

The Warning

A cool breeze moved her hair slightly as she took a sip of wine. The little table sat in front of a sidewalk café with the smell of spicy Italian food drifting past them into the crowded streets. Cars, bicycles, carts and pedestrians made their way along, going about their travels. Some children scurried happily up the sidewalk across the street.

"Are you Italian?" Kevin asked as they waited for their meal.

"Part," she returned. "Are you British?"

"No, I'm American, but my ancestors came from Ireland."

"I *have* heard of you. Your name is mentioned frequently in caving groups."

"Yeah, I guess I do have sort of a reputation."

"They say you are the best."

"I doubt that," Kevin laughed. "What about you? How long have you been caving?"

"Always," she replied as the waiter set lunch on the table in front of her.

"Thank you," Kevin said to him as his lunch was placed before him. He poured some more wine before he left them to their conversation. "Always?" he asked.

"I've been crawling around in caves since I was a kid. Fascinated with them. I didn't know about procedure. I just wandered around in any cave I could find and I toured every catacomb several times."

They were silent for a while and Kevin said, "I became interested in caving while I was in college. On a field trip, we were taken to Carlsbad Caverns. I was bitten there and never recovered."

"Excuse me," an Italian man with a heavy accent said as he drew near their table. "You are Kevin McQueen, are you not?"

"Yes." Kevin surveyed the tall man with dark hair and sharp chiseled features. He wore a deep scowl between bushy eyebrows that protected almost black eyes. He had a long Roman nose and an unexpressive mouth that hardly moved as he spoke. His clothes were common with loose fitting pants and a wrap around shirt held in place with a tie belt.

"My name is Beniamino Giovanni. My friends call me Ben. I must talk to you. May I sit down?"

"Why not?" Kevin looked at him. He turned to get a chair from the next table and Kevin looked at Pet and shrugged. She blinked at him and took a sip of her wine. The man seated himself and leaned near.

"Mr. Giovanni, this is Petrena Hambrick."

"Pleased, ma'am," he nodded at her and then turned back to Kevin, "You and your team are in grave danger," he said softly with his heavy accent.

"Danger? From whom?" Kevin looked intrigued.

"If I told you, you would not believe me. Just be careful and watch everyone around you. Do not trust anyone."

"Give me one good reason to trust you, then," Kevin opened his hand to him.

"I have brought you the warning."

"That is not good enough," Pet entered.

He gave her a blank stare and smiled sadly, "You want proof? I can not give that to you. I can but warn you."

"Okay, well, you warned us, Mr. Giovanni," Kevin drew his attention, picking up his glass to take a drink.

Giovanni grabbed his hand and said through clenched teeth. "Do not be a fool and ignore this warning. You do not know what you are getting into. These people are ruthless." Kevin looked at his hand and then at the man. The man released his hand and said with emotion, "They are holding my son and will kill him if you find what they are looking for." There was real pain in the man's voice. "They cannot afford to leave you alive, either." Kevin looked over at Pet, who frowned as she stared at the man.

"And what if we don't find what whoever it is wants?"

"Then you will be safe and my son released, and a five-hundred-year-old mystery will remain a mystery."

"So, if you succeed in scaring us off, your son will be released."

"No, you do not understand," he clenched his right fist that was lying on the table. "They must find out what is in that labyrinth. If you don't go, they will find another. You are the best in your field and that makes me sure they think they will find what they are looking for."

"What are they looking for, Mr. Giovanni?" Pet asked softly.

Kevin saw the man stiffen and he was looking across the street. "Remember the warning," he said. Rising up, he dropping a small piece of paper on the table and walked briskly away.

"Well, that was interesting," Pet muttered into her glass.

"Certainly was," Kevin replied thoughtfully. "The guy is a kook," he picked up the paper.

"Five hundred year old mystery?" she looked at him.

"The guy is doing some kind of scam and I'm not buying into it," Kevin said as they ate.

"You're not buying it, huh?" Pet returned.

"Nah, the world is full of kooks."

They both fell silent and finished their meal. Then Kevin stood. "You ready to go back to the hotel. I have some things to do to get ready for the catacomb."

"No, I want to do some shopping."

"Okay, see you tomorrow," Kevin smiled and went to pay for the lunch. He kept looking at the piece of paper as he walked down the street. He really needed to go through his gear and cull out the things he would not need for the catacomb. That didn't take as long as he thought it would and the man's warning kept taunting him. It was probably a scam, as he'd told Pet, but if this Giovanni knew something about that labyrinth, he needed to know what it was. He didn't like playing these cat and mouse games, though.

An hour later, Kevin was standing outside an old abbey on the west side of town near the Tiber River. He walked up the wide steps and into the darken interior. He made his way through the wide foyer into the chapel area where stained glass windows made colored patterns on the seats and podium. A long altar flanked each side with three candle stands of rising heights stood before the podium at the back of the room. A large wooden cross hung on the wall behind the podium with red velvet curtains on each side of it. In the curtains was embroidered a religious symbol of significance to this abbey.

"I am glad you came," a heavily accented voice sounded beside him and he turned to see Giovanni come from the darkened recesses of the chapel to the right of the altar. He was wearing a priest's robe and gave a friendly smile. He drew near and said sadly, "What you have come here to learn may cause the death of my son."

"I didn't think priests were allowed sons." Kevin looked at him. "Don't they have to take a vow of abstinence?"

"Some do not follow that vow," he returned. "It was never taught among the Disciples of Christ. It is a church law that has resulted in much embarrassment and gross sin. Some of us have wives, even though the marriage is not recognized by the church, and children by them."

"Why tell me this, if it will be the death of your son?" Kevin studied him.

"Our heavenly Father gave his son to bring truth to many. Should I do any less?" He patted Kevin on the arm. "Truth, my friend, is sometimes more important than life." he said with deep sadness in his voice. "Walk with me."

He turned and Kevin walked with him. He led the way through a long corridor with many doors and out into a garden cemetery.