

# Chapter One

Erica refused to meet Sam's eyes. When he called her into his office, she had a sinking feeling she knew what his problem was, but she smiled brightly just the same and hoped for the best.

She'd been with Sugar Babies Inc. from its inception. Sam's bold idea of an exclusive matchmaking service for the wealthy lovelorn struck a chord with her, and when he offered her the position as his personal assistant, she readily accepted. No one could have been more eager to escape the corporate world. The endless grind of trying to please her superiors, spending 70+ hours a week doing every dirty task they dumped on her desk, all while looking like a fashion icon, was easy to leave behind. Sam's words were barely out of his mouth when she began stripping her desk and tossing her things in boxes. It didn't matter where he was going, she was going, too. He was smart, kind and compassionate, and if he believed he could make a go of this new venture, she was all in. What did she have to lose?

Her Manhattan apartment was lovely, decorated by a high-end designer, but she never had the time to enjoy it or entertain. Men asked her out, wealthy corporate attorneys and clients, but she knew they never looked any farther than her expensive clothes and manicured nails. Despite her appearance and business skills, Erica wanted far more than a Cartier watch and a few nights of passion. Although at times she wasn't quite sure what she was looking for in a relationship, she knew it wasn't becoming a notch on some asshole's headboard.

Now, she typically wore what she wanted to work, although her standard 'uniform' was a dark navy blue suit with a pencil skirt and low-heeled pumps. No sense in being uncomfortable. Her long dark hair was worn up in either a French twist or tidy bun. She kept make-up to a minimum and frequently wore a tiny pair of reading glasses perched on the end of her nose, although she didn't need them. They added to what she liked to think of as her 'librarian persona' and kept the hounds at bay. Working with men who were both lonely and wealthy tended to put her in dangerous waters. In her opinion, most men didn't acquire enormous wealth and status without being somewhat of a shark, used to getting what they wanted. The fact that they turned to Sugar Babies to find women who fit their needs, didn't change who they were.

"I have a few things I'd like to discuss with you," Sam said, watching as she fidgeted and looked around the room.

"Oh, Sam, that's a lovely photo of you and Johanna," Erica dodged, reaching forward and picking up the print. "Was that taken in Vegas?" *Shit, shit, shit, her mind screamed. Why did I have to mention Vegas?*

"It was," he answered, smiling as he took the picture from her hand and looked at his beautiful fiancée before setting it back on his desk. "Speaking of Vegas, would you like to talk about it?"

"Not especially," she sighed, still not meeting his eyes.

"Alright then," he replied. "Let's talk about John."

"John who?"

"John Braden, and you know very well who I was referring to," Sam scolded gently. "Look at me, Erica," he insisted, steepling his fingers as he peered at her. "I want to know what's going on between you and John."

“Nothing’s going on,” she replied, meeting his eyes. “I didn’t want to go to Vegas with a group of couples and feel like a third wheel, so I asked him to come along. He’s a nice guy, we had fun, end of story. He’s a client, just like everyone else.”

“Then would you care to explain why, for the last month, every single match I suggest for him comes back with a negative comment from you on the form?”

“That’s not true,” she defended herself. “I don’t care who he’s matched with as long as it works out and grows the company.”

“Oh really,” he drawled, picking up a stack of papers and walking around to the front of his desk. Leaning his tall body against it, he began to review the forms as he recapped her comments, handing her each paper. “Too young, too old, not a good match, he’s too dominant for her, she wants a daddy, she’s too short, they’ll look ridiculous together; he likes dark hair, she doesn’t want to be spanked or disciplined, she has children and he wants to travel, she wants to top, and my personal favorite, she’s a whiney wimp, he’ll hate that and her hair looks like straw.’ So what gives, Erica? Why are you deliberately sabotaging John’s chances of finding the right match? Did he do something to you in Vegas and you want some sort of payback?”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” she insisted, standing and twisting the papers in her hands. “I just don’t think any of these women are right for him, that’s all.”

“Would you like to drop him as a client? I like John, know him very well, but if it bothers you to the point you can’t be objective, I’ll call him and explain that right now we are not making any progress and he should feel free to look elsewhere,” he offered, sympathetically placing his hand on her shoulder.

Erica shook his hand off and thrust the papers at his chest. “No! Absolutely not,” she insisted. “I’ll set up a meet-and-greet, for two weeks from Friday. You invite every one of those women,” she said, pointing her finger at the papers in his hand. “I’ll take care of notifying our clients, including John Braden. I’m sorry Sam; apparently I let my personal feelings cloud my judgment, which isn’t acceptable. I will make it my mission to find the perfect match for Mr. Braden, and this will be the best party we’ve ever had,” she promised before turning to leave the room. She barely managed to close the door without slamming it.

Sam smiled and shook his head. He had a feeling Erica would indeed find John’s perfect match, and he didn’t think she’d have to look too hard, if she would only open her own eyes.

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Entering her office, Erica slumped down at her desk and put her head on her arms. It had been a horrible month and the memories of what happened in Vegas frequently kept her from getting a good night’s sleep. For the first time in her life she’d been spanked and not in a grown-up way, if there even was such a thing. Did all spankings involve reducing a woman to a childlike state? She didn’t know and was too embarrassed to ask Sam or Mike or any of the other men she worked with.

She invited John Braden to go with her to Ty and Kelsey McCarthy’s wedding because everyone else was part of a couple, and she didn’t want to tag along without an escort. Although Sam knew John quite well on a personal level, he was a recent addition to Sugar Babies’ list of clients. After interviewing him, Erica was impressed. He was very handsome in a tall, lanky cowboy sort of way despite his expensive suit. Older than she, he was probably more physically fit. While she wouldn’t consider him a health nut, he believed healthy eating, regular exercise and limiting consumption of alcohol were all beneficial.

During the interview, she’d watched for signs of a dominant personality and found few. His deep voice was appealing with just the slightest Texas drawl, his demeanor calm and

thoughtful. Some of the questions were quite probing but he never batted an eye and answered truthfully as far as she could tell. Propping her chin on her hands, she recalled their conversation.

*“Mr. Braden,” she began, lightly tapping her pen on her desk. “You seem like a very nice man without, umm, complicated needs. Can I ask you why you’ve decided to let Sugar Babies find you a suitable match instead of doing it the old-fashioned way? I mean, surely you have no requirements that couldn’t be met by just about any woman on the dating market.”*

*“I’m a very busy man, Erica. May I call you Erica?” he asked, smiling when she nodded. “I’m sure you know how difficult it is to detect the genuine from the phony in today’s world of instant information. Any woman with access to a computer can find out nearly anything she wants to know about me, before I even arrive at her door. Most of what I do, what I own, is public record and a crafty girl can mold herself into whatever she thinks I want. That’s one of the reasons I’m so secretive regarding my personal life. Sugar Babies hand picks its female clients and they are extensively investigated. A woman has no idea who she may meet at one of the gatherings; giving her precious little time to transform herself into what she thinks will appeal to a certain man. I value my free time, so why not let you do the work for me?”*

*“I understand,” Erica replied, looking over her forms. “One more thing, you don’t seem to have much down here as far as sexual preferences,” she observed. “Is there anything that’s a deal-breaker as far as you’re concerned?”*

*“Obviously, I expect fidelity, but that goes without saying. Other than that, I’m open to many different kinds of relationships and I don’t want to limit my options. When I find the right woman, we can discuss it further. Please don’t interpret this as arrogance, but I have no doubt I’ll be able provide my woman with anything she needs.”*

*With your money, I’m sure of it, Erica thought. Rising, she walked around her desk and extended her hand.*

*“Thank you for coming in, Mr. Braden,” she said as he engulfed her small hand in his.*

*“I’m sure we’ll be able to find you the perfect woman.”*

*John nearly did laugh at that.*

*“Perfect really isn’t necessary,” he replied, his lips twitching. “Honesty and respect are far more important, and please call me John.”*

*“Okay, John,” she smiled as he released her hand. “We’ll be in touch.”*

*“I look forward to hearing from you, Erica.”*

When the need for an escort presented itself, John Braden was the first man she thought of. He was charming, attractive and wealthy. She knew for a fact he wasn’t in a relationship, so he seemed the perfect choice to accompany her to Vegas for the wedding. Another plus was his mild-mannered nature. He wouldn’t expect anything and she had no intention of offering. In her opinion, a more malleable man would be hard to find. Boy was she wrong!

Everything went well for almost the entire trip. John was attentive, fun and generous, even going so far as to pay for her suite even though she’d invited him. They enjoyed dinner and dancing with the other couples, gambled a little and talked a lot. When she wanted time with the girls, he was more than happy to spend time with the other men. Occasionally she noticed him watching her with a very intent expression on his face, but she ignored it. Whatever he was thinking about had nothing to do with her. If she sensed a little disapproval coming her way, she smiled and waved. He was a cupcake, a push-over, she thought. Hopefully he wouldn’t find a match right away, and she could take advantage of his good nature again. Sam and Johanna were getting married in a few months, and she’d need a date for that.

It wasn't until the night before the wedding that things spun out of control. They all had dinner and went to a show, after which the girls wanted to go out for a few hours alone. The alphas, as Erica mentally referred to them, finally agreed, as long as they remained in the hotel and stayed together. Marcus maintained that it wasn't a good idea. Smart man, but he was outvoted. Sam, Mike, Ty, Marcus, Jeff and John all went to find a poker game. Johanna, Brandy, Kelsey, Susan, Elena and Erica went to find trouble. Mission accomplished!

While Susan and Erica headed to a club called Desperado's, they left the others at an all-male dance review, stuffing money into the G-strings of nearly naked men. Things went downhill from there. By the end of the night when John retrieved her from the club, she was highly intoxicated and giving lap dances while strangers stuffed money into the bodice of her short cocktail dress.

Erica didn't remember much, but the next morning when she woke to find John waiting for her in her suite, he informed her that her last words to him were, 'You're not the boss of me,' as she took a swing at him.

After a very enlightening discussion about inappropriate behavior, her eating habits and his cure for them, he pulled her over his knee and spanked her to tears. Actually, well beyond tears, but her mouth may have had something to do with that. The worst part occurred when she stupidly told him she'd asked him to be her escort because 'he was easily manipulated.' That was a huge mistake.

His lecture had been nearly as bad as her spanking. He told her point blank that there was a little girl inside her who needed attention and now, a month later, she still couldn't get it out of her head. Was it true, and if so, how did he know that about her?

After he left her suite, she threw herself on her bed and continued to cry for the first time in many years. What was up with that? She was not an emotional person. She was a highly organized woman who had carefully constructed little compartments in her mind. There were designated areas for her needs, insecurities, fears, dreams and emotions. She'd be damned if she let them out for the world to pick apart.

The strangest thing, and the one that bothered her most about the whole experience, other than the embarrassment of having her bare ass over John's knee, was the way she felt after. Her tears had cleansed her in some way. She felt refreshed, renewed, and lighter, as though for a short time she actually was a child again, without the cares and responsibilities of her complicated adult life. It scared the crap out of her! She carefully and methodically straightened up her compartments and put things away, things she didn't and wouldn't think about. Things John seemed to know instinctively.

Now she had to find him a woman, and she had to do it quickly. A matched man was off limits, and the sooner that happened, the safer she would feel.