

# Love Hurts

By

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# Chapter 1

“Yes, I’m running late. *Of course* I called the mechanic!” *You idiot*, I added silently. Even though I didn’t say it, my tone of voice made it clear. “I’m still waiting. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Tell the partners to keep their pants on.” I clicked the phone off without waiting for a reply. I was too busy to listen to Jack’s sniveling and fretting today. He’d been my assistant for over a year, and not a day went by that I didn’t think about firing him. The man was just too *needy*. I felt like I spent more time holding his hand than doing my actual *job*.

Just thinking about it had me rolling my eyes in frustration. I glanced over my shoulder once again to see another moron behind me, blowing his horn despite the obvious fact my emergency blinkers were on. I craned my neck out the window, shouting, “Go around, idiot!” He honked louder as he drove around, and I flipped him the bird. Jesus, people today. Was the whole world going crazy?

It didn’t help that my phone kept buzzing every three seconds with texts and phone calls. No matter how many people I told, someone at the office still wanted to know where I was. I felt like no one could function without me. Even though I was the CEO, I had assumed I had a competent staff to handle the moments when I couldn’t be there—not that there had been many in the last six years.

*Of course*, if there were a day my car was going to decide to break down, it would be today when I had the most important business meeting of my life. Not for the first time, I regretted leaving the house without my morning coffee. I never, ever forgot coffee—I knew all too well the consequences and that they would be painful, but I was in such a rush this morning that it had completely slipped my mind. Which made it understandable—or so I told myself—that I had been less than pleasant when I’d called my mechanic. My car had just lurched, making a whiney sound as it did, before it stopped dead in the middle of the road. He had to understand that, right?

My palm still smarted from how hard I’d hit it on the steering wheel. I had immediately snatched up my Blackberry and punched in the number for my mechanic. It wasn’t that I called often, but I had always been good with numbers. I remembered practically every phone number I’d ever dialed, a talent that came in handy once in a while. It also made writing up charts and projections for fiscal growth very elementary, which made my job a hell of a lot easier.

While the phone rang, I’d been letting loose with a stream of curse words. It helped calm me down, for some reason.

“Fuller Brothers,” a voice had answered.

“I need someone. *Now*,” I’d replied.

“Okay, Ma’am, can you describe what’s going on with the vehicle?” he’d asked.

“No, I can’t,” I’d snapped at—what was his name? Curtis? Cameron? I never could remember. “That’s what I pay you for. Now get your ass over here.”

I’d hung up and promptly slammed the phone down. If I’d been a little rude, well, that was to be expected. This was a big day, maybe the biggest of my life and I was stuck on the side of the road. I had lawyers to meet with and strategy to plan. If I didn’t make it there today, I could see stock prices starting to fall before the day was even out. A headache pulsed at my

temples and I began to massage them, looking out the rearview mirror again. Where the hell *was* he?

Just then, my cell phone began to vibrate. With a long-suffering sigh, I snatched it up and checked the number. Work. *Again*. It was my VP, so I didn't have much choice; I had to take it.

"You've got me," I said as I answered the phone.

"Karen, it's Mark. When did you think you'd be coming in today?"

I rolled my eyes skyward and counted to five before replying. Mark really knew how to test my nerves. If he wasn't the best in the business I would have fired him years ago. That, and the fact he knew too much for me to risk him going over to the competition. I silently congratulated myself on having added the non-compete agreement to his contract this year before answering. "It depends on the mechanic. You know I'm stranded out here."

"Well, for God's sake, let's send a car!"

"Right." I gave a short laugh. "Like I'd ever leave my baby." I knew all too well what he and most of the senior staff thought about my love for my Porsche, not that I gave a damn. Whether they liked it or not—and I was sure they didn't—I was the boss. I called the shots.

"Karen, it's very important—"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" I demanded. "Who do you think set this deal up? Was it you, Mark? No. It's my plan, my deal. I'll get there when I get there, and you'll thank me for the privilege of working for me when this is done. Later." I pressed the "End" button with a grim sense of satisfaction. He was such a stuck-up prick. Knowing that he was probably cursing me in his office right now made me smile.

I glanced behind me one more time and when I saw no one—no one important, anyway—I decided to reapply my makeup. I flipped the visor down and slid the mirror open. My dark brown eyes were snapping angrily. I studied my face; my skin was the same hue as light brown sugar which made the hideous pimple on my chin all the more noticeable. I wished, not for the first time, that I wasn't so prone to breakouts when I was nervous. It was like an instant tell and I never wanted anyone to have one over me. I'd done my best to hide it with concealer. I used to have such a tan complexion before I began working sixty or more hours a week, I thought wistfully.

My straight, jet-black hair fell well past my shoulders. My best features were my high cheekbones and my full lips. Other than that, I was pretty *bleh* as far as I was concerned. Lucky for me, I had a stellar brain.

And modesty. I was great at modesty. The thought made me smirk, at least until I saw my phone vibrating away. A quick check showed that it was my assistant again. "What?" I snapped into the receiver.

"Um, Ms. Donahue, I just spoke to Mr. Patterson and he wanted to know—"

"Tell Mark to fuck off, and could you *please* make yourself useful and send out an email to let everyone know my situation? I will be there when I get there, Jackie. Got it?" Without waiting for a reply, I slammed the phone down onto the dashboard with all my might.

My blood was really starting to boil and before I could calm down, I saw a flash out of the corner of my eye. Turning my head, I saw a beat-up white truck pulling in behind me sporting a "Fuller Brothers" logo on the side. Instead of feeling relieved, it only fueled my anger. He sure as hell had taken his time getting here! I threw my car door open and marched over, not sure what I intended to do. I knew I was going to let him have it and maybe I'd at least kick his tire or something. My mother always said I had a hot temper. I'd never believed her until that

moment, with my blood coursing so hotly through my veins that I was practically seeing red as I waited for the truck door to open.

When it finally did, I was ready. “About time you got here! I’ve been—” The words died on my lips as I realized that the man who’d stepped out definitely was *not* Curtis. Or was it Kervin? It didn’t matter, because whoever this was, he was taller, darker and hot with a capital *H* whereas what’s-his-name had always seemed a bit lanky and much too dorky for my tastes.

The first thing I noticed about him was his flawless skin, marred only by the stubble darkening his strong jaw, both of which I found sexy. His hair was hidden under a “Fuller Brothers” cap but the dark brown brows above his sharp blue eyes gave me a clue. His face was so ruggedly handsome that it robbed me of the power of speech, which wasn’t something I was used to.

“Sorry for your wait, Mrs. Donahue,” he replied dryly, in a voice so smooth it made my breath hitch. “What seems to be the problem?”

Hearing him speak didn’t do anything to loosen my tongue. His voice was husky and warm all at once and as he walked toward me the scent of sandalwood on his skin almost made me dizzy with intoxication. It took several tries, but finally I found my voice, despite not being able to take my eyes off his lusciously full lips. “Ms.” I replied, my earlier impatience having evaporated.

“Excuse me?”

“You said ‘Mrs.’ and there’s not, well, you know.” I felt my cheeks flush. I never, ever stammered. “There isn’t a Mr. Donahue.”

I could see a smirk twitching at the corners of his mouth as he arched a dark brow. I watched as he took his time sliding his eyes down my body, looking me over. I was used to seeing men give me the once-over, never in my life did I consider asking one of them what they thought—until now. “Is that so? Well then, should we take a look at your car?”

I felt like such an idiot. A blathering moron. What the hell was wrong with me? Sure, his well-built, muscled body was nice to look at, but I’d seen plenty of good-looking guys. What millionaire hadn’t? We walked to my car—I let him stay a step ahead of me so I could have a good view. The more I saw, the more impressed I became. I loved a man with big, broad shoulders and his butt wasn’t hard to look at, either.

“Can I get the keys?”

Boy, he didn’t mince words, did he? “Sure.” I reached in to my coat pocket. “Where’s Kevin?”

His blue eyes narrowed as he looked at me. “If you’re talking about my brother, his name is Corbin.”

“Oh, *Corbin!*” I exclaimed, slapping my hand on my leg. So that was it.

“Yeah, normally he handles the service calls, but he said something about not being in the mood to deal with entitled rich girls. Something along those lines.”

His words caused me to flush even brighter and I ducked my head to hide my burning cheeks. So he’d heard about that.

“But I don’t see any of those here, do you, *Ms. Donahue?*”

“No, Sir.” The reply came to me instantaneously, though I was even more embarrassed—if that were possible—once the words left my lips. There was something about the quiet authority in his voice, his easy, assuming manner that had made me feel the need to “sir” him.

If he found it odd, he gave no indication. “The keys, please?”

“Oh. Right.” I pulled them from my pocket and handed them over, dropping them into his palm before our fingers could meet. Physical contact with this man was the last thing I needed right now when he’d already reduced me to a lovesick teenager with his sexy voice and gorgeous eyes.

Get a grip, the devil on my shoulder snapped at me. Wake up! So he’s got a handsome face, so what? Does that give him any right to talk to you like that? I shook my head, but the thoughts kept coming until I started to get annoyed. Come to think of it, what right did he have to make assumptions about me? Why should he assume that I was entitled, based on a conversation he hadn’t even had with me? Who the hell did he think he was to talk to me in that stern, no-nonsense voice, and for that matter, why did it make my heart skip a beat?

“How long are you going to be?” I called out, anger making my voice petulant.

“As long as it takes to do a thorough job. You wouldn’t expect anything less, would you?”

“Just get it fucking done,” I muttered. I thought I’d spoken low enough under my breath for the comment to go undetected, but the minute he climbed out of the car and stood facing me, I knew better.

“What was that?” He was smiling but I could see the displeasure in his arched eyebrow and the unspoken warning in his voice.

I hesitated, which was another first for me, swallowing hard as I waffled between apologizing and pretending he’d misheard me. I’d always been a bit of a spit-fire, and this was the first man I’d ever considered apologizing to for it. In the end, though, I stretched to my full 5’4 height, throwing my shoulders back and giving him the look that I’d been told was intimidating, the one I normally reserved for business meetings. “I’m late. I need you to move this along.”

“If it were that simple, I’d be done already. But as things stand right now, I don’t have the first clue what’s wrong with your vehicle and I won’t if you keep making unreasonable demands. I’m going to take the time to get this done right, or not do it at all. Your choice.”

I narrowed my eyes, but he met my eyes without flinching. He pinned me with the intensity in his gaze until I was forced to look away. I swallowed again, wondering why my mouth suddenly felt so dry. “Fine.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“*Fine*,” I repeated, facing him again and speaking through gritted teeth. “Do what you have to do.”

“First I’ll be needing an apology.”

Despite how calmly and matter-of-fact he sounded, I took a step back when the words registered. “A what?”

“An apology for your behavior, Ms. Donahue, along with a promise that it won’t happen again.”

“But—” I spluttered, wondering what was happening to me. Normally, he’d have apologized to *me* by now. Either I was losing my edge, or this man was somehow unaffected by my steely gaze and resolute demeanor. It must be an off day for me all around. “I don’t believe that’s necessary.”

He smiled and even though I knew he was mocking me, his confident, pearly-white grin was nearly my undoing. Just the sight of it had my panties dampening in a way that made me distinctly uncomfortable. “I didn’t ask for your opinion on the matter. Those are my terms, take it or leave it.”

If looks could kill, his sexy, perfect body would have fallen at my feet. Not only did he *not* die, he didn't even look fazed by my piercing glare. What I wanted to know was, when had I lost control of this situation? When had it even become a *situation*? I didn't know what annoyed me more—his bossy attitude, or that my body seemed so responsive to it. The best thing for me to do would be to get away from this man and the sooner, the better.

"I need to get in to my car—Move." I scowled at him as he raised his dark brows. "Please." Once he'd stepped aside, I marched toward my Porsche, reaching inside for my purse. As soon as I had it in my grasp I began riffling around for my phone.

"You know, I've met women like you before. You think because you have a lot of money you own people. I had a girlfriend with a temper like yours once. She spent more time over my knee than off it."

I froze, my hand in mid-grab. It had been a long time since I'd met someone—anyone—who could put me off my game. Despite my need to stay pissed, I slowly turned my head to look at him. Was he teasing me? But no, the expression on his face hadn't changed. He was watching me, waiting for my reaction. Could he see how his words made me tremble? Could it be possible that he was saying what I thought he was?

I heard a sound like rushing in my ears. This couldn't be happening. Yet, the more I denied it, the more my blood surged through me, hot and ready for anything he might propose. "Where is my damn phone?" I cried out. Just then, I remembered I'd put it on the dashboard. I picked it up and hit the button to bring up the screen, but nothing happened. I tried again, and again, pressing it harder and harder each time, but the screen stayed maddeningly blank. When I remembered how I'd slammed in onto the dashboard, dread filled me. What had I done?

"Is there a problem?"

"No." I gave him a clipped smile, trying to make my voice belie my sinking heart. Now I'd never be able to call someone else for help. I couldn't even take Mark up on his offer to send a car for me. "Everything's fine. Let's just get my car fixed and we can both get on with our day."

He nodded, still watching me, for what I did not know. "Fine by me."

But he didn't make a move to go back to my car, and the longer I watched him standing motionless the more it became clear what he was waiting for. I swallowed hard and took a deep breath before spitting the words out: "I'm sorry."

He took a step forward, closing the distance between us. He was a good head taller than me, so he inclined his head. "Are you now?"

I was just as caught off guard by the sweetness in his deep, husky voice as I was by the smile on his lips. It truly transformed him, taking his features from handsome to startling. I wanted to fall in his arms on the spot. I wanted to let him possess me, the way his blue-gray eyes had been telling me they wanted to since the moment he'd first seen me. I wanted to melt against him for as long as he'd let me.

Or so I thought, until I heard his next words. "I'm sorry, but I don't think that's going to cover it anymore. If you want me to fix your car, you're going to have to take the spanking I mentioned earlier."