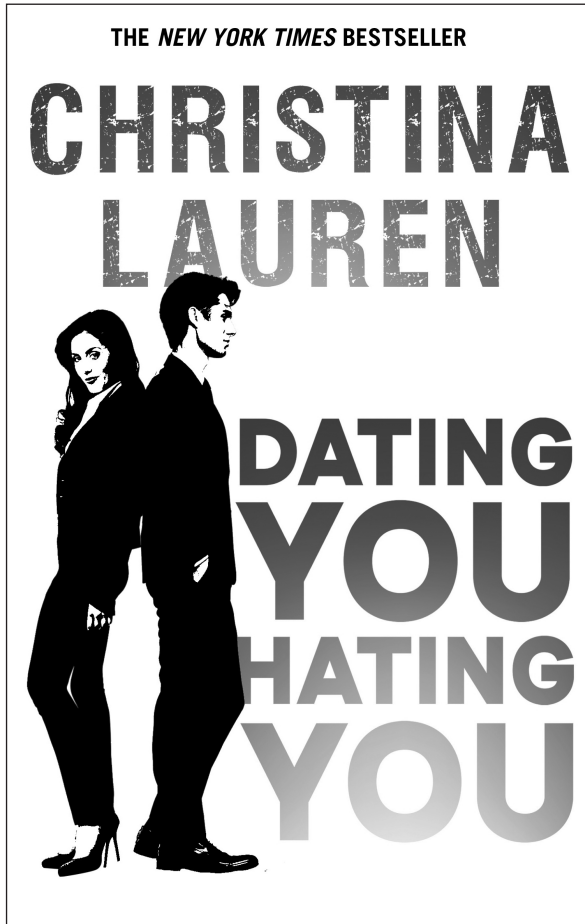


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Despite a meet-awkward at a mutual friend's party,
Carter and Evie immediately hit it off. But will these two
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When push comes to shove and love fights with hate, will these two ever get their fairytale Hollywood ending?

CHAPTER ONE

Evie

La Cienega Boulevard is a never-ending hell of snaking concrete, but it's a necessary evil in this town. Running north to south in Los Angeles, it forms an enormous artery cutting through the "thirty-mile zone," also known as TMZ, also known as the Studio Zone—historically containing all the early film studios.

In its heyday, and before other cities began offering tax credits and big incentives to lure filmmakers into shooting on location, this was where most movies were filmed. It's been the center of hundreds of millions of dollars in movie deals over the decades, but I've never heard anyone in the industry throw out "TMZ" in casual conversation. Not in the way you're thinking, anyway. Similar to a tourist shuffling around San Francisco and calling it Frisco, anyone referring to the nexus of Hollywood life as such nowadays would reveal herself as an out-of-towner who'd happened upon a detailed Wikipedia page. It's so archaic, in fact, that many of my colleagues don't even realize that's where the gossip site got its name.

La Cienega looks like most surface streets here in Hollywood: rows of shops and restaurants built at odd angles and crammed into every inch of possible space, palm trees and billboards that shoot for a gray-smudged blue sky, and cars *everywhere*. To the

north is the stuff most Hollywood dreams are made of, where a backdrop of steep hills seems to have erupted straight from the asphalt. Multimillion-dollar homes sit like Tetris blocks on the hillsides, their gleaming windows and gated drives towering above the city.

It's one hell of a panorama if you can afford it, but like most people here in Los Angeles, I have my feet safely on the ground, and at home *my* only view is into the apartment across the alley, inhabited by a frequently shirtless Moroccan juggler.

There are worse sights, I suppose.

But as much as I hate La Cienega and its never-ending gridlock, the boulevard is as much *as the crow flies* as you're going to find through LA. Any local will tell you that driving here is all about timing: leave at two, and you can get nearly anywhere in twenty minutes. Leave at five, like everyone else, and it'll take you an hour to go five miles.

Thank God I'm usually one of the last ones out of the office.

I look up at the sound of a knock and see Daryl in all her blonde-haired, blue-eyed glory standing at my door. While I'm the faintly anticlimactic amalgamation of two dark-haired, dark-eyed parents, Daryl Hannah Jordan is the picture of her namesake, and looks more like she just washed up on the set of *Splash* than grew up in San Dimas, three houses away from me.

"The workday ended over an hour ago," she says.

"Just reading this article before I go. It's about—" My eyes narrow instinctively as I study her. Daryl was in a skirt and skyhigh heels just a few hours ago; now she's wearing a pair of scrubs and has her sandy hair pulled back into a ponytail. "We have that party at Mike and Steph's tonight. Please tell me that's your costume."

Daryl starts to fidget and becomes increasingly interested in a nonexistent spot on the hem of her shirt, and I know I've been had.

"No," I gasp.

“I’m sorry!” She falls dramatically into the chair opposite me.

“You dick. You’re flaking?”

“I didn’t mean to! I forgot I promised my uncle I’d come in tonight. Why didn’t you remind me this afternoon? You know that’s your job in this relationship!”

I slump back in my chair. Daryl worked her way through college at her uncle’s medical spa, and enjoyed the hell out of that employee discount while she was there. She’s gorgeous—with tight skin, perfect boobs, and a thigh gap you could watch TV through—but she’s also the first to admit that a chunk of that is due to the pioneering efforts of science and her uncle, Dr. Elias Jordan, Plastic Surgeon. Daryl turns thirty this year, and in addition to her job upstairs in the TV-Literary department, she’s been doing some extra work for him on the side to pay for all her recent *fine-tuning*. Like most people in this town, she’s determined to never grow old.

Thankfully, she doesn’t have to worry about that anymore, because I’m going to kill her.

“Well, this day has been comically bad.” I check my phone before tossing it into my purse. “Remind me why I love you?”

“You love me because I listen to your endless movie trivia and my passivity complements your need to be in charge all the time.”

I wish I could argue, but she’s made two good points. I grew up obsessed with movies; it’s in my blood. My dad was an electrician for Warner Bros. and my mom did hair and makeup for almost every studio around. By the time I was eight, I’d convinced them to let me ride my bike after school to the neighborhood video rental store—yes, I am old—and then talked the crusty old manager, Larry, into letting me work there for free rentals. When I was in eleventh grade he finally agreed to start paying me.

I’ve traveled the world, but LA has always been—and will always be—my home. It isn’t only because my family is here; it’s because my heart resides in the grit and chaos and unspoken rules

of Hollywood. It's why I became a talent agent. I've never wanted to be *in* movies, but I've always dreamed of being part of how they were made.

And I do always need to be in charge. She's totally got me on that one, too.

"Fine," I say. "But next time I'm set up on a terrible blind date by a client and can't refuse, you're putting on an Evie face and going in my stead."

"Done." She inspects me with a forced smile. "Not to add fuel to the fire, but is your costume in the car or are you going as a surly but fashionable banker?"

I open my mouth to tell her exactly what she can do with my costume, but I catch movement through the open doorway, over her shoulder.

"Amelia!" I call, and she pokes her head inside. "What are you doing tonight? Please, please tell me nothing, Miss Amelia Baker, my favorite person alive."

"I'm picking Jay up from camp," she says, "and spending the rest of the night in my pajamas eating ravioli out of the can."

My head drops to my desk.

I work in Features, representing actors and actresses; and Amelia is the second in command in HR. Because she got a start in adulting earlier than most of us around here, Amelia is also proud mommy to the smartest, handsomest twelve-year-old boy in the world.

"Any chance you could get a sitter?" I am verging on desperation.

Amelia steps inside and sits on the arm of Daryl's chair. Her hair is cut close to her scalp. As much as I'd like to be able to pull off a style like that myself, it's never going to happen—but on her, it shows off her bright smile, luminous dark skin, and cheekbones for days.

"On a Friday night?" Her tone carries an undercurrent of *guffaw*. "Not a chance. Why?"

"Because Daryl is the worst friend, and you're the best friend?"

Her laugh tells me to give it up, and I groan.

"You have big plans?" With completely unmasked sarcasm, she adds, "It's not like I expected you to have a date or something, but you know, one can hope."

I sit up and point dramatically at Daryl. "I was supposed to go to a party with that one."

"It's true," she says guiltily, "but I forgot and promised Uncle Elias I'd go through his accounts."

Amelia points a mom finger at her. "You are *not* having something else done to your face."

Daryl immediately waves this off. We rarely comment on anything Daryl has done—she's a grown-up, and as perfect as we think she already is, she's doing it because she wants to and, well, it's really none of our business. Still, even I'll admit she's been a bit . . . overzealous lately.

"Just a little light dusting." Daryl gives a prim flourish of her hands and then turns back to me. "Speaking of, I need to get going."

"I guess I'll head out, too. No sense prolonging the inevitable." I move to slip some work files into my bag, but then I remember what I'd been reading. "Hey, real quick: did either of you see the article about Brad in *Variety*?" I lower my voice and look out into the empty office. "Wait, is he still here?"

Amelia peeks out and down the hall toward the office of Brad Kingman—vice president of Price & Dickle, head of Features, and asshole extraordinaire—and returns, shaking her head. "Just us and Dudley, I think."

I smooth the paper on my desk, and everyone leans over to read. "It wasn't *about* him, exactly." I point to the article in question. "Just a mention of how he was seen having dinner with Gabe Vestes." Gabe is an A-list movie star who's signed with our rival agency, CT Management. And, funny thing: everyone

knows Brad and Gabe hate each other, although no one really knows *why*.

Daryl straightens, unimpressed. “That’s it? I thought this was going to be something tawdry and scandalous.”

I give her a little growl and look back down at the article. I’m not reassured by her certainty that this is meaningless; suspicion itches at me.

“Maybe they patched whatever up?” Amelia offers.

I hum, unconvinced. “I don’t think that’s a thing that happens to Brad unless there’s money involved.”

“You go ahead and think on that, Nancy Drew,” Amelia says, “but Jay is waiting, so I gotta jet.” She turns to leave but stops just shy of the door. “And before I forget, a memo ran by my desk today—it’ll probably hit your box this week, Evie—Brad is postponing your department’s annual retreat, so you can take it off your calendar for now.”

“Postponing? Did it say why?” My spidey senses are heightened now. Brad has held our Features department retreat in Big Bear the same week every November for as long as anyone can remember.

“Didn’t say,” Amelia tells us. “All I know is that it’s been delayed indefinitely and I’m sure I won’t hear you complain about skipping an entire weekend in the woods with that guy.”

When you’re my age and living alone in an apartment with a common entrance, endless hallways, and tiny buzzers on the doors, you forget that creeping hopelessness you get walking up to a real house. A house with a porch, and a Craftsman door, and a knocker that tells you a little something about the people inside.

An iron dragon.

A brass rose.

Maybe a copper gargoyle.

I stare at the perfectly tarnished cherub on Steph and Mike’s front door and scowl, suddenly feeling a lot less satisfied with my

life than I did only a few hours ago. They're six years younger than I am and they're already knocker people. Front door people. *Homeowners.*

I can't commit to the yearly plan for Netflix and don't even own the car I just parked two blocks down the crowded street. I am a terrible adult.

I glance at my black robe, at the burgundy-and-yellow tie, at the wand in my hand, and wonder why I ever agreed to this. I'm thirty-three years old and at a costume party dressed as a teenage Hogwarts character.

Jesus, Evie.

Damn you, Daryl.

And it takes some bravery, let me tell you, to come here alone, dressed like Hermione Granger. There's this instinctive panic, that Bridget Jones tarts-and-vicars-induced anxiety that the door will open and everyone will stare at me with jaws agape and Steph will whisper in empathic mortification, *Didn't you get the email saying we weren't doing costumes?*

At least with Daryl at my side that outcome would be funny, and we could drink and tease each other about how we ended up here on a Friday night. But alone? Not so much. Here's to hoping the *Come As You Are* theme held, because a girl who needs a time turner to get everything done each day is a perfect alter ego for a single woman working in Hollywood.

I lift the knocker with some effort—using both hands. It's surprisingly heavy.

When I let it go again, it doesn't make the soft, deep knock I imagine, and instead strikes with a deafening metallic crack against the wood. The sound reverberates in the tiny brick courtyard and for a single, terrifying heartbeat the giant cherub wings wobble on their hinges as if they might crash to the ground.

Jumping back, I notice the perfectly normal doorbell on the outside wall: clean, obvious, and to all appearances, completely functional.

So . . . not a knocker then.

The door flies open, letting out a roar of laughter that, from the way everyone is staring at me, seems to be directed at the racket I've just caused. Steph steps forward, bringing a waft of her Prada perfume with her. With a graceful, manicured hand, she stills what is obviously, in hindsight, a metal door decoration.

"Evie's here!" She pulls me into a hug. "You're here!"

I like Steph. We used to work together at the Alterman Agency when I was a young, shiny new agent and she was an intern. She's still there, a full agent now, and to this day she holds the honor of being the colleague—past or present—whom I least frequently wanted to strangle. She's warm, she's accomplished . . . but once I step inside, I'm reminded again that she is frantically trying to cling to her teenage aesthetic even though she's neckdeep in her twenties. Case in point: her costume. I'm pretty sure she's dressed as "Wrecking Ball"—era Miley Cyrus in a cropped white tank and a white bikini bottom with boots. Also? I spy a table in the corner with an artful arrangement of Red Bull cans and a selection of fancy vodkas.

Ushering me in, she says—too loudly—"That thing is just decorative, you goose! You scared everyone! And oh my God! Hermione! You look amazing. You are so great for coming alone. My brave little Evie!"

Brave?

The sound you heard? The one that sounded a little like tires screeching? That was my confidence, coming to a standstill just inside the door.

I look around at an assortment of expectant faces wearing polite smiles, waiting for introductions.

A friendly-looking redhead dressed as Ariel, with her arm around the waist of a tall Hispanic Prince Eric.

An aloof brunette dressed as a vampire, whispering something to her vampire boyfriend.

A few couples across the room who had been engaged in

a group convo but are now staring at where I've just brought singledom into a party clearly meant for pairs.

"Everyone, this is Evie-slash-Hermione! Evie, this is . . . everyone!"

I wave, muttering to Steph out of the side of my mouth in my best Bogart, "You didn't tell me this was a couples thing."

"It's not, really. It just ended up that way!" she chirps, pulling me deeper into the living room. "I promise it will be great."

For a second, when I spot two women dressed as Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj snuggling on the couch, I think she might be right. This is a liberal, open-minded group, and I am a strong female choosing to embrace her independence and attend a party alone. Nothing to feel out of place about here.

But then she steers me past the main cluster of guests and parks me at the Red Bull-and-vodka table.

So that's how it is.

"Is Morgan at least here?" I ask hopefully, happy to entertain Steph and her husband Mike's toddler all night if it helps me look even a fraction less awkward.

She looks at me with a dramatic little pout. "At the sitter's. How's work, by the way?"

My shoulders sag, resigned. "It's fine. Tyler—the Broadway actor I signed in March? He isn't here full-time with his wife and kid until the end of November, so I told him I'd check on them. I basically spent the day in a Child Sensory Training and Integration seminar where babies play with cooked pasta in giant plastic bins for seven hundred dollars an hour."

There's an understandable beat of silence before Steph leans in closer. "You didn't."

"I did." And talking about it again, I remember how incredulous I was when we walked in. A group of tiny women in white jeans with their perfectly dressed, smudge-free children staring excitedly at giant bins of cooked noodles. But as the hour

went on, and I saw Bea's joy over the naughtiness of playing with her food for fun, my cynicism over the ridiculous parenting extravagance lessened, and I started to feel like, *Yeah, this is pretty awesome.*

But that is exactly how your brain gets corrupted in this town. Seven *hundred* dollars an hour to squish noodles in their chubby fists. These kids could have an awesome time playing with macaroni in their bathtub at home for a buck fifty.

"You aren't her nanny," Steph reminds me with gentle outrage.

"No, I know. But I adore Tyler, and his landing the lead in *Long Board* was a huge coup for us both." A coup I sort of needed, and Steph knows it, too. "I'm happy to check in on his family, obviously, but yeah. Not a nanny. How about you? Things are good?"

"Yeah. Ken's been acting a bit weirder than usual, but—" She mimes tipping a bottle back dramatically and I laugh. The office cocktail hour with Ken Alterman—my old boss—was always an adventure.

Someone catches Steph's eye from across the room, and despite my pleading headshake, Steph gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze and says, "Hold tight, I'll be right back."

And then she's gone.

You'd think I'd be used to this sort of thing by now—navigating a room full of matched-up people, alone—but somehow it never really gets easier.

I pull my phone out of my robe pocket, quickly texting Daryl.

With a mental groan, I glance covertly at the time before tucking my phone away again. I can stay for forty-five minutes, right? That seems like a length that communicates, *I value your friendship and am so glad I came!* and *No, I am absolutely not rushing out the door so I can continue slipping into spinsterdom in peace.* I feel like there should be a clear rule: if you're unmarried at my age and have been a bridesmaid more than seven times, you should

be automatically allowed an early exit from any couples event without ever being deemed an asshole.

With this decided, I inspect my vodka choices, pulling the most expensive one from an array of multicolored bottles.

“Is this the third-wheel table?”

Because I’m midpour, I answer without turning around. “The one with all the booze?” I ask. “It should be. I mean, it’s the least they can do.”

“Then I’m sorry, but I need to ask you to leave,” the man says sternly, and just as I turn in surprise, I feel him lean in a little behind me to say more quietly: “I was assured I was the only single person hired to work this event.”

He’s closer than I expected, and so my laugh is cut off when I see him.

Is he kidding? He’s single? No way am I this lucky. His hair is dark, longer on top, and as I watch him bend to inspect some of the bottles, he pushes it back from his forehead. Not like he’s fixing it in any way—quite the opposite, because now it’s standing straight up—but like that’s an unconscious thing he does. I immediately notice how comfortable he seems in his skin, loose and easygoing enough that it’s a solid guess *he* wasn’t just planning a bout of fake intestinal distress to make a dive for the nearest exit. He smiles again, and when I look down to what he’s wearing, I have to close my eyes to stifle a laugh. “Did Steph put you up to this?” I ask.

“What?” He follows my gaze. It’s subtle, but with the hair, green eyes, and glasses I can tell where he was going with the white shirt and loose tie beneath a gray zip-up jacket. Harry Potter. The lightning-bolt scar drawn on his forehead helps; that probably should have immediately tipped me off.

His brows furrow. “Oh my God.” He takes in my robe, the tie, the wand, the wild dark hair I teased to within an inch of its life while I sat in traffic. “Are you kidding me? The only two single people at this party and we match?”

I can't stifle the laugh this time, and it tears from me, surprising him as it does everyone who has ever heard it. I am small but my laugh is mighty.

He stares at me with a slow-growing, amused grin. "*Wow.*"

"Hi." I hold out my hand. "I'm Evie."

"Is that short for Evil?" He pretends to be scared as he tentatively returns the handshake. "Are you sure you're Gryffindor? Your laugh makes me think you have a secret lab and are building an apocalyptic robot dog that's going to eat every smug person here. Slytherin for sure."

"It's short for Evelyn. The cackle is my gift. It keeps the delicate ones away."

"I'm Carter." He points two thumbs at his chest. "Not delicate, I promise."

Is he . . . flirting? I consider the rolling tumbleweeds of my dating life and marvel that I can't even tell anymore.

Carter is sort of dorky, despite being hot. The glasses look real, dark and thick-framed. He's taller than me, but not too tall—which is a bonus in my book—with eyes that are a startling green, hair deep brown and thick . . .

I blink out of my inspection and back down to his face, realizing how long I've been staring at the top of his head. "Nice to meet you."

"You too." He points to his own costume again and smiles. "This was about the best I could do on half-assed motivation and an uninspired closet." He looks me over again. "You're an *amazing* Hermione, though. Harry and Hermione. Perfect. I ship it."

My stomach does another little tumble. "My friend Daryl was supposed to come along as my Ron, but she had to bail at the last minute. She's dead to me."

Carter's laugh comes out as a loud, surprised guffaw before he pops the tab on a can and takes a long, slow drink.

Honestly, I'm trying to stay cool and not look too closely at him, but failing.

Living in LA, and especially working in Hollywood, I meet beautiful people every day, even dated a few. But in a town full of pretty faces, I've become immune to the predictability of them, the symmetry. Carter is pretty in a distinctive way: His eyes are big, and lined with the darkest, thickest lashes. His jaw is sharp. With the thick frames of his glasses, his is an oblivious type of beauty. He needs a haircut. When he smiles, I see that his teeth are white but not perfectly straight. It makes him seem immediately friendly. And his imperfections are surprising in a sea of Invisalign, Botox, and self-tanners. He looks . . . *real*.

Now, before you think I'm putting too much thought into this, let me remind you that I am no longer in my twenties, and when you meet men at my age you immediately place them on one of three lists, just to make life easier for everyone: datable, not datable, or gay. Datable basically means you wear your bra when they're around, and you don't talk about bodily functions or pimples. Not datable or gay: anything goes.

"You're ahead of me there. I never even had a plus one," he says. "I was threatened into coming by our illustrious hosts. How do you know them?"

"I used to work with Steph at Alterman."

Something passes over Carter's face—a flicker of recognition, maybe?—but before I can question it, Steph walks out juggling an armful of plates. Carter and I both struggle to make room for them amid the Red Bull.

"What's up with the bar selection?" I ask her, gesturing to the table. "Are you expecting frat boys later?"

"Oh my God, can you imagine?" Her question comes out breathy—nearly orgasmic—and I stare blankly at her. "Everything else is over there." She lifts her chin, gesturing to another table in the living room that I now see is covered with wine, beer, and all the usual spirits.

I slump my shoulders in mock defeat. "But that's in *married* territory."

“We don’t have tickets to that side of the room,” Carter adds.

Steph looks like she’s about to roll her eyes at us but then freezes, and her mouth drops open. “You guys match.”

Carter and I exchange a knowing look. “We talked earlier,” he says. “Made sure to coordinate it for maximum awkward.”

She slaps his arm. “Shut up! Mikey and I *knew* the two of you would really hit it off. Did you know that we’re *all* in talent management? I mean, *guys*. The two of you are like a match made in heaven, right?”

Just before she heads back in the direction of the kitchen, Steph scrunches her nose at us as if we are a cute set of porcelain figures on a shelf and she’s tilted us *just so* toward each other.

When Carter turns to me, we stare at each other for a wordless, stunned beat.

“Those assholes set us up,” he whispers.

“It appears so.” I glare back in Steph’s direction. “Don’t they know that sort of thing never works?”

“It’s like that movie with Seth Rogen and Katherine Heigl where they have that disastrous date.” He pauses with his can partway to his lips. “Or wait . . . am I remembering that wrong?” A sensation like Pop Rocks goes off in my chest—I know which movie he’s talking about. “You mean *Knocked Up*?” He nods, and I roll on: “It’s not a date, actually. They meet at a club after she—Katherine Heigl—gets a promotion. She meets Seth Rogen at an actual club here in LA called Plan B, and they get drunk and have unprotected sex. She realizes she’s pregnant eight weeks later and *then* they have the awkward date where she tells him.”

When I finally come up for air, I see him watching me, eyebrows raised over the top of his Red Bull. “That was an impressive summary for a movie that came out over ten years ago.”

I give him a little shimmy. “It’s my other gift.”

His eyes shine. “I have to be honest, Stephanie should know better. You are incredibly pretty, and obviously blessed with at

least two enviable gifts, but sight unseen, nothing sounds worse than dating a fellow agent.”

God, I agree. Dating someone in my business would be a disaster: the hours are terrible, the phone calls are constant, and the blood pressure—and the sex life—suffer.

So I’m glad he’s said it, glad he’s just thrown it out there. It’s like we’re on the same team and suddenly there is zero pressure: Team *They’re Cute But It Could Never Work*.

“And,” he adds, “I just realized that you’re the beloved Evelyn Abbey. It’s all falling into place now.”

I’m caught off guard for a second and not sure how to react. Hollywood is an industry of almost forty thousand people, but its circles are small. If he’s heard of me—and my track record—it could be great . . . or not. I feel uneasy not knowing which.

“So you’re an agent? How have we never met?” I ask.

“I’m in TV-literary.” *Small circles*. I relax a little. “But Michael Christopher and Steph talk about you all the time.”

“You call Mike ‘Michael Christopher?’” I ask. “That’s really cute. I’m getting Winnie the Pooh vibes.”

“We went to grade school together,” Carter explains, “and old habits die hard. He tries to pretend he’s cool being married and having a three-year-old kid who makes him wear tiaras, but deep down I know it makes him crazy that I’m still single and there are no pictures of me on Instagram wearing my kid’s sparkly lip gloss.”

I laugh. “Well, if it makes you feel better, this is going so much better than the last time Steph tried to set me up.”

Carter has the magical ability to sharply lift one eyebrow, and it makes a chemical reaction in me go off like a bomb. “She does this to you a lot?”

“Last time,” I explain, “she set me up with her chubby twenty-two-year-old cousin, Wyatt.”

“That’s thoughtful. She must really like Wyatt.”

I let this compliment slide warmly over me. “I’m thirty-three, so . . .”

Carter’s laugh is soft, but his entire face smiles when he does it. “He couldn’t handle you, I take it.”

“Newly graduated from UCLA, poor Wyatt hadn’t been out on a date in a few months.” I smile. “Or . . . ever.”

I’m unsure what to do with the straightforward honesty of his attention as he listens. I’m used to being the person who dissolves into the background, by necessity. Most of my life—most of my socializing—is centered around work. And there I make myself seen when I need to raise the red flag or go to bat for my clients, but otherwise my job is best done from backstage. It’s only when I’m here, standing with a man who is watching me like I’m the only thing in the room, that I realize how long it’s been since anyone has looked at me this way.

A thought occurs to me: although he grew up with Mike back east, if Carter’s in TV-lit, he’s probably local. Daryl might even know him. “Where do you work?”

Carter smiles, as if he realizes that what he’s about to say is a tiny social stink bomb dropped between us. “CTM.”

CT Management is our biggest rival. Inside of me there are warring impulses: an urge to fist-pump because he’s local, offset by an instinctive spike of competitiveness.

If he notices my silence, he rolls past it. “I moved out here two years ago, and I’m saying this as someone who grew up surrounded by subways and a million other ways to get where you need to be,” he says. “But here? God. I live in Beverly Hills—never thought I’d say that—and it’s still a nightmare getting anywhere.”

“You East Coasters are so spoiled with your”—I make finger quotes—“*subways* and *efficient taxi system*.”

Carter’s laugh is a quiet, whiskery chuckle. “It’s true. I’m a Long Island boy at heart. But now, I’m going Hollywood.”

“Just make sure you don’t go *full-on* Hollywood.”

"I'm not even sure I know what it means to go 'full-on Hollywood.' Is that when you look at the five-hundred-dollar shoes at Saks and think, 'I should probably get those'? Because we had that in Manhattan."

"Worse," I say. "It's when you recognize the five-hundred-dollar shoes on someone else's feet and know where they probably bought them. And then you judge the person wearing them a little because those loafers are no longer the town's number one underappreciated, overpriced designer and you know they were on sale last week so they didn't pay full price."

"Wow. You *are* Eve-il."

"Oh, that's not me." I hold up my hands and then point to my simple yellow flats peeking out beneath my robe. "I'll have you know these shoes are from Old Navy, sir. Purchased on clearance. But I've lived here my entire life. Every day it's a struggle to not get pulled down into the game."

"The game'?"

"Talent agents in Hollywood?" I say. "You *know* it's a game."

"Right, right." He nods, and I realize that with that one subtle gesture, he's already *playing*. And if my instinct is right, he's good at it, too. He's wide open until the subject of work comes up, and then a filter slides into place.

Interesting.

I take a sip of my drink, looking out at the party around us. Together, Carter and I form this tiny island in the dining room; it's almost as if the rest of the guests have been instructed to leave us alone.

"So you're at P&D," he says.

"I am." I look at him, trying to read him like I do every new person I meet so I can figure out how to best interact, and I think: *He's unflappable*. "Under Brad Kingman."

Carter doesn't react, and if my guess is correct, it's because he already knew this about me.

“Is it true he’s notoriously picky about food and only eats raw, unprocessed, no sugar . . .” Carter grins as he cheekily tilts his can of Red Bull to his lips. “Obviously I am very health conscious, myself.”

I laugh. “It’s true—all of it.”

“It can’t be as extreme as everyone says.”

“One time,” I begin, “I put a home-and-garden magazine on his desk, thinking he could take the dog food bar sample stuck to the cover home to his pampered Great Dane. I walked by later and *he* was eating it. Like, he’s so used to bland, tasteless food that he ate an organic dog food bar and didn’t realize it wasn’t for people.”

Carter looks horrified. “Did you say anything?”

“Um, *no*,” I say, unable to keep from laughing. “But in my own defense, he’d just told me I looked a little *fluffy* in my new dress. So maybe he deserved it.”

As soon as the last word is out of my mouth, I wish I could take it back.

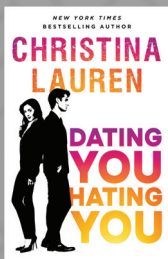
Agents are notoriously gossipy. In some ways, sharing confidences to make inroads is part of the business. But it’s never been a very large part of *my* business. I keep it level. I keep it up front. I get things done. And as much as I felt justified letting my boss eat dog food, I don’t get bogged down in sharing stories of bad behavior, drunken antics on tabletops at bars, or which intern is banging which partner. Unless I’m with Daryl or Amelia—in which case, the gloves come off. And in general, I like to run in like-minded circles. Reputation is everything.

Carter leans in. “That’s a pretty terrible thing to say to you, though.”

And dammit—by whispering this reassurance, he’s managed to play both the professional *and* the reassuring angle. Good agents can read people, instinctively put them at ease and get them talking, or remain discreet in every situation. Great agents can seamlessly do all three.

We all tend to keep our cards pretty close to our chests and not let on what we're really thinking. Our guards are up, our walls are high, and our bullshit meters are tuned to the most sensitive setting possible.

It occurs to me, looking at him a little more closely, that Carter definitely keeps his cards close to his chest, yeah. But he also seems to have a really good hand.



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