
Chapter 1

"**W**riting?"

It was his customized text tone—his tone—rather than what he'd asked that had rudely interrupted her thoughts. It was something she'd created especially for him, using one of those apps that would let you take a snippet of sound and make a tone you could use as a notification sound for your phone.

Knowing he'd never hear it—why would he text her when she was with him—she'd isolated one very specific word, expressed in a very particular tone, from one of the rare voice-mails he'd left her. Rare, because—even though he was a high-powered businessman who spent most of his day on the phone for one reason or the other, or perhaps because of that—he preferred not to communicate in that way in his personal life, when he had a choice.

And, even in business concerns, Sabin Northrop always had a choice.

Luckily for him, he was no stranger to the written word in any way, having been extremely well educated—sent to expensive private schools and graduating from both Harvard and Wharton

with business degrees. She knew that he had been accepted at Oxford, which he would have loved to attend, but then, studying the classics wouldn't have done anything to further the family's fortunes, and that was his father's greatest concern.

He was nothing if not a dutiful son. After all, without his father's money—the family's money—he wouldn't have had that choice to make. Despite his privileged upbringing, his father had seen to it that—despite his otherwise privileged upbringing—his eldest son was no stranger to hard work, either, and that he thoroughly understood the value of every considerable dollar that had been spent on him.

No matter that he could have made more money than his father would ever conceive of by working as a sexual dominant for women who would pay exorbitantly well for his services. His voice alone could have made him hundreds of thousands a year from thirsty women, young and old. It often had absolutely the perfect pitch, especially when he was saying that ubiquitous, but—in his voice—unapologetically authoritative command.

He'd been using that word in particular with her when she had done something of which he was not fond. She would be willing to bet that he had long since forgotten what he'd said to her, what the situation had been that had occasioned him leaving a message during which that particular word was liberally sprinkled, and in that thoroughly bossy, more than slightly disapproving tone.

Honey Jacobsen still shivered every time she remembered that message. It was the closest brush she'd ever had with his dominant side—the one he showed to everyone but her. He was protective of her, and affectionate with her, but he treated her like his kid sister, which was something she had heartily wished to change, at first. That fevered impulse had faded some as their years together as friends had passed, but it had not disappeared entirely. She doubted that it would ever happen.

Sabin wasn't at all her type, she liked to remind herself, but

No, Sir

that didn't seem to matter in the least to the rest of her. More realistically, though, she was hardly his.

She still had the full voicemail on her phone—backed up to the cloud, and on her laptop and tablet, just in case. She wasn't about to take the chance of losing it.

And, when she was all alone at night sometimes, in her cramped little apartment, when she could no longer stop herself from doing so, Honey would take him to bed with her.

No.

There it was again. Honey had been in such a reverie that she'd forgotten to text him back, which she almost always did pretty immediately. It was as if he was objecting to her thinking about masturbating to him saying that, among other things.

Still up?

Her *no, I'm sleep texting*, and his, *don't text back if you're sleeping. You need your rest. I'll get in touch with you tomorrow*, crossed in the ether.

Until the word *brat* popped up on her screen.

Rough time eking it out today? he asked.

Something like that.

Fancy a nightcap? I can send Teddy over.

She was in bed, in her pajamas already, and planning on going to bed, but at least she hadn't taken the melatonin she often took to get to sleep. And she'd do pretty much anything to see him, not that she was about to tell him that.

No, I don't want to bother him. I'll drive myself over.

Honey could hear him saying his next text in that low, growly voice of his. *It's what he gets paid for, Honey B. It's no bother.*

Still, don't send him. I'll be over in fifteen or so.

She could see him in her mind, sighing at her in mild exasperation but not wanting to make it a thing between them. *All right. Drive carefully, and don't speed, lead foot.*

She sent him an emoji with its tongue sticking out at him,

and he sent her the one with its eyebrow raised, as he often raised his at her when she did such things to him in his presence.

Since she didn't wear makeup, Honey ran a brush through her hair—which had a mind of its own and sprang back to the mass of messy curls it always was—grabbed her keys, her purse and her phone and headed out.

Not for the first time, as she drove over to his place, she wondered if she should have gotten into the habit of primping and prepping herself to see him. But that wasn't her, and he seemed to like her the way she was, although perhaps he'd like her more—or in a more intriguing way—if she'd bothered to make the effort.

It was hard to convince herself that any man was worth doing all of that, though. That kind of artificiality was anathema to her, and, although she'd certainly worn makeup occasionally, she felt as if she was suffocating the entire time all of that goop was on her skin.

Luckily, since she worked for herself, she didn't have the usual reason for dressing up that most women had. The fact that she didn't much care about what anyone else thought of her helped a lot in that department, too.

If any man would be worth it to her, as far as she was concerned, he was it. But she had no illusions as to her place in his life, and it was not that of a romantic partner, which informed her behavior towards him entirely. She was utterly herself with him—inside and out.

And Sabin didn't seem to mind, either. He liked how natural she was—at least, that was what he told her. He wouldn't care in the least that she was going to arrive on his doorstep in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. In fact, if she'd worn anything dressier than that, he'd probably wonder who the hell she was. And she'd never hear the end of it, either, from him.

Of course, she knew that the women he dated were all model gorgeous, inevitably looking like they'd just stepped off the

runway and still wearing the same designer clothes. And that kind of camera-ready look didn't happen without a lot of expensive spackle and, in most cases, she'd snarkily bet, cosmetic surgery. Neither of which she wanted or could even afford. Her tastes were much simpler than that.

"Miss Jacobsen," Harry, at the gate, recognized her immediately, tipping his hat and waving her through as she pulled in in her cream-colored VW Bug, complete with eyelashes around the headlights.

"Thank you, Harry," she said, stopping anyway to hand him a small box of cookies she'd made earlier—milk chocolate chunk—his favorite.

The older man actually blushed. "You're too sweet, Miss Honey," he complimented, accepting the box with ill-concealed greed.

She grinned. "I'm not, but they are. Make sure Ellen rations those out to you, Harry. They should come with a vial of insulin."

He laughed, and she was on her way to the big house.

And it wasn't a short trip. The Christmas song, "Over the River and Through the Woods" always came to mind—even in the middle of the summer—when she drove to his place. His lane did exactly that, calculatedly, she was sure, showing off the magnificently manicured grounds during the day.

But at night, it just seemed to her to be a bit creepy, and she was always glad to see the lights of the house up ahead.

Not that his house was particularly cozy. It was much too big and imposing for that. Honey supposed it needed to be that way. Someone in his position—with his amount of money—didn't want to live in a dinky little shack. He had clients to impress—or whoever. She didn't like to dwell on that idea much—whether it was women he was impressing or his "business associates"—neither bore much scrutiny, as far as she was concerned.

She couldn't remember the number of times he'd told her to

come to the front door, but she couldn't quite get herself to do that, so instead, Honey followed the road less traveled, taking an almost invisible fork in the road, to the right, that headed around to the back.

It led to the plain, unassuming servants' entrance, which she found herself much more comfortable entering through. Someone like her would not normally come through the front door—she left that to the models, actresses and otherwise gorgeous women who had inevitably only entered or left that way.

Of course, the lights were on there, too, and she knew that he had turned them on; the thought of his obvious care for her warmed her heart. Her practical mind was always at work, though, bringing up the fact that he hardly had to go around the vast property and light torches. He merely had to say, "Alexa, turn on the backyard lights."

But still. It was nice of him to think of her, she said to herself, pushing her grumpier, jealous thoughts to the back of her mind.

The door was unlocked, another sign of him thinking of her, since it was pouring rain and she was already drenched just running from her car to the door. Not that she didn't have a key if he'd forgotten that little step, but it would have been unusual for him to forget even the slightest touch that would make her time here more pleasant.

"Ah, there you are."

Honey had just stepped inside, turning around to close the door and lock it behind herself when she heard his voice. A shiver ran up her spine, nipples tightening to the point of being painful. She'd debated about wearing a bra but hadn't been able to convince herself to put one on, even for him. It was a decision she was beginning to regret, even though she'd never felt as if she needed protection from him before—even when they'd first met—and Honey couldn't imagine why she was feeling that way now.

"Here I am." She stood in place, on the rug just inside the kitchen door, and shook the rain off herself, which had him smiling softly at her even as he was inevitably hit by some of the water droplets she was shaking off her like a dog.

"You know, there's this new-fangled invention called an umbrella—you might want to look into it."

"Nah, thanks. I've bought zillions of them. If I'm in the car, and I need it, it's in the house, and vice versa. Keeping track of them is more annoying than putting up with a little rain. Besides, there's absolutely no possibility that I'm sweet enough to melt."

Sabin came to stand pulse-poundingly close to her, and she knew, as she looked up at him—a distance of at least a foot—that her hair was a mess, her clothes were damp and clinging to her body in all the wrong places and there were rain droplets on her face.

"Someone named Honey might do well to be more careful about that."

She smiled up at him. "You know me well enough to know that my name bears no resemblance whatsoever to my personality."

The slash of smile across his face made her knees weak. She loved having the power to do that to a very powerful man who wasn't necessarily all that pleasant to anyone else. "You are the most refreshingly natural woman I have ever known," he murmured, still looking down at her very intently.

Wanting to diffuse the tension she was feeling and he was inspiring—either inadvertently or deliberately—she snorted. "For that read: too lazy to use makeup."

He frowned, and a frowning Sabin Northrop was never something to be taken lightly. Grown men had wet themselves at that look, and for good reason, she had no doubt.

But she'd never had the practical sense that God gave a goose in regards to him, and she'd also never spent any time during her

considerable relationship with him being afraid of him, so Honey ignored it.

She shivered delicately as she stood there, and he raised his right hand, in which he already had a rocks glass full of what she knew was not the most expensive or the best rye whiskey in the world, but rather the one that she preferred the most. He always kept a bottle of it around for her.

"Take a sip of this," he ordered softly but with no less expectation of being obeyed than if he had used a louder voice. When she'd done as he asked, he took the glass away and set it on the counter, producing an enormous, deliciously heated bath towel—the softest she'd ever felt against her skin—and laying it over her head then wrapping it around the rest of her body.

"You look like Little Red Riding Hood," he commented with no small amount of chagrin.

She flashed a smile up at him. "Well, you'd make a pretty convincing Big Bad Wolf, Guido."

He growled low under his breath.

Grinning unrepentantly, she teased, "I rest my case, Mr. Northrop."

He remained obviously unconvinced. "Since I know how allergic you are to modern conveniences, I put some clean, dry clothes in the bathroom for you. The heat lamp is already on. When you're changed, I'll be in the den."

As she knew he expected, she toed her sneakers off and left them neatly on the mat by the door before turning back to head to the closest downstairs bathroom.

Sabin stared after her then, when she'd disappeared down the hall, made his way to the den.

He was as good as his word. A pair of the jeans she'd left there long ago and a pretty t-shirt, decorated with pastel hummingbirds, were sitting on the counter, with a pair of warm, fuzzy boot socks perched on top. When she touched the socks to move them, she realized that they, too, were warm—that all of

the clothes were, as if he'd put them and the towel that he had so carefully wrapped her in, in the dryer so that they would be comfortably inviting when she got there. And he probably had.

The idea of him even knowing what a dryer was, much less how to work one, seemed absurd, but he was a man of many talents, that one.

Honey stripped down, assiduously avoiding looking in the large mirror over the vanity as she did so. She wasn't hideous, but she wasn't gorgeous, either, and she was in no mood to be reminded of just how average looking she was. She was nothing special, certainly no one to turn his head in any way. She knew that and had long since accepted it.

So much so that she'd always wondered why she was still such a part of his life—why one of those beautiful women hadn't caught him by now, such that she would inevitably fade from his orbit as he dedicated himself to being a husband and a father.

Only when she was fully clothed again, did she face herself in the mirror, realizing that her hair looked like it had exploded atop her head. With no brush, she had to settle for dragging her fingers through it, instead, tucking errant curls behind her ears, trying for a side part but knowing that it would never remain that way. Her hair had a mind of its own and would soon be a riotous mass of soft curls around her face and down almost long enough to touch her shoulders.

Honey scrunched her face at herself and shrugged her shoulders. She wasn't here trying to win a beauty contest.

And *he'd* texted *her*.

In fact, she thought as she left the bathroom and headed through the large home to the den, which lived at the back of the house, *he was the one who had always kept their thing—whatever it was, their friendship—going, from the beginning.*

"There you are. I was just about to send out a search party," he commented from the comfy couch before taking a sip of his own drink.

Sabin was quite fastidious, and the rest of the house was kept quite pristine. As a result, Honey wasn't necessarily as comfortable anywhere else. But the den was big and cozy, with a lot of warm woods and a big fireplace with a merry fire already burning. The décor was quite different from the rest of his house, much homier and more welcoming.

Honey took her usual seat in the other corner of the large sofa, tucking her legs beneath her and putting her drink down on the coaster on the coffee table in front of her that should have been groaning with the weight of what was on it.

"Have you eaten anything today, my dear?" he murmured, staring at his drink and already knowing the answer.

She had the grace to blush, whispering, "No."

"Honey," he tsked. "What have I told you about that?"

His scolding tone and heavy gaze never failed to make her squirm—internally, of course. "I-I got caught up in what I was writing and didn't remember to eat."

Sabin turned himself more towards her. "I thought you said that it was coming hard today?"

"By the time you called, it was."

He never doubted her answers. She was almost too open. She'd never tried to lie to him, and he felt he would have known if she had. In his business, if you couldn't tell when someone was making things up, you wouldn't be in that business for long. Your first error in judgment could very well be your last.

Besides, he knew that was not her bent. She was almost brutally honest, saying things that others might hesitate to rather blithely, sometimes speaking without thinking, without considering her audience.

Considering what his work was like, where everyone was always trying to put one over on someone, although rarely him anymore, not to mention the women he dated, too, it was no wonder he liked how refreshingly different she was.

"Well, you're not writing now. Eat something."

Everything on the table was designed to tempt her. He was always after her—gently—to eat more, blaming it firmly on his Italian heritage. He not only liked eating, he could cook like nobody's business, too. She'd had his family's "gravy"—hand made by him—and it was so good, she would have been just as happy to never eat anything else for the rest of her life.

But Sabin never nagged her; instead, he gently nudged. Frequently, and in a very firm tone, sometimes. And he had long since noted that it was the firmer tones to which she responded most favorably.

Tonight, having suspected that she hadn't eaten much, as she was wont to do when she was writing—"lost in the haze" as she'd described her writing "fog" to him—he'd raided his fridge as soon as she'd agreed to come over. Sabin wasn't just in the habit of keeping the booze she liked on hand. Several shelves of his fridge had stuff that she liked, and he'd brought some of it out tonight, arranged artfully on an impromptu grazing tray.

There was Havarti and Brie cheeses he knew she wouldn't—couldn't—buy for herself, baby carrots, pepperoni, Boars Head Italian seasoned roast beef, black and green olives, and sultanas, as well as pistachios, peanut M&Ms, and unwrapped Kit Kat bites, to tempt her sweet tooth. He put it all out because he was never sure what kind of a mood she was going to be in. Sometimes he had to work hard just to get her to eat anything at all, no matter how careful he was about his selections.

He often felt as if he was trying to tempt a wild bird to a feeder, never really knowing what would entice her to eat.

Those were the times when he was most tempted to turn all Dom on her, but despite the fact that he'd noticed she paid more attention to him when he was firmer with her, Sabin wasn't at all likely to assume that it translated to anything more.

She was a very strong, independent woman, more so with him, he thought, than others, which always gave his heart a little twinge to think of, but he understood.

After all, it wasn't advisable for most people to make themselves vulnerable to him in any way, although he sincerely hoped that she knew she wasn't among them.

He thought she did, but then, Sabin tried not to take anything in regards to her for granted, and very carefully doing so had kept her around him, where he wanted her to be, so he wasn't about to rock the boat at this late date, Not that the very strong impulse to do so wasn't something he had to fight quite frequently around her.

"I'm sorry it's not coming more easily for you, sweetie."

Honey shrugged. "Easy sometimes, not others. Overall, it's going well, though."

"You'll be on the best sellers list in no time at all, I'm sure."

"Don't care."

He would never understand how she didn't really allow herself to want to be successful, at least not monetarily. It was as if, if she wanted it too much, she knew it wasn't going to happen, or some messed up shit like that. But he kept his mouth shut.

"How about you? Is that cute new D.A. giving you a fit?"

"Editha Chamberlain?" he snorted. "No. I'll just let her spool out her line buzzing around me, until she gets wrapped up in it."

Honey frowned. "I think you mixed about twenty-seven metaphors in that one sentence."

"You would know, Miss English Major," he grinned.

"Puh-leeze. You are smarter and better read than I will ever be in this lifetime. Not to mention more ambitious, prettier, and more successful."

"Honey."

How could he make his use of her name—which was also an endearment—sound as if he was scolding her? However, he managed to do it with unerring accuracy, making her frown back at him as he looked at her through drawn brows.

"What? I don't know what you're always objecting to when I

say things like that. They're the truth. I can't help it if you don't like hearing it."

His tone did not improve with his next sentence as he leaned closer to her, as if to prove his point. "You know that I don't like to hear you say such things about yourself."

"Sorry, not sorry," she answered flippantly, throwing an M&M up in the air and catching it in her mouth. "Besides, I've been hanging around you long enough that you should long since have given up on the idea of trying to reform me to your liking, Mr. Northrop."

Surprising her, Sabin leaned back, giving her the very same one raised eyebrow look as the emoji she'd sent to him earlier—only his was a helluva lot more potent.

"Oh, I should?" he asked, taking another sip of his drink. "Do tell, little one."

That got him the fierce frown he'd been expecting. "And you know that I don't like to hear you call me that."

"Doing so is not psychologically detrimental to you, however. Putting yourself down is."

"Being constantly reminded that I'm smaller than you are could be considered psychologically damaging, I'm sure."

"I don't call you that constantly."

"And I don't constantly run myself down, either. I have a relatively healthy ego. And I'm not running myself down, anyway. I'm merely acknowledging the truth of the situation, Don Vito."

His chin nearly hit his chest at that as he looked out from under his brows at her. "Hon-NEY."

He did not like her calling him that, despite the fact that they both knew it was almost uncomfortably apt.

She gave him an impish smile. "Okay, Michael, then?" she suggested with a grin.

He ignored her entirely, saying instead, "Hand me the bowl of Kit Kats, please."

That surprised her, too, because he was not much of a fan of candy. Sweets, yes, but he was more a cakes and pie guy, tiramisu, or ice cream, rather than candy. But she did as he asked.

And it wasn't until he used one hand, to take the bowl from her, and the other to wrap those long, thick fingers around her wrist, using his hold to pull her towards him, that she said something. "Sabin, what do you think you're doing, anyway?" She laughed, not particularly concerned that he was drawing her to him. Sometimes they ended up in the middle of the couch, sitting next to each other. He'd never made the slightest of passes at her, and she never expected that he would.

But, boy, was she wrong.