

THE WARNING

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CHAPTER 1

The longest and most terrifying night Nikolai Crowe ever experienced started the moment he found her dead.

While on the subway train headed for home, he received an urgent text message from his ex-girlfriend. She wanted them to meet. He immediately switched trains for Central Park, where she'd told him to go.

He kept his mind occupied on the crowded train by watching the news on a small flat-screen television on the wall. Robbers were holding hostages at the First National Bank on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Reporter Sakura Yoko was on the scene, reporting live, with the flashing blue lights of police cars surrounding the building behind her.

The television was on mute. The subtitles at the bottom read that thirty-five hostages remained inside. The story began getting interesting when an automated voice announced Nikolai's stop. The moment the train eased into the station, he forced his way through the swarm of tired nine-to-fivers.

Nikolai followed the steps up to the street where the cool autumn air brushed against his face. The shadow of the evening crept over the city like a skillful thief, making no sound. Thousands of lit windows in the skyscrapers pierced the dark like artificial stars. October's chilly breath blew over the city.

For Nikolai it had been a long day, but he was ecstatic to be seeing her again. *Why would she want to meet with me? Last week, she told me we couldn't be together anymore.*

Before switching trains he'd texted her, but her reply had only been to hurry. When he'd tried calling, he was sent to voice mail.

"You've reached Jade. I can't answer right now. If you want to speak to me, you'll have to leave a message."

He left one message.

Reaching Central Park, he rushed to the Greywacke Arch Bridge, where she'd instructed him to meet her. The park street lamps came to life as night settled in. He jogged over the path, excited and anxious.

Maybe she's changed her mind. Maybe she wants to get back together. She didn't seem too sure about the break-up in the first place.

His heart beat harder. By the time he reached the bridge, his lungs burned from both the run and his nervousness. He peered over the iron railing to the path below and called her name. When no answer came, he began to worry. Central Park wasn't a safe place when the sun went down.

He clambered down an overgrown embankment and entered the underpass. It was dark beneath the bridge, with limited help from a single street lamp on the other side.

“Jade?” he whispered. “Are you here?”

He neared the center of the bridge. The silhouette of a person lying face down on the ground appeared in the dim light. At first he thought a hobo might’ve fallen asleep or had passed out drunk. He made no sound as he approached.

The silhouette shaped itself into a woman’s figure, and she wasn’t asleep. “Jade?”

His bottom lip quivered and his palms moistened with perspiration. He didn’t want to believe it was her. It was a woman, but he could make out no distinct features. As he knelt beside her, he recognized the sweet lily fragrance of the woman’s perfume.

Please, don’t let it be her.

He reached for her, almost too afraid to touch her. The soft fabric of her sweater told him that she wore no coat.

He moved his hand across her back, toward the shoulder, to turn the body over. His hand slid over something wet and cold. His shock forced him to snatch his hand away. The darkness didn’t allow him to distinguish what it was, but he knew what it smelled like.

A sudden burst of light struck him.

“Hold it right there!” yelled a man standing west of the bridge.

Nikolai jumped and nearly fell over. The intense brightness of the flashlight prevented him from seeing the man.

“Put your hands where I can see them!”

If the man was a police officer, it would be best to cooperate. Nikolai raised his hands and shielded his eyes from the light. The blood painted his fingertips. He slid his eyes over the woman. The light gave only a partial view, but it provided more detail than the street lamp.

Her head lay to the side, her long brunette hair draped over her face. Thick smears of blood covered most of her sweater. Like the perfume, he recognized the sweater; he’d bought one just like it for Jade last month. He felt cold and hollow.

“Stand on your feet and put your hands behind your head!”

He stood on wobbly legs. He didn’t even try explaining himself. If he kept his cool and explained everything at the appropriate time, he’d be all right.

He interlocked his fingers behind his head. The blood seeped through his hair, touching his scalp, yet he was too shaken to notice. He remained motionless while the officer called in for backup.

The man aimed a gun at him as he closed in. Nikolai said nothing, even when he was thrown against the wall and handcuffed. “What are you doing here? What did you do to that girl?”

“I didn’t do anything to her,” he said. “I got a message from my girlfriend to meet her at the bridge, and I found this woman here.”

The officer searched him and found his wallet and cell phone. He placed them both into his own pocket, yanked Nikolai away from the wall, and led him out where two other officers appeared.

“We have a body,” the first officer said. “See if she has any identification on her.”

The police officers rushed under the bridge, while the other forced Nikolai to sit on a bench under the street lamp. That one planted a foot on the seat and loomed over him, exuding the stench of cigarette smoke.

“You need to be straight with me,” the officer said, keeping sharp eyes on him. “I need you to tell me what happened here.”

Nikolai took a deep breath. “I got a text message from Jade—my ex—to meet her here, just like I told you. And when I got here, I found ...”

“You found your ex-girlfriend’s body?” the officer prompted.

Nikolai shuddered and turned away. “I don’t know if it’s her. I don’t know who that is.”

Although the evidence pointed to it being Jade—the sweater, the hair color, and the lily-scented perfume—he walled himself in denial. He held onto the thin thread of hope that it was someone else.

“Mason,” one of the officers said as he emerged from the underpass.

“What is it?”

“I need to speak to you.”

Mason went to him. Nikolai watched as he listened to what they said. In the younger officer’s hand was a red velvet wallet, which he had opened to show Mason the driver’s license. Nikolai couldn’t hear what they whispered, but knew it was bad.

Mason studied the driver’s license before turning back to him. “Watch him, Cooper,” he ordered before disappearing under the bridge.

To Cooper, Nikolai asked, “What’s going on?”

“If you know what’s best for you, you’ll keep quiet.”

Being in no position to argue and having the common sense to realize it, he did.

Moments later Mason reappeared with the third officer, his eyes targeting their suspect. “D’you know who that is?” he asked, referring to the body. “Do you?” His tone was caught between anger and shock. When Nikolai shook his head, he glared viciously. “Don’t lie to us!”

He stood up. “I’m not lying about anything!”

“He killed her,” Cooper said.

“I didn’t kill anyone!” he exclaimed, surprised by their quick accusation.

Mason took out his nightstick and approached him. The other officers held him back.

“Whoa, whoa! Calm down, Mason. Easy!”

Nikolai sidestepped from the officer, confused as to why he wanted to suddenly bash him in. The thought of running crossed his mind, but a couple reasons came to him why that would be a mistake. For starters, he was cuffed. And if he ran, he would blow his one chance to set things straight.

“All right! I’m all right,” Mason said, backing away. He turned to Cooper and said, “Call in more backup. I want this entire area sealed off.”

Cooper nodded and got on his radio.

“Geiger, call Homicide.”

“No problem.”

Mason faced Nikolai. “You’re coming with me.”

He grabbed Nikolai by the arm and yanked him forward. He didn’t say a word as he was led out of the park. He knew he was innocent. To keep his head from getting bashed in, he didn’t debate the issue any further.

In his apartment, Hiroshi Sho and his wife watched the evening news. The top story was the armed robbery of the First National Bank, where gunmen held thirty-five hostages inside.

“What do you think they’ll do?” Claudia asked. “The police, I mean.”

Sho took a sip of his scotch and soda. "They'll likely raid the building." He spoke with a thick accent. "I've already given the captain permission to use any force necessary if the perpetrators don't surrender."

"What about the hostages? Won't they be in danger?"

He rubbed his forehead and let go a long breath. He'd had this conversation with her before. "There may be casualties, but we have to make examples of these people and show them we aren't going to bow to their demands anymore." Then he added. "Even if hostages are involved."

His phone rang in his pocket.

"Are you going to answer it?" she asked.

"What?" he said, hearing the muffled trilling. "Oh, yes. It might be Charles. He'll want to know about tomorrow's speech."

"Are you all right?" she asked as he reached into his pocket.

"You've seemed distracted lately."

Instead of answering her, he studied his cell phone and scrunched his face. He didn't know the number, but put the phone to his ear anyway. "Mayor Sho."

Claudia continued to watch the news, but turned back to him when the leather of the armchair creaked as he stood.

"How?" he asked in a trembling tone.

"What is it?"

"When did it happen?" he asked the caller, louder and angrier. "Where is she now?"

"Who?" Claudia asked, standing.

Sho's narrow eyes went wide. He stood motionless, and although he stared directly at her, she was invisible. Finally, he lowered the phone. He didn't say anything else to the caller.

"For God's sakes, Hiroshi, what happened?"

"She's dead," he said faintly. "My daughter is dead."