompson,” she says slowly, looking me up and down. “What a surprise to see you here.”

“Hey, Anna,” I say tiredly, rubbing my back. “I saw your show last night. It was great. I loved the way you used metallics, it was very steam-punky.” I didn’t, her clothes were actually really weird, but I figure now’s not the time to say anything.

Her eyebrows raise. “I see. You came here to see me?”

I blink. “Well. No. I just had a show. I’ve checked out a bunch of the other designers this week, though.”

“*You* had a show?” Anna sniffs. “I didn’t even hear about it.”

“Are you a bit blind?” Zack asks kindly. “Muffin’s name was on all the same schedules as yours. And the same posters. And the same social media stuff. You were even CC’d into the same emails as her.”

Anna gives him a withering look, then drops her gaze to Lavender. “And who is this?”

“Lavender,” I say. “My daughter.”

Her face pinches. “Is she really? She doesn’t look like you.” She leans forward, sweetening her voice. “And who do you belong to, sweetheart?”

“No one.” Lav says, kicking her legs so she can look at her sparkly shoes. “I’m a person.”

I snort. Anna smiles indulgently. “I mean, which one of these men is your father?”

Lavender looks confused. “All of them.” She points at Zack, then Josh, then Luke. “Daddy, Dad, Pop,” she explains.

Anna looks deeply unimpressed. “I see. I guess your mom doesn’t know, huh?” She straightens, turning to me. “You

know, DNA tests are very cheap these days,” she says loudly. “There’s no reason you can’t get one done and work out who the real dad is.”

“Okay,” I tell her.

“I mean, *really*,” she presses. “It’s one thing to sleep around when you’re a single woman. But you have a child now. You have to start acting like a mother.”

I rub my forehead. My temples are starting to ache. “Okay,” I say again.

“Don’t you think the poor girl is going to get confused with so many men coming in and out of her life? Aren’t you worried about the *morals* that you’re teaching her?”

I open my mouth to respond, but before I can, a tiny voice interrupts me. “You’re very rude,” Lavender pipes up in Zack’s arms, wiggling her legs to be put down. He sets her carefully onto the carpet, laying a hand lightly on her head. Josh raises an eyebrow at me, like, *should we stop her?*

I shrug a shoulder.

Anna looks taken aback. “I’m not being rude, love. I’m just saying what I think.”

“What you think is only important to you,” Lavender says loudly. “You don’t need to tell it to other people. Mummy tells me that whenever I want to say something mean.”

“Well,” the woman smiles. “I think your *mummy* should teach you about a little thing called free speech.”

Lavender looks up at me. Luke clears his throat. “It means that people are free to say their opinion. The government can’t tell them to stop talking, or censor them,” he explains.

“You can *say* your opinion,” Lavender says, exasperated. “But you shouldn’t, because you’re mean and stupid and no one cares about you. And I’m *not* confused, I’m actually very smart. *You’re* the one who doesn’t understand. And you’re really old, so you should understand better than me, because I’m just a kid.” She tugs on Zack’s hand. “Let’s go, Daddy. I don’t want to talk to her anymore.”

I choke on nothing. Josh smothers a laugh in his fist.

“Aye, you’re your mother’s daughter,” Zack mutters under his breath. “No doubt about that.”



After getting dragged to filth by a six-year-old, Anna disappears pretty quickly, and we make it back to our suite without incident. By the time we pull up outside the heavy wooden door, all I want to do is take off my shoes, fall into bed, and sleep for twelve hours straight. Luke taps our keycard against the door, unlocking it — but before we can even turn the handle, the door yanks open.

The babysitter we hired to look after baby Rose stands wide-eyed in the doorway, her blonde hair pulled up in a dishevelled bun. Behind her, the sound of Rose’s lusty screaming echoes down the hallway. Josh immediately stiffens, frowning.

“Oh dear,” Luke says mildly. “Someone sounds unhappy.”

The poor babysitter tugs at her hair, looking stressed. “She’s been crying on and off all evening. I tried my best, but I just couldn’t calm her down. I—”

Josh pushes past her, heading into the room and making a beeline for the cot. As soon as he reaches in and picks up

Rose, she immediately goes quiet, her loud cries dying down to soft little sputters. I hear Josh murmuring to her as he jogs her on his hip, holding her close to his chest and kissing her head.

I smile.

Of all of the men, I was surprised to see how well Josh took to fatherhood. Zack and Luke love kids, but Josh *loves* kids. If he could, he'd always have baby Rose strapped to his front. He adores everything about her — including when she gets grouchy and screams for hours. We all watch as she tugs at his hair, mashing her tiny face into his shoulder and sobbing quietly.

“Oh,” the babysitter says. “Um...” ,

“Not your fault,” I tell the girl. “She wanted her dad. Zack, would you mind paying up? I want to see what people are saying on the socials.”

Zack nods, pulling out his wallet, and I head back into the suite, kicking off my shoes. Stopping to press a kiss to Rose's wet cheek, I slump onto our giant hotel bed, pulling my phone out of my pocket. I know I should probably just go to sleep, but I can't stop myself opening up my social media and checking out the NYFW hashtag. I have to know what people are saying. I can't help myself.

I guess I still am a bit of a workaholic. But I'm also a family-aholic. So it balances out. My shoulders slump in relief as I read the tweets.

Briar Saint @TheRealBriarSaint ✓ Her Treat has been my fave show so far this week. Gorgeous clothes ♥

Cassie @CassandraRaySaysHey The pink look from the Her Treat collection stole my heart!!

Jewel @DiamondDollClubbie Hi, I want to buy everything on the @HerTreat runway please

All of the press coverage is really positive. Thank God. As I scroll through my timeline, I also see Anna's name flash up a few times.

Couture Urban @Couture_Urban_Magazine ✓

Out with the Old and in with the new: Anna Bardet Couture's collection flops at NYFW, while Layla Thompson (Her Treat Lingerie) is voted best newcomer by Urban Couture readers

Saffy @SaffronJamesModel ✓ Just saw @HerTreatLayla's new Nude collection — LOVE LOVE LOVE. After Anna Bardet's weird metal thongs, I thought this FW would be a flop. Thank GOD

Ah, well. You win some, you lose some. And right now, it looks like I'm the one who's winning. Poor Anna.

Setting my phone down, I bring my hands up to my face, rubbing my eyes. The mattress dips next to me.

Luke sits down, offering me a sandwich. "We picked this up for you. Figured you wouldn't want to wait for room service."

My stomach turns. I sit on my hands. "I'm okay. Not hungry."

He frowns. "Really? You didn't eat dinner."

I pull a face. "Kinda nauseous. Probably the stress, or something." I feel bad lying to him, but now isn't the time to tell him. I glance around the suite. Everyone has split while I was obsessing over Twitter. Lavender has gone to her own little bedroom off the main suite. Josh is making up a bottle, chatting to Rose under his breath as he bounces her on his hip. I don't know where Zack is. Worry churns in me.

Luke sets the sandwich down. “Oh, love.” He kisses my shoulder. “Do you think you’re getting sick? Are you about to start your period? I can go to the pharmacy if you need to pick up tampons. I don’t think you packed any.”

I make a non-committal noise, and luckily before I have to answer, the door to Lavender’s adjacent bedroom pushes open. She’s changed into her nightie, her little face scrubbed pink and clean. “Mummy?” She calls.

“Hey, baby.” I stand slowly. “I thought you’d fall right asleep. Since you managed to stay up all through my show.”

Lavender looks down, twisting her little hands in the hem of her nightie. “I’m worried,” she confesses.

“About Hamish?”

She nods.

“Okay. Let’s talk about it.” I take her hand and lead her back into her bedroom, shutting the door behind us. She’s left the bedside lamp on, and it’s shading the room in a soft pink glow. Picking her up, I plop her back into bed, pulling the covers up over her tiny body and squishing her little toy unicorn by her cheek. “I’m sorry he’s making you so worried, baby.”

“I don’t really care about my special pen,” she admits, her voice soft. “But I don’t like when he calls me names.”

“I know, honey.” I sit on the end of the mattress. “But you’re being very brave.”

She reaches up and tugs at my hair. “I wasn’t brave. He scares me.”

“It’s normal to be frightened by a bully. And being scared doesn’t mean you’re not brave. I get scared all of the time.”

She narrows her eyes suspiciously. “No, you don’t.”

“I do,” I insist. “I was so frightened before I went on the runway tonight I thought I’d pee myself. Luke practically had to push me onto the stage.”

She bursts into giggles. I kiss her cheek. “You are so much braver than I was at your age,” I tell her, reaching for her tiny hand. “But asking for help is just as brave as fighting back, okay? If you want us to speak to his parents and the teachers, we will. Whichever you prefer.” I stroke back her long hair off her forehead. “But you know the most important thing?”

She shakes her head, her dark eyes serious.

I kiss her finger. “You don’t ever think you deserve it. Okay? No one gets to be mean to you. No one.”

“No one,” she repeats sleepily, her eyes falling closed. I sit by her bed for a few minutes, stroking through her hair, until she finally falls asleep, her little body going heavy under her bedsheets. Then I stand, tuck her in more carefully, and creep out of her bedroom, shutting the door softly behind me.



Chapter Three

WHEN I STEP BACK into the main suite, Josh and Luke are both sprawled out on the bed. Luke is drinking a glass of wine, flicking through his Kindle, and Josh has baby Rose sitting cuddled on his lap. There's a half-empty formula bottle sitting at his side.

"Is she okay?" Luke asks, glancing up as I unzip the back of my dress. "Do we need to go speak to the school?" His face is tense.

"I think she'll let us know if we do," I say, wincing as I step out of the clingy, dark fabric. "We'll just keep an eye on her. But she's smart. I think she knows when to ask for help."

He nods, watching as I change into my silky pajamas, then sit heavily on the bed, flopping down between the two men. Josh automatically leans against my side, resting his chin on top of my head as he strokes his fingers through Rose's curls, rocking her slightly. She's half asleep, her tiny face flushed from crying. I reach over and dry her damp cheek with my finger.

She's been fussy all day. She didn't particularly appreciate being forced to fly over to America. I actually told the guys to leave the kids at home. I have three husbands; surely at least one of them could've stayed in London to look after the children. But all of them insisted on seeing my first fashion week. "How's Rosie?"

"She doesn't know if she wants to eat or sleep," Josh murmurs, nuzzling her little cheek.

I look at her drooping eyelids. "You could probably put her down. I think she's settled."

He shakes his head, hugging her closer to him. He obviously has no intention of letting her go any time soon. “We’re just having a cuddle.” He tweaks one of her tiny toes, then looks across at me. “You were amazing tonight,” he says quietly. “Incredible.”

“We’re so proud of you,” Luke agrees, reaching across to carefully unclasp the clip holding back my hair. I smile tiredly as my soft curls fall loose around my face.

“I did good, didn’t I?”

“So good.” Luke leans in and presses a kiss to my neck. I sigh, feeling warmth flood through me as his lips trail down my throat.

I used to think this would go away. That after a few years’ honeymoon period, the guys’ effect on me would wear off. But it never did. My whole body still sets alight every time they touch me.

Rosie starts snoring softly in Josh’s arms. He sighs, standing and carefully setting her in her crib, then heads over to the minibar, cracking open the fridge. I hear the clink of glasses, and then he comes back, handing me a glass of cold white wine. “Celebratory drink?”

I shake my head. “No thanks, babe.”

He gives me a questioning look, and for a second, I think he might suspect something — but then he shrugs, slumping back down on the bed and wrapping an arm around me, swigging the wine himself.

I glance at the glass balcony doors lining the suite. It’s dark outside, but I can see a big silhouette huddled on one of the deck chairs, overlooking the city.

My heart twists. “Is Zack okay?”

Josh nods. “As okay as he can be, I think. He’s seemed pretty okay all day.”

It is perhaps the worst timing in the world that the biggest fashion show of my career happens to land on the anniversary of Emily’s death. After nine years together, I’ve seen Zack struggle through April 5th plenty of times. He usually takes the day off work and just wants to be left alone. Spends the day at her grave.

But today, he can’t go and visit her like he does every year. Because of me.

“Think he’ll mind company?” I ask, absentmindedly combing through Josh’s hair.

“I doubt he’ll mind yours.”

I nod and stand, padding across the suite and towards the balcony. Zack doesn’t look up as I slide open the glass doors, stepping outside.

It’s late, but New York is still awake, the city below us alive with car headlights and angry honks. Zack lifts his beer bottle to his mouth, his eyes unfocussed as he looks down at the streets spread below us.

“Are you okay?” I ask quietly.

He finally turns to look up at me. He looks exhausted. His smile is more of a grimace. “Fine, pet.”

“Your knee hurting?”

“No. Why?”

Wrapping an arm around his neck, I carefully slide onto his lap. He immediately pulls me closer to him, tugging my head against his chest and just holding me, like a giant teddy bear. I

close my eyes for a few seconds, listening to the steady thump of his heart.

“You didn’t have to come out,” I say into his shirt. “I hope I didn’t make you feel like you did.”

He sighs. “Course you didn’t, love. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” He takes a sip of his beer, then lifts the bottle to my lips. I shake my head, nerves swirling in my stomach as we look out over the city. The secret inside me is weighing me down. He shrugs, taking another gulp, then sets the bottle aside and tugs me closer. His fingers swirl up and down my arms, drawing goosebumps all over my skin.

“What is it, lass?” He rumbles, his lips brushing my hair.

“What’s what?”

“I can hear you thinking. Thought you’d be relieved the show was over.”

“I am relieved,” I argue, my heart beating in my throat.

“I’m a master of body language, remember? Something’s bothering you.” He combs a hand through my hair. “Tell me.”

I look down at my hands. My stomach pinches, and I take a deep breath. “I don’t know if it’s the wrong time.”

“Cause of Em?”

I nod.

He holds me a bit closer. “Baby. S’fine. Tell me. Please.” When I don’t say anything, he frowns. “My life don’t stop ‘cause of her. I love you. I need to know what’s up with you. Fuck, is it something bad?”

“No. Nothing bad. It’s good.” I turn on his lap to face him, cupping his cheek. The city lights reflect in his eyes like little

gold showers of stars. “I’m pregnant.”

He’s clearly not expecting that. His mouth goes slack. He’s silent for a few seconds. I keep talking. “I only realised this morning. I felt really weak. At first I thought it was just nerves, but after two babies, I can kind of... feel it in my body. I know what the symptoms feel like. I took a test right away.” I scratch the side of his neck lightly. “It was positive.”

Zack gapes for a few seconds. “I... today?” he chokes out eventually. “You found out *today*?”

I wince. This is what I was afraid of. April 5th has always been a bad day for him. And now I’m gonna associate it with one of his children?

Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe I should have waited until tomorrow, and ordered breakfast in bed, and made it really special. Instead, I just blurted it out while he was grieving. I’m such an idiot. “Is that okay? I...”

Zack grabs the hem of my pajama shirt and yanks it up, pressing his face against my stomach.

I sigh in relief, tugging my fingers through his long hair as he rubs his cheek against my skin, pressing in close. “Um, I don’t think you’ll be able to feel it yet, love.”

He looks up at me, his bright blue eyes sparkling. “*My* baby,” he checks, his voice hoarse.

I laugh. “I mean, you’ve claimed sole ownership of my pussy for the last few months, so I think it would be anatomically impossible to be anyone else’s.”

He narrows his eyes. “I don’t trust Luke and Josh,” he says archly, pressing a kiss to my belly button. And then another one. And another one. “I bet they were fucking you behind my back.”

“They were,” I agree. “But only in the arse, or mouth, or with their fingers. I promised you, remember?”

Maybe I went a bit overkill. I could have just used protection, but I really, really wanted this for Zack. When we started having kids, I purposely tried to get pregnant by Luke first. It seemed the obvious choice, since he was the oldest. After we had Lavender, my career pretty much caught on fire, so I took a break for four years. After that, it was luck of the draw, and Josh knocked me up with Rose. Zack swears down he wasn’t disappointed, and I know he loves Rose to bits — but I think it’s time he had a chance to contribute to the family gene pool. He’s been so patient.

“My baby,” he says, sounding awestruck. He sits up slowly, slipping his hand under my shirt to curve over my stomach. “How far along are you?”

“Not long at all. Early days.”

His fingers stroke over my skin. He buries his face into my neck, breathing into my hair. “Reckon it’ll be another girl?”

“Probably. I have a very feminist womb.”

He closes his eyes. “A baby.” He sounds choked up. “A little baby.”

I smile. “Yes, Zack.”

“*Three* kids.” His voice is shaking. “I... I never even thought I’d have one. I never thought I’d have any of this. A wife, or a family, or daughters. And now I’m gonna have *three*.”

My heart twists. I cup a hand under his jaw, gently angling his face to mine. He looks up at me, his eyes sparkling.

It’s hard to believe this is the same man who was sitting broodily on the balcony five minutes ago. He looks like he’s

been lit up inside. He's just... shining. Wrapping a hand around the back of my neck, he tugs my face to his very, very carefully, bringing our mouths together.

I snort. All of the boys touch me like I'm made of glass whenever I'm pregnant. Settling myself more firmly in his lap, I curl my fingers in his shirt and yank his mouth to mine, kissing him hotly. He groans against me, pulling me closer.

Suddenly, a shout breaks through the still, perfect moment. "LAYLA!" Josh's frantic voice calls from inside the suite.

Zack immediately tenses underneath me, panic jolting through his muscles. "Oh God," he says, carefully sliding me off him and standing. "The kids—"

I push him back onto the chair. "Nothing's wrong," I assure him. "I just... I wanted you all to find out at the same time."

Zack's eyes narrow. "What did you do?"

"I left the stick on the bathroom counter," I admit. "I guess they found it."

The glass doors to the balcony slide open, and Josh and Luke pretty much fall out onto the terrace.

"Is it true?" Josh demands, brandishing the pregnancy test like a weapon.

"No," I say, "this is all a very odd prank."

Zack tugs me closer, nuzzling happily into my neck. "She's carryin' *my* baby," he says proudly. "She's gonna be so beautiful." His hand smooths protectively over my belly.

As one, Josh and Luke both drop down on either side of me. Luke wraps a hand around the back of my neck.

“Kiss me,” he orders. Obediently, I lean forward and press my mouth to his. On my other side, Josh starts mouthing hotly up the side of my neck. Heat wires through me, making me shudder.

“You guys get so horny when I’m pregnant,” I mutter as Josh sucks my earlobe into his mouth.

“It’s sexy,” he says in my ear. “You’re making us our family.”

The balcony door creaks.

“What’s happening?” A tiny voice asks from the doorway. We all turn to see Lavender looking at us, blinking sleepily in her nightie.

Josh reaches out his hand, and she takes it, coming closer. “Mum’s having another baby. You’re gonna have a little sister or brother.”

Lavender considers. “Can I have a sister, please?” She asks me. “Boys are gross.”

“Hey!” Zack protests.

She rolls her eyes. “You’re not a *boy*, daddy, you’re a man.”

He nods, appeased. “Good girl.”

“I will pass on the request to my womb,” I inform her, and she nods seriously, studying my stomach with a tiny frown on her face.

“I guess I’ll love a brother as well,” she says slowly. “But it will be much harder.”

I snort. She lifts her arms, and I pick her up, sitting her carefully in my lap. Zack makes a punched-out sound at the extra weight, settling us both more comfortably on his knee.

There's a sudden indignant squawk from inside the suite, and Josh stands, blinking hard. His eyes are bright and shiny. "Hang on. I'll get Rose." He heads back inside the balcony doors, and reappears a few seconds later with the baby wrapped up in his arms.

"Lav, squish up," I say, moving her to one arm so I can take Rosie in the other. Lav shuffles over, then lays her head on my chest tiredly, her long dark hair tickling my cheek. Rose curls up against my shirt, her heavy eyelids falling shut as she smacks her tiny lips.

"All of my babies," I say, my voice breaking in my throat. Zack smiles, pulling back my hair and pressing a kiss to the nape of my neck.

I can't believe that my life has turned out this way. For so many years, I thought I wouldn't even manage to get a husband, let alone a kid. They were all just far-off dreams; checkboxes on my to-do list, that I thought I'd never really get to tick off. Back then, I was always looking ahead. I wasn't happy in the moment. I never sat back and looked around me.

But now, here I am, with three gorgeous men who love me, and three babies. And I'm happy every day. All the time.

A tear rolls down my face, landing in Lavender's hair. She looks up, frowning, and wipes off my face. "Are you happy or sad?"

"Happy," I tell her. "I'm so happy, baby."

She beams, laying her head on my chest and closing her eyes.



THE END

Thanks for reading the bonus chapter for *Faking with Benefits*! If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving [an Amazon review](#)—they're vital for indie authors, and even one sentence is immensely helpful :)

Don't forget to check out my other contemporary reverse harem novels, *Three Swedish Mountain Men*, *Triple-Duty Bodyguards*, and *Nanny for the Neighbors*.

Thanks! ♥