

CHAPTER ONE

Look, you imbecile. I pay you to find me drivers for my trucks, and that's what I want done. You find me ten new drivers by the end of the week or else." Pig hung up his cell phone and threw it to the floor. He shifted his four-hundred-pound body in the back seat of his dark SUV with tinted windows. "Head Hunter, take me to the house."

Head Hunter, Pig's driver and lead enforcer, knew that Pig's anger was about to surface, something everyone avoided like the plague. "No problem boss," he said.

Pig wore a three-piece suit custom made from fine Asian silk. His feet were covered with the finest snakeskin, size fourteen boots. He never went anywhere without his black felt fedora—it had become his trademark. There were only two times Pig removed his hats outside his home—when he was making a deal in person, and when someone was going to die.

The leather beneath him moaned under his weight as he looked through the side window. "I am surrounded by idiots," he muttered.

"I know, boss." Head Hunter put the SUV in drive and they pulled away from the restaurant Pig frequented on a regular basis. "I can take care of Black Jack for you if you want, boss."

"Just drive," Pig barked and then wheezed.

He'd been a chain smoker since he was a teenager. He always smelled of sweat and nicotine, even after bathing. His unpleasant aroma was how he had earned the nickname, Pig.

The men who worked for Pig and protected his business had become accustomed to his stench and dreaded the man far more than his smell. Pig was a ruthless protector of what he felt belonged to him.

Pig was strapped with two forty-fives under his coat and two four-ten derringers were hidden in each sleeve of his jacket. He was known to pull a weapon literally at a drop of a hat. He paid his enforcers extremely well for their loyalty and protection, but every one of them knew if they crossed Pig, he would kill them without hesitation. Pig trusted no one and ran much of his operations on his own from a computer that never left his sight. He was only in his early thirties but because of his weight, he used a cane to walk like a man in his eighties.

Although food and cigarettes were unfettered excesses, Pig avoided alcohol; he wanted his mind to remain sharp. He loved beautiful women, but his stench repulsed them, leaving him to pay handsomely for carnal companionship. Seduced by his money, several legitimate women attempted to be his mate, but not even money could make him appealing. Pig had everything he wanted in life...except a woman, and it irked him every time he thought about it.

Shelby and Jack Mathews had returned from Colorado after much needed time away to recuperate. Shelby had again been traumatized by her former coworker, Betty Burton. Now Betty was dead, and while Shelby had never been one to rejoice over someone else's misfortune, she had to admit she was relieved to have Betty out of the picture for good.

Shelby was glad to be home with Jack, the love of her life. And while she still enjoyed her chosen profession as a trucker, she was not content with her current job. Shelby would always be grateful to Jayne who not only encouraged her to become a trucker, but had also given Shelby her recent position, which allowed her to stay close to home. Shelby, tired of working for other folks, now dreamed of owning her own truck. She knew she couldn't possibly afford one on her own, so kept her wish to herself.

Shelby had pulled into the Flying J truck stop at exit 277 off I-20 near Tye, Texas for a cup of coffee and to stretch her legs. It was a cool October evening and she put her hands in the pockets of her hoodie and walked briskly to the store.

A man held the door for her as she approached. "Thank you," Shelby said, smiling faintly.

"You're welcome."

Before stopping for coffee, Shelby headed to the restroom. The man who had opened the door for her followed her toward the back of the store and headed for the men's room as she opened the door to the ladies' room.

After using the restroom, Shelby filled a cup with black coffee. The man who had held the door for Shelby was mixing creamer and sugar into his coffee on the counter. "Looks to me like you prefer your coffee black," he said, glancing over at her with a smile. "I used to take mine like that but over the years I guess I've gone soft and like it sweet."

Shelby smiled back at him. "I like my coffee with a little half and half, but I bring it with me and add it when I'm in the truck."

"You aren't taking your husband some coffee?"

Shelby knew the man was fishing for information. She'd gotten the marriage question more times than she could count. "I drive alone," she told him. "Been a solo driver for years. My husband does ride from time to time, though."

The man led the way to the cash register. “Not sure I would let my wife drive a truck alone, especially if she looked like you.”

Shelby blushed a little.

“No need to be embarrassed by the truth, my lady.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

The man quickly paid for both cups before she could object. “Thank you, but you didn’t have to do that for me.”

“Nonsense. I never get to buy a beautiful woman a cup of coffee. It was my pleasure.”

“Well, thank you. Perhaps I can buy you a cup sometime.”

“Perhaps, but this is a big country. We might run into each other again, though. It has been known to happen.”

The man escorted Shelby through the doors and walked with her toward her truck. They talked casually about trucking and what each of them was hauling. They discussed their destinations and the amount of time they spent away from their families. When Shelby and the man reached the back of her trailer she stopped. “Well, here I am.”

The man put his hand out and Shelby shook it. “It’s been great getting to know you.”

“Same here.”

The man reached into his pocket, pulled out a business card, and handed it to Shelby. “If you ever decide you want to change jobs and make some really good money, give me a call.”

Shelby looked at the card and then at the man. “Black Jack? That’s your name? Sounds like a handle.”

The man chuckled. “Yeah, it is a handle and also what everyone I know calls me.”

Shelby looked over the card again and noticed on the back a phone number that had been written by hand.

The man responded before Shelby could ask. “That’s my private number in case you can’t reach me on my company phone.”

Shelby stuffed the card into the pocket of her hoodie and shook the man's hand again. "Okay, I'll keep that in mind." Shelby walked toward her truck, sipping at her coffee. "Thanks again for the coffee, Black Jack."

Shelby could feel Black Jack's eyes on her as she unlocked her truck and started to climb inside. At the last minute, Shelby leaned out of her truck and yelled toward the stranger as he started to walk to his own truck. "They call me Barbie."

The man lifted his coffee and laughed. "I see why."

Shelby smiled and pulled her door closed. Then she pulled the card out of her pocket and examined it. She slapped it a couple times against the steering wheel before placing it on her visor. She looked out her window and saw that the man was driving a beautiful black Peterbilt tractor, chromed to the max. It was attached to an equally chromed out drop deck trailer. The trailer was loaded with what appeared to be a train car box.

I don't see myself calling him for a job, she thought, but if his company provides that kind of equipment to all its employees, I may just have to think about it.

Head Hunter pulled up to the fancy, guarded wrought-iron gate in front of Pig's estate and rolled down his window. The sentry recognized his boss' SUV, gave a cursory glance to ensure his employer was in the vehicle, and quickly opened the gate. Head Hunter closed the window, entered the estate, and moved up the long, winding driveway.

The twelve-thousand-square-foot mansion was isolated and concealed by trees and shrubs, making surveillance of the premises impossible from anywhere but the air. Pig possessed several acres of well-manicured lawn fenced off by white pickets, which separated a smattering of warehouses and other buildings. There was a landing strip for his private plane, which select customers also used. The entire estate was protected and monitored by the best high-tech security money could buy.

Although Pig had cameras everywhere, some of his permanent, dedicated-for-life soldiers had been implanted with microchips in order to assure Pig of their dedication to him as well as granting him access to all of their personal information. As of yet, the microchip implants were not a requirement for employment, but if someone volunteered for the chip, they received a huge bonus with job security for life.

Almost everything Pig owned had microchip locators, from the simplest piece of furniture or electronic device in his home to the many buildings he owned, many with cameras as well. Anything mobile or extremely valuable had a camera. Pig had complete access to and control of everything and everyone from his laptop computer.

Not being a man to take chances, Pig had an off the grid generator and a twenty-four-hour manned surveillance command center.

Pig had layers of politicians and law enforcement officials on his payroll, protecting his lifestyle and theirs. Anyone dealing with Pig was placed on his detection list. Their every movement was tracked in one way or another. All this to protect his warehouses of drugs, guns, and other contraband.

A security guard stationed at his front door quickly met his boss once the vehicle stopped. He opened Pig's door and helped the oversized man exit the back seat. Pig accepted the help, but once he was clear of the door frame he jerked his arms away grumbling, "I can manage. Get my phone from the floor and bring it to me."

Pig waddled up the two steps that led to the front entrance, where his personal attendant opened the front door for him. "I'll be going to the command center and then to my room, Harry. Have Hank, Tazz, and Drifter meet me there."

Harry took Pig's hat. "Yes, sir."

The command center was located just to the left, off the main foyer. Harry opened one of the wide wooden doors that barely allowed his employer to slip sideways through the entrance. The center was manned by a team of eight dispatchers. There were several armed guards, watching every move made in the center. Monitors in the center plastered two complete walls.

In one corner of the huge room, a control panel for the entire operation towered over the cubicles below. Pig made his way up the three steps to the glass-enclosed brain of the operation. Just as he reached the panel, his right-hand man Hank entered the center and hurried over to where his boss was waiting. "Harry said you wanted to see me, boss?"

Pig squinted at him. "Where are Tazz and Drifter?"

"They're taking care of a shipment that just arrived."

Pig nodded and then took a seat in a custom made, oversized chair. He took out his laptop and began punching keys, causing several screens to appear on the main monitors. "I want to know why these warehouse cameras are not giving me wider views of the merchandise, Hank. I pay you to make sure that the items my customers have entrusted me with are safe and secure. You and I both know Bullets and his men will do whatever they have to do to penetrate my operation."

"I was sure we had every inch of that building covered inside, boss."

Pig pointed impatiently to several points of interest on different monitors. “There, there, there, and there, you idiot. If you move from one screen to another you can see the break in security, and I want it fixed at once. I want more camera coverage and listening devices placed in that building immediately!”

“I see what you’re talking about, boss, and I’ll make sure that it is taken care tonight,” Hank said nervously as he scanned the screens.

Pig got slowly out of his chair and waddled toward the exit of the platform. “I’ll check in the morning to make sure it has been completed to my satisfaction. Also, check on the building in the M-9 region. I overheard some chatter from a couple of drivers that Time Bomb and some of his flunkies were seen in that area. They may be staking out the area in order to get access to that warehouse.”

“Got it, boss. I’ll send Parker to the area for a personal inspection and report back.”

Gripping the handrails tightly, Pig climbed slowly down the steps. “Parker has done a great job protecting that building, but Bullets is a snake. If his men are snooping around, you know he’s up to something.”

“I know, boss.”

Pig barked out one last command to his lead enforcer before leaving the room. “Check on Black Jack and let me know what he’s doing. I gave him an order and I want it followed.”

“I’ll email you my findings before you wake up in the morning, boss.”

Hank breathed a faint sigh of relief once Pig was out of the room. He had no idea what Pig had ordered Black Jack to do other than it had something to do with Texas. Among other things, Black Jack was in charge of recruiting new drivers for Pig. Hank knew Pig was expanding his operation to meet customer requests for “special” storage for their “special” property. He figured Black Jack was being pushed to find several more drivers to transport that property. Whatever it was, Hank knew when Pig wanted someone tracked something was wrong.

He punched up Black Jack’s chip and downloaded his activity to Pig’s email. Then he switched to the M-9 region and the areas around the warehouses. It took several hours to check the whole area, but there was one specific spot to the back of the area that appeared to be at risk. Hank marked the area and again sent the information to Pig.

Hank put a call into Parker, who had made several verbal threats to Bullets’ men. “Parker, you know Pig wants no involvement with any law enforcement agency. Do not confront or make any kind of enforcement movements in the open

against any of Bullets' men. Eliminate the leak as quietly and as ghostly as you can."

"Okay, Hank, but without bringing them into the warehouse area and disposing of them in the secrecy of our secured area, I'm not sure how else to keep them from checking out the warehouses."

"INVISIBILITY, PARKER! INVISIBILITY! I have located a possible exposure point to the rear of the warehouse area near the trees. I'll email you the satellite picture of the area and I want it closed. Do not bring anyone into the secured areas without authorization. If you have to eliminate the spies, take it to the border and let Pig's foreign friends have the pleasure of executing them."

"Fine, Hank. But how do you suppose I get those boneheads down there?"

"Figure it out. Just don't draw attention to Pig or his property. That would be a devastating mistake for you."

"Fine," he sighed. "I'll do what I can."

Pig had a perfect pickup and delivery system. People in particularly sensitive positions were placed along the borders and on docks and ports located on both sides of the country and in customs. He ensured those placements by tapping political clients and business associates that used his services. Products and merchandise that required protection or no detection from honest law abiding politicians and law enforcement were given to Pig for delivery or storage. One thing Pig couldn't control, however, was the DEA. He had been unable to infiltrate that organization. Since he had no idea if they had anything on him, he kept his nose as clean as possible, hoping they wouldn't notice him.

The drivers were hired to pick up sensitive cargo in Texas, California, and border towns near Mexico, as well as ports across the East Coast. They were to deliver their consignments to Pig's secure warehouses. Black Jack, a seasoned truck driver, brought in new drivers straight from the road. The drivers were never given any information about what they were hauling and were forbidden to check out their freight. The pay was fantastic and the work was easy. Of course, there were downsides, too. They were monitored constantly with onboard trackers, cameras, and voice monitors. Any driver who got curious or had run-ins with the law were terminated immediately.

Pig had made it very clear he didn't want or need DOT putting their noses in his business. Trucks and trailers were kept in perfect condition with all mechanical issues attended to immediately. Pig's theory had proven to be correct, if DOT had no reason to watch his trucks, they wouldn't and they didn't. He was allowed to haul his illegal merchandise across the country without problems because he made his company maintain a low profile.

Even with all his precautions and rules, he had a lingering thorn in his side—Bullets. The pain Bullets and his gang had created for Pig was eventually going to lead to an all-out ground war. Pig, however, was doing everything in his power to avoid that confrontation, knowing it would lead to exposure. The inevitability was there regardless. Bullets wanted Pig's business and nothing except death was going to prevent him from going after it.

Pig had even gone as far as inviting Bullets into his organization, willing to make him his lead lieutenant. But Bullets had laughed and let Pig know in no uncertain terms that he would rather take Pig's empire for himself.

Shelby didn't know why she was so intrigued with Black Jack, but he stuck in her mind as she moved down the highway. She couldn't decide if it was his appearance or his personality. Black Jack was a tall, slender-built man who made a pair of Wrangler jeans fit like a glove. But the black felt cowboy hat that covered most of his forehead hid what Shelby liked best but only caught a glimpse of—dark brown eyes. *Stupid woman. Jack will go crazy if you ask him to buy you a truck, she thought. He'll also lose it when you bring up the idea of long hauling again. You just need to put it all out of your mind and live with what you are doing now.*

Shelby reached above the steering wheel and took Black Jack's business card off the visor. She turned on the overhead light and looked at the card again before putting it back in the place she had just taken it from. Then she shook her head and turned the overhead light off again. There was no way Jack would let her change jobs. She let the subject go as she headed home.

Miles away, Black Jack couldn't get Shelby out of his head either. He wished he had gotten her number, but he hadn't wanted to seem too forward, especially after she mentioned her husband. He did think she would have made a great driver. He had recruited only two women since he had been given the assignment, and one of the women—Angelica—had already moved up in the company. In fact, she was one of his best recruits. She was never late for a pickup and was always on time for a delivery.

Shelby seemed to be just what Black Jack was looking for in a recruit. He had liked the results he was getting with his female drivers. The better the drivers did, the better he looked in front of Pig. *I just need to find Barbie again and soon,* he thought.

After Hank finished sending Pig all the information he'd asked for, he completed his regular scan of properties and then left the command center to the night shift. Hank was met by two of Pig's enforcers in the lobby of Pig's house. "So did you take

care of the shipment?”

Tazz and Drifter were always cocky with Hank when Pig wasn't around. They knew he had every inch of his property under cameras and voice monitoring devices but they loved making Hank feel like he had no power over them. “Well, I don't know, Hank sir, is that what we were supposed to do?”

“Shut up, Drifter. You guys had better have done as you were told or Pig will know tomorrow in my report.”

“We did, Hank,” Tazz said. “Don't get your panties in a bunch.”

Hank rolled his eyes. “Good. At least I won't have to have you beheaded by the cartel tonight.”

“Ha! Ha! Jackass!”

Hank disappeared in the elevator, leaving Drifter and Tazz to their joking.

Pig had retired to the comfort of his private quarters. His personal attendant, Harry, helped him undress and get into silk pajamas. He turned down the bed and left a bottle of water on Pig's nightstand. “Will there be anything else this evening, sir?” he asked.

Pig lay in his bed focused on the seventy-two-inch flat screen TV that took up a large portion of the wall. “No, Harry. That's all, thank you.”

“Very good, sir.” Harry left the room, locking the door as he left. Pig, by habit, had his laptop next to him on the bed. He opened the screen and checked through his warehouses and house and then turned his attention back to the television.

Pig's cell phone rang. He looked at the screen and then answered it. There were no pleasantries with Pig, especially when he was doing business. Pig opened a screen on his computer. “Yes?” The person on the other end of the line said very little but plainly explained what he needed from Pig. “How many?” A response. “Where and what time?” Another response. “Destination and time?” As Pig listened, he typed the information into the computer and then gave confirmation. “Done.”

Pig emailed Head Hunter to let him know they'd be going to a warehouse near his property in Louisiana. It was one of the many places not located on his estate He had agreed to meet a client there personally for the pick-up of a very valuable painting that Pig had been protecting for him. The painting had been brought into the States without going through customs.

The new owner had obtained this new property through less-than-honest measures and was determined to keep what he had taken no matter the cost.

Hank reached his room and closed his door. He knew he was still under surveillance, even in his room. Pig, however, had made it clear to his monitors that unless he gave them specific orders, they were to give his top lieutenants their privacy during rest hours. If they violated that small amount of privacy without permission, they would be terminated. Hank liked working for Pig and he was paid well for his loyalty, but sometimes he hated the lack of privacy. He cherished the few hours he had without surveillance. He also hated the fact he had never had time for a family, but this was the life he had chosen. The other stuff would have to wait.

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