

TRUTH BEHIND THE MASK

by

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Chastilian's many great towers rose high into the night sky, daring to touch the stars with their majestic height. They stretched to fill the seemingly endless skyline, illuminating it in a myriad of lights. A Sentinel stood atop one such structure, keeping watch from her vantage point. Dressed all in black, her face hidden behind a mask, she embraced the shadows on the roof and used them to her advantage to watch over the city unnoticed. Using her night vision binoculars, she focused her attention on a figure on the street below.

Shifting suddenly as her quarry made a move, she climbed onto the roof edge and for a brief moment was silhouetted against the full moon, revealing herself to the night. Then she stepped off the edge of the building and disappeared into the darkness.

CHAPTER ONE

Pagan Osborne maneuvered her van through the wild and manic early morning traffic, marveling at how many commuters were still racing to work as she tried to cross at a busy intersection. Pagan squinted at the bright sunlight that spilled through her windshield and hitched up her sunglasses to try to cut out the light that threatened to blind her tired eyes. She drove with gritted teeth, trying not to let the erratic maneuvers of the other drivers test her patience. She was relieved when she finally saw the ornate gates of the Ammassari Dealership, and she steered the van into the designated parking bay and got out. She looked over the endless rows of cars and vans laid out for the lucky buyer to peruse. She gave a quick glance at her own vehicle. The black van was decorated with a lighthouse motif on both side panels, its beam of light highlighting the words *Ronchetti Security*.

“Finally!” A small, rotund man barreled his way toward Pagan and clapped his broad hand on her back. “I thought you’d never get here.”

Pagan looked at her watch. “You only came and saw us yesterday, Mr. Ammassari, and you are the first call on my rounds.”

“Yes, yes, but things happen in a busy city like ours.” Tito Ammassari leaned forward and whispered, “I’m hearing all sorts of things from all sorts of people. I need this place wired and alarmed pronto. A man in my line of business needs to be secure.”

Pagan nodded, intrigued by his almost palpable unease. “I’ll start with the offices first, then we’ll work our way out.” She scanned the lot with an expert eye. “You’ll need plenty of cameras out here. This is a big lot to cover.”

“Anything, any cost. It doesn’t matter. Just keep me safe!”

Pagan nodded and gestured toward the office building attached to the main car lot. "Can I set up in there?"

"Yes, yes, go see Erith. She's our new girl. She'll show you anything you need." Tito nudged Pagan with a meaty elbow. "She's very smart. She's mended half the antiquated machines in our office, and she's very fast on the computer."

Pagan was bemused as to why he would be sharing this information with her.

"She also fixed the coffee machine." From the awe in Tito's voice, this was some miracle of science.

"It sounds like you have found yourself a good employee, Mr. Ammassari."

"She's pretty too." He gestured to his own sparse hair. "And all fire."

Pagan was a little mystified at his description but paid it little heed as she grabbed her case from the back of her van. "I'll just go get started, then." She watched as his attention was caught by potential customers arriving on his lot, and he dismissed her with a distracted wave.

She jogged up the steps that led to the main offices that housed the car lot business, then meandered through the series of short corridors until she found the office where visitors were sent. Pagan stuck her head around the open door first so as not to startle the office's occupant. The greeting Pagan was set to utter stuck somewhere in her throat.

A young woman stood by a filing cabinet, and when she turned to see who was entering her work space, Pagan was pinned to the spot by the greenest pair of eyes she had ever seen. She was doubly arrested by the color of the woman's hair. Pagan removed her sunglasses to better appreciate the vibrant colors she was seeing. Ammassari had not been exaggerating. This woman was indeed *all fire*. A rich red mane of hair streaked with highlights of orange framed her face.

Pagan realized that the woman was waiting for her to speak. She had struck a pose against the cabinet and was regarding Pagan with an amused look.

"You're Erith, right? Mr. Ammassari told me to just come up..." Pagan began, but her voice cracked like a teenage boy's.

"Ronchetti Security, yes?" Erith filed away the paperwork she had in her hand, then slid the cabinet closed with a nudge of her hip.

Pagan headed for a flat surface where she could lay down her case. It clattered loudly, making her cringe. She flipped open the lid, and a coil of wire snaked out in a bid for freedom. She stifled a sigh and began to wind the wire back up again.

“Got out of bed just a little too early this morning?”

Pagan looked over her shoulder. “It’s always too early. I’m more a night person.”

“Do you need coffee to start your day more smoothly?”

“I honestly can’t drink the stuff.”

“There’s a pop machine just outside if you’re in need of a different caffeine fix.”

Pagan nodded, grateful of the excuse to escape. “Can I get you anything?”

Erith tapped a black painted nail on the side of her mug. “I drink coffee. I’m made of sterner stuff.”

Pagan grinned at the delightful drawl of Erith’s soft voice and left to find the drink machine. She fumbled with her money, trying to get it into the coin slot, and was amazed to see how slick with sweat her palms were. She jumped as the can fell with a loud clatter into the tray, and she removed it before it made any more noise to startle her edgy nerves. The coldness did little to stop her hands from sweating. Pagan was drawn back toward the office. She chuckled at the thought that entered her head: *like a moth to the proverbial flame*. She was surprised to find Erith waiting for her at the door, all but barring her entry.

“Just how tall *are* you?” she asked as she tipped her head back to take in Pagan’s full height.

“Six feet, give or take an inch.” Pagan looked down at the much smaller Erith. “And you’re what? About five foot in your biker boots?”

“Five foot four, if you must know.”

Pagan bit back a smile at what was obviously a touchy subject for Erith. “What are a few inches between friends?”

“So quick are you to make friends with the office girl?” Erith walked back into the office to lean against her desk. “For all you know, I could be a mass murderer who wanders from office to office seeking my next prey amid the paper clips.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, though I think you might need a touch

more black to carry the whole murderer thing off with any panache. I'm Pagan Osborne." She held out a hand politely.

"*Pagan?* Is everything about you so unusual?"

"You have *no* idea."



Erith Baylor. Pagan let the name roll around her head as she meandered from office to office, marking off every door and window on her plan. She wandered back into Erith's office and tapped further instructions into the small electronic notepad that held her virtual map. Seated across from Erith, she pretended not to watch her work.

Pagan was fascinated by Erith's clothing. She was dressed in a black wool sweater that hung from her shoulders to reveal a dark-colored T-shirt underneath. Jeans that had seen better days were held up by a studded belt. Black biker boots added a touch more menace to the ensemble. The brightness of Erith's hair was at furious odds with the darkness of her clothing. She understood the draw to the darkness of attire; black was a color that could be very intimidating. She wondered why Erith would feel the need to warn people away. Pagan looked down at her own clothes, starting with a pair of black boots that were polished and shiny. She also wore jeans, but high-quality ones that were smart yet practical. A dark blue sweatshirt bearing her work logo finished off her attire. Pagan reached up to check if she'd at least taken the time to comb her hair before she'd grabbed the keys to the van and set out into the day's early light.

Her movement caught Erith's attention. Pagan sensed Erith's sharp eyes traveling over her like a physical touch. She lifted her head from her notepad to find Erith watching her, looking straight into her soul, it seemed. Erith smiled, and Pagan smiled in return. She shifted to try to ease her long legs out across the floor before her and not slip out of the chair that was too small for her. She caught the smothered grin Erith tried to stifle at her predicament.

"Damn plastic chairs aren't built for comfort."

"Not for the giants among us, no," Erith said. "So, Pagan Osborne, what draws you to the world of security alarms?"

"It's a family business."

“Do you like your work?”

“Who wouldn’t want to keep the city safe from harm?”

Erith chuckled at Pagan’s obvious party line. “So you’re fitting the car lot with cameras and such?”

“It seems Mr. Ammassari feels the need for an eye on every corner of his business. We’re here to fit whatever he requires for him to feel his business is secure.”

“How long do you think that will take? To get everything set up and alarmed?”

Pagan pursed her lips a little as she calculated the work necessary. “A couple of days and then we can start on his home too.”

Erith’s head lifted slightly. “Tito’s having his house done as well?”

Pagan nodded. Erith flashed her a cheeky grin.

“Guess there is plenty of money to be made in selling cars.”

“His business is keeping me in business, so I have no complaints. I’ll be loitering around here on the lot until further notice.” She took a healthy swig from her drink. It stuck somewhere in her throat like a leaden lump at the soft *good* she heard whispered from Erith’s lips.

“I’ll make sure the pop machine is stocked for you.” Erith studied Pagan, unabashed in letting her eyes wander over Pagan’s face.

“How old are you?” Pagan blurted out and cursed her lack of social etiquette. “I’m sorry, I just...” She could feel the redness of her cheeks burn like a beacon to her stupidity.

“I’m twenty-two.”

“I’ve got a year on you.”

“Checking I’m old enough to be out of school, eh? Please don’t put me back through that torture.” Erith held up her hands to ward off the unimagined horrors.

Pagan chuckled at her expressive face. “School wasn’t so bad, unless you happened to tower over all of the kids by the age of twelve. Adolescents take umbrage to that, for some bizarre reason. The boys see you as a threat to their manhood, and the girls think you’re just plain weird for letting your hormones make you grow *up* instead of *out*!”

“Ouch. Bullied much?”

Pagan shook her head. “More left alone than singled out once I

gained the muscle to add to the height.” She saw Erith look her over and tried not to react to the obvious glint in Erith’s eyes. Her body flamed to that look. She shifted once more in her seat.

“Made you more the strong and silent type?” Erith rested her chin in her hands. “I’d have probably been drawn to you at school. All that tall, dark, and brooding air you exuded would have called to me. And I like the sound of your voice. It’s kind of low and edgy. You have a very strange accent going on there. I’m sure we would have hung out together.”

Pagan was intrigued by the light dancing in Erith’s bright eyes as she ignored the comment about her voice. “Doing what?”

“I’m guessing you are the brainy type, so I’d have had you help me do my homework so it was in on time. And maybe I’d have even had the incentive to stay in class.”

“You hated school that much?” Pagan had loved her years of schooling.

“Let’s just say the motivation wasn’t there for me to stay. And we moved around a lot, so I never got to stay in the same seat for very long.”

Pagan wondered at Erith’s sudden stillness and where her thoughts had taken her. It didn’t look like a happy place. “And now you work here.”

“Yeah, the office is all mine and the guys are great.” She rolled her eyes. “If a little overprotective.”

“You’re the only girl on the lot; it’s to be expected.” Pagan stood to put her calculations away. She stretched to try to dispel some of the nervous energy she could feel building up inside her. She couldn’t explain what she was feeling, but it intensified when she looked at Erith. She felt like her stomach was filled with a thousand butterflies all taking flight at once.

“Time for me to head back to the office and work out a plan of action.” Pagan drained what was left of her drink. She smiled at Erith, still seated behind the desk. “It was nice meeting you, Erith.”

“Same time tomorrow, Pagan?”

“I expect so, or at least before the lunch rush hits.”

“I’ll try to find you a bigger chair.”

“I’d appreciate that.” She gathered up her case and waved good-

bye. Pagan wondered at her own haste as she left the offices and headed back for the van. She saw Tito Ammassari busy herding a client around a more expensive range of vehicles and pantomimed he'd get a call later. He nodded and went straight back to business. Pagan settled back in her van and purposely did not take one last look at the office window where she could sense Erith stood.



Pagan drove back toward the business that was also her home. Ronchetti Security was a shining beacon in the middle of the city, quite literally when the building's famed lighthouse shone its gentle beam across the city advertising its presence. The light was not so bright as to cause problems for the dwellers in the high-rise buildings surrounding the out-of-place lighthouse on land. The lighthouse was a lasting reminder of what used to be there by its side. The Last Port in the Storm restaurant had been in Pagan's family since before she was born. On the night her parents died, the restaurant had been set on fire, and the building, including their home, had been lost. The lighthouse, miraculously, survived the blaze. It continued to be a welcoming sight, tall and proud amid the noise and bustle of Chastilian. The restaurant was long gone, but in its place stood a new building, the home to the Ronchetti Security offices. Now the lighthouse was used to advertise alarm systems and personal protection for the citizens of Chastilian. The company's motto paid tribute to what had gone before: *Ronchetti Security, your first and last port in a storm.*

Pagan parked the van and took a small detour through the back door of the building where she spotted her older sister making a pot of coffee in the small office kitchen.

"Pagan!" Melina Osborne's cheerful voice greeted her. "Everything go okay?" She set cups on a tray, along with a jug of milk and sugar. Then she arranged a small plate of cookies.

Pagan smiled at Melina's finishing touch. "Ammassari's lot is a huge place to cover, Mel. We should get a good few days' work out of it."

"That should keep Rogue happy." She handed Pagan the plate of cookies and then poured her a glass of milk. "I think you need these

cookies more. Go eat. You skipped breakfast again. Rogue is out in the shop meeting with a new client. I thought I'd win them over with some old-fashioned hospitality."

Pagan accepted the plate gratefully and opened the door to let Melina pass by. Pagan was struck by just how different she and her sister Melina were, for all their shared genes. They had the same jet-black hair and dark blue eyes. Melina, however, was quintessentially feminine while Pagan had heard herself described as handsomely androgynous. She peeked through a small window into the shop where she was able to spot Rogue Ronchetti walking around with the new customer, showing him what was available and what she recommended for their security. Rogue was attired in jeans and a white shirt, her hair already slicked down in a vain attempt to tame its natural curl. Pagan looked upon Melina's lover as someone who was as much a parent to her as her blood sibling was. Rogue and Melina had brought Pagan up when the sisters' parents had been killed. She watched as Rogue demonstrated a particular product in her no-nonsense manner. Pagan grinned as she watched her. It was no secret she worshipped Rogue. She was a quiet woman, solid as oak, butch to a fault, with a wicked dry humor that very few were privileged to witness.

Melina was her perfect foil. She stood nearly as tall as Rogue's intimidating six foot two, but had hair that curled almost to her waist. She was vocal, temperamental, passionate, and loud. Rogue was all calmness, possessing an almost zenlike quality, but was passionate when her temper got riled.

Pagan thought Rogue and Melina made a striking couple, and she loved them for taking on the parenting roles they had been forced into so young. As role models went, they could not have been a more loving couple whose ideals spread far beyond their lives together or the security business.

Juggling her milk and plate of cookies, Pagan climbed the stairs that took her to the living quarters above the office building. She went through the living room and down a corridor to climb more stairs that led to her bedroom. She wandered over to a poster of a film heroine bedecked in shiny leather and dark glasses and ran her hand over the print. She pressed a small hidden button, and the wall before her revealed a door cleverly hidden by the line of wallpaper covering it. Pagan opened it and stepped into a secret set of rooms, accessible only

by a spiral staircase that ran inside the lighthouse tower. The lighthouse held a hidden lair that was known to a select few and used only by Pagan and her family. Pagan sprinted up the staircase and checked the screens off one of the landings. She reached for a keyboard and entered in her codes. The screen sprang to life, and she was greeted by a familiar face.

“Hi, Uncle Frank.” Pagan began reading the messages that ran along the bottom of the screen.

“Hey, Pagan, you’re on the screens early.”

“I had a new job to price. I just wanted to see if there was anything you’ve heard happening in the city. It’s got our local car dealer shaken up so much so that he’s having his entire lot and home alarmed. He seems frightened rather than merely security conscious. It just struck me as odd.”

“I’ll run it by our man in the police force. They might already have a lead on what’s going on around there. I heard they’ve been busy with some thefts. They think it’s kids because it’s primarily money being taken and the burglaries are sloppy, a lot of mess and little regard for alarms. As for the car lot, have you seen the prices that guy sells his vehicles for? Might just be a disgruntled buyer wanting payback and terrorizing him. But otherwise it’s quiet so far. Chastilian is just gearing up for the day. But, as you know, when night falls it can all change in the blink of an eye.” Uncle Frank winked at her and shoed her away from the screen. “Go do your other job. You have people to protect out there. Be sure to give my best to Rogue.”

Pagan turned the screen off to end their conversation. She swiveled around in her seat to look at her black leather suit hanging from its pegs. Pagan ran a finger across the collar.

“And welcome to the *other* family business,” she muttered before padding back down the tower’s steps to reenter her bedroom. She closed the connecting door between the rooms, hiding away her other identity and life.