
MR. SUNSHINE

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Chapter 1

Ava took a breath and pushed open the door to the police station, hefting both the baby bag and her purse onto her shoulder yet again.

At the very least, she was going to get a workout carting this kid around in the baby carrier. It was one of those things where you kind of wear the baby—she was strapped in to her chest, facing out, and that left her hands free, for which Ava was eternally grateful. Of course, it also meant that the baby's hands were free to get into mischief, too. At least the baby was generally happy, although she'd heard enough of Lee Ann's complaints about the times when she wasn't to be wary of how well things were going.

She walked up to the small, unprepossessing desk, and the uniformed officer who turned to speak to her was quite possibly one of the most gorgeous men she'd ever seen in her life—tall, dark, well-muscled, and just devastatingly handsome. At the sight of him, her mouth went dry, but she felt the acute need to drool at the same time.

Neither impulse won out, thankfully.

"Hello." She smiled, if somewhat wanly. "I'm here to see Detective Zapata, please?"

He smiled immediately when he saw her, but not at her. He was staring at April, who—at six months—was already an inveterate flirt, and the child smiled and giggled back at him, making him put his finger out so that she could latch onto it with her chubby little hand.

"May I ask what your business is with him?"

Again, he was addressing the baby, not her.

What there was of Ava's small smile dimmed considerably, not that he noticed. "He was the detective who responded to a 911 call about my friend, who died in her apartment a few days ago. I have some questions, and I've left several messages for him, but he hasn't returned my calls."

So, I'm going to go camp out on his doorstep all day, if I have to, she thought with a frown, at the idea of having to waste time doing that.

"The detectives are in a different building—just down the street. If you go left out of the parking lot, it's three buildings down—the Town Hall, at 3200 Franklin. It'll be on your left."

Of course, they were.

"Thank you, officer."

Sighing, Ava turned and made her way to her small car, shed the baby into her car seat, tucked the baby bag and her purse behind the passenger's seat and made her way there, where she reversed the process.

The waiting room she ended up in didn't look at all as if it was a place where the police worked. It looked much more like the telephone customer service department for the bank where she worked—rows of nondescript cubicles with nondescript people sitting in them.

"May I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"My name is Ava LaValley, and I'd like to see Detective Zapata, please?"

Again, the person in front of her fell in love with April and barely looked at her—not that she was anything great to look at, but still, it would be nice if the adults she was speaking to actually addressed the other adult present.

"Ooh! Your daughter is adorable! What's her name?" She then proceeded to talk baby talk to the poor kid, a practice that Ava disliked intensely.

"She's not mine; she's my friend's. Her name is April."

That sparked more inane babbling at the baby, although she seemed to enjoy it.

Although she noted it, Ava was too exhausted to be particularly annoyed. The past few days had been so tiring, she didn't think she'd ever not be tired again.

"What a pretty name for a pretty little girl!" she gushed, her manner and singsong tone only changing slightly when she said, "I'm afraid the detective is away from the office today."

"Oh." Ava hadn't considered that, shoulders sagging in defeat, which, of course, caused the baby bag and her purse to slide down her arm and onto the floor. As she hefted them back where they belonged, she continued. "Well, he was the officer who came to her apartment when my friend, Teara McConnell, April's mom, passed away a couple of days ago. I've been trying to get a hold of him—left some messages on his cell and office phones—since then because I have some questions I'd like to ask him."

The realization that the baby she was speaking nonsense to in a high-pitched voice was an orphan was a sobering thought. The woman's demeanor underwent a hundred-and eighty-degree change. "Oh, I'm sorry for your loss—and the baby's, too."

Ava was inordinately grateful to hear that common expression of sympathy, mainly because few others she'd dealt with in the course of handling the horrible situation that had dropped into her lap had said it to her. Friendships apparently didn't warrant it, although she and Teara considered each other "sisters

from another mister.” They'd known each other for almost all of their thirty-mumph years—having met in daycare and then gone to school together.

Although Ava had gone on to college—to earn a degree in art history that had proceeded to do her no good at all—Teara had stayed in their smallish New Mexico town. Ava certainly wouldn't have said that she was doing all that well herself—especially since she'd ended up back here—but she had definitely been doing better than Teara had, although she'd helped her friend as often and as much as she could.

Through it all, they'd only become closer, despite the differing challenges they faced in life.

“Thank you,” she said, feeling herself begin to tear up yet again.

“You're welcome. If you'd like to take a seat, I could see if the lieutenant who's on duty today could speak to you.”

Brightening slightly at the possibility, despite what she perceived as the woman's somewhat less than enthusiastic delivery of that suggestion, she smiled. “That would be wonderful. Thank you!”

“Have a seat. I'll call him and let you know.”

As Ava took a seat across the small room, she could still hear the conversation the woman was having with the nebulous lieutenant, and it didn't sound promising, but for what she considered to be a rather unusual reason.

“Lieutenant, I have an Ava LaValley here who came in to see Detective Zapata.”

She was silent as the lieutenant responded.

“Yes, I know. He's at training, and so is everyone else but you, which is why I'm bothering you. Apparently, he responded to the call when her friend died, and she's left messages for him, but he hasn't gotten back to her. Would you be willing to talk with her?”

There was a pause, then the woman said, “Wait. There's

something else I want you to know before you come out here. She has a baby."

She was quiet for quite some time then spoke quite urgently. "I know, and I'm sorry, but there's no one else here to talk to her but you." More silence. "She came all the way down here, because Zapata wasn't calling her back. Please, Lieutenant." More silence. "Yes, I understand. I'll let her know."

It didn't bode well to Ava that the lieutenant apparently really didn't want to talk to her, which made her wonder whether she really wanted to talk to him. Maybe she should just wait for the detective to call her back.

But no, she needed to get on some things about Teara's death that really couldn't wait—that she wanted to get decided, or in the process of being decided—as soon as possible, so as to cause as little disruption in April's life as possible.

She heard the phone being hung up, and the receptionist informed her, "Lieutenant Gilmore will be with you in a few minutes. He needs to take a few minutes to familiarize himself with the case before he can speak with you." *And to steel himself to do so*, the receptionist thought to herself but didn't say.

"That's fine. Thank you for your help."

"You're welcome," she answered, returning to her work.

April was busy holding onto the April-sized stuffy that Ava had actually given her when she was born. She seemed to really like it, although occasionally, she liked to make Ava play fetch by throwing it across the room. The kid had quite an arm on her, and that was how they spent their time waiting for the lieutenant to get to them.

Ava grew weary of that game immediately, but at least baby wasn't screaming—although, to her credit, April really hadn't had a screaming fit since she'd been taking care of her.

Finally, she fished a soft book out of the baby bag and began reading it to her, but that only diverted her attention for a few minutes before she flung poor Simba across the room yet again,

where he landed right at the feet of the man who had just opened the door to the lobby where they were waiting.

The big man looked down at the stuffy, frowning darkly, and his demeanor didn't change from there at all when he looked up to pin Ava with his gaze.

"Ms. LaValley?" he asked, in a voice that—in another situation entirely—might have inspired a much different reaction in her than it did; it was so deep and low and rumbly.

But there was something unusual about him that made her feel even more unsettled about him, but Ava couldn't put her finger on it.

Forcing herself to put that feeling aside, she rose, gathering all of the crap she was horrified to think she was going to become used to carrying around, and headed towards him. When she got there, she ignored his outstretched paw for long enough to bend down to rescue the lion—which he hadn't—before April, whose arms had been reaching for it since seconds after she'd thrown it, decided that this was a good time to exercise her considerable lung capacity for one so small.

She straightened with a small smile on her face, cramming the stuffy into the bag—a bag—she didn't really care at this point which one.

Then she reached for his hand, looking up—and up—and then up some more—at him to meet his eyes, which were anything but welcoming.

"I'm Lt. Gilmore. I'm sorry you had to wait, but I wanted to read over the file before I spoke to you."

"That's fine."

"Follow me, please."

They ended up in a good-sized corner office—not in a tiny, cramped cubicle. One of the perks of being a lieutenant, she guessed, not that she would make that comment to him. His attitude did not invite polite social banter.

"Please sit."

She took a seat in one of the chairs in front of his impressively large desk—big man, big desk. And he was certainly that. He wasn't fat in the least, though. Instead, he was almost perfectly proportioned, she noted with more interest than she wanted to acknowledge, with muscles that were definitely there, but weren't cartoonishly obvious. He had a broad chest and long legs. There was a light, well-trimmed beard that made him look more handsome than he probably really was, and he smelled amazing—of something on the order of oranges, that she was surprised to find she liked. His suit was nicely cut and—Ava blushed to realize—it outlined his very nice butt when he turned away from her for a moment to take an incoming call.

She was so absorbed in looking at him that she forgot to keep an eye on April's curious, wandering hands, and before she knew it, the baby had gotten a hold of two small Star Trek Original Series figurines, one of Kirk and one of Spock, that he had displayed at the front of his desk.

As fate would have it, of course, that was the moment his call ended, and he sat down at his desk.

If anything, he looked even more unfriendly as he reached his hands out towards the baby, but Ava sensed that he was being extremely careful not to touch her or have any kind of interaction with her, for some reason.

Maybe the man didn't like babies.

Ava could understand that—she'd not heard her biological clock ticking ever, even when April came into the picture, and wasn't at all sure that she ever would. Not that that mattered in the least now, but that was how she used to feel, anyway—how she was trying not to feel anymore if she was honest with herself.

And he did avoid all contact with the baby as he plucked the figurines out of her hands with the precision of a surgeon to put them back where they belonged.

"Sorry," Ava mumbled, holding her breath, wondering if April was going to scream at being deprived of the toys she'd

brazenly selected, but she didn't. Instead, she seemed enchanted by a man who apparently wanted nothing to do with her, as she smiled and giggled and cooed at him, all to no avail.

"So, what is your relationship to Ms. McConnell, Ms. LaValley?"

"You can call me Ava. I'm her best friend."

His head jerked up at that, and she felt like a specimen squirming on a pin as his eyes narrowed at her. "You're not a blood relation?"

"No, she has no blood relations."

"None?"

"None. Her grandparents were gone before she was born, and her parents died in a car crash when she was eighteen. No siblings, aunts, uncles or cousins that I've ever heard of, and I'd known her all her life. She was an only child, and so were each of her parents."

"Huh," he grunted, going through paperwork, and largely ignoring the both of them. "Could I see an ID, please?"

It was a strange request, but she rummaged in her purse and pulled out her driver's license, which he looked at for all of about two seconds, then handed back to her.

"And, in case we have any questions, could I have your contact information, please?"

Although she was a very private person, Ava gave him her address and cell number.

"One of the reasons I wanted to talk to the detective was because I was told that he had found a copy of her will, and I know I'm her executrix and that she appointed me guardian of April, and I would like to have that copy of the will."

"It went to the funeral home—uh, Sutton's, I believe."

"Oh. Okay. I'll go to them next, then. I also wanted to ask if there was any drug paraphernalia or booze found in her apartment?" She tried to get through the question without crying, but

it was close. Sometimes, Teara's death hit her at unexpected times.

He glanced up at April, fleetingly, then at her, and proceeded to answer her question with his own. "Where was the baby the night her mother died—do you know?"

"She was with me. I babysit for her sometimes, and Teara had wanted a night out."

"She was a drug user?"

"She'd been clean for almost a decade," Ava defended her friend, not bothering to wipe away the tears that were, by now, streaming down her cheeks. "No relapses whatsoever."

"Uh huh."

His skepticism rekindled her annoyance at the world and at him in particular.

But then he handed her a box of Kleenex, his voice taking on a velvety tone that made her toes curl inappropriately. "I'm so sorry that you're having to go through this, Ms.—Ava."

"Thank you." Ava wanted to melt but refused to allow herself, although his sympathy only made her cry that much harder—until he spoke again and broke the spell.

"Well, they did find drugs in her house—marijuana," he said, closing the folder in front of him and looking at her again with that disconcerting intensity. "And there was a twelve pack of beer there, too, but the man who was with her said it was his. But her death was not caused by either of those things, as I'm sure you know. She fell and hit her head on the corner of the fireplace. She was gone before either the EMTs or the detective arrived. The man she was with admitted to owning the drugs and accompanying equipment." He looked up at her and she immediately straightened her back, even though she was stunned by what she'd learned.

"Did you know the man she was seeing?"

"No, I did not. I don't think she even mentioned that she was going to be with anyone, but I kind of assumed it, since she

wanted me to take April for the night. Probably found him on Tinder or something like that."

The lieutenant nodded.

The crying resumed, even more unchecked than before. "I'm sorry for sobbing all over you, but no one has really told me anything about what happened to her because I'm not a relative."

Although his voice resumed that soothing timbre, he ignored her tears this time. "And neither should I, probably, but I've seen the will and you are named in it—everything goes to you, including the child."

"Everything," which was comprised of closets full of clothes and purses and shoes, and not much else—besides April, of course. Except for a car that was older than the one she was already driving.

"Thank you. And she'd told me that she'd done that."

"Do you have any reason to think that there was any sort of foul play involved in your friend's death?"

It was a strange, startling question, and Ava felt a bit ambushed by it, although she supposed it was a valid inquiry.

"No, but then, like I said, I don't know who she was seeing."

He reopened the folder. "Edward Castillo. He was with her when she fell, called 911 and was present when EMS got there."

"But you're suspicious of him anyway? You think he made her fall so that he could take her fifteen-year-old car? Or her collection of Walmart fashions?"

The lieutenant shrugged, not surprised or responsive to her sarcasm. "I've seen worse things happen for much less motivation."

Ava didn't know what to say about that. "But do you suspect Mr. Castillo?"

"No, I just wanted to know if you had any impression of him, if you'd known him."

"I don't."

He sat back in his chair, and Ava felt his eyes settle on her again, like a physical touch. One that she wished she wanted to shrug off, but that was not the impulse it inspired in her, unfortunately.

"I was wondering if, since they found her will, if you have any record of where her purse or wallet is? I haven't been over there yet, but I'm assuming that I need to call her bank and credit cards, etcetera." Ava didn't mention that she really didn't want to go there, although she figured she'd have to at some point. "The apartment manager had said they couldn't find her wallet that night." Although it did strike her as unusual that they could find her will but not her purse.

His eyes narrowed on her at that, as if he thought that she was going to try to rob her dead friend or something. Then he seemed to reconsider and peered through the paperwork. "I don't see any notes about it, but I'll ask the detective when he returns and get back to you about that. You might ask at the funeral home, although that would be a bit unusual."

Since her questions had been asked—if not answered satisfactorily—Ava forced herself to rise abruptly as she brushed away her tears. "Well, I thank you for your help, Lieutenant Gilmore. I'll head over to the funeral home."

He rose and met her at the door to hold it open for her. "If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me, rather than Detective Zapata. I know for a fact that he's stretched really thin, which is probably why he didn't get back to you in a timely fashion." He held out his card to her, and she took it from him, being as careful not to touch him as he had been not to touch April.

"Thank you."

"Again, I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

When he'd closed the door behind her, he made his way back to his desk. There, he flopped down into his chair with a heavy sigh to put his fingers to his temple as one knee bounced furiously up and down and the other fidgeted with a pen before making its way to adjust the very uncomfortable bulge he was sporting—however unexpected and distinctly unwanted—it was.

It was the first time in quite a while that he'd had that bold a reaction to any woman, and it was just his luck that it was to someone who had a baby. Sighing loudly, he turned the stack of paperwork he needed to get through, trying to discharge Ava LaValley completely from his thoughts. But his mind kept returning to her, despite his efforts to the contrary.

Finally, he gave up, shouldered into his suit coat, and headed out of the office, telling the receptionist, Sheila, that if she needed him, to call his cell. It wasn't at all like him to abandon his post, but he had to get out of there and stop thinking about her as well as much less pleasant things.

He headed for the shooting range, where he would give his rebellious mind something more acceptable to concentrate on, other than that rather elfin woman's tantalizingly rounded body.

Lt. Gilmore had lived up to his first name—Kurt—which he had not offered, even though she'd told him to use her first name, but she'd seen on the nameplate on his desk. Although he had given her some useful information, as well as answering some of the questions she'd had, even if she'd discovered that she really hadn't wanted to know about some of it.

As she went through the rest of her day, trying to get as many of the administrative things associated with Teara's passing done as she could on her day off, he kept popping into her mind at the strangest of moments. Like whenever she was taking care of April. Most men melted around babies, little girls in particular,

she thought, but not him. He'd avoided her like the plague. It was such a strange, stark reaction that she couldn't get it out of her head.

That was to say nothing about the fact that, physically, he was exactly what she liked in a man. She was a small woman, and she liked large men. Not that she'd allowed her preferences in that area to dictate whom she dated. She'd had serious relationships with two redheads, which were on the bottom of her preference list aesthetically, and another with a short, dark Italian who had a lot of body hair that she could have lived without.

But she fell in love with personalities much more so than looks, which was a good thing, considering that she was no great shakes in that department herself. She was average looking, and there were about twenty-five pounds more of her than her doctor would like. Her hair had a mind of its own and refused to be tamed into any semblance of a style, but she'd grown it out a bit, and that had helped to tame the curls some. And she wasn't much of a girlie girl, when it came down to it.

If she had been the one who had gone first, Teara wouldn't have closets full of clothes, shoes, and bags to contend with—which was yet another in the growing list of chores to add to the list. Instead, she had boxes of electronics—old gaming systems she no longer used, old desktops and laptops that no longer worked—plus family pictures galore, and lots of cooking equipment and small appliances.

Ava might have been sarcastic to the lieutenant about how her friend didn't own anything of any value, but when she thought about it, neither did she. It was a sobering realization. She didn't own a house, drove an older car—newer than Teara's, but still old—and hadn't invested in anything of any great value. Even her IRA account—which was a benefit at the bank—didn't have much in it because she needed money for whimsical things like rent, groceries and a car payment.

By the time she got home that night, she was exhausted, and

she still had to feed April, give her a bath, and put her down for the night before she could feed herself and sit down in front of the TV with an enormous glass of what she really wished was wine and zone out for an hour or so before she fell asleep on the couch.

Damn, she was getting old! April was in bed by six or so, and—especially in the past few days—she was falling asleep by eight! She'd never been much of a party girl—except in college, a bit—but this was ridiculous! She was sleeping more than her eighty-year-old granny!

She'd just gotten April into the tub, in her cute little whale tub within a tub that she was close to outgrowing, when the doorbell rang.

"Of course," Ava groaned, picking up the wet baby and wrapping a towel around her so that she didn't get cold, praying she wouldn't be peed on—or worse—while she answered the door.

"Who is it?" she asked, keeping the baby—who was frantically shaking a pink sea star toy that she loved, but that she had yet to get the hang of using to squirt anyone, thankfully—on her hip.

"It's Lieutenant Gilmore—Kurt."

That surprised her. She'd already written him off as relatively unhelpful—or at best, reluctantly helpful—and hadn't expected to hear from him again. She certainly wouldn't have contacted him again herself, but here he was, on her doorstep.

She opened the door and those dark, startling eyes found hers immediately. Ava felt as if she'd been struck by a bolt of lightning that headed right for the parts of her that she had paid the least attention to over the past few years and, definitely, the past few days.

Damn, he was potent, more so in this much less formal setting!

"Can I help you, Lieutenant?" She tried to sound businesslike—hopefully.

Again, he looked only at her and not at the baby, who was a bit fussy from having been plucked from her bath and still energetically waving her toy around in a manner that any human would have found enchanting.

But, judging by the tense look on his face, the lieutenant apparently wasn't human, which she could definitely believe. Mr. Sunshine, he wasn't.

He held out what she immediately recognized as Teara's small cross-body purse. "I found it at her place—it had fallen into one of the cracks behind one of the couch cushions."

"Thank you very much. You didn't have to bring it all the way out here."

"I thought that might be easier for you."

Because of the baby, Ava completed for him in her head. But it seemed as if he couldn't so much as even refer to the child in a sentence. What the fuck was wrong with this man, anyway?

She didn't figure she had much of a possibility of ever finding that out, and Ava realized with a start that knowing that was making her sad, for some reason. She'd never found herself attracted to a man who seemed so off putting and exuded such a grouch vibe. Although she'd not been attracted to a lot of men in her life, all of them had had relatively sunny dispositions, with a definite tendency to want to make her laugh—at least at first. Why did it feel so different to her with this guy, whom she knew a lot less than she had some others?

Realizing she was having a conversation in her head and standing in front of him silently like an idiot, she replied, "Thank you." Then she remembered her manners, "Would you like to come in?" and stepped aside.

He seemed reluctant to do so, which also intrigued her, shuffling a bit back and forth before taking the plunge and coming in.

"Please excuse the mess." Ava blushed brightly when she

surveyed the scene in her living room with fresh eyes, as he was no doubt doing. It looked like a Babies R Us had exploded—there were toys everywhere, and, in her small, single person apartment, there was very little that said an adult lived there. It was all baby, all the time, and none of it organized.

"That's fine," he said, but she could hear that edge in his voice, the one that broadcasted his extreme discomfort with the situation, and he didn't come very far into the apartment, either, standing stiffly near the door. "I went to the apartment myself, not just to see if I could find your friend's purse, but also to make sure that if or when you decide that you want to go over there, you won't be confronting anything you might find upsetting."

Ava was floored that he'd done that for her. "Wow, thank you very much, Lieutenant."

"Kurt," he corrected, almost but not quite smiling.

"Kurt," she repeated.

"I could tell that you were feeling kind of hinky about going over there, so I wanted to make sure you could do so without worrying that you're going to see anything you obviously don't want to."

"I really appreciate that, Lieu-Kurt."

"You're welcome." He reached for the doorknob then turned back suddenly. "I would be glad to accompany you when you go there, especially the first time. It can be a very emotionally charged thing to do. Or, if you like, you could tell me what you'd like from there and I'll bring it over to you."

"That's a very generous offer. Thank you again, but I don't know what's over there that I would want to bring here, you know? I was never in her apartment thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to need to have that when I have to take care of April full time, you know? I think I'll need to see it to know I need it.'"

He nodded. "I do, and, like I said, I'd be glad to go over and be there with you. I'll be donkey labor, too, if you need it. I have

a pickup, and I'd be glad to haul whatever out of there you'd like and bring it over here for you."

She definitely hadn't thought that far ahead. The apartment manager had told her to take her time, get what she wanted from the apartment, and then she and her staff would deal with whatever was left. Ava was pretty sure that ninety-nine percent of what she was going to take from Teara's place was baby stuff. She didn't have much else. Ava might take some of the pictures from the rogue's gallery that led down the hallway towards the bedroom, but that was likely going to be it.

She was surprised at how keen he seemed to help her. Maybe she'd been wrong about not seeing him again.

The baby was growing more agitated, and she figured she needed to get her back in to the bath and get her down in the Pack 'n Play before she escalated to a full-blown tantrum, so she headed towards the bathroom, saying, "I was just in the middle of giving her a bath."

She had April in the tub and was finishing bathing her before the lieutenant appeared in the doorway. She stole a look at him, and although he was facing into the bathroom, he seemed to be diligently trying to look anywhere else but into it.

Still, April had a trick up her sleeve when she managed to crush the sea star between her little body and Ava's at just the wrong angle, which ended up with him getting sprayed all over his nice, neat suit.

Maybe that was it, she wondered. He was a neatnik, and the inevitable messiness of kids was unappealing to him.

He didn't seem angry about getting doused, but he did turn away from them as she dried April off in the bathroom then brought her into her bedroom to diaper her and put her into her pajamas.

Kurt again hung around the doorway but didn't come in, and this time he didn't even bother to try to face them, but just stood there, looking very uncomfortable.

Ava wondered why he didn't just leave, but he seemed to be waiting for her to put the baby down, which she did, tucking her in and turning on the unicorn mobile so that it would dance above her head while playing a soft lullaby and shining a very low light that April seemed to find very comforting.

She left the bedroom door open a crack and the hall light on, then she joined the man who was looking so painfully out of place as he stood in her living room.

"Thank you for bringing the purse over and for your very kind offer," she started, walking towards the door as a hint.

He took it, but stopped before he'd opened the door, turning back to look down at her with a very different expression on his face. A much more relaxed one than she thought she'd seen him wear—probably because April wasn't around to make him crazy.

"Ms. LaValley—Ava—I have to confess that I had another motivation for coming over here."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows rose at that. "And what might that be, Kurt?" she asked, looking all that way up at him and regretting it as soon as their eyes collided. Her entire body shuddered once on a tight, hard contraction that left her breathless and instantly on the edge. Ava felt as if her libido was running rampant and unchecked through every bit of her, and she knew the exact moment when she wished she'd worn a panty liner.

"I wanted to ask you if you'd like to go out with me."

She was surprised—yet again—by him. That was the last thing she expected to hear from him. She would have bet that he didn't even like her, much less be interested in dating her.

So, Ava was completely unable to suppress the disbelief in her tone. "Really?"

That got her what she thought was probably his first real smile. It wasn't dazzling, as if he was some Hollywood star. Instead, it was warmer, more inviting, as if he was encouraging her to smile with him—more genuine and less tense, although not less *intense*—than he'd been around her. It changed his face

entirely, and he ceased to look like a walking thundercloud and actually looked quite handsome.

He chuckled at her shock, and that, too, went a long way towards proving to her that he wasn't dour all the time. "Yes. I'm attracted to you, and quite frankly, that hasn't happened to me in a long time. I'd very much like to get to know you."

Ava tore her eyes away from those mesmerizing dark ones of his, hugging herself and looking down. Dramatic demeanor change aside, she also kind of had to wonder why a guy like him hadn't been dating. Hell, why he wasn't married with twelve kids by now!

Looking down at her, standing there like that—as if she felt like she needed some kind of protection from him—Kurt wasn't getting a warm and fuzzy feeling about how she was going to answer his question.

"Well, you're not alone in that, frankly. It's been a while for me, too." Her head came up, and green eyes met his hesitantly. "But... yes, I'd like to go out with you... if I can find someone to babysit for April."

"Oh." It was as if he'd put the baby entirely out of his mind, and she had just forced him to face the reality that she existed, which he didn't seem very happy about. Mr. Sunshine—however fleeting a glimpse she'd gotten—had left the building.

Perhaps she shouldn't have accepted his offer, considering how he apparently felt about babies. But her very carnal reaction to him made it hard for her to turn him down.

"I'm certain you'll be able to find someone. Would Friday night work for you?"

"No, I'm working then. But Saturday would be fine?" she suggested and got herself another one of those panty melting smiles.

"Saturday it is, then. I'll pick you up at seven?"

"That sounds fine."

"Great!" He headed out the door then turned back. "Don't

hesitate to call me if you need anything, or if I can be of any help in any way in regard to the situation with your friend."

"Thank you again, Lieu—"

His frown was the stuff of which spanking porn was made. She was going to have to change her panties when he left.

"Kurt," she corrected herself.

"You're very welcome, Ava," he replied formally then turned and headed for his car.

She peered after him—trying not to be too obvious about it—but she was curious as to what kind of car he was driving. He'd mentioned a truck, but Ava wondered if he just wanted to appear helpful, although it wouldn't have been at all unusual for him to have one around these parts.

Instead, he got into a very nice blue Jeep Wrangler. Of course, he could have two cars. Police lieutenants must do better than she thought, if that was indeed the case.

Ava headed back in before he drove by and saw that she had been spying on him, checking on the baby first—who was sound asleep—then sinking down in front of the television to turn on the latest episode of "Killing Eve," which she definitely would never watch when the baby was around.

For a long moment, she wallowed in how her life had changed in a split second and was going to change even more in the future. She didn't regret saying she'd take April if anything happened to Teara, but then, who the hell had thought that an otherwise healthy woman in her mid-thirties was going to die so suddenly? She should have lived to be eighty or ninety, as long as she stayed away from the drugs.

The fact that pot had been found in Teara's place didn't shake Ava's absolute belief that her friend was clean and sober. She'd had a hard time of getting rehab to stick at first, but once it did, and she had some real time behind her, Ava had never seen any instance of behavior that indicated to her that Teara might be using again.

And over the years that her friend was using, she'd certainly learned to recognize those signs very intimately—and unforgettably.

She got up, intending to pour herself the big glass of wine she'd been promising herself as a reward for making it through another day without her best friend—and with her best friend's daughter. But when she took the bottle out of the fridge, she stood there with it in her hand for a long moment, staring at it intently and biting her lip.

Then, in what would be a monumental decision for her, she uncorked it and poured its cabernet deliciousness down the drain, throwing the bottle into the glass recycling bin and doing the same to what had been the uncorked bottle of red she had in the cupboard—for "emergencies".

If she was going to be that baby's momma—and it looked like she was—she didn't want to indulge in anything that might render her even slightly impaired. This whole mothering thing wasn't going to come naturally to her in any way, and she had a feeling that she was going to need all of her faculties about her in order not to accidentally do some kind of harm to the child, if just from her own ignorance about babies more so than anything else.

She was utterly terrified to take this on.

But she was going to do it, for Teara—and for April.

With that, she raised the glass of Diet Coke she'd gotten herself instead to her best friend. "You always said I'd make a great mom. I'm sorry I have to experiment on your April. Forgive me, for I know not what I do, and you were fully aware of that fact when you put my name down in your will."