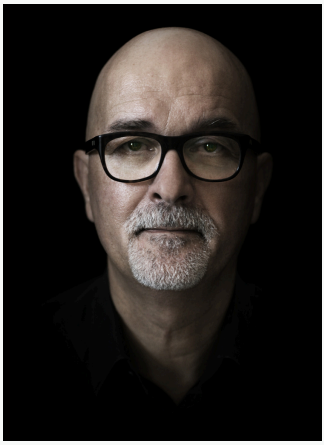

Vincent V. Severski

***The Tailor***

**Synopsis, Bio & Excerpts**



Vincent V. Severski

## About the author

**Vincent V. Severski** is a retired intelligence officer, with the rank of colonel, and former Director of Poland's Foreign Intelligence Agency.
He is a bestselling author of several critically acclaimed spy novels, with over **1 million copies sold in Poland alone.**

Severski spent **13 years abroad** and participated in **more than 140 missions across 50 countries**, including regions in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. He was trained in Poland and in the U.S by the CIA. His first-hand experience in global intelligence operations provides a unique authenticity to his writing.

In recognition of his service, Severski was awarded **the Legion of Merit**, the highest U.S. military honor for foreign officers, **by President Barack Obama**, as well as several high-ranking Polish orders.

**Based on his *The Illegals* Series, Studio Canal produced a 10-episode series in 2018,** directed by Jan P. Matuszyński and Leszek Dawid, starring Andrzej Seweryn and Grzegorz Damięcki, among others.

# The Tailor
# Vincent V. Severski

**Espionage**


June 2025
464 pages

4.4/ 77 ratings/ 7 reviews

7.9/ 246 ratings/ 62 reviews

Sometimes a person's life ends before their death...

2003. Poland stands on the brink of a historic decision to join the European Union. Behind the scenes, Operation "Iraqi Freedom" is underway — and in Warsaw, a Russian agent suddenly surfaces. Polish counterintelligence scrambles to uncover his motives. The trail leads to a young woman working as a caretaker for Prime Minister Feliks Wirski.

The head of Polish intelligence assigns the case to veteran agent Roman Leski and Monika Arent, a newcomer just beginning her service.

Meanwhile, in Budva on the Adriatic coast, Russian oligarchs gather on luxury yachts. At the centre is billionaire Aleksander Gierman, orchestrating a bold plot to overthrow the Russian president.

In London, MI6 agents Martin and Ray are drawn into the operation. Their investigation brings them to Warsaw, where the Russian spy proves far more dangerous than expected.

Together with Polish intelligence, they follow the trail to Montenegro — and into the heart of a geopolitical mystery.

*The ending leaves the reader pensive, with the sense that they've glimpsed a piece of the real world—one that is usually kept silent.*

Czytam wszędzie, literary blog

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- revolves around interconnected intelligence agencies, each driven by its own agenda,
- shows Russia planning a bomb attack both as a political tool and as a way to frame a rival service, based on real-world methods of Russian statecraft:
- offers a reflection on early 21st-century optimism vs. today's disillusionment,
- standalone, while featuring returning characters from *Senate Square* and *The Section* series.

It was night, the lighting was poor and the road was steep, so within seconds Martin slipped on a stone, twisted his ankle, and landed face-down on the hard tarmac.

# *The Tailor*

## *Synopsis by Kate Webster*

*The Tailor* unfolds in 2003, a pivotal year for Poland: the country stands poised to join the European Union, while secretly preparing to contribute troops to the U.S.-led operation 'Iraqi Freedom'. Against this backdrop of high-stakes geopolitics, a dramatic intelligence operation unfolds across Poland, the UK and the Balkans.

The story kicks off in Warsaw, when Polish counterintelligence detects a Russian agent operating in the city. This agent is linked to **Julia Bartkiewicz**, a young woman employed as a nanny to the daughter of Prime Minister **Feliks Wirski**. Given the potential national security implications, the Polish intelligence chief assigns the case to **Roman Leski**, a seasoned veteran, and **Monika Arent**, a novice officer recently recruited into the service.

**Leski** and **Arent** form a compelling investigative duo – his experience grounding their methods, her intuition and fresh perspective pushing them to uncover hidden truths. Their mission becomes a race against time to understand the depth of the infiltration and whether it ties into a larger international threat. The plot thickens when the investigation unearths rumours that the PM's daughter might have been born as the result of an affair with **Bartkiewicz**.

Simultaneously, across Europe, a secret MI6 task force is active in Budva, Montenegro. On luxurious yachts anchored off the Adriatic coast, a group of Russian oligarchs, led by billionaire **Aleksander Gierman**, are plotting the overthrow of the Russian president. **MI6 agents Martin** and **Ray** are dispatched to monitor the unfolding conspiracy. The trail soon leads them to Warsaw, where they intersect with **Leski** and **Arent**. The British agents bring advanced tradecraft, and the Polish counterintelligence team contributes deep local insight; navigating the inter-service collaboration, however, proves both complicated and essential. The stakes escalate as their findings hint at destabilising plots not only in Poland but in broader international affairs.

Back in Montenegro, the MI6 agents collaborate with a local intelligence group comprising brothers **Nikola** and **Jovan**, and their commander **George**, who are in charge of surveillance on the yachts and throughout the town. The action moves from clandestine meetings in cafes to tense seaside enclaves, winding streets and surveillance hubs marred by shadows of the Yugoslav wars. **Severski, a former intelligence officer with direct experience in Balkan missions, inserts an authentic and haunting dimension into these sections. He paints a vivid portrait of a region still reeling from the 1990s conflicts, rife with personal grievances, shifting loyalties and the lingering bitterness of war.**

The British and Polish teams begin to home in on **Grigorij Portnoy**, a former KGB colonel known as **'The Tailor'** and **'The Prince of Spies'.** To reach Portnoy, **Leski** and **Arent** bring in agent **Dima**, an **'illegal' (long-term undercover agent)** who has worked for the Poles infiltrating intelligence networks in Russia and knows Portnoy personally. When Dima is sent to Montenegro to unearth Portnoy's intentions, it takes some time for the true situation to come to light: officially, Portnoy merely plans to confront the conspirators. Meanwhile, the British want to catch Portnoy, and Polish intelligence is supposed to help them. In reality, however, Russian intelligence plans to blow up Gierman's yacht, eliminate the conspirators, and blame the British.

The novel culminates in a tightly orchestrated intelligence operation in the Balkans, where all narrative threads converge. Ray and Martin learn that George is a Russian mole who has been destroying materials meant for MI6. The bomb plot targeting the oligarchs' yacht is exposed and tensions run high as the protagonists confront one another; blood is shed as true allegiances come to light. Makarow, the Russian intelligence agent who was detected in Warsaw (also known as Berezovsky), pays Portnoy a visit with the intention of shooting him to prevent any chance of retaliation, and the two men end up killing each other. Ray, Martin and Dima escape on Gierman's yacht.

Meanwhile, Julia Bartkiewicz's body is discovered on the banks of the Vistula. The subsequent police inquiry reveals that she was taking antipsychotics and her diaries highlight her unrequited obsession with PM Wirski, proving the rumoured affair was a delusion of her own making. Leski discovers that the true mission of the mysterious Russian agent in Warsaw was to embroil the prime minister in a scandal on the eve of Poland's entry into the EU and participation in the 'Iraqi Freedom' campaign, undermining public trust in the government's decisions.

The resolution of the story is both satisfying and thought-provoking. The immediate threat – the Russian plan to fuel international tensions by implicating the Brits in the bombing of the yacht and destabilising the Polish government – is neutralised, but the moral and emotional consequences of espionage linger. **Given the references throughout to the ongoing threat posed by Russia, echoing real-life events from the last few decades, readers are left to ponder the all-too-real incidents described – this may be a work of fiction, but it is strongly grounded in reality.** The finale avoids neat conclusions in favour of realism, emphasising the personal toll on those who operate behind the scenes. Severski deftly balances geopolitical stakes with the intimate cost of loyalty, sacrifice and blurred allegiances.

**Kate Webster** is a professional Polish-to-English literary translator, editor, and subtitler. Her literary translations have been nominated for prestigious awards, including **the International Booker Prize** and **the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize**. She lives in London, UK.

**Chapter 1**

March 2003 was an unremarkable month in the southern Adriatic. It was sunny, there was a gentle breeze from the south and it was growing warmer by the day. The sea water was seventeen degrees Celsius, two degrees higher in the bays.

The last war had not reached medieval Budva, and even the previous wars had spared it. Although the conflict of the 1990s had effectively scared away the German pensioners, life in the city had come to a standstill only briefly. The seaside boulevard, Stari Grad, the restaurants, cafes, port and beaches had quickly filled with the hubbub of Russian voices.

A few weeks earlier, brothers Nikola and Jovan had rented a two-storey house away from the centre, on the mountainside. It was situated on the densely built western edge of the city, at the end of a steep, winding street, and surrounded by a thicket of acacia trees that concealed its ugliness. There was a lingering sense that all the clocks had stopped and the street lights had gone out here at the moment of Tito's death.

There was a garage on the ground floor that housed a ten-year-old white Volkswagen Passat and a dinghy with an engine on the back of a tow truck. The living area was on the first floor. The bright living room led out onto a spacious terrace adorned with agaves in stone vases and four antennas, boasting views of the turquoise sea, forest-covered mountains and the red roofs of the Old Town.

Nikola was fifty-five years old, Jovan fifteen years his junior. It was Nikola who made all the decisions – not only because of his age, but also because he was the one who had dragged his younger brother into this job. He had given Jovan the large bedroom off the living room and settled himself in the dark cubbyhole at the end of the corridor. The third bedroom served as the technical workshop, which they called the Bunker.

The time was 7AM. It would be sunny and warm that day. Jovan sat on the terrace, drinking coffee and watching through his sunglasses as a plane drew vapour trails in the sky. He listened to the news on Radio Nova Budva. He puffed on his cigarette, sipped his coffee, stared out to sea and intermittently glanced at the sky.

When the adverts ended, the broadcaster announced that the next song would be *Postojim i ja* by Sergej Ćetković, who was representing Montenegro at the Budva Music Festival in June. Jovan turned up the radio and stretched out in his chair, interlinking his fingers behind his head. He adored Ćetković.

"There's no bread," came Nikola's low voice behind him.

"It's in the car, the green bag on the back seat," said Jovan.

As the song faded out, the broadcaster came back on the air, his voice animated. "Dear listeners, I've just received some extraordinary information. Four dolphins have been sighted in Uvala Mogren Bay. Apparently, they were spotted there yesterday too, jumping out of the water, putting on a show for the onlookers. They appear to have escaped from a sanctuary in Croatia. You can watch them from the walls of the citadel – and don't forget to pay a visit to Luna restaurant in the Old Town while you're there!"

"Did you hear that?!" cried Jovan, turning towards the living room. "Did you hear? Niki?" he repeated, louder, leaping from his chair.

He went into the living room and saw Nikola coming up the stairs.

"Dolphins have been spotted in Mogren Bay," said Jovan excitedly. "Shall we go?"

"Common or bottlenose?" Nikola asked, taking the bread from the bag.

"I don't think people usually know the difference."

"Hm," Nikola muttered, but he knew perfectly well what Jovan wanted. No one loved dolphins like his brother did.

"Let's go and swim with them," Jovan said. "The last time was…"

"Three years ago, in Turkey," Nikola cut in.

"Yeah, in Kaş..." Jovan shook his head. "That was beautiful. Twenty bottlenoses. The young ones wanted to play. Do you remember?"

"You're fucking crazy about those dolphins," Nikola said. He'd started making himself a sandwich.

"Let's go, maybe they're still there..."

"Grow up, little brother." Nikola smiled. "We should change the chips today and send the files back to HQ. We're two days late as it is. You've got to be in good nick. If you go and play with dolphins now, you'll be good for nothing come evening."

Jovan nodded and put his coffee cup on the table.

"I guess you're right," he said half-heartedly. "Shame."

"Don't worry." Nikola went over to his brother and ruffled his thick hair. "I'm sure they'll stay for a bit longer and I promise, you will swim with them. Tomorrow." He pulled Jovan's head to his chest. "I love you, bro."

"Are we actually accomplishing anything with this job?" asked Jovan. "Because I have my doubts. We've had nothing from HQ, not a single good word. Nothing. We're like fucking paparazzi, not..."

"That's not our concern," Nikola interrupted. "We know what we have to do, and we're doing it," he added without conviction.

## Chapter 2

The safe house – codename 'Maczek' – was situated in the Służewiec district of Warsaw. It was a two-room flat on the third floor in a building with no lift, which posed quite a challenge for Roman Leski. It took a lot of effort for him to climb the stairs, leaning on the banister the whole way. He had been taking medication for high blood pressure for the last two months and felt constantly tired. As he reached the first floor, beads of sweat were appearing on his forehead. By the second floor, his breathing had quickened, and as he arrived at the third, his heart began pounding ominously. Only once he had steadied his

breathing a little and wiped the sweat from his brow did he ring the doorbell.

A woman with short, blonde hair, a pretty, delicate face and blue eyes opened the door. She was twenty-five years old, but she could just as easily have been fresh out of secondary school. Jeans and a light blue shirt with rolled-up sleeves matched her casual, youthful look perfectly.

Roman thought that this seemingly ordinary girl had the potential to become a hardy intelligence officer. Monika Arent was still training, but Roman already knew he had chosen the right person.

Roman had applied to the Academy of Fine Arts three times without success. He loved art so much that his repeated failure of exams didn't put him off. Studying hadn't seemed important to him back then – he had devoted every free moment to his underground activities. It was then he'd realised that the perfect composition would be created when he managed to unite the artist and the warrior in a single soul. Fantasy and abstract thinking break down formulas, enable us to look beyond the horizon, to describe reality with colour and shape, rather than an analogue image. This was how Monika perceived the world, because she was an artist by nature. Now Roman had to turn her into a spy.

"So, how did I do?" she said as soon as he crossed the threshold.

"Get me some water first," replied Roman, still trying to catch his breath.

Before he could hang up his jacket, Monika had disappeared into the kitchen; a moment later, she placed a glass on the coffee table in the living room with a loud bang. She sat down on the sofa and watched Roman as he settled into the armchair, panting.

He took a few sips, heaved two lengthy sighs and placed his worn brown briefcase, which resembled an old school satchel, on his lap. He rummaged inside it for a moment before finally pulling out a green ring binder.

"How did I do?" asked Monika impatiently. "Did I pass?"

"Patience, patience! I'll tell you, just wait for it," said Roman as he opened the ring binder. "Now then…" He nodded.

"Now then what, for f…?" Monika was unable to hold it in much longer.

"Don't swear," Roman muttered under his breath. "Intelligence officers have to control their tongues. They can't reveal their emotions. Especially to their superiors."

"Gimme a break, Roman," she replied, amused. "Tell me, did I pass or not?"

He liked her independence and explosive temperament, so typical of the student subculture at the art academy; he had made no attempt to change them. On the contrary – Monika's unselfconsciousness was a great advantage. She had been enrolled on an individual intelligence course because Roman foresaw a future for her away from HQ. She would be working underground, leading a life in her natural environment.

For the past two months, she had been taking an intensive course in surveillance, detection and shaking off tails. This was the most important subject of espionage education. If a professional spy is unable to confound surveillance, they are not fit for operational work. And this was the very future that Roman had planned for her.

[*Edward Bauman, head of Polish intelligence, assigns a sensitive case to Roman and Monika, involving Prime Minister Feliks Wirski and his 28-year-old housekeeper and nanny, Julia Bartkiewicz, who is thought to have received a visit from a Russian intelligence agent, Berezovsky.*]

**Chapter 6**

After leaving the doctor's, Roman called Bronek and arranged a meeting for later that day.

If anyone could help Roman in the Julia Bartkiewicz case, it was he – Inspector Bronisław Walczak, head of the criminal

department of the Warsaw Police Headquarters and Roman's friend since school.

Bronek had studied law at the University of Warsaw and then, immediately after graduating, he had begun serving in the criminal division of the Warsaw civic militia, as the police force was called at the time. He was aware of Roman's involvement in opposition activities, so he had helped him as much as he could.

After the fall of communism, Bronek had passed the 'verification' process, but he hadn't revealed his collaboration with Roman.

Notifying Zbyszek Malinowski was out of the question for now – his talkative nature threatened to blow the case before they could determine what had actually happened.

Roman wasn't sure if the whole thing was even worth looking into, but he had given his word to Edward and was obliged to act. After all, it related to Prime Minister Feliks Wirski, whom he respected and in whom he saw hope for Poland. *We ought to do what we can to clear his name*, Roman thought. *We have so few decent politicians*.

Bronek had requested two days to gather information about the building on Modra Street, though Roman hadn't told him about the Russian or Julia Bartkiewicz. Bronek had found nothing that gave him cause for concern, but Roman knew this was just the beginning. The police had sketched a superficial picture – now it was time to delve deeper. He had come to the conclusion that no one could do this better than Monika. Still untainted by routine, spontaneous and uncompromising, she might see something that others had missed. If there was truly something unusual going on in that building, she was the one to see it.

*In a few weeks, Monika's due to be promoted to first officer rank and she'll become a professional spy*, Roman thought, *so the Julia Bartkiewicz case will be her dissertation. They're similar, from the same generation, they both come from small towns in eastern Poland and they arrived in Warsaw around the same time. Who better to investigate Julia Bartkiewicz?*

Roman arrived at 'Maczek' half an hour early. He didn't want Monika to notice the effort it took him to get to the third floor, but to his surprise, he managed to climb the stairs quite easily this time.

He sat down and pulled out the mobile phone he had received only two months earlier – a silver Nokia 6310, far too small for his deteriorating eyesight. Answering a call required several steps: first finding the phone in his pocket, then putting on his glasses, all under the pressure of a ringtone that was trying to sound like a Bach fugue. Despite these inconveniences, Roman had soon got the hang of his new device and was beginning to appreciate its capabilities.

Mobile phones had spread like a virus, almost everyone had one these days. Sometimes he wondered where this was leading. Would this small device push the world in the right direction? What would the consequences be? And he knew this was the tip of the iceberg. A great revolution was underway. He wondered what the world would look like in twenty-five years.

Roman could no longer imagine working or handling everyday matters without his mobile. He had a feeling that this gadget would soon become something like an implant – an indispensable organ for every spy.

He had also managed to get hold of an identical model for Monika.

The clock on the wall showed 6PM as Bach's fugue sounded.

"I'm ten minutes late," said Monika on the other end of the line. "Sorry."

"Of course. No problem."

He realised that Monika had just demonstrated the essence of the new, mobile-based world. In the past, people were late and apologised later; now they apologised in advance.

Eventually, Monika entered the room.

"What's up?" she asked before collapsing into the armchair.

"I've got a job for you," replied Roman. "Your first real job."

"Awesome." She smiled.

"And it's very serious," he added. "It involves the prime minster."

"Oh!" said Monika, although she didn't look surprised.

"Here," he said, handing her a folder. "These are the case details. Not much material, as you can see. Go in the other room and read it. You've got half an hour. Have a think about what we could do with it. Or what *you* could do. Don't force it. If the case doesn't suit you, you're not feeling it, or you don't know where to go with it, don't just make something up. We'll have a chat and figure out what to do. Got it?"

"Sure thing, boss, sounds good," she replied firmly, taking the folder and disappearing into the other room.

Roman dug around in his briefcase and took out an album of work by Pieter Brueghel the Elder. He placed it on his lap and opened it at random. The painting he landed on was *Dulle Griet* – Mad Meg. He found his magnifying glass and began to study the picture. He knew this allegory almost by heart – the crazy, greedy, aggressive Meg and her companions fighting the demons.

He looked at the closed door behind which Monika was sitting and began to wonder if his protégé might have something of the Mad Meg in her.

Just then, the door opened.

Ten minutes had passed.

Monika didn't look like Mad Meg, but there was something disconcerting about her face. For a moment, he thought he might have been led astray by his emotions again. Monika was delicate, but not like a flower, more like a bomb.

"So…?" he asked.

"We know the Russian got out of the lift on the seventh floor, but then he could have taken the stairs to any other floor," she began. "He could have gone up or down. That's what I'd have done. So it might just be a coincidence. Would they mess up like that? Come halfway across Europe to screw up the final stage? Something doesn't add up.

Besides, what secrets would the PM share with her? Unless she's the one running him…"

"So you've got your doubts," Roman interrupted her. "Excellent!"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" replied Monika, excitement in her voice. "It's a naive story."

"It's not in the documents, but we know something else about the flat. On Modra Street, there are two identical buildings built in the 1970s – number one and number three. We're interested in number one. It used to belong to the army. Military personnel were living there, but there was a wave of privatisations a few years ago and the ownership status of many premises changed, along with the tenants. All the same, there are still plenty of soldiers living there, mostly ex-servicemen. There are almost a hundred flats in the block and 305 people registered there, but of course, that doesn't reflect the actual situation. We don't know how many of the flats are being rented out, legally or illegally."

"Let's be honest – everyone and everything in this building is a suspect," said Monika, "and sussing out several hundred people when you don't know what to look for is pure abstraction. We don't know whether Berezovsky came to see Julia, or even whether she was at home at the time. We know nothing at all. It could be Julia, it could be some kind of safe house, it could be another agent, it could be a one-time event, or a hiding place, for example. After all, there's lots of ex-military types living there, probably some are still active, maybe even from the secret services. I'd focus on Julia. If Berezovsky visited her at home and it's intelligence-related, then they have great trust in her. I struggle to believe she's an agent. Where's she from?" Monika reached for the blue folder.

"Siedliszcze, near Chełm," Roman replied immediately.

"Ukrainian?"

"We don't know. We know nothing about her family, and hardly anything about her. She took her high school leaving exams in Chełm. I agree, you look into Julia first and I'll focus on the building.

We'll see what we come up with. We can't count on the cooperation of the PM or the Office of State Protection. We have to do this ourselves, with intelligence resources, carefully and quickly," Roman explained. He knew that Monika liked to think of her work that way.

"I can imagine what would happen if this was leaked to the media," said Monika, barely concealing her excitement. "The opposition would tear Wirski apart. And that would be a shame, because he's not too bad as PMs go."

"That's why the case must be kept in the strictest confidence. Politics isn't exactly a clean profession, so if the PM's got himself dirty, it's our job to clean him up…"

"I don't understand…" said Monika, hesitating. "Maybe we should just speak to him?"

"It wouldn't change anything. We might have to at some point, but not yet."

"Right," she said, nodding. "So? Shall we get started?" She didn't sound quite so enthusiastic now. "I'll go to Siedliszcze tomorrow."

"Let's give ourselves a week," said Roman at once. "First we'll figure out who Julia Bartkiewicz is. You've got her photo in the file. I'll try to talk to the PM's security team. They always know a lot. We'll make use of technology too, set up a surveillance system at the flats and see if anyone pays her a visit. We'll observe what's going on for a few days, until we determine who the mysterious Julia really is."

[*MI6 intelligence officers Martin and Ray are in Budva, closing in on the Russian plotters, when they receive a tip-off from Jovan and Nikola about their collaborator George being a suspected double agent.*]

**Chapter 74**

Martin and George went their separate ways when they reached the port, heading in opposite directions. After a while, when he was sure he was alone, Martin inserted the earpiece and called Ray.

"Where are you?"

"I'm checking out the place for the Pole," Ray replied calmly. "We're meeting at 11PM. He's nervous, something's up."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"So how do you know he's nervous?"

"I just do! But I can hear you're nervous too. Has something happened?"

"There's some kind of conflict between them, but they're pretending everything's fine in front of me. Jovan, the younger one, wants to talk to me, but without George. I don't know if I've got the strength or time to deal with it. What time did you say we've got Dima?"

"11PM."

"So you think he's nervous," Martin said. He knew Ray was good at picking up on that sort of thing. "That worries me."

"Me too. We have some time, so find out what's bothering the brothers, we can't just ignore it. I'll prepare the contact point for the Pole."

"Okay."

Ray was right, as always. The situation had to be dealt with right away, so Martin decided to head straight back to the brothers' house without calling ahead.

The return journey took him longer – he realised he could feel the alcohol he had consumed. He was physically drained. He knocked on the door.

"Someone's here!" Jovan called to Nikola, who was in the Bunker, before going to the window. "It's Philip," he added and ran down the stairs.

"I was hoping you'd be back," Jovan said warmly, closing the door behind Martin.

They went upstairs, where Nikola was waiting, and sat down in the living room.

"What's wrong?" Martin asked.

"We've got a problem," Jovan began.

"George?"

"Yep."

"He's drinking?"

"No, that's not the problem, though in a way, I guess it is. We need to show you something."

"Hang on, Jovan – first, let's tell Philip how this came about," Nikola chimed in. "You already know what we're doing here. This program is experimental in some areas. It's a bit technical, but the problem we've identified is relatively simple. London aren't happy with the results of our work because they can't extract our files. According to my findings, someone interfered – to be specific, someone infected the files that were sent to HQ with a virus. HQ couldn't track it, but I did. I have reason to believe it was done here. And it certainly wasn't me or Jovan."

"George?" Martin asked, shaking his head in disbelief. "You think he'd destroy the material? Why?"

"Exactly, why?" said Jovan. "We don't know, but something's not right. And that's not all. The day before yesterday, after work, George got wasted as usual. It was late, already dark. He left and I followed him. I wanted to see if he'd manage to get home and then go for a run. I also wanted to see Gierman's yacht and take some photos. And now..." He stood up from the sofa. "Come over to the computer, it'll be easier to explain."

Martin was more and more perplexed. The brothers' story sounded credible and increasingly disconcerting. They went to the computer room and Nikola sat down at the keyboard.

There were some photos displayed on the screen that Jovan had taken in the square next to the Old Town. Martin immediately recognised George.

"Who's the other one? Did he tell him something?" asked Martin, surprised. "What happened?"

"They're only in the photo by accident. I was focussing on the yacht."

"At first, we thought it was someone from London," Nikola interjected. "Because George was saying for ages that someone was coming to check what wasn't working, but then he said that they'd be targeting Gierman. Someone like you, I guess... but still, something wasn't adding up. He was clearly up to something. Yesterday we were getting stuck into the tech on that yacht like never before, and that was without hydro, only clones and GSM. George was working like crazy, he didn't even drink. We were already tired." Nikola paused and looked at his brother. "Go on, Jovan."

"We went to get fish at Dragan's in Stari Grad and we ran into this guy with a New York Yankees cap. A lot of people wear those caps, but this guy was distinctive. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible to take a photo. He didn't look like a Yankees fan, more like a Dynamo Moscow fan. He had a slight limp."

"What?" Martin said loudly, and the brothers looked at him in surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Definitely," replied Jovan. "He almost walked into me. He was limping on his left leg, very slightly, but visibly."

Martin straightened up in his chair and for a moment his eyes went dark. He took a few deep breaths and immediately felt himself coming back down to earth.

"Are you feeling alright, Philip?" asked Nikola.

"Have you got some water?"

Jovan handed him an open bottle. Martin took a few sips and exhaled loudly. The brothers looked at each other quizzically.

"You know him?" said Nikola. "Because that's not the end of the story."

Nikola tapped some keys on the keyboard and three photos appeared on the screen.

"This guy…" Jovan tapped the screen. "He was with the limping cap guy at Dragan's yesterday. And this," he continued, pointing to the picture on the left, "is Gierman."

"Ah," said Martin. He sighed. "So George is in contact with Gierman?" In his mind, he was already formulating a plan that he couldn't tell the brothers about.

"It seems so – that's why we thought we should…"

"What you've discovered is very important. I need a full report on this by tomorrow morning, and these photos…" He pointed at the computer screen. "Print them out for me now."

"Sure," said Nikola.

"And watch your backs." Martin got up to leave.

The brothers didn't have the full picture of the situation in Budva. They only knew their part of what was going on, they weren't operational spies, and they had no reason to worry. They were unaware of the presence of Portnoy and Makarov, who were protected by the Serbian services. By chance – or perhaps thanks to their intuition – they had stumbled upon the inebriated George, the Russian spy who followed none of the rules.

Martin went out onto the street and immediately called Ray. They arranged to meet at a cafe near the citadel in Stari Grad.

They had an hour until their meeting with Dima, and Martin broke into a jog for the first time in years. It was night, the lighting was poor and the road was steep, so within seconds he slipped on a stone, twisted his ankle, and landed face-down on the hard tarmac.

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