

A close-up photograph of a vibrant red rose in a white ceramic vase. The vase sits on a light-colored wooden surface. Several red rose petals are scattered in the foreground. The background is softly blurred, creating a bokeh effect with warm, golden light. The overall mood is romantic and elegant.

*Playing by
the Rules*

PLAYING BY THE RULES
BOOK ONE

REESE RYAN

PLAYING BY THE RULES

Prequel to [Playing with Desire](#)

Reese Ryan

Copyright © 2016 Sinfully Sweet Publishing

**Join the [Reese Ryan VIP Readers List](#) for
news, contests and special reader goodies.**

Dedication

For Mama Lewis, a spitfire we lost too soon, and Aunt Doubt who is fierce, feisty and still going strong at 105 years old.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Lani Bennett—beta reader extraordinaire—and author Caren Crane who was kind enough to critique this story and help tweak the speech and terminology used by these British characters.

Thank you to VIP Reader Jodi Marinich who provided the name of Merrie's Yorkshire Terrier, Rocky, and VIP Reader Judi who provided the name of Daphne's Shih Tzu, Aslan.

Thank you to Marie Force, Sara Cannon, Marquita Valentine, Delaney Diamond, and every other author who was kind enough to share their knowledge of indie publishing. I've gained a wealth of insight from these authors and others on indie-publishing panels at my local Romance Writers of America chapter, during online workshops, in online forums, via informative e-books, from their blogs, and from their gracious answers to questions I posed privately. I am constantly amazed and ever grateful for the generosity of the romance writing and indie publishing communities.

Summary

When Meredith Jane encounters her ex's elder brother at a saucy Valentine's Day party for singles, the last thing she expects is to spend 'seven minutes in heaven' with him or to discover that he has feelings for her.

Hunter Westbrook adored Merrie long before his competitive younger brother asked her out. Now that Merrie's relationship with his brother is at an end, he faces the hardest decision of his life. Will he risk his relationship with his brother and jeopardize the future of their family's luxury resort empire by pursuing the woman he loves? Or will he suffer in silence to keep peace in the family and risk losing her forever?

Merrie discovers a startling truth: She's been with the wrong brother all along. But as one of the few women on the management team at her firm, she can ill afford to get caught up in the gossip and scandal sure to come if she chooses to be with Hunter. Nor does she wish to hurt Liam's family or disappoint her own.

Hunter and Merrie have spent their entire lives playing by other people's rules. In a society where perception is everything, is true love worth risking everything they've worked so hard for?

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Summary](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Thank You for Reading](#)

[Other Series by the Author](#)

[Excerpt of *Playing with Desire* by Reese Ryan](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Meredith Jane was decidedly overdressed.

The temperature inside her cousin Daphne's spacious flat was tropical compared to the cold, dreary, never-ending London winter.

Soft music played in the background, and laughter filled the space. The catering staff wore tight blouses and tiny skirts. Guests dressed as angels, devils, cupids and male revue strippers gathered around the blazing fireplace in the reception room. A handful of couples flirted unabashedly.

Daphne's naughty Valentine's Day parties were infamous. Merrie's knowledge of them was strictly second-hand. She'd spent most of the previous five years in an exclusive relationship.

"You made it!" Daphne hugged her tight. Her cousin's rosy cheeks and 100-proof breath indicated the party was well under way.

"You threatened to drag me from my flat if I didn't show."

The gold flecks in Daphne's hazel eyes glinted through her red leather mask when she grinned. "Would've done it, too. It's for your own damn good, love. Time to stop moping about. It's been six months since you broke it off with Liam. Now hand over your coat." Daphne indicated the pretty young woman who'd answered the door dressed in a naughty maid uniform. "Don't want you sneaking off."

Her cousin knew her too well. Both only children, born less than eighteen months apart, they'd practically been raised as sisters.

Merrie groaned as she removed her wool coat and handed it to the smiling girl.

Daphne tugged on the hem of the red knit jumper Merrie wore over black leggings. "Where on earth is your costume?"

"The invitation said costumes were encouraged, not mandatory. How was I to know every bloody person here would wear one? It's Valentine's Day for goodness sake, not Halloween." Merrie hated how defensive she sounded. "The alternate option was themed clothing. Thus the hearts." Merrie indicated the black and white hearts trailing down her right sleeve.

Her outfit was dreadful, but it was the only heart-themed item she owned. No way would she trudge from her flat in Camden to Daphne's place in Chelsea clad in a scanty costume during winter.

Daphne gestured to her own outfit. A tight, red leather bustier showed off her colorful tattooed shoulders and toned arms. The asymmetrical cut of the short leather skirt highlighted her fit thighs. A black feather halo perched above her head of wild auburn curls highlighted honey blond. Black angel wings, held in place by a black leather harness, completed the look.

"This is what I had in mind, love. Not gram's jumper and a pair of yoga pants."

Merrie's cheeks burned. Coming here was a mistake. She tugged her sleeve down, covering her wrist. "Perhaps I should—"

"Leave? Don't you dare. Look, I know that being here is a big step for you. I shouldn't have teased you, I'm sorry. I just want you to have some fun tonight." Daphne looped her arm through Merrie's and ushered her inside the reception room.

The tension in her shoulders eased. "I know. I promise to try."

"Good. Now the first rule of the night is, be open to anything." Daphne held up one acrylic nail adorned in shiny red varnish embellished with silver and gold hearts. "Rule number two, live a little. Three, what happens at the party stays at the party. If the evening goes the way I've planned, we'll all be too pissed to remember anyway. Which reminds me, you need a drink. What would you like?"

"I've only just arrived."

"That's no excuse at all." Daphne grabbed a drink menu printed on black linen card stock, lettered in silver foil. She shoved it in Merrie's hands. "Surely something there will tempt you."

Merrie perused the list. "A Dirty Shirley. Easy on the vodka, please."

She tried not to stare at the barman's well-defined muscles, rippling beneath his bronzed skin as he moved behind the bar. The man was dressed in only a bow tie above the waist.

Please let him be wearing a proper pair of trousers under there.

"Excellent choice to start the evening. We'll work our way up to the harder stuff." Daphne winked. "Oh, there's Eleanor. Mind if I leave you alone for a bit? I haven't seen her in ages."

"Of course not." Merrie sipped her drink. The request to go easy on the vodka had fallen on deaf ears. She'd have to sip her drink.

Slowly.

"You'll barely miss me. In the meantime, mingle. That's why you're here. You'll encounter a few familiar faces. Perhaps that'll ease your nerves."

Daphne's flat was festively arranged, bathed in warm, glowing red light. Heart-shaped white ramekins filled with fragrant red roses decorated the tables scattered with rose petals. The buffet overflowed with Valentine's Day-themed foods: heart-shaped mini pizzas, fruit kebabs, gourmet meats and cheeses. The dessert station was a study in culinary eroticism. Cookies shaped like generously-filled boxers and bustiers. Candies imprinted with naughty suggestions. Desserts that were a silent ode to the male member.

Daphne approached every project with determination and passion. Hooking up her single friends on the loneliest day of the year was no exception. If it required plying them with erotic food and drinks strong enough to strip paint from a wall, so be it.

Merrie scanned her fellow party-goers. If only she were daring enough to pull off a costume like Daphne's. In a flat filled with busty women in tight, sexy outfits and shirtless men sporting bowties, Merrie looked like the chaperone at a school dance.

"You're Merrie Jane, Daphne's cousin, right?" One of the Chippendale dancers ran a hand through his dirty blond hair, a sheepish smile on his face.

"Guilty. And you are?"

"Brent Logan. Daph and I work together at the ad agency. She often speaks of you. I recognized you from the photos on her desk."

"Nothing embarrassing, I hope." With Daph, there was no telling.

He grinned. "She keeps those on her mobile."

Merrie's cheeks warmed. *Anything but the pics from Cousin Emma's bachelorette weekend in Madrid.* "I'm afraid to ask."

"Nothing to worry over. Orange is a good color for you." His eyes glimmered, as if the vision of her in that tiny orange string bikini danced in his head.

I'm going to strangle Daphne.

"On that note, I think I'll have another." She lifted her glass.

"What are you drinking?"

"A Dirty Shirley."

He grinned, revealing a deep dimple in his right cheek that reminded her of Liam's. "A Dirty Shirley it is. Be right back."

Daphne's invitation issued a silent challenge: *If it's really over between you and Liam this time, prove it.* Less than half an hour in and her mind drifted to her ex. Coming to the party was a bad idea. She needed to find her coat and slip out before Brent or Daphne was the wiser.

"Merrie, how are you?"

It couldn't be.

She turned around. Hunter Westbrook, her ex's elder brother, approached, tall and handsome as ever. He appraised her with eyes the color of a stormy winter sky swirling over the sea. "Hunter? What on earth are you doing here?"

Hunter shrugged his broad shoulders and shoved his hands into his trouser pockets. He nodded toward her cousin. "Daphne invited me. Hadn't planned to attend, but your cousin is quite persistent. What are you doing here?" A deep blush spread across his nose and cheeks. "I thought this was...you know, a hook-up party."

Merrie understood the implications of the party, of course. Still, her ears burned hearing him say it so plainly. "I'm here for the same reason you are, I suppose. I'm single on Valentine's Day—a perceived affliction my cousin is determined to remedy."

He frowned. Deep lines spanned his forehead. "Liam says this is only temporary."

"It's over." Merrie set down her drink. Liquid sloshed onto the tablecloth. She folded her arms. "I made that quite clear to Liam. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't meant it."

There.

He pursed his lips, a deep shade of red she'd always found fascinating, and regarded her with amusement. "Then why do you look like a cornered rabbit desperately seeking the nearest exit?"

Why had Hunter always been so much better at reading her emotions than his brother? "I wasn't—"

"Here you are. One Dirty Shirley." Brent reappeared with her drink in hand. He eyed Hunter.

"Thank you, Brent." She smiled politely, pretending not to notice Hunter scowling at the man.

She reached for her drink, but Hunter seized it. "Thanks, mate. Got incredibly thirsty on the drive over. You don't mind do you?"

"Actually—"

"Thanks." Hunter patted Brent's shoulder, his predatory sneer worthy of a James Bond villain. "Sorry to intrude, mate, but I must speak to Merrie about an urgent matter."

Brent narrowed his eyes at Hunter before shifting them to Merrie.

"Please, Brent. If you wouldn't mind." She gave him a kind smile, hoping to ease the unwarranted blow to his ego.

"Very well. Catch up with you later."

Merrie turned to Hunter, her jaw clenched. "That was poor form. Did you mean to humiliate me? Brent is Daphne's colleague. She'll be mortified I've treated him so poorly."

Hunter set the drink on the nearest tray and crossed his arms, his penetrating blue eyes filled with censure. "You should know better than to accept a drink from some sod you met not five minutes ago."

"Were you eavesdropping?"

"That isn't the point now, is it?" He frowned. "Something awful could've happened to you."

"In a room filled with people, including my cousin?"

"That's certainly never happened to an unsuspecting young lady before, has it?" His voice dripped with sarcasm.

In the years they'd known each other, he'd never uttered a cross word to her. But here he was being fiercely protective.

It was infuriating yet endearing.

Her initial anger faded. Heat crept across her cheeks as she adjusted her sleeve. "Point taken. I appreciate your concern. I promise to be more careful."

Hunter's expression softened. He nodded. "Good, then."

Panic rose in her chest as he turned to walk away. Was he going to leave her to fend for herself with Brent and the other partially-dressed blokes?

Merrie caught his arm. "Don't go. I'm not sure it's safe to leave me to my own devices. Besides, I'd appreciate the company."

CHAPTER TWO

Hunter's gaze dropped to Merrie's hand on his forearm. Her warmth seeped into his skin. Suddenly, his throat was dry and the sound of his heartbeat filled his ears.

He hadn't seen Merrie in months. Her effect on him hadn't changed. He was completely taken with her.

Cheeks flushed, she withdrew her hand, pulling him from his daze. Merrie tucked strands of her coppery brown hair behind her ear as she stepped away from him. She must think him either incredibly rude or borderline mad.

Get a grip, mate. Merrie is off limits.

Words he'd often repeated in his head as he pounded the punchbag. No matter how many times he said them, his heart refused to listen.

He shrugged. "Sure. I'll stay."

One corner of her mouth lifted in that crooked smile he'd come to adore. He straightened his expression in an attempt to mask the pure joy of seeing that smile focused solely on him.

"Hungry? I'm starving, and everything looks so good." Merrie grabbed two plates and handed him one. After filling their plates, they settled onto an open love seat.

"Why'd you really come here tonight? You've certainly never had any difficulty finding a pretty girl to go out with," Merrie teased.

"Now, who has bad form?" He nudged her with his elbow and smiled.

"That isn't an answer." She speared a mozzarella heart with her fork, popped it in her mouth, and chewed thoughtfully.

He was captivated by her mouth, the lower lip slightly fuller, plump, like a juicy berry. When she caught him staring, he returned his attention to his plate. "Nothing better to do, I suppose."

"Rubbish." Her asymmetrical grin pulled slightly to the right. She waved a hand. "No matter, I'm just glad you're here and that you aren't cross with me."

"Why would I be?"

"Because of my split with Liam, of course. I know you're his brother, but I've always considered us to be good friends. I've missed our chats. Even before the break-up, I hadn't seen you for a while."

"I was busy with work. We opened that new resort in the Caribbean." He hated lying to Merrie, but the truth wasn't an option. They were friends. Nothing more. Regardless of his feelings for her. "When you and Liam broke it off, I wanted to ring you. Make sure you were okay. Didn't think you'd be up to hearing from the ex's brother."

"It would've been nice to hear from you."

His heart squeezed in his chest at the thought of Merrie sad and alone these past months. He didn't respond, not trusting his voice to keep his secrets.

"No visible bruises." She quickly filled the uncomfortable silence between them. "Still boxing?"

"I am." He stopped short of inviting her to the gym to see his next sparring bout. Encountering her tonight was an anomaly. A single occurrence never to be repeated.

Merrie shuddered. "I know you love it, but the thought of you taking hits like that terrifies me."

He only played at boxing, sparring at a local club. To say he loved the sport was a stretch. It was gratifying to take out his frustrations on the punchbag or his opponent. "You worry too much."

"Like you did when you imagined poor Brent was going to drug me and have his way with me?" Her haunting gray eyes beamed, flecks of gold and blue danced in the light.

"Been thinking of giving it up. Perhaps as a Christmas gift to the old man."

Merrie laughed. "I still remember Nigel's reaction when he saw your face after that brutal sparring match. I'd no idea your father could turn five distinctly different shades of red."

"His chief concern was how it would look to our board." Westbrook International Luxury Resorts owned high-end resort properties in Europe, Asia, the Pacific, and the Caribbean. They were on the verge of opening their first U.S. property.

"To be fair, he was concerned about your welfare, too." Merrie's smile was kind. "Nigel has big plans for you and Liam."

"I'm already quite involved in the business." He had an active role in the planning, design and development of their resorts as assistant vice president of the division. "What else does he want?"

"You know what he wants." She slid the heart-shaped pieces of fruit from the skewer.

He did. His father expected him and his brother to be the new faces of the company. To sit beside him in the boardroom and one day take his place.

Hunter groaned. He loved what he did, and he was good at it, but he had no desire to be the face of the company. He lacked the patience and tact required for the politics of business. That's where his brother excelled. Liam was one part charmer and one part bullshitter, all wrapped in a handsome bow. Made him a natural at marketing and public relations.

"You are the eldest, and according to Liam, you're Nigel's favorite."

"Westbrook International is my father's favorite son. By that standard, I'll always pale in comparison."

"Your father loves you. Can you blame him for being worried about your sparring? Besides, it's a shame to see that handsome face beaten and bruised." She flashed a smile that did things to his heart and made him want to lean in and taste her sensual mouth—accented with a dusty mauve lip color.

Hunter shut his eyes and forced the thought from his mind. Thinking like that would get him into serious trouble.

CHAPTER THREE

Hunter stood at the edge of the room, avoiding the handsy blonde dressed in a red negligee that showed more of her bum cheeks than it covered. He'd encountered the woman after Daphne forced him and Merrie to mix about the room. The woman cornered him and invited him to dance. After a few dances and a drink together, he excused himself to go to the loo.

The woman—Leslie or perhaps Liza—craned her neck and searched the room. He should send Brent or one of the other dodgy bastards in a Chippendale collar over to distract her.

Regrettably, Brent was preoccupied with Merrie.

Brent swooped in the moment he'd stepped away. Like he'd been lying in wait. Merrie was on her third drink, not that he was counting. At least she'd taken subsequent drinks directly from the barman.

Merrie threw her head back and laughed, then covered her mouth, seemingly embarrassed.

His face tightened with an involuntary smile. Her laugh was adorable. He could still remember the first time he heard it. Merrie had come to their house back when she and Liam were just friends at university. Back when he thought he had a chance with her.

Hunter balled his hands into fists at his side. That half-dressed wanker didn't deserve her laugh. Her smile.

He sipped his beer and tried to relax. He was behaving like a jealous idiot over a woman who wasn't his, who never would be.

That hard truth didn't relieve the envy that gnawed at his guts like acid each time Brent touched Merrie's arm. He gritted his teeth and gripped the cold, empty glass.

"What hornet flew up your bum?" Daphne approached, arms crossed. "You look like you're ready to take off someone's head."

He swallowed hard, his cheeks hot. "Something about that guy bugs me. Merrie's had a tough go of it. Last thing she needs is some blighter taking advantage of her."

"I've been looking after her since we were both in nappies. You think I'd stand by while she hooked up with a bloody tosser?"

"Can't say you're the best judge of character in that regard." Hunter's smirk widened when her cheeks flamed.

"Okay, maybe I don't have the best judgment when it comes to my personal choice of men, but I happen to be quite a good judge of character where others are concerned. Which is why I never liked your brother. Nothing personal, you understand. He's not a bad person. He just isn't right for Merrie. They're like chalk and cheese."

Hunter grunted his agreement. Daphne was a keen judge of character after all.

"No need to hover. She'll be fine. Now go. Have fun. Liza is looking for you. Shall I call her over?"

"No! Don't."

Daphne laughed. "A little too forward, even for you, eh? No matter, I know there's someone here for you." She turned her back to him. "Be a love and straighten out my wings, will you? They've tilted."

Hunter put down his glass and repositioned the wings. When he glanced across the room, he met Merrie's cold stare. Eyes narrowed, mouth pressed into a tight line, she studied him and Daphne before dragging her attention back to Brent.

"What was that about?" Daph asked, following Hunter's gaze. "Something going on between you two?"

He stumbled over his words, unable to voice his denial quickly enough. "Of course not. We're friends, that's all."

"Hmm," she mumbled, one eyebrow raised as she bit into a cookie shaped like a man's chest, complete with a blasted bow tie. She laughed at his expression of outrage as she sashayed across the room.

Hunter huffed and raked a hand through his hair. He could definitely use another pint of bitter.

"There you are."

Thank God it was Merrie smiling at him rather than Daphne's bum-cheek-baring colleague. His mouth tightened in a grin. "You've been preoccupied with what's-his-face over there. Do you think he's cold? By the size of his nipples, I believe so."

"You're being awful." Merrie giggled. "What did poor Brent ever do to you?"

Vie for your attention.

"Nothing. Bit of good-natured teasing, that's all."

"If I had abs like his, I'd have worn something as cheeky as that, too." She smiled. "You know, it isn't too late for you to join him. I believe they're looking for one more member so they can regale the ladies with a proper dance revue."

"I'd look bloody ridiculous."

"I've seen you shirtless. Ridiculous isn't the word that comes to mind." She grinned. "Why do you think your brother took up running again?" Merrie covered her mouth and shook her head. "Forget I said that. I'm feeling a bit tiddy. Shouldn't have had that last drink."

"You graduated from the Dirty Shirley." He indicated the remainder of the grapefruit Martini in her hand.

"Brent said it was fantastic, so I tried one. He was right, so I had another. Ill-advised, I know. We both know I'm not much of a drinker." She set the glass down and slipped onto a nearby stool.

He sat beside her. "Maybe you should slow down. Going through a break-up is hard. I'm worried about you."

She frowned. "I'm not some helpless little lamb who needs minding. Liam and I broke up. These things happen. I'm over it, and I'm ready to move on."

He raised his hands in surrender. "Perhaps I'm being overprotective. I apologize for that, but I care about you, Merrie. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Her frown softened. She waved a hand. "I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm just sick of everyone acting as if I'm made of glass. I doubt anyone is coddling him."

Touché. His brother was lying on the sandy beaches of Rio de Janeiro. Probably entertaining some girl he'd met days before. "My apologies." He indicated Brent, who was looking about the room. "Your friend is missing you."

"As your friend in the red nightie appears to be missing you." She slipped her arm through his and leaned against his shoulder. "But if you don't mind, I'd prefer to stay here until I get my head back on straight."

The sweet tone of her voice and the warmth of her body, pressed as close to his as their stools would allow, made his heart race.

He was in serious trouble, indeed.

About the Author

Reese Ryan writes sexy, contemporary romance featuring colorful characters and sinfully sweet romance. She challenges her heroines with family and career drama; reformed bad boys; revealed secrets; and the occasional identity crisis, but always rewards them with a well-earned happy ending.

A native of The Land (Cleveland, OH), Reese resides in North Carolina where she carefully treads the line between being a Northerner and a damned Yankee, despite her insistence on calling soda *pop*. She gauges her progress by the number of "bless your little hearts" she receives each week. She is currently down to two.

Reese is an avid reader with a to-be-read stack that resembles a small skyscraper and a music lover with a serious thing for brilliant singer/songwriters and an incurable addiction to Broadway soundtracks and film scores.

Connect with Reese via [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) or [ReeseRyan.com](#).

Thank You for Reading

Thank you so much for purchasing and taking the time to read this excerpt of *Playing by the Rules*. Purchase the full novella here: books2read.com/PlayingByTheRules.

To see if Liam finally finds love and makes peace with Hunter and Merrie, pick up your copy of [*Playing with Desire*](#)—the first book in my Pleasure Cove series with Harlequin Kimani Romance.

Be among the first to know about new developments in these series and future series, free reads, reader giveaways and fun contests by joining the [Reese Ryan VIP Reader List](#).

Other Series by Reese Ryan

Pleasure Cove Series– Harlequin Kimani Romance

[Playing with Desire](#) (Liam’s Story)

An unexpected summer fling puts a notorious bachelor British ex-pat at risk of falling in love with a divorced mom and her two adorable daughters.

Playing with Temptation

When compromising video of a star wide receiver goes viral, he must rely on his ex, a savvy media consultant, to help him repair his reputation and secure his last big contract.

“His Holiday Gift” in *Never Christmas Without You*

When Pleasure Cove’s prodigal son returns home for the holidays, he meets the daughter he never knew about and falls for the one woman who hoped never to see him again.

Playing with Seduction

After one night together in London, an event promoter and the reigning queen of American beach volleyball who never expected to see each other again are tasked with collaborating on a project pivotal to both their careers.

Bad Boys Gone Good Series – Carina Press

[Love Me Not](#)

For struggling artist, Jamie Charles, her art provides a haven from the painful secrets of her past. She prefers living on the edge—without the complications of love—until she encounters charming ad exec, Miles Copeland, who is harboring his own dark past, and determined to have her heart.

Love Me Not is a gritty, deeply emotional romance that deals with themes that may be a trigger for some, due to the abuse Jamie experienced as a child.

*****Note:** While *Love Me Not* is the second book in the Bad Boys Gone Good series, chronologically, Jamie's story takes place first.***

[Making the First Move](#)

Melanie lands her dream promotion, and the man of her dreams in less than 24 hours, but when neither is quite as expected she must decide whether she'll fall apart again, or let go of her misguided expectations and go for what she really wants.

Excerpt from *Playing with Desire* by Reese Ryan

Another server decanted a bottle of wine, then poured a glass for each of them. Maya picked up her glass so fast it nearly sloshed over the rim. She took a healthy sip.

Why does he make me so nervous?

If she'd met him in her business attire, and this wasn't a semidate, she'd be confident. In control. She frequently negotiated with business executives in her work. She wasn't easily intimidated, regardless of how rich or powerful those men were.

However, in a tiny red dress that left little of her legs and back to the imagination, she felt like a warrior going to battle without a stitch of armor.

Liam drank his wine, silently awaiting her answer.

"Sorry, I don't do this much." She took another sip from her wineglass.

"You don't do what much?" He was definitely enjoying this.

"Date." She immediately regretted her word choice. "Not that this is a date."

"Isn't it?"

"It's a dinner date, but it isn't a date-date. Does that make sense?" *Of course not.* She was babbling like a loon.

The smirk he tried to suppress brimmed over in his dark eyes. He set his glass on the table. "And why is it that a gorgeous woman like you doesn't date much?"

"Because I'm..." A single mother of two beautiful little girls. The words caught at the back of her throat, taking her by surprise. It was the most natural thing in the world for her to say. She repeated the words, nearly by rote, every time she met someone new in a nonbusiness setting. Being Sofia and Gabriella's mother was her primary identity, no matter what else she did in her life. She was fine with that, because she adored her daughters. Loved them more than anything in the world. Yet, as she looked at Liam, his eyes dancing over her skin, drinking her in like she was the most fascinating woman he'd ever met, something in the pit of her stomach wouldn't allow the words to escape her mouth.

Would he look at her differently? Would she suddenly seem less attractive?

It was her birthday. The last of her twenties. For one night she could sit through a gourmet meal she didn't have to cook and have an adult conversation with a man who thought she was beautiful. A man whose appreciative gaze made her feel beautiful—something she hadn't felt in a while.

What was the harm in living out the fantasy for one hour of dinner conversation? She wouldn't lie to him. But he was a stranger. He didn't need her full biography. She'd give him the annotated version instead.

Catch up with Hunter & Merrie and meet Maya Alvarez—the woman who finally steal's Liam's heart—in [*Playing with Desire*](#).

