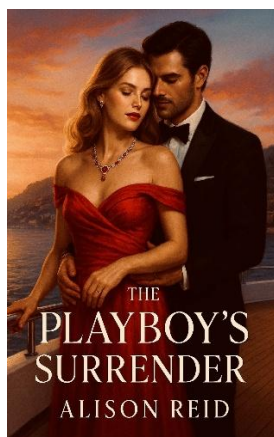


The Playboy's Surrender

by Alison Reid



Jack leaned back slightly, his eyes still on her. “You know... I could help you. With getting Wyatt to notice you.”

He didn’t even know why he was offering. The words slipped out before he could stop them, and the moment they did, he regretted it. Because deep down, he didn’t want Wyatt to notice her. Not now. Not ever.

Olivia blinked, startled. “Oh—no, no, you’re much too busy to worry about my silly hopes.”

“They’re not silly,” he said, his voice low but certain. “And I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t mean it.”

She gave a small, embarrassed shake of her head. “Still... it’s not your problem.”

He tilted his head, thoughtful. “Coming from a man’s point of view,” he said, “guys like Wyatt usually don’t start noticing things... until another man does.”

She gave him a sceptical look. “That’s ridiculous.”

He grinned, one corner of his mouth curving up in that lazy, confident way that shouldn't have made her stomach flutter—but did. “Maybe. But it's also true.”

She rolled her eyes, but she was smiling now—a little uncertain, a little shy. “So, what, you're going to flirt with me in front of him?”

Jack chuckled, low and amused. “Not if it makes you uncomfortable. But I could make him wonder... why I'm talking to you. Why I'm looking at you.”

She turned to him then—really turned—and her gaze held his like she wasn't afraid of what she might find there. “Why are you looking at me?”

The question hit him harder than he expected. For a beat, he almost defaulted to charm, to something clever and detached. But the honesty in her eyes demanded something real in return.

“Because you're interesting,” he said, his voice quieter now, more careful. “And you're not trying to be.”

Olivia blinked at him, surprised, her cheeks warming. “I'm not sure I know how to be anything else.”

“Good,” he murmured, without hesitation. “Don't change.”

The words hung in the air between them, soft and oddly weighted.

She hesitated, then looked down at her hands, fidgeting with the edge of her shirt. “But... wouldn't you be pretending to like me—just to get Wyatt's attention—wouldn't that be dishonest?”

Her voice was quieter now, almost reluctant to voice the thing that didn't sit right inside her.

Jack's smile faded, his amusement sobering. He looked at her then—not the way most men looked at beautiful women, but like he was seeing her for the first time.

And he realised—she's probably never been dishonest a day in her life.

The thought stopped him. Slowed him down. In his world, pretence was currency. Games were just how things were played. But she... she was different. She wouldn't know how to manipulate someone even if she tried.

“No,” he said after a moment, his voice thoughtful. “It would only be dishonest if I didn't actually like you.”

Her eyes lifted to meet his. Wide. Cautious. Hopeful.

“And you do?” she asked, almost disbelieving.

Jack held her gaze. “Yeah. I do.”

She didn't answer right away. But her smile—small, quiet, and more real than anything he'd seen all week—was answer enough.

And just like that, the game they were pretending to play—about Wyatt, about favours—slipped into something quieter, more intimate. The air between them shifted.

The kind of shift that made her suddenly aware of how close they were sitting.

And made him wonder why the hell he'd offered to help her win another man.

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