

## **Preview of Black Flagged VEKTOR**

*10:25 AM*

*Mountain Glen “Retirement” Compound  
Green Mountains, Vermont*

Karl Berg walked briskly down a wide, raked gravel path bordered by cedar planks. The main walkway cut directly through a rough landscape of knee high grasses and watermelon sized rocks. Several subsidiary paths branched off into the thick pine trees and led to a modest residences hidden just out of sight. He easily found path number five, which was marked by a solid looking post displaying the number. He stopped for a moment and took in his surrounding.

He stood in a round clearing the size of three football fields. A natural stream ran through its northern edge, visible from Berg’s position near the center. At the opposite end of the field behind him stood a massive post and beam lodge, which contained the facility’s gourmet kitchen, common dining area, recreation room, indoor pool and exercise facilities. Fifty meters to the left of the lodge sat a white, one-story building that housed the compound’s backup generator, water distribution system and main electricity breaker. An attached two bay garage held several ATV’s for patrolling the grounds, plowing snow and transporting “guests.” He had left the only other structure present on the compound. The security station.

Resembling a two-story colonial style home, the station housed fifteen security specialists and contained the state of the art equipment used to keep track of the compound’s “guests.” Bristling with antennae and fitted with an odd dome at the apex of the roof, the house served as the compound’s nerve center, monitoring every aspect of the “guests” lives. From heartbeats to toilet flushes, dozens of active and passive measures were taken to ensure each guest’s compliance with the rules.

Each residence was “bugged” and monitored by several cameras mounted in the surrounding trees. Motion detectors tracked movement inside and outside of each structure, guiding the sophisticated array of night vision and thermal imaging equipped cameras assigned to each guest. Patterns were recorded, analyzed and anticipated. Anything out of the ordinary was immediately investigated by a mobile security team.

Guests were allowed free run of the compound, as long as they didn’t bother another guest or interfere with the staff. Violations resulted in lockdown. Each guest villa could be locked and unlocked remotely from the security station. The final immediate security precaution consisted of a reinforced, twelve-foot tall, razor wire fence that encircled the entire compound. Located three hundred meters beyond the edge of the clearing, the entire fence line was monitored by cameras and motion detectors. If one of the compound’s guests, or an outside party decided to scale the fence, security personnel could deliver a substantial electrical charge to the section of fence under attack. Beyond the fence, the last

deterrent to an escape was isolation. Located deep within the Green Mountains, accessible by a single road that wound through thick pine stands and rough terrain, anyone finding themselves on the other side of the fence would face a fifty mile trek through unforgiving wilderness to reach the first signs of civilization.

For such a small “guest” population, the Mountain Glen facility cost taxpayers an unimaginable sum of money. The compound had been designed as the final “deal” for enemy foreign nationals willing to provide information critical to U.S. national security. Enemies too dangerous for release were offered a lifetime “retirement” in exchange for their knowledge, which would be vetted and confirmed. Each case was carefully reviewed by the Director of the CIA, prior to their permanent placement. If the information turned out to be bogus, or failed to live up to advertised expectations, the “guest” would be evicted. Permanent placement was contingent upon full disclosure of the information promised, which involved a significant element of trust. Few prospective guests turned their back on the deal after spending a few days at Mountain Glen. Fresh air, mountain views, babbling brooks, gourmet food, first class accommodations. Most of them had already tasted the alternative while in U.S. custody. Only the most stubborn or distrustful chose to spend the rest of their lives trapped in a dank, poorly lit prison cell, peeing and shitting into a rusty coffee can that was emptied once a day.

He turned down the path and let the pristine air fill his lungs. Cold pine air. Quite a difference from the crowded confines of the Beltway. He couldn't imagine anyone turning down the offer to stay here. The temperature dropped a few degrees as he passed through the green curtain of pines. He could see a small post and beam structure with a green metal roof situated in a clearing fifty meters ahead. He searched the trees while he walked, trying to spot any of the cameras or sensors. He felt exposed walking to Reznikov's villa alone.

He approached the front door cautiously, scanning the windows for signs of life within the house. Security has assured him that Reznikov was awake. Breakfast had been delivered thirty minutes ago. He thought about that. They delivered breakfast at Mountain Glen. Reznikov certainly didn't deserve a place like this, but what other options did they have? The door opened before he could knock.

“Come in my friend. Breakfast is waiting,” said an invigorated looking Anatoly Reznikov.

“I already ate,” said Berg, stepping across the threshold prepared to defend himself from a hand to hand attack.

“Nonsense. Please. This is my treat. Welcome to my mountain dacha.”

“It's not yours yet. We're still a long way from securing your stay, which is why I'm here,” said Berg, following Reznikov through a short hallway to kitchen table.

From the table, they had a view of the pine wall at the edge of the back yard, and the snow covered peak of a mountain rising above the pines. The view wasn't what caught Berg's attention. A one third empty bottle of Grey Goose vodka sat on the kitchen counter, next to a small shot glass.

“Looks like you’ve made a remarkable recovery,” said Berg.

“It must be the mountain air, and a little gift from the staff. Join me in a toast.”

“A little early, don’t you think?” replied Berg.

“Never too early to celebrate. Plus, it’s almost noon—“

“It’s 10:30,” interrupted Berg.

“And I need to warm up for our chat. You won’t be disappointed,” said Reznikov.

While the mad scientist pulled another shot glass out of a cabinet, Berg placed his leather satchel on the pine floor and sat down at the kitchen table. He surveyed the feast prepared for him by the lodge’s kitchen staff. He hoped they were just rolling out the red carpet to loosen Reznikov’s lips. Fresh fruit, lobster benedict, smoked salmon and toasted bagels with cream cheese, orange juice.

“Please help yourself. They just showed up with all of this. Can you believe it? Only in America. I should have come to your country earlier. Maybe I wouldn’t have turned out so bad,” he said and poured two full shots of vodka.

He set one of the glasses in front of Berg and took a seat across the table.

“A toast. To taking down VEKTOR Labs.”

Berg hesitantly raised his glass. He eyed Reznikov warily, as the Russian downed his glass of clear liquid. Berg followed suit, grimacing at the sharp burn. A few seconds later, he felt a little less worn out from the previous day’s travels.

“Where did you stash your beautiful assistant? I had hoped she would be part of the package. I didn’t notice any women here.”

“I’m sure they keep a few blow up dolls on hand for the guests,” he said, placing the shot glass down on the table.

“Such hostility. Not exactly the kind of environment that makes me want to share the intimate details of my former employer,” said Reznikov.

The Russian reached behind him to retrieve the vodka bottle from the counter top behind him.

“Perhaps you’d rather have your head stuffed into a diarrhea filled toilet bowl three stories below the surface of the earth?”

Berg raised his hands to simulate a balanced scale.

“Fresh mountain air, nice view, gourmet food, spa-like amenities,” he said, raising one hand and lowering the other.

“Or…daily beatings, concrete pavement sleeping arrangements, one meal a day and toilet bowl scuba lessons. Don’t fuck with me here.”

“Easy, my friend. I get it,” said Reznikov, pouring another shot.

He started to move the bottle over to Berg’s side of the table, but Berg grabbed it from his trembling hand. On closer inspection, Reznikov didn’t look as robust as he was acting. Mention of a permanent prison cell underground had quickly flushed the color from his face.

“I’m not your friend, and you’ll get this bottle back after we’ve made considerable progress.”

He placed the bottle on the floor and retrieved a legal pad from his satchel, along with a digital recording device.

“Don’t put the bottle on the floor. Radiant heat. Feels wonderful, but you almost have to wear socks,” said Reznikov.

Berg removed the chilled bottle from the floor, placing it on the table, shaking his head. Radiant fucking heat? What was next? Daily massage therapy?

“So. Where do you want to start?” said Reznikov.

“From the beginning. How did you become involved with VEKTOR?”

“The roots of that decision reach back to my childhood. Are you in the mood for a story?” he paused.

“As long as it has something to do with VEKTOR,” said Berg.

“It has everything to do with VEKTOR, and how Russia’s bioweapons program long ago eclipsed their nuclear weapons program,” he whispered.

Four hours later, Berg emerged from the villa with a distant look on his face. He followed the gravel path through the forest to the main clearing, hardly paying any attention to his footing or his surroundings. The warm, late afternoon sun barely registered on his face. If Reznikov had told the truth, the United States and its allies faced the greatest threat to world stability since the Cold War. A secret race to develop bioweapons of mass destruction, and the Russians had a thirty-year head start. The reckless plan that he’d suggested to Sanderson didn’t feel so outlandish anymore. The bioweapons program at VEKTOR Labs had to be destroyed.

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Anatoly Reznikov peered through the shades of his front window at the vanishing shape of Karl Berg, the enigmatic CIA agent that had miraculously rescued him from a quick death at the hands of his former masters. The past week had been confusing, hazy and punctuated by severe fluctuations in his mental state that kept him unable to focus. He’d spent most of the time feeling utterly helpless, certain that he would be brutally interrogated and discarded. The pessimistic side of him had taken full control of his emotions, which came at little surprise to him. He’d tried to drink himself to death in Stockholm, and failing that, had put a gun to his head to finish the job. And that was just the beginning of a two-day roller coaster ride marked by repeated cardiac arrest, torture and beatings while strapped to a bed.

Only a sheer miracle could explain his sudden moment of clarity on the jet ride back to the United States. It had probably just been a natural fluke. A random release of chemicals, possibly dopamine, to relax his anxiety long enough for him to wrestle control of his mind. Maybe it had been triggered by the sight of Karl Berg sipping scotch, or the sharp smell of aged liquor filling the cabin. It didn’t matter. Within the short span of time it took for Karl Berg to walk down the business jet’s aisle, he had formulated a plan that was guaranteed to set him free. Free from all of this.

Earning a transfer to this facility was just the first step in his plan. As soon as his mind had devised the plan, he wondered if it had been his fate all along to fall right into Berg’s lap. He couldn’t think of a better scenario now that his mind had cleared enough for him to see the bigger picture. He’d been despondent about Al Qaeda’s betrayal and his subsequent failure to recover more of the virus canisters, but this new turn of events would take his original plan to the next level. He just needed to place a single phone call to activate part two of his plan.

He hadn't lied to Berg. On the contrary. He had told the agent everything, except the part about how he had successfully stolen samples of every weaponized virus and bacteria created at VEKTOR. He hadn't been dismissed from VEKTOR for attempting to steal viral encephalitis samples. By that point, he had already stolen samples of everything he had seen in the bioweapons division. He had been caught trying to access a section of the laboratory off limits to everyone except for three scientists. Rumors started circulating that the small group had created something nobody had seen before. He took the bait and attempted to sneak into the lab. At that point, security features at VEKTOR relied more on humans than technology, and large sums of money helped him circumvent most of the security surrounding the isolated laboratory cell. Or so he had thought.

Seconds from crossing the point of no return, he was warned off by the only security guard not infiltrated by FSB agents. Without stepping foot in the off limits section, they couldn't shoot him on the spot like they had planned. Instead, FSB agents backed off and allowed him to continue work at the lab, under close supervision. A week later, he received an offer to lead a lab group at their sister institute in Kazakhstan. He knew it was a setup, and the rest was history. He'd escaped with his life and bioweapons samples worth millions of dollars. Fate had given him one more chance and he didn't intend to waste it. One call to some very nefarious "friends," and he could take leave of this place, free to sell his weapons to the highest bidder. And the icing on cake? VEKTOR's bioweapons division and all of its personnel would be likely be targeted by Berg's people. He'd finally avenge his parents' murder at the hand of Russian security forces. Revenge was sweet, especially when it required no effort on his part.

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Berg reached the security station and stood in the fading sun. He was still in shock from Reznikov's story, and needed to place a call immediately. The compound had it's own cell phone tower, which randomly bounced the transmission along one of several routes, prior to unmasking the signal at another randomly selected cell phone tower across the United States. He felt more comfortable with this system than the STU-III secure telephone installed inside the building. He dialed the latest number provided by his friend in Moscow.

"This must be important. It's past an old man's bed time here in Moscow," said a thickly accented, Russian voice.

"It's important," said Berg.

"Give me a minute to throw on a coat. I need a smoke before heading to bed," he said.

Berg heard Kaparov rummaging around his apartment, followed by a door shutting. A minute later, Kaparov was back on the phone.

"Deputy Director, how can I be of assistance?"

"I try to play that down around here, comrade."

"The infamous Karl Berg claims to be modest? This is disappointing," said Kaparov.

"I try not to attract too much attention in my twilight years. It's bad for the career," said Berg.

“Apparently not so bad. Every time I read the cables, you are once again promoted. After last week’s events, I expect you to be running the show over there,” said Kaparov.

Berg could hear traffic and voices in the background. Possibly a light breeze blowing across Kaparov’s cell phone.

“I had little to do with this one. Our domestic security forces took the lead. Plus, I’m starting to get the feeling that this promotion is more about keeping and eye on me, and less about my wildly lucky hunch.”

“Instinct, my friend. There’s no such thing as a hunch in this business, which leads me to a rather delicate matter. My instinct tells me that you haven’t been completely forthcoming about Stockholm’s grand prize,” said Kaparov.

“And I thought I could still slip one by you after all of these years.”

“You couldn’t do it back in the day. What made you think anything had changed?” said Kaparov, followed by roaring laughter.

“Unfortunately, this isn’t a social call. We need to discuss an ongoing problem in your neck of the woods. Something that shouldn’t exist.”

“Confirmed by our mutual friend?”

“Confirmed with details. I’m going to need some help with this one,” said Berg.

“Timeline?”

“No hurry, but given what almost happened here, I don’t think we should wait too long.”

“Be careful with your guest. He’s a slippery one. Our Arab friends weren’t the only party interested in his services.”

“He’s in a safe place,” said Berg.

“I hope so. We’ll have to figure out a better way to keep in touch. Throwing cell phones into the Moscow River can be expensive.”

“I can’t believe you would pollute the river like that. I thought they were cleaning up the Moscow,” said Berg.

“Throwing phones into the river is the new national pastime. Putin has resurrected the paranoia in our DNA. Even the kids throw their phones in, and they don’t even know why they’re doing it.”

“As long as it keeps *you* out of the Moscow River, I approve.”

“Stay out of trouble, my friend.”

“That goes double for you, comrade,” Berg said and hung up the phone.

He had to hand it to Kaparov. There was little he could slip by his old adversary. He suspected that the wily Russian knew he was in a hurry to put an end to the bioweapons program at VEKTOR Laboratories in Novosibirsk. He’d had a few calls to make to get this ball rolling, followed by a string of trips to Vermont to visit with Reznikov.

Kaparov’s hint that Reznikov had attracted attention beyond Al Qaeda disturbed Berg to the core. Given Reznikov’s outlaw status in Russia and Europe, he would have been forced to rely on the Russian mafia for false paperwork or “off the books travel.” They would have undoubtedly surmised his potential. The market for bioweapons among desperate rogue states represented an untapped profit resource for the Russian mafia. The thought sent a chill through his body.

Few would ever truly realize how important it had been to take Reznikov out of circulation. If the raid on VEKTOR succeeded, he would permanently “retire” the scientist. Reznikov wouldn’t be the first “retiree” to take a walk in the forest and never return. The term “retirement” had more than one meaning at the Mountain Glen facility.