

~ An excerpt from **Déjà Vu**, by Ian Hocking ~



Chapter Two

FIB Headquarters, Berlin

That September morning in Berlin, leaves of blood and gold littered *Unter den Linden* from the columns of the Brandenburg Gate to the Schloss Bridge. Saskia Brandt kicked through the drifts without stopping.

Sunlight caught the distant glass dome of the *Reichstag*. Tourists drank in the open street cafés. At *Potsdamer Platz*, the shoulder of the Federal Investigation Bureau's headquarters poked through the jostle of buildings, and Saskia strode inside, ignoring the blind man and his collection tin near the entrance. She covered the inlaid

insignia – *Ex tabula rasa* – in five paces, dumped her weapon into a bucket, and retrieved it on the other side of the detector while the guard folded his arms haughtily.

‘*Kopf hoch,*’ he said.

Saskia marched on. Attacked by the air conditioning, her sweat dried cold. She passed a copy of the European Union constitution in a glass case. A tour group had clotted around it while a guide recited trivia. Saskia found the lift and rose to the fifty-first floor.

Her office was spare. To the left was a screened section for her secretary. In the centre was her black desk. On it sat only an antique blotter and a framed photograph of Simon, her English boyfriend. To the right, beyond some abstract art, was a separate kitchen and bathroom.

Her office was haunted by a computer that she had failed to name. ‘The air conditioning is broken,’ it announced.

Saskia walked to the window. Two cameras hung in the dark corners of the ceiling. They tracked her mouth.

‘Why?’

‘I do not know. A repair man has been called. Perhaps you could take a cold shower.’

Saskia turned to one of the cameras. ‘Thanks for the advice.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Where is my secretary? Why didn’t she report it?’

‘Your secretary is on holiday.’ The computer paused. ‘You should also be on holiday. In London.’

Her holiday had been one day old when Jobanique,

her immediate superior, had interrupted it with an urgent case. Simon had been cooking pasta for a romantic meal when the call came through and, without discernible romance, had thrown the boiling pot across the room. A stray tassel of spaghetti had branded her forehead in the shape of a question mark. She had packed with a coldness that, in itself, told her that she and Simon were no more. In the taxi, she had stretched across the back seat and cried.

She walked into the bathroom, drew some water and splashed it over her forehead. She walked into the kitchen and surveyed it: a microwave, some cupboards, a coffeemaker and a large refrigerator. Her eyes stopped on the refrigerator. It promised cold, sparkling mineral water. Saskia pulled the handle and her secretary rolled out, taut and twisted, dead joints creaking as she unfurled. Their eyes met and Saskia crouched slowly, her attention finally moving from the dry orbs to the hole below the secretary's left ear.

West Lothian, Scotland

Around midday, the rain drew back. A car arrived at the Park Hotel. The ruin of the West Lothian Research Centre lay beneath its foundations. Its entrances were capped. It lay dormant. No longer were approaching vehicles checked, or visitors searched, or the expansive woodlands patrolled.

The single occupant of the taxi was a man with a friendly, forgettable face. He was halfway to baldness

and kept the remainder of his hair long, swept over his ears and rakishly curled at the collar. His jacket was tailor-made but his jeans were fashionably cheap. He was David Proctor, Oxford academic, and it was twenty years since he had cradled the head of his dead wife in the darkness below.

‘One moment, please,’ said his computer. ‘You have a phone call.’

‘Tell them I’m busy.’

He opened the door and relished the damp air.

‘It is your daughter.’

David pulled his leg back into the car and closed the door. He steepled his fingers to help himself think. It didn’t work.

‘Put her on.’

‘I cannot. The communication is encrypted. I do not know the cipher.’

David smiled. ‘Find Jennifer’s high school maths project.’

‘I’ve found it. Decrypting.’

The image of his daughter appeared. David straightened his back. She looked like her mother.

‘Hello, Jennifer.’

‘Hi, Dad.’

David laughed. She had an American accent. ‘I’m glad you called.’

‘Are you?’

‘Yes.’ He paused. ‘I wanted to talk to you.’

‘Talk, then.’

David watched the rain on the windscreen. This conversation had arrived too soon. ‘I – I’m sorry. After

you went to New York, I thought you needed some time to yourself.'

'You sent me away. You sent the freak to the freaks, then skipped the country.'

'You couldn't stay in Oxford any more. You wouldn't have realized your full potential.' David sighed. 'We've been through this.'

'I was the one who had to go through it, not you. Do you know what it was like in that school?'

'I got your e-mails.'

'I didn't get yours.'

'Jennifer, why did you call?'

'Not to sing happy birthday. I have a message for you.'

'What is it?'

She moved closer to her camera. 'Where are you?'

'Actually, I'm at the old research centre in West Lothian.'

'What are you doing there?'

'I can't tell you that on the phone.'

'This isn't a phone, Dad.' She was almost smiling.

'I know. You've encrypted the transmission.'

She nodded. 'You remembered the cipher.'

'What's wrong, Jenny?'

'You need to go back to Oxford.'

Through the windscreen, the hotel was a tearful blur. 'Has someone been talking to you?'

'Dad, something may happen.'

His expression was grim. 'Something already has happened. And I'm late. Can I call you later?'

Jennifer smiled. It was hollow. 'Sure.'

The screen went blank.

David Proctor removed his personal assistant from the dashboard and dropped it in his wallet, where it would pass for a bank card. As he stepped out, his jacket blew open. He inhaled the Scottish air. An audience of high firs leaned in. Behind him, his driverless taxi rolled back to its depot.

Inside the hotel, an elderly receptionist was speaking to a tall man, whom David recognized as Colonel McWhirter. He wore baggy jeans, boots, and a shirt under his heavy sweater. His hair was white and cropped; his face brown and marked with ancient acne. Though David had not seen McWhirter for twenty years, the colonel had not truly changed. He was still a man on alert for problems to solve.

‘Hello, Dr Proctor.’ They shook hands.

‘I’ve had my title changed to “professor”,’ David replied, deadpan, ‘so that it doesn’t rhyme.’

McWhirter smiled warmly.

‘Professor.’

‘David to you, Colonel.’

‘It’s been six years.’

‘The robotics conference. Amsterdam.’

‘Of course.’

The moment evaporated and McWhirter rubbed his palms. The foyer was marble-cold.

‘Can you fill me in?’ asked David.

The colonel took his elbow and drew him away from the receptionist. ‘It’s Bruce. He managed to enter your old lab. Last Wednesday morning, he put New World

back online. He's getting the power from the main hotel supply. That's how we got wind of the whole business.'

'What's the environmental situation down there?'

'Near freezing. We've got some temporary lighting, nothing else.'

'And Bruce's physical condition?'

'Stable. I thought you could take a look at him.'

'Medical school was a long time ago. I had long hair then. Christ, I had hair.'

'Ach, you'll be fine.' McWhirter's eyes were humourless. 'Shall we go?'

David stepped backward. 'You want me to go down there?'

'Come on, Proctor. I didn't invite you here for the fishing. I need an expert to assess the situation.'

He knew McWhirter was remembering the young and irascible researcher he used to be. 'You're right. The old route?'

'The old route.'

They headed for the west wing. A conservatory on their right opened on the hotel's rear grounds. To their left was a lounge. David imagined old men talking in lowered tones over their broadsheets. But there was nobody. The hotel appeared empty.

They reached the cloakroom. In the old days, David would have stood exactly as he did now, placed his thumb on the wall and waited for the computer to scan his blood. Then the room would have sunk. But there was no longer a computer. Instead, there was a rough hole in the floor with a ladder leaning against its edge.

'What happened to the lift?'

‘It was dismantled. All part of the clean-up.’

David paused. He did not want to talk about that. The regrets were shards of glass. ‘Me first?’

‘No, me. The guard knows my face.’ He cupped his hands and shouted down the hole: ‘Two on the way!’ There was no reply.

The colonel eased through the hole and was gone.

‘Ego, send an e-mail to my daughter,’ David said. ‘Tell her that I’ve gone past the point of no return.’

‘I cannot get a good signal,’ replied his personal assistant. Its voice was clear in his earpiece.

‘Send it when you can.’

‘Understood.’

‘David,’ called a voice from below. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine. I have a thing about heights.’

He sat on the edge of the hole, slid his weight forward, and began to climb down. When his head passed below the level of the floor, he looked down and saw a circle of lighting twenty metres below.

As he stepped off the ladder moments later, he shielded his eyes from the spotlights, which put irregular shadows over ruptured cabinets, upside down chairs and blackened computer monitors. Paper lay like snow. David could hear the faraway *put-put* of a diesel generator.

An armed man stood next to McWhirter. He wore a builder’s hard hat and outdoor clothing. He ignored David’s polite nod.

‘Shall we?’ asked McWhirter. His breath condensed to fog.

‘After you.’

They stepped into a corridor as derelict as the lift shaft. David remembered an air-conditioned expanse with decorated walls. Now there was only a sense of space in the darkness.

McWhirter threw a relay and lights bloomed along the corridor. The fire doors had disappeared. The walls were charcoal black. Doors leading from the corridor were now only gaping holes, some filled with furniture, others with masonry.

‘Take this,’ said McWhirter. It was a heavy outdoor coat. ‘It’s a steady five degrees down here.’ He also handed David a hard hat, some gloves, a first aid kit, and a laminated map of the complex. ‘We’ll need to keep in contact if we get separated. Do you have a computer?’

David thought about Ego. ‘No.’

McWhirter gave him a walkie-talkie. Then the old colonel paid out a length of climber’s rope and tied himself to David.

‘Are we going potholing too?’

McWhirter bullied his torch until it shone. ‘It’s a possibility. We’ve already lost a guard.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘He was checking out one of the higher levels and the floor gave way.’

‘Bloody hell.’

‘Step only where I step. Let’s go.’

They crept away. McWhirter went first. He swept to and fro with his torch and tested the floor with each step.