

## THE KIDNAP, KIND OF

### PART TWO: THE GHOST PLAN

#### INT. MOTEL ROOM, SZCZECIN - MORNING

Sunlight comes through the thin curtains in stripes, making the orange blankets look like they're on fire. The water stain on the ceiling is dry today, a pale country shaped like regret. The TV is still off. The shower still drips.

Jess is awake, sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at the van through the window. It's still there. Gray and patient and full of possibilities.

William is at the small desk, laptop open, a map of Szczecin on the screen, red dots scattered like blood spatter.

**JESS:** "So we buy the van today."

**WILLIAM:** "No."

**JESS:** "You said yesterday."

**WILLIAM:** "I changed my mind."

**JESS:** "You can't change your mind. We had a deal."

**WILLIAM:** "We had a conversation. Not a deal."

Jess stands up. Walks to the window. Presses his forehead against the glass. The van sits there, rust spots like acne, crack in the windshield like a lightning bolt.

**JESS:** "What do you mean no?"

**WILLIAM:** "I mean kidnapping is stupid. It fails. Always. In movies, in real life, in everything. You grab her, you put her in a van, you drive five minutes, police pull you over, you go to jail, inmates fuck your ass. The end."

**JESS:** "Not if we're smart."

**WILLIAM:** "You're not smart. I'm smart. And I'm telling you it's stupid."

**JESS:** "Then what? We just go home?"

**WILLIAM:** "No. We do it my way."

Jess turns around. Leans against the windowsill. The sunlight makes his face look younger, like a kid who got caught doing something and is waiting for the punishment.

**JESS:** "Your way."

**WILLIAM:** “My way.”

**JESS:** “Which is?”

William turns the laptop around. The map fills the screen. Red dots. A coffee shop. A community center. A park. A school. Lines connecting them, a web, a constellation.

**WILLIAM:** “We become ghosts. We stalk without stalking. We remember her face. We find events she’ll be at. Public events. Concerts. Markets. Whatever teenagers do in Szczecin.”

**JESS:** “And then?”

**WILLIAM:** “And then we plant seeds. First meeting: you’re clumsy. You fall in front of her. Things go everywhere. Papers. A prop. Something embarrassing. You say one sentence. One. ‘Oh my god, hayst, it’s embarrassing.’ That’s it. Nothing else. She helps you or she doesn’t. You walk away. Seed planted.”

**JESS:** “That’s it?”

**WILLIAM:** “Second meeting: coffee shop. She’s there. You’re there. You don’t talk. You just smile. Nothing else. Just smile. Seed number two.”

**JESS:** “Third meeting?”

**WILLIAM:** “Third meeting we figure out later. Fourth meeting: park. You’re sitting. She walks past. You don’t look up. You don’t say anything. You just exist. Let her ask your name. Or don’t. Let her wonder. Let her come to you.”

**JESS:** “This takes days.”

**WILLIAM:** “This takes weeks. Maybe longer. We track her. We learn her schedule. Not obviously. Not stalking. Just... being where she is. Casual. Invisible.”

**JESS:** “I don’t want to be invisible. I want her to see me.”

**WILLIAM:** “She will see you. But she won’t know she’s seeing you. That’s the point. You don’t ask her name. You don’t ask her to marry you. You don’t say ‘let’s fuck.’ You just exist near her until she notices. Until she wants to know who you are.”

**JESS:** “And if she doesn’t notice?”

**WILLIAM:** “Then we try something else. But we don’t kidnap her. We don’t grab her. We don’t put her in a van.”

Jess walks back to his bed. Sits down. The springs creak.

**JESS:** “I don’t know, bro. Sounds boring.”

**WILLIAM:** “It’s not boring. It’s strategy. It’s how you win.”

**JESS:** “You don’t care about winning with girls. You said so.”

**WILLIAM:** “I care about winning at everything. This is a game. We’re playing it. And we’re going to win.”

**JESS:** “What if I mess up the one sentence?”

**WILLIAM:** “Then we practice.”

**JESS:** “Practice?”

**WILLIAM:** “Stand up.”

**JESS:** “What?”

**WILLIAM:** “Stand up. Pretend you’re walking. Pretend you see her. Trip. Fall. Say the line.”

Jess stands up. He looks at William. He looks at the space in front of him, like he’s seeing something that’s not there. He takes a step. He trips over nothing. He falls on the floor. The motel shakes.

**JESS:** “Oh my fucking baby help me fuck me.”

**WILLIAM:** “What.”

**JESS:** “Oh my fucking baby help me fuck me.”

William picks up a pillow from his bed. Throws it at Jess. Not hard. Just enough to land on his face.

**WILLIAM:** “What the fuck are you saying?”

**JESS:** “I’m practicing.”

**WILLIAM:** “That’s not the line. The line is ‘oh my god, hayst, it’s embarrassing.’ Not ‘oh my fucking baby help me fuck me.’”

**JESS:** “I got confused.”

**WILLIAM:** “How did you get confused? It’s one sentence.”

**JESS:** “My brain went somewhere else.”

**WILLIAM:** “Your brain is a porn site.”

Jess throws the pillow back. It hits William in the chest. William doesn’t flinch.

**JESS:** “Okay. Again.”

He stands up. Brushes off his cargo shorts. Takes a breath. Walks forward. Trips. Falls. This time he lands on his hands, more controlled.

**JESS:** “Oh my god, hayst, it’s embarrassing.”

His face is wrong. Too serious. Too practiced. Like he’s reciting lines in a school play he doesn’t want to be in.

**WILLIAM:** “What the fuck. Your expression looks like you’ve been practicing for days. In a mirror. With a coach.”

**JESS:** “I am practicing.”

**WILLIAM:** “You look like a serial killer rehearsing his confession.”

**JESS:** “How should I look?”

**WILLIAM:** “Embarrassed. Clumsy. Like you actually fell. Like you didn’t plan it.”

**JESS:** “But I am planning it.”

**WILLIAM:** “She can’t know that. She has to think it’s real.”

**JESS:** “How do I make it real if it’s fake?”

**WILLIAM:** “You have to believe it’s real while you’re doing it. Method acting. Like De Niro.”

**JESS:** “Who’s De Niro?”

**WILLIAM:** “Oh fucking idiot.”

William stands up. Walks to the center of the room. The space between the beds is narrow, two meters maybe. He demonstrates. A walk, natural, casual, then a stumble, a catch, a recovery.

**WILLIAM:** “You don’t fall all the way. You almost fall. You catch yourself. Things drop. You look surprised. Then embarrassed. Then you say it. ‘Oh my god, hayst, it’s embarrassing.’ Like you just remembered she’s there. Like the embarrassment is about her seeing you, not about falling.”

**JESS:** “Show me again.”

William does it again. Slower. The walk. The stumble. The catch. The look. The line. Perfect. Terrifying in its perfection.

**JESS:** “You’re good at this.”

**WILLIAM:** “I’m good at everything.”

**JESS:** “Have you done this before?”

**WILLIAM:** “No.”

**JESS:** “Then how are you good at it?”

**WILLIAM:** “Because I understand people. I watch them. I know how they move. How they think. You’re impulsive. I’m deliberate. That’s why you need me.”

Jess tries again. Walk. Stumble. Catch. He drops an imaginary prop. Looks up at an imaginary Ivanka.

**JESS:** “Oh my god, hayst, it’s embarrassing.”

Better. Not good, but better. The embarrassment is almost real. Almost.

**WILLIAM:** "Again."

Jess does it again. And again. And again. The motel room fills with the sound of his footsteps, his stumbles, his line. Outside, the van waits. The sun moves across the sky. The water stain on the ceiling watches like an eye.

### **INT. MOTEL ROOM, SZCZECIN - NIGHT**

The room is dark except for the laptop screen. William has found something. A post on a local Szczecin forum. A youth music event. Open air. Saturday. In the park near the river. Bands Jess has never heard of. Teenagers drinking cheap beer. Ivanka's friend tagged her in a comment. "See you there?"

**WILLIAM:** "Saturday. Four days. That's the first meeting."

**JESS:** "What do I wear?"

**WILLIAM:** "What you're wearing."

**JESS:** "This has a hole."

**WILLIAM:** "The hole is good. It makes you look poor. Harmless. Not a threat."

**JESS:** "I am poor."

**WILLIAM:** "Then it's authentic."

**JESS:** "What prop do I drop?"

**WILLIAM:** "A book. Something intellectual but not too intellectual. A novel. In English. She'll see it. She'll think you're smart."

**JESS:** "I don't read."

**WILLIAM:** "You don't have to read it. You just have to drop it."

**JESS:** "What book?"

**WILLIAM:** "I'll find one. Something with a good cover."

**JESS:** "What if she doesn't help me pick it up?"

**WILLIAM:** "Then you pick it up yourself. You don't look at her. You don't talk to her. You just say the line and walk away."

**JESS:** "What if she talks to me?"

**WILLIAM:** "She won't."

**JESS:** “What if she does?”

**WILLIAM:** “Then you say ‘sorry’ and walk away. You don’t engage. You plant the seed and you leave.”

**JESS:** “This is torture.”

**WILLIAM:** “This is strategy.”

Jess lies back on his bed. Stares at the ceiling. The water stain looks like a face tonight. A girl’s face. Blonde. Smiling.

**JESS:** “What about the second meeting? The coffee shop?”

**WILLIAM:** “We find her coffee shop. The one she goes to. We wait. We watch. We learn her schedule. Then you go there. Same time. Same day. You sit where she can see you. You smile. Nothing else.”

**JESS:** “Just smile.”

**WILLIAM:** “Just smile.”

**JESS:** “What if she thinks I’m creepy?”

**WILLIAM:** “You are creepy. But if you do it right, she’ll think you’re mysterious.”

**JESS:** “What’s the difference?”

**WILLIAM:** “Creepy is staring. Mysterious is smiling and looking away. Creepy is following. Mysterious is being there before she arrives. Creepy wants something. Mysterious already has something and she’s curious what it is.”

**JESS:** “And I have something?”

**WILLIAM:** “You have me. That’s something.”

**JESS:** “She doesn’t know about you.”

**WILLIAM:** “She will. Eventually. When you tell her. When she asks. When she’s curious enough to ask.”

Jess rolls onto his side. Looks at William. The laptop light makes his glasses flash, hiding his eyes.

**JESS:** “Why are you doing this? Really?”

**WILLIAM:** “I told you. I like winning.”

**JESS:** “There’s no winning in this. There’s just a girl. A maybe. A probably not.”

**WILLIAM:** “Then I’m winning at probably not. I’m making probably not into maybe. That’s winning.”

**JESS:** “You’re weird, bro.”

**WILLIAM:** "I'm William. Just William."

## **EXT. PARK NADODRZE, SZCZECIN - DAY**

The park is a long strip of green along the Oder River, which is wide here and brown and moves like it's thinking about something. On one side, the water. On the other, apartment blocks in various states of repair, some new glass, some old concrete with graffiti. Between them, grass, paths, benches, trees that have learned to live with the wind from the river.

The open-air stage is at the north end, a concrete platform with a metal roof, speakers stacked on either side like black monoliths. Cables snake across the ground. A sound check happens, a guitar riff, feedback, someone saying "check, check" in Polish.

Teenagers gather in clusters. Some sit on blankets. Some stand near the stage, waiting for the first band. The smell of grass and river water and cheap cigarette smoke. The sky is that particular European summer gray, not sunny, not raining, just existing.

Jess and William are on a bench near the path, not too close to the stage, not too far. Close enough to see. Far enough to not be seen.

Jess wears his black t-shirt with the hole. He's holding a book. "The Great Gatsby." William found it in a secondhand shop. The cover is blue with gold letters. It looks like something someone would read on purpose.

**JESS:** "I don't know what this book is about."

**WILLIAM:** "It doesn't matter."

**JESS:** "What if she asks?"

**WILLIAM:** "She won't ask. Not this time."

**JESS:** "What if she does?"

**WILLIAM:** "Then you say 'it's about wanting something you can't have.' Which is true. And relevant."

**JESS:** "Is it about that?"

**WILLIAM:** "Everything is about that."

Jess looks at the crowd. Teenagers in clothes that look like they came from the same stores as teenagers everywhere. Jeans. Hoodies. Crop tops. A girl with blue hair. A boy with a septum ring. And then:

Her.

Blonde. Not the bright blonde of Instagram filters, something softer, more real. She's with two other girls, laughing at something, holding a plastic cup of something. She moves like she doesn't know she's being watched, which is the only way anyone ever moves.

**JESS:** “There.”

**WILLIAM:** “I see her.”

**JESS:** “She’s more beautiful in person.”

**WILLIAM:** “She’s a child.”

**JESS:** “She’s perfect.”

**WILLIAM:** “Wait for the right moment. Not when she’s with friends. When she’s alone. Walking to the bathroom. Getting water. Something.”

They wait. The first band starts, some local punk group, Polish lyrics shouted over distorted guitars. The crowd moves, jumps, spills beer. Ivanka stays near the back with her friends, not jumping, just watching, sipping her drink.

Twenty minutes. Thirty. The band finishes. A break. Ivanka says something to her friends. Walks away, toward the portable toilets near the trees.

**WILLIAM:** “Now.”

**JESS:** “Now?”

**WILLIAM:** “Now. Walk toward her. Trip. Drop the book. Say the line. Walk away.”

Jess stands up. His legs feel wrong. Too long. Too obvious. He starts walking along the path, toward the portable toilets, toward her. The book is heavy in his hand. His palm is sweating.

She’s twenty meters away. Fifteen. Ten.

He times it. Or tries to. His foot catches on a tree root he didn’t see, a real root, not part of the plan. He stumbles. The book flies. It lands in the grass, pages open, spine cracked. He falls to one knee. His hands hit the dirt.

Ivanka stops. Looks down at him. Her face is surprised, then concerned, then something else. Amusement? Pity?

**JESS:** “Oh my god, hayst, it’s embarrassing.”

The words come out wrong. Too fast. Too rehearsed. His accent is thick. The “hayst” sounds like a cough. He looks up at her. She’s looking down at him. Their eyes meet for one second. Two.

She doesn’t move to help. She just stands there, holding her plastic cup, looking at this strange man on his knees in the dirt with a book about wanting something you can’t have.

Jess scrambles up. Grabs the book. Doesn’t look at her again. Walks away, fast, toward the river, toward the water, toward anywhere that’s not here.

Behind him, he hears her laugh. Not mean. Just surprised. Confused. The laugh of someone who just saw something weird and doesn’t know what to do with it.

He reaches the river. Leans against the railing. His heart is hammering. His hands are shaking. The book is bent, pages crumpled.

William appears beside him. Not fast, not slow. Just there, like he was always there.

**WILLIAM:** "Well?"

**JESS:** "I fell on a real root."

**WILLIAM:** "I saw."

**JESS:** "She didn't help."

**WILLIAM:** "I saw."

**JESS:** "She laughed."

**WILLIAM:** "I heard."

**JESS:** "It was terrible."

**WILLIAM:** "It was perfect."

**JESS:** "How was it perfect? She laughed at me."

**WILLIAM:** "She noticed you. She'll remember you. The guy who fell. The guy with the book. The guy who said something weird and walked away. She'll tell her friends. They'll laugh. But she'll remember."

**JESS:** "She thinks I'm an idiot."

**WILLIAM:** "She thinks you're something. That's better than nothing."

They stand by the river. The brown water moves. A barge passes, slow and heavy, carrying something invisible. The music starts again, another band, another shout of Polish lyrics into the gray sky.

**JESS:** "When's the second meeting?"

**WILLIAM:** "We find her coffee shop. We watch. We wait."

**JESS:** "More waiting."

**WILLIAM:** "More strategy."

## **INT. MOTEL ROOM, SZCZECIN - NIGHT**

The laptop screen shows a satellite map of Szczecin. A coffee shop marked with a red dot. "Kawiarnia Miś" near the old town. A photo from Instagram. Ivanka sitting at a table by the window, a latte in front of her, looking at her phone. The caption: "usual spot."

**WILLIAM:** “Tuesday. Four o’clock. She’s there every Tuesday.”

**JESS:** “How do you know?”

**WILLIAM:** “I looked. Four weeks of photos. Same place. Same time. Same drink.”

**JESS:** “You’re scary.”

**WILLIAM:** “I’m thorough.”

**JESS:** “Same thing.”

### **EXT. KAWIARNIA MIŚ, SZCZECIN - DAY**

The coffee shop is small, squeezed between a bookstore and a vintage clothing store. The facade is brick, painted white, with a brown wooden door and windows that fog up from the inside. A chalkboard sign on the sidewalk shows today’s specials in Polish and English. “Latte 12zł. Cake 15zł.”

Inside, six tables. Four by the window, two in the back. Exposed brick walls. Shelves with old books no one reads. A counter with an espresso machine that hisses like it’s in pain. The smell of coffee and cinnamon and something sweet baking.

Jess sits at the table by the window, the one where Ivanka usually sits. He’s early. An hour early. He ordered a latte he can’t afford. William is outside, across the street, in a doorway where he can see through the window.

Jess sips the latte. It’s bitter. He doesn’t like coffee. He puts it down. Picks it up. Puts it down.

The door opens. A bell rings. Ivanka walks in.

She doesn’t see him at first. She goes to the counter. Orders. “Tak, latte proszę.” The barista knows her. They exchange a smile, a few words Jess doesn’t understand.

She turns. Looks for her table. Sees him sitting there. The guy from the park. The guy who fell. The guy who said something weird.

She pauses. Just for a second. Then she sits at the table in the back. Not by the window. Not near him. But she can see him. And he can see her.

Jess remembers the plan. Smile. Nothing else. Just smile.

He smiles.

It’s the wrong smile. Too big. Too eager. Like a dog that’s been waiting all day for its owner to come home. He tries to make it smaller. It gets bigger. He tries to look away. He can’t.

Ivanka looks at her phone. Then back at him. Then at her phone. She’s not scared. Just confused. The smile of a stranger in her usual spot, smiling at her like they share a secret they don’t share.

Jess holds the smile until his face hurts. He sips the latte. It’s cold now. He doesn’t care.

Ivanka drinks her latte. She doesn't look at him again. Not directly. But he sees her eyes move. He sees her notice. He sees her wonder.

After twenty minutes, she stands up. Leaves money on the table. Walks out. The bell rings. She's gone.

Jess exhales. His face aches. His stomach hurts. He looks out the window. William is still in the doorway, watching. He gives a small nod. Almost invisible.

## **EXT. STREET OUTSIDE KAWIARNIA MIŚ - DAY**

They walk together, not close, not far, like two people who happen to be going the same direction.

**WILLIAM:** "You smiled too long."

**JESS:** "I know."

**WILLIAM:** "You looked desperate."

**JESS:** "I know."

**WILLIAM:** "But she noticed. She'll remember. The guy from the park. The guy at her coffee shop. The guy who smiles too long."

**JESS:** "She thinks I'm a creep."

**WILLIAM:** "She thinks you're something. Two somethings make a pattern. Three make a story."

**JESS:** "When's the third meeting?"

**WILLIAM:** "We wait. We watch. We find the right moment."

## **INT. MOTEL ROOM, SZCZECIN - NIGHT**

Days pass. The laptop screen shows more red dots. The school. A shopping mall. A swimming pool. Ivanka's life mapped out in locations, times, patterns.

William watches. Jess waits. The van sits in the parking lot, untouched, unnecessary now, a relic of a plan that died before it lived.

**WILLIAM:** "Saturday. The market. She goes with her mother. They buy vegetables. Flowers. We don't approach. We just be there. Same aisle. Same space. You don't look at her. You don't smile. You just exist."

**JESS:** "That's the third meeting?"

**WILLIAM:** "That's the third meeting."

**JESS:** "I don't do anything?"

**WILLIAM:** “You breathe. You shop. You exist in her world without entering it. She sees you. She remembers. She wonders. But you don’t give her anything. No smile. No line. No fall. Just presence.”

**JESS:** “This is the hardest one.”

**WILLIAM:** “Because you want to do something. You want to talk. You want to touch. But you can’t. You have to be a ghost. A warm ghost. A ghost she almost recognizes.”

## **EXT. SZCZECIN WEEKEND MARKET, PLACE ZWYCIĘSTWA - DAY**

The market fills the square, stalls under striped awnings, red and white and green. Vegetables in piles. Flowers in buckets. Meat hanging from hooks. The smell of earth and pollen and something metallic.

Jess walks through the stalls, alone. William is at the edge of the square, near a fountain, reading a newspaper he can’t read.

Ivanka is there, with a woman who must be her mother. Same blonde hair, older, harder, buying tomatoes with the efficiency of someone who’s done this a thousand times.

Jess is in the next aisle. He picks up an apple. Examines it. Puts it down. He doesn’t look at her. Not directly. But he knows where she is. He can feel her, the way you feel someone watching you in a dark room.

Ivanka says something to her mother. Laughs. The laugh from the park. The laugh that wasn’t mean, just confused.

Jess moves to the flower stall. Daffodils. Tulips. Something purple he doesn’t know the name of. He touches a petal. Soft. Alive.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees her look. Just a glance. A recognition. The guy from the park. The guy at the coffee shop. Here, now, buying flowers he doesn’t want.

She doesn’t say anything. She turns back to her mother. They move to the next stall. Cheese. Bread.

Jess buys nothing. He walks away, through the market, past the fountain where William sits, past the edge of the square, into the narrow streets of the old town.

He finds a bench. Sits down. His hands are shaking again. Not from fear. From holding back. From being a ghost when he wants to be a man.

William sits beside him. The newspaper is folded under his arm.

**WILLIAM:** “She saw you.”

**JESS:** “I know.”

**WILLIAM:** “She almost said something.”

**JESS:** “I know.”

**WILLIAM:** "You're doing well."

**JESS:** "I feel like I'm dying."

**WILLIAM:** "That's the feeling. That's the ghost feeling. You're not alive to her. You're not dead. You're in between. That's where the power is."

**JESS:** "I don't want power. I want her."

**WILLIAM:** "Power gets you her. Patience gets you her. Being a ghost gets you her."

**JESS:** "When do I stop being a ghost?"

**WILLIAM:** "Fourth meeting. The park. You sit. She walks past. You don't look up. You don't smile. You just exist. And if she stops, if she says something, if she asks your name... then you're alive again."

### **EXT. PARK ŻEROMSKIEGO, SZCZECIN - DAY**

The park is different from the riverside park. Older. More trees. A pond in the center with ducks that look like they've been bribed to stay. Benches around the pond, some occupied by old men feeding the ducks, some empty, waiting.

Jess sits on a bench near the water. Not the closest one. The second closest. He has a book. Not Gatsby. A different one. "Norwegian Wood." William found it in the same shop. Something about loss. Something about wanting.

He's been sitting for an hour. The ducks have accepted him. An old man nodded at him. The sun is doing that thing where it almost comes out but doesn't, just makes the clouds brighter.

She comes from the east entrance, the one near the street with the tram line. She's alone today. No friends. No mother. Just her, in jeans and a sweater that's too big for her, blonde hair in a ponytail, walking like she has somewhere to be but isn't in a hurry.

The path goes around the pond. She'll pass his bench. She'll see him. The guy from the park. The guy at the coffee shop. The guy at the market. Here again.

Jess doesn't look up. He reads the same sentence he's been reading for ten minutes. "Death exists, not as the opposite but as a part of life." He doesn't know what it means. He doesn't care.

Her footsteps on the path. Gravel crunching. Closer. Closer.

She stops.

He doesn't look up. He can't. His neck won't move. His eyes are glued to the page.

Silence. The ducks quack. The old man coughs.

**IVANKA:** "You're the guy who fell."

Her voice is higher than he expected. Younger. The accent is thick, Polish, English learned in school and practiced on YouTube.

Jess looks up. Slowly. Like he's surprised to see her. Like he wasn't waiting. Like he's a ghost who just got caught being alive.

**JESS:** "What?"

**IVANKA:** "At the concert. You fell. With the book."

**JESS:** "Oh. Yeah. That was embarrassing."

**IVANKA:** "And the coffee shop. You smiled at me."

**JESS:** "Did I?"

**IVANKA:** "You did. For a long time."

**JESS:** "Sorry. I'm weird."

She laughs. The same laugh. Not mean. Just surprised. Confused. Curious.

**IVANKA:** "Why are you always where I am?"

**JESS:** "I'm not. I just... like this park. This coffee shop. I'm new here."

**IVANKA:** "Where are you from?"

**JESS:** "Philippines."

**IVANKA:** "That's far."

**JESS:** "Very far."

She stands there, looking at him. The sun almost comes out. The clouds get brighter. A duck waddles past, looking for food.

**IVANKA:** "What's your name?"

The question he's been waiting for. The question William promised would come. The moment the ghost becomes alive.

**JESS:** "Jess."

**IVANKA:** "Jess."

She says it like she's tasting it. Like she's not sure if she likes the flavor.

**IVANKA:** "I'm Ivanka."

**JESS:** "I know."

She pauses. The smile fades, just a little. Just enough.

**IVANKA:** “How do you know?”

Jess feels the ground shift. The book in his hand feels heavy. The sentence about death and life blurs.

**JESS:** “I... someone told me. A friend. He knows people.”

**IVANKA:** “What friend?”

**JESS:** “Just a friend. He’s... not here.”

She looks around, like she expects to see someone. The old man with the ducks. A woman pushing a stroller. No one else.

**IVANKA:** “This is weird.”

**JESS:** “I know. I’m weird. I told you.”

She takes a step back. Then another. The curiosity is still there, but it’s fighting with something else. Something older. The instinct that tells prey when a shadow is just a shadow, and when it’s something watching.

**IVANKA:** “I have to go.”

**JESS:** “Wait.”

**IVANKA:** “Don’t follow me.”

She turns. Walks fast, not running, but fast, toward the east entrance, toward the tram, toward the street with people and noise and safety.

Jess sits on the bench. The book drops from his hand. The ducks come closer, hoping for bread. The old man looks at him, then looks away.

William appears from behind a tree. Sits on the bench. Doesn’t say anything for a long time.

**WILLIAM:** “She asked your name.”

**JESS:** “She did.”

**WILLIAM:** “You said it wrong.”

**JESS:** “I know.”

**WILLIAM:** “You said ‘I know’ when she told you her name.”

**JESS:** “I know.”

**WILLIAM:** “That was stupid.”

**JESS:** “I know.”

**WILLIAM:** “She’s scared now. Not scared enough to call the police. But scared enough to remember. Scared enough to tell her friends. ‘There’s this weird guy. He knows my name. He’s everywhere.’”

**JESS:** “What do we do?”

**WILLIAM:** “We wait. We see if she comes back. If curiosity wins over fear. If the ghost story becomes something else.”

**JESS:** “And if it doesn’t?”

**WILLIAM:** “Then we start over. New city. New girl. New plan.”

**JESS:** “I don’t want a new girl.”

**WILLIAM:** “Then make this one work.”

They sit on the bench. The ducks lose hope and waddle away. The old man stands up, empties his bag of bread crumbs, shuffles off. The pond is still. The clouds stay bright but the sun never comes out.

**JESS:** “She’s perfect, bro.”

**WILLIAM:** “She’s sixteen.”

**JESS:** “She’s perfect.”

**WILLIAM:** “You’re twenty-two.”

**JESS:** “Age is just a number.”

**WILLIAM:** “Jail is just a building.”

**JESS:** “You said we wouldn’t get caught.”

**WILLIAM:** “I said we’d be smart. Smart isn’t the same as safe.”

Jess picks up the book. Brushes dirt off the cover. “Norwegian Wood.” Death exists. Life exists. Something in between exists too, something that isn’t either, something that waits on park benches for girls who might come back.

**JESS:** “What if she comes back tomorrow?”

**WILLIAM:** “Then you’re lucky.”

**JESS:** “What if she doesn’t?”

**WILLIAM:** “Then you’re learning.”

**JESS:** “Learning what?”

**WILLIAM:** “That ghosts don’t always get to become alive. That sometimes haunting is all you get.”

They sit until the light changes. Until the park empties. Until the tram stops running and the streets go quiet and the only sound is the water in the pond, lapping at the edges, remembering the shape of the shore.

## **INT. MOTEL ROOM, SZCZECIN - NIGHT**

The laptop screen is dark. The map is closed. The red dots are just memory now.

Jess lies on his bed, staring at the ceiling. The water stain looks like a face again. Her face. Smiling. Waiting.

William sits at the desk, not typing, just sitting, looking at the wall.

**JESS:** "Do you think she'll come back?"

**WILLIAM:** "I don't know."

**JESS:** "Do you think she liked me?"

**WILLIAM:** "I don't know."

**JESS:** "Do you think we can still..."

**WILLIAM:** "I don't know, Jess. I don't know anything. I'm making this up as I go. I'm a guy who writes grant proposals. I'm not a love expert. I'm not a stalker coach. I'm just here. Because you asked. Because no one else asks."

**JESS:** "I'm glad you said yes."

**WILLIAM:** "I'm not."

**JESS:** "Why?"

**WILLIAM:** "Because I think we're going somewhere bad. I think the van is still in the parking lot. I think you still want to grab her and put her in it and drive away. I think the ghost plan is just a slower version of the kidnapping plan. And I think I'm helping you. And I don't know why."

**JESS:** "Because you like winning."

**WILLIAM:** "Because I'm lonely. Because you're the only person who sees me. Because I'd rather be part of something terrible than be alone in something safe. That's why."

The room is quiet. The shower drips. The van waits. The girl sleeps somewhere in the city, dreaming of whatever sixteen-year-old girls dream of, not knowing that two men are awake in a motel room, arguing about whether love is a reason to become a monster.

**JESS:** "Tomorrow we go back to the park."

**WILLIAM:** "Tomorrow we go back."

**JESS:** “And if she’s there?”

**WILLIAM:** “Then we see.”

**JESS:** “And if she’s not?”

**WILLIAM:** “Then we see something else.”

Jess closes his eyes. The water stain face smiles down at him. The orange blankets smell like dust and old dreams. Somewhere, a phone buzzes. Somewhere, a door slams. Somewhere, a sixteen-year-old girl turns in her sleep and frowns at something she can’t quite remember, a face, a smile, a voice saying her name like it was already familiar.

**TO BE CONTINUED...**