



## Hard To Handle: HunterMan in Control (Long Tall Texans)

*By Diana Palmer*

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**Hard To Handle: HunterMan in Control (Long Tall Texans)** By Diana Palmer

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### HUNTER

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### MAN IN CONTROL

Ever since DEA agent Alexander Cobb had given Jodie Clayburn a Texas-size brush-off, they'd been sworn enemies. But eight years later, this cynical long, tall Texan couldn't believe the baby-faced schoolgirl had turned into such a beauty. Or that she'd help him crack the drug-smuggling case that threatened Jacobsville. He'd risk everything to protect her. Would the man in control finally get caught in his own web of danger...and desire?

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### **Editorial Review**

#### About the Author

The prolific author of more than one hundred books, Diana Palmer got her start as a newspaper reporter. A New York Times bestselling author and voted one of the top ten romance writers in America, she has a gift for telling the most sensual tales with charm and humor. Diana lives with her family in Cornelia, Georgia.

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The silver-haired man across the desk had both hands clasped together on its surface, and his blue eyes were narrow and determined.

Hunter wanted to argue. He'd protested assignments before, and Eugene Ritter had backed down. This time the old man wouldn't. Hunter sensed Ritter's determination before he even tried to get out of the job.

That didn't stop him, of course. Phillip Hunter was used to con-frontation. As chief of internal security for Ritter Oil Corpora-tion for the past ten years, he'd become quite accustomed to facing off against all manner of opponents, from would-be thieves to enemy agents who tried to get the jump on Ritter's strategic metal discoveries.

"The desert is no place for a woman," he told the old man. He sat back comfortably in the straight-backed chair, looking as for-midable as his Apache ancestors. He was very dark, with jet-black hair conventionally cut, and eyes almost black in a lean, thin-lipped face. He was tall, too, and muscular. Even his perfectly of exercise. Hunter was ex-Green Beret, ex-mercenary, and for a short time he'd even worked for the CIA. He was an expert with small arms and his karate training had earned him a black belt. He was thirty-seven, a loner by nature, unmarried and apt to stay that way. He had no inclination to accompany Eugene's sexy field geolo-gist out to Arizona on a preliminary survey. Jennifer Marist was one of his few ongoing irritations. She seemed to stay in hot water, and he was always deputized to pull her irons out of the fire.

Her last exploration had put her in danger from enemy agents, resulting in a stakeout at her apartment a few months ago. Two men had been apprehended, but the third was still at large.

Hunter and Jennifer were old sparring partners. They'd been thrown together on assignments more often than Hunter liked. Like two rocks striking, they made sparks fly, and that could be dangerous. He didn't like white women, and Jennifer was unique. Her soft blond beauty, added to her sharp intellect, made him jittery. She was the only female who'd ever had that effect on him, and he didn't like it. The thought of spending a week in the desert alone with her had him fuming.

"Jennifer isn't just a woman, she's one of my top field geolo-gists," Eugene replied. "This is a potentially rich strike, and I need the new capital it will bring in. Jennifer can't go alone."

"I could send one of my operatives with her," Hunter replied.

"Not good enough. Jennifer's already been in danger from this assignment once. I want the best—and that's you."

"We don't get along, haven't you noticed?" he said through his teeth.

"You don't have to get along with her. You just have to keep anyone from getting his hands on her maps or her survey results."

He pursed his lips. "The site's in Arizona, near the Apache reservation. You can go see your grandfather."

"I can do that without having to follow your misplaced ingenue around," he said coldly.

"Jennifer is a geologist," the older man reminded him. "Her looks have nothing to do with her profession. For God's sake, you get along with my other female employees, why not with Jennifer?"

That was a question Hunter didn't really want to answer. He couldn't very well tell Eugene that the woman appealed to his senses so potently that it was hard to function when she was around. He wasn't in the market for an affair, but he wanted Jennifer with a feverish passion. He'd managed to contain his desire for her very well over the years, but lately it was becoming unmanageable. The temptation of being out on the desert with her was too much. Something might happen, and what then? He had good reasons for his dislike of white women, and he had no desire whatsoever to create a child who, like himself, could barely adapt to life in a white world. White and Apache just didn't mix, even if he did frequently wake up sweating from his vivid dreams about Jennifer Marist.

"You can always threaten to quit," Eugene advised with a sharp grin.

"Would it work?" Hunter queried.

Eugene just shook his head.

"In that case," Hunter said, rising to his feet with the stealthy grace that was unique to him, "I won't bother. When do we leave?"

"First thing in the morning. You can pick up the tickets and motel voucher from my secretary. You'll need time to lay in some camping equipment, so the motel room will be necessary the first night. You and Jennifer will be pretending to be husband and wife when you switch flights in Phoenix to head down to Tucson.

That's going to throw any followers off the track, I hope, and give you both time to scout the area before they

discover their mistake and double back. Better get in touch with our operatives in Arizona and advise them of the plan."

"I'll do that now."

"Try not to look so dismal, will you?" Eugene muttered darkly.

"It's demoralizing!"

"Stop sending me out with Jennifer Marist."

"You're the only man in my corporation who could complain about that."

"I'm Apache," Hunter said with quiet pride. "She's white." Eugene had been married twice and he wasn't stupid. He could read between the lines very well. "I understand how it is," he replied. "But this is business. You'll have to cope."

"Don't I always?" Hunter murmured. "Will you tell her, or do you want me to?"

"I'll enjoy it more than you would," Eugene chuckled. "She's going to go right through the ceiling. It may shock you to know that she finds you offensive and unpleasant. She'll fight as hard to get out of it as you just did."

That didn't surprise Hunter. He had a feeling Jennifer felt the same unwanted attraction he did and was fighting it just as hard. From day one, their relationship had been uneasy and antagonistic.

"It won't do her any more good than it did me," Hunter murmured. "But if she ends up roasting over a campfire, don't say I didn't warn you."

Eugene's blue eyes twinkled. "Okay. I won't."

Hunter left and walked along the corridor with an expression so cold and so fierce that one employee turned and went back the other way to avoid him. He had a fairly decent working relationship with some of Eugene's people, but most of them kept out of his way. The icy Mr. Hunter was well-known. He was the only bachelor who didn't have to fight off feminine advances. The women were too intimidated by him. All except for Jennifer, who fought him tooth and nail.

And now a week on the desert with her, he mused. He lit a cigarette as he walked and blew out a thick cloud of smoke. He'd just managed to give up cigarettes the week before. He was getting hooked again, and it was Eugene's fault. For two cents, he'd quit and go back and raise horses on the reservation. But that would bore

him to death eventually. No, he'd just have to find some way to survive Jennifer. One day, he promised himself, he was going to walk out the door and leave Eugene with it.

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