

The Gaudi Façade

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Chapter One : A warning sign

“Tell me what you can see”, the man demanded, his direct, brusque manner accentuating the demand. He was a large, imposing character who dressed in a style which indicated authority and a degree of sophistication. On this particular day, his nervous anticipation belied his usual air of calmness.

The sparsely-furnished, bare-walled room had an eerie, overwhelming darkness, punctuated only by the faint glow from a single candle, set in a solid gold holder in the centre of the plain, wooden table. Tarot cards were laid out in regular patterns, the hooded figure taking yet another card from the pack and placing it face uppermost on the table. Although feeling intimidated by the senior man, he was very deliberate and irritatingly slow in his actions. “Please be patient. When I am certain what the cards are telling me, I will let you know.” He could see the impatience on the other man’s face, but was not going to be bullied or hurried in his reading. Another card, and yet another. He did not like the way the cards were appearing, but wanted to be certain before giving any interpretations to his demanding client. He had given readings on hundreds of occasions, and yet, this time, there was an unsettling influence in the way the cards were falling. His gaunt, sallow features appeared exaggerated in the flickering candlelight. He could feel droplets of sweat on his brow and wiped them with his hood, trying to avoid letting the other man sense his nervousness.

His impatience exhausted, the senior man stood up, sliding the chair noisily away from the table, making the candle flicker angrily with the sudden movement of air. “This is ridiculous! I don’t know why I wasted my time coming here.”

The hooded figure shot a look of anger at his client. “Please, wait! The cards are definitely telling me something very important, but I have to be certain before I say just what it is.”

Almost reluctantly, the other man pulled his chair nearer to the table again and took his seat, once more. He glanced at his watch. “Okay, but be quick! I just don’t have time to waste.”

Satisfied that he could now concentrate on his task, the Tarot reader began, “Within the next few months, there will be a major threat to us, from within the country. A communication will make many demands. There is also a woman who could either assist or destroy us. She is not Spanish and, yet, not from across the water.” The impatience had now been replaced by an obvious interest and curiosity in what the cards were foretelling. “She has inner strength and a high degree of clairvoyant powers. Powers far greater than those endowed upon me.” There was a hint of envy in the seer’s voice.

“Do you know who she is?”

The teller shook his head, surprised by the question. “The cards are just a guide. It is too much to expect specifics. I think she is quite young and very beautiful. Of one thing I am certain, she will reveal the secret of the tomb.”

The other man looked startled by this statement. “I would say that is quite a specific prediction. Can you see anything else?”

“Yes. As well as knowing the body is the wrong one, she is capable of finding the real location.”

“But, she can’t! Nobody knows that. Not even us!” For the first time, there was a note of alarm in his voice.

“This is what the cards are telling me. It is difficult to say whether this woman will be a blessing or a threat, but I am quite certain that, around the time she appears, there will be the biggest threat we have ever known.”

The other man was noticeably shaken by the teller’s predictions. He stood up and said, in a voice which demanded respect, “I’m already late for an appointment and have to go, now. But, I want you to find out as much as you can about this threat and the woman.” The manner in which he said, “Woman” emphasised his feelings of anger for the person who, potentially, posed such a threat to his organisation and, more pointedly, to himself.

Chapter Two : A Chance meeting- Wednesday, 20 June

It was a blistering, hot day even for Barcelona in the summer of two thousand and twelve. Adam Sheldrake, a six foot tall, fair-haired Englishman, was beginning to wish that he had picked April or September rather than June to spend his holiday, here. He could have visited any time, but he had chosen the hottest part of the year. Still, at any other time, he would have missed the most dangerous, demanding and, yet, most exciting experience of his life, as he was later to discover. Adam Sheldrake was a workaholic, by nature and had not had what could be described as a proper holiday for over five years. As a partner in an architectural practice, his time was fully occupied in designing Health Service buildings and supervising their construction. Ever since the Conservative Government, led by David Cameron, came into power in two thousand and ten, much greater expenditure had been approved for construction of new, energy-conserving hospitals. The need to meet tight deadlines meant that there was little time left for vacations. It was Adam's mother who, realising the strain it was creating on her son, insisted that he must make time for a break. In fact, June had been the most appropriate month, as one project had just been completed and handed over to the client. Heather, Adam's mother had pointed out that there were sufficient assistants in his company to manage without him for at least a couple of weeks. He was reasonably affluent and could have travelled anywhere in the world, but it had been Adam's wish to visit Barcelona, one day, because of its historical and architectural significance.

He had not expected such high temperatures, but, this year, in particular, the heat was so intense, that one felt permanently exhausted and drained. Water was in short supply as the Spanish soil had seen little rainfall for many months. Large areas of grassland had been destroyed as fires had broken out as the tinder-dry grass and ground-cover easily ignited, exacerbated by strong winds. This had become a regular pattern over the past few years and was blamed, not unreasonably, on global warming and was as a consequence of constant misuse of the earth's resources. Increases in flight taxes had failed to reduce the carbon footprint of an ever-increasing number of people flying within and between countries and continents. The problem of significant changes in climate had been exacerbated by China and India whose growth and demands for valuable resources kept on gaining momentum.

During the afternoon, only tourists were demented enough to walk through the streets of the city, enduring temperatures far too hot for comfort. The more sensible of the million and a half inhabitants of the city stayed within the confines of their comfortable, air-conditioned offices or apartments.

On Adam's first full day within this sprawling city, he decided to take refuge in one of the countless modern coaches on an excursion to the Olympic stadium, a favourite haunt for many thousands of tourists. During the journey, the tour guide had explained the history of the stadium. Estadi Olympic was originally completed in nineteen twenty nine but was not used for the Olympic Games until nineteen ninety two and can accommodate up to sixty five thousand spectators.

Adam had to admit that the thought of the brilliant and sadly missed Freddie Mercury singing, albeit posthumously on a huge screen, with Montserrat Caballe during the Olympics, in this very stadium, excited him more than the games themselves. Although many critics described it as overwhelming theatre, the song "Barcelona", will always be one of those magical, spine-tingling songs which will stay fresh in everyone's memory when others will have been long forgotten. This superb performance, when Adam was an impressionable twelve-year old, held lasting memories for him and motivated him to follow Queen's lead singer's career throughout the nineteen eighties, until Freddy Mercury's untimely death from AIDS on the twenty-fourth of November, nineteen ninety-one at the age of only forty-five.

The size and grandeur of the stadium was impressive, especially for someone like Adam, who was not normally a spectator of live team sports such as football or rugby. The guide showed everybody where the Olympic torch had been positioned for the duration of the games. Adam had to admit that, after the initial effect, the remainder of the tour was, for him, rather boring. His eyes began to wander from the spectacle of the stadium to the other people in the tour party. Most of them were British, but there were also some Germans, Dutch and, not surprisingly, a few larger-than-life Americans. As usual, most questions were asked by the Americans, while the others tended to follow in sheepish silence. Of course, the size of the stadium did not impress England's cousins from across the water, as their Baseball stadiums were at least as big, if not bigger than the Barcelona Stadium.

Most of the tourists were either elderly couples or families with children, but there was one who, like Adam, was unaccompanied. A very attractive, dark-haired woman, probably in her late twenties, who also seemed to have exhausted her interest and looked to be day-dreaming. Her nationality was uncertain; she could have been British, but was more likely to be of Mediterranean origin. Spanish, Portuguese, Italian or Greek - she could have been any with her delightful, smouldering beauty, but Adam hoped to find out before the end of the day. Her skin was pale, but this contrasted sharply with her long, jet-black hair, resting lazily on her slender shoulders. Her clothes had no hint of any designer label, yet, on her toned, supple body, any clothes would have looked superb. Her eyes sparkled with the innocence of youth, while her facial features with high cheek-bones and delicately-formed lips and chin gave her the looks of which many women would have been envious. Adam's inert shyness prevented him from approaching her. He was desperately trying to think of a way to start a conversation, when, to his dismay, he discovered that he was not the only man interested in this amazingly beautiful young woman.

Two tall, heavily-built German tourists, both men in their early twenties approached the woman. It was only early afternoon, but they were obviously already substantially intoxicated. In a slurred, guttural voice, one of the men said, "Why is such a good-looking woman like you on her own?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued. "We're having a party, tonight and you must come along and enjoy yourself. We can be very good company for you."

The second German nodded, drunkenly, in agreement. "Ja, this is your lucky day, fraulein. Heinrich and I will give you a time to remember and you don't even need to bring a bottle with you." The two men looked like a couple of hungry, drooling dogs eyeing up a potential meal as they waited, expectantly, for her, hopefully positive, response.

Her face flushed with embarrassment at this unwanted invitation and she looked as though she was desperately trying to find an excuse to avoid the men, without being thought of as rude. She caught sight of Adam and, with a sudden inspiration, said, "I'm not on my own. My partner is over there." She pointed to Adam. Her English was excellent, but sounded even better with her delightful Italian accent. "Darling, these men have invited us to a party, tonight." She winked at him, making sure the Germans did not notice her meaningful signal.

It gave him a tingle of excitement to be called "Darling" by this beautiful stranger and he responded, willingly. "Oh, that's such a shame. We already have plans for this evening. Still, thanks for the invitation." One could literally feel their combined envy as they mumbled something incoherent and quickly melted away into the crowds of tourists looking round the stadium. As if to convince them of her attachment, she walked over and put her arm around Adam's waist giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you, so much. I can't stand the overbearing pressure from people who really feel they are God's gift to women."

"I'm glad to be of help", he honestly replied. "What do you think of the Olympic stadium?"

"Hmmm... It's okay. I felt I had to come and see it, but, I must confess to finding it a bit boring. How about you, er ...?"

This was fantastic luck for the Englishman. "Adam Sheldrake." He just managed to stop himself from taking her hand, an instinctive, typically British, gesture on meeting someone for the first time. "I nearly shook your hand, then. That would have spoilt the illusion you created so cleverly.

She giggled at his near-miss. Adam liked her character and hoped to continue with their conversation "I'm Caterina. Caterina Fonteras."

"You asked what I thought of this place, Caterina. I have to admit that the fact that Freddie Mercury's song with Montserrat Caballe was heard here during the Olympics that interested me most. At the age of twelve, I really thought that Freddie was actually here, until my parents told me that he had already died. I don't think it needed very long to see around the stadium. Does that sound terrible?"

"No, not at all. At least you are honest. What interests you most about Spain?"

"I'm an architect, so there's a great deal for me to see in Barcelona. Especially Gaudi's work. I'm really looking forward to seeing the Church of the Sagrada Família."

Her face lit up and her jet-black eyes sparkled with excitement at his reply. "I'm an artist and have much the same interests." She looked a little pensive, as though she wanted to ask something. "Adam, do you think I could ask a favour of you?"

This was going even better than he could have expected. "Yes, of course. What is it?"

"Well, the problem of me being on my own is that I keep getting guys like those Germans imposing themselves on me. Only yesterday, a Spanish guy tried to pick me up, obviously thinking that I couldn't resist his charms. I'm thoroughly fed up with their childish chat-up lines. Would you mind if we looked at the sights of Barcelona, together?" A sudden thought crossed her mind as she added, "That is, if you don't already have someone with you?"

Adam could not believe his luck. In his thirty two years, he had never been invited by a woman to be with her. There had been girl friends, of course, but it had always been his task to make the first approach. Feeling pleased at this reversal of roles, he replied, "Don't worry, I'm alone, and, yes, of course I would be very happy to accompany you. But, how do you know that I'm not like the others?"

She laughed. "Instinct, I suppose. I feel that I can trust you. You have an honest face." As an afterthought, she added, "And, we do have similar interests. Is that enough?"

"It's fine by me." He mopped the sweat from his forehead, as the brilliant sun shone relentlessly from a perfectly clear blue sky. "This place is far too hot for my liking. Do you fancy cooling off a little with an ice-cream?"

"Yes, I'd love one. I think I've probably seen enough of the stadium." As the couple walked away from the rest of the group, Adam noticed the two young Germans, their faces showing the extent of their envy. He could just imagine them wondering why he was the fortunate one. Adam could only assume that today was his lucky day, or, at least, he hoped it would be. Caterina insisted on paying for their ice-creams, as reward for rescuing her from the unwanted advances by the Germans. The couple enjoyed their refreshments and chatted happily. Conversation with Caterina was very easy and Adam felt more relaxed in her company than he would have expected for a first meeting. Perhaps it was fate that they had met and, maybe, their relationship would become important to both Caterina and Adam. He told himself not to expect too much as he had been disappointed several times in the past. He

decided to let her do the leading and would not push himself on to her, as this may result in rejection.

By the time the tour of the stadium was complete, they had learned a great deal about each other. She lived with her parents and younger brother, Sebastian, in an apartment in the outskirts of Rome. Her father worked in the printing department of one of Italy's leading newspapers. It was not a well-paid occupation and her own work as an artist was insufficient to live on. As a consequence, finances were tight in the household and this was the first visit to another country in her twenty seven years. As an artist, it had been her wish for a long time to travel to Barcelona and she had found it necessary to make many sacrifices to even afford the holiday. Caterina was interested to learn more of Adam's architectural background and asked many questions about the type of buildings he had designed. Although he was proud of his work in the Health sector, there was little scope for producing aesthetically exciting buildings when the requirement would be for a maternity unit or a specialist unit for physically handicapped people. These buildings required a more practical functionality and, there had always been financial constraints in designing Health Service buildings. "My favourite project was five years ago, before I was involved with the Health sector. I was given a completely free hand to design a new Church in Cheshire. A great deal of research was necessary for this project and that was when I studied the work of Antoni Gaudi. He was such a terrific inspiration for me, as with many others interested in Art and architecture."

Caterina was equally enthusiastic about Spain's most famous architect and the two chatted for a while about his fluidic, natural style of design.

When the official tour of the stadium was complete, it was fortunate for them that they were on the same coach, but separate from the two Germans, otherwise their collusion would have been obvious as they left the coach at different hotels. Luckily, they had managed to sit next to each other as there were several empty seats on the coach. Adam offered to meet her the following morning at reception in her hotel and, to his relief, she gratefully accepted. He made a note of her hotel name and address, otherwise this could have been the last time to see her if he had forgotten such an essential piece of information. Adam returned to his own hotel, with a feeling of both exhilaration at meeting such a beautiful woman and sadness that their time together was over for this day. After a satisfying yet forgettable meal in the hotel restaurant, he returned to the air-conditioned comfort of his room, where he relaxed and, happily, remembered the curious events of his first full day in Barcelona. His sleep was punctuated by thoughts of Caterina and how miserable he would be if she changed her mind about seeing him again. He still could not believe his luck at the manner in which they met and was, in a way, thankful to the two unfortunate Germans, for, without their drunken efforts to pick her up, Adam would probably not have had the courage to even talk to Caterina.