

## Chapter One

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Hunter walked into headquarters wearing a three-piece suit and tugging uncomfortably at his tie. Crap, this was just the beginning. There would be daily briefings, conference calls with agents in the field and he'd probably be trapped in the office most of the time. He almost refused the promotion. It wasn't something he was aspiring to, that was for damn sure, but J.R. talked him into it. After all, it meant he would see Suzie Q every day, Jay reminded him. That alone was worth something.

Not that she was speaking to him. Sure she'd gotten him the information he needed while forcing his way into his boss' last hurrah. Hunter had been helping his best friend Jay get his wife, Joy out of Chet's clutches. Damn old man was losing his fucking perspective if he thought he could get away with abducting an agent's wife. It was time the agency retired him.

Hunter didn't mind that. He just never expected to be tapped for Chet's job. No amount of trying to worm his way out of it worked either. No, the powers that be had made up their minds. They wanted Hunter and it didn't particularly matter what Hunter wanted.

Apparently, they weren't the only ones happy to have him in charge, as he was nearly mobbed as soon as he stepped off the

elevator. There were handshakes, back-slapping and a generally elated atmosphere that caught him off guard. He hadn't known how despised Chet was, or how readily he would be received as his replacement. Noticeably absent however, was Miss Suzie Quantrell.

As soon as the hoopla died down and he'd shaken all the hands he was prepared to shake he made his way down the hall to her office, rapped once and opened the door.

"I take it you're still mad at me," he sighed, closing the door behind him.

"Once again your powers of deduction astound me," she replied glancing up at him.

"I thought maybe you'd cooled off. You did get me that information."

"It's my job," she answered shortly as she shuffled papers on her desk.

Hunter sauntered to the chair in front of her and eased down. At this point towering over her was probably not working in his favor, not that he didn't tower over most people, but Suzie wasn't most people, not in his book.

"You didn't have to. You could have refused me. Technically, I wasn't assigned to the case," he pointed out as his eyes traveled hungrily over her.

"I like J.R. and his wife is a nice person. Chet's been a little off his rocker for some time now," Suzie explained. "It was nothing personal."

"I see. So you didn't help because I asked. In fact, you wouldn't have helped at all if it were not for Jay."

"That is correct, Mr. McCaughey."

"So that's the way it is?"

"As far as I'm concerned," she replied, looking at him with a frozen expression.

"And you're not going to forgive me?"

"Apparently not."

“For God’s sake,” he growled, running his hand through his short cropped blond hair. “It was only a little spanking.”

“Hunter, you left bruises,” she hissed, stiffening her spine.

“I won’t do it again,” he ground out leaning forward.

Suzie pushed her chair back putting more space between them and he cringed. She was not some tiny little thing. Damn, she was nearly six foot with heels on. And she was strong. As he recalled she’d put up quite a fight when he pulled her over his knees. Yet he still intimidated her, physically at least.

“You won’t spank me again?” she asked suspiciously.

“I didn’t say that. I won’t leave bruises,” he clarified.

Suzie snorted, rolled her eyes and pulled her chair back to her desk. She focused on her computer.

“If there is nothing else, Mr. McCaughey, I have work to do,” she said firmly.

“Damn it, Suzie Q, you were asking for it. You know you were,” he insisted.

“I was not!”

“Yes you were, teasing me, almost daring me to put a stop to your sassy mouth. When you get wound up you’ll argue over anything, even stuff that’s meaningless. I’m not stupid. I know when a woman is trying to push my buttons, looking to see how much I’ll tolerate.”

“Well now I know,” she hissed, leaning forward so quickly her blonde ponytail swung wildly. Her brown eyes narrowed accusingly. “You hurt me, Hunter.”

“Spankings are supposed to hurt. I have that on good authority,” he insisted, leaning forward as well until they were almost nose to nose.

Suzie backed up, picked up a pen and started tapping it on her desk.

“So, you’re an expert on corporal punishment now, are you?” she said with a laugh.

“Not yet, but I imagine I will be by the time I can get you to behave.”

“I wouldn’t count on that,” she said rising. “I’m sorry to cut this short, but I have a meeting, and so do you.”

“Shit,” Hunter said glancing at his watch. “We’ll continue this conversation later,” he stated firmly as she skirted both her desk and him and walked to the door.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I’ll be available later,” she countered, smiling sweetly at him over her shoulder. “In fact, I don’t believe I’ll ever be available again, not to you anyway.”

She was gone by the time he shot to his feet. He watched her walking down the corridor, swinging her hips. It was as though she’d somehow trained her ponytail to move in the opposite direction. Her sweet, sassy bottom went one way, her hair the other. He stood, mesmerized until Helena came up beside him.

“Easy there, tiger,” she whispered. “You’re on probation. Right now, you’re the Acting Director and I, for one, don’t want to see you screw that up. You don’t need another episode like the one you had a few weeks ago.”

“You heard about that, did you?” Hunter asked dragging his eyes away from Suzie Q’s ass.

“Don’t delude yourself,” Helena advised with a laugh. “The entire department knows about it. That kind of gossip never stays quiet.”

“Fucking great,” he growled out.

“Now don’t get upset,” she placated sweetly. “There are a good many men in this office who suddenly have a great deal of respect for you, and a few women who may swoon if you get too close. Suzie can be a real bitch when she wants to. Besides, not everyone is opposed to a little slap and tickle, Hunter. You just picked the wrong girl,” she cooed, reaching up and placing her hand on his shoulder.

It was at that moment Suzie stopped and glared at them before she turned to enter the conference room. Her derisive snort could be heard all the way down the hallway, and he was pretty sure she stuck her tongue out at him. Shaking Helena’s hand off, he strode after Suzie.

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THE MEETING WAS SHORT. Hunter took charge of it.

“I appreciate the support you’ve all demonstrated this morning and I’m hopeful the transition period will be smooth and timely. As of this moment I have nothing to tell you. Things will proceed as usual and I’m well satisfied with having everyone remain on board.

“Over the next three or four weeks, Miss Quantrill will be assisting me in reviewing the manual and we’ll be taking recommendations for any procedural changes under consideration. Then we will meet again to discuss them. I will be interested in your input. I’ve always felt the men and women in the field have a lot to offer in that regard.”

“Mr. McCaughey, I’m really much too busy with my own work to assist you. Get someone else,” Suzie stated clearly.

“Miss Quantrill, we’ve worked well together in the past and I see no reason why we can’t continue to do so. Helena will pick up any slack,” he informed her firmly.

“Certainly, Mr. McCaughey,” Helena replied with a smug grin aimed at Suzie. “You know you can always count on me for anything.”

“Thank you, Helena. Now as far as immediate changes there are only a couple and they will be implemented and a memo sent out. No agent will attempt to recruit a new operative on their own. All suggestions will cross my desk, and I don’t care how helpful the individual has been to the agency.”

“I assume that abducting an agent’s wife is also off limits?” Baker asked with a laugh.

“You assume correctly,” Hunter replied as a general chuckle went around the table. “That kind of action has always been and will continue to be crossing the line. The only exception is when any member of an agent’s family is in imminent danger. Such an aggressive action has to be approved by me unless there are extenuating circumstances. If such is the case an agent has the

authority to act quickly and I trust you all to have judgement that is superior to my predecessor.”

“How are Jay and his wife?” Thornton asked quietly.

“They are back on their ranch and enjoying a quiet life,” Hunter replied. “I don’t believe you’ll see Joy Everly around here again, despite her skills. Not unless Jay suddenly loses his mind,” Hunter said wryly. “As her husband Jay is adamantly against her working for the agency.”

“That’s a shame. She’s very talented,” Baker added.

“She certainly is, but Jay is against it, so that’s the end of it.”

“Hasn’t she ever heard of women’s rights?” Suzie drawled sarcastically.

Hunter’s jaw clenched and the room fell silent.

“I’m certain she has, but believe it or not Miss Quantrill, there are still some women who fall into a different category, women who value their husband’s opinions and respect them enough to actually listen.

“I don’t believe Joy will ever go behind her husband’s back again, and even if she does something as foolish as that, she’d have to work through me.”

“And you would rat her out,” Suzie sassed.

“In a heartbeat,” Hunter replied with a brisk nod of his head as he stared at her. “I might remind you, Miss Quantrill that typically a civilian’s only involvement with the agency is when they are under our protection as witnesses. We do not allow untrained personnel to immerse themselves in missions they have no clue how to handle no matter how skilled they happen to be in their field.”

“Yes sir, Mr. McCaughey,” Suzie shot back.

Hunter noticed her blush and hid his smile. In his opinion ‘sir’ had a nice ring to it.

“Now, let’s all get back to work. I have an open door policy. Should something come up that needs my attention, don’t hesitate to see me. Miss Quantrill, meet me in my office in ten

minutes. We have a few things to discuss. Have a nice day everyone.”

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SHIT! Shit! Shit! Suzie thought as she gathered up her papers and left the room. Damn, the man was bossy enough as a lover, now he was going to be her superior at work. It was untenable. She was going to have to look for a new job and there was not a damn one that would pay what she was making at the agency. Why had she bought that condo? The walls were paper thin and at least three of her neighbors had looked at her with knowing smirks after the night Hunter spanked her to tears, well to shrieks if she was honest! It had been embarrassing as hell.

The man was a complete Neanderthal that much was clear. Sure she'd rattled his cage a few times, and maybe she was looking for some sort of reaction. A girl needed to know the kind of man she was getting serious about. Was he even tempered? Could he take some razzing now and then without losing his cool? Was he someone who would retaliate physically?

Suzie was no slouch. She'd sailed through training like a champ and at 5'10" she wasn't easily intimidated, but Hunter was mammoth, a giant at six foot eight and incredibly strong. Besides that, he was remarkably agile and quick. It still galled her to recall how easily he'd overpowered her. She was tough, for sure, but she didn't stand a chance against Hunter.

Truthfully, his size attracted her from the beginning. As a rule, tall men were attracted to tiny little women, or so it seemed to her. She towered over more dates than she cared to remember, and most men didn't particularly want a girlfriend who could kick their ass with one hand tied behind her back. They wanted someone small and dainty who would coo up at them, gushing about how big and strong they were. Gag me with a spoon, Suzie thought as she stomped down the hall to her office and slammed the door behind her.

Plopping onto her chair she couldn't prevent the smile that crossed her lips as she remembered their first date. It surprised her when he asked her out. All evening he'd been a perfect gentleman, opening doors, asking her what wine she preferred and talking to her like a long-lost friend.

Deeply disappointed she was shocked when he escorted her to her door. This was going nowhere she thought. She might as well have been his sister, or maybe an old friend of the family. Suddenly he'd pulled her against him, kissed her passionately and whispered that he'd like to fuck her into next week.

With her hands shaking she unlocked her door and decided to test his mettle. He didn't disappoint. Hunter didn't exactly fuck her into next week, but he did fuck her until next week for they didn't leave her apartment until Monday morning when they had to go to work. It had been heavenly.

As impressive as he was in his clothes, he was even more so out of them. He showed some wear and tear, she didn't deny that. There was a wicked scar on his thigh about eight inches long and half an inch wide.

"If not for J.R., I would have died from that," he'd told her huskily as she gently traced it with her fingers.

Another scar was clearly from a gunshot wound, and there was a third notable gash along his side, but the rest of him was magnificently well-formed and for weeks after that night she dreamed about his body. Watching him remove his clothes had been like an unveiling, stunningly beautiful yet moving her in ways that were new to her.

No shy virgin, at almost thirty she'd had her share of lovers, but no one to compare to Hunter. If he didn't have that nasty little quirk of thinking he should always be in charge he'd be damn near perfect. In bed he was more flexible; as long as she didn't do anything that tickled him, he was game.

For a while she thought she might marry him. Hunter was the sort of man you kept if you were lucky enough to run across him. They worked well together, were of equal intelligence so



their conversations were never stilted or boring and he could make her body sing. He had a sense of humor, could take a fair amount of ribbing and was quick to give it right back. In a word, he was fun, in and out of bed.

Until that horrible night several weeks ago that changed everything, she thought sadly. Heaving a heartfelt sigh she grabbed her tablet and cell and made her way to his office. Soon she'd start looking for a new job. Already she had a few interesting leads, but there was one place in particular she wanted to learn more about before she made the leap.