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**The Truth Teller**

In memory of my father, Nic Ursem

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## Prologue: The Clinic

*18 September 2009*

At twenty minutes to ten the black taxi finally draws up at the semi-circular drop off point in front of the Jacobs Zweiger Clinic. The London night sky is as dark as it will get. A man in a black leather jacket moves back into the shadow behind one of the massive neo-classical pillars. The passenger door of the taxi opens. The professor heaves himself out and starts walking towards the entrance of the clinic, his considerable figure moving faster than one would think possible. Without a sound the glass entrance doors slide sideways. Institutes like this are always open for business, whatever time of day.

From his position outside the man in the black jacket watches the professor waiting, impatiently, for someone to appear at the reception desk and inform him where to go for his meeting. Then the big figure continues into the building. The receptionist turns around, no doubt to return to her crossword. This is his moment to enter the building, without her noticing him or being able to see him on the security screens in the back room. He slips through the automatic doors and is past the reception and out of her sight before she has a chance to sit down again. He knows where to go. He's pretty sure that the professor will use the lift, which at this time of night will sit stationary in the basement. Taking the stairs he'll get to the fourth floor faster than the fat professor.

Two minutes later he carefully opens the door out of the stairwell, four flights up. The number two lights up in the lift lobby. The professor is on his way, but he has plenty of

time to cross the corridor towards the rear lobby of the doctors' lounge. The floors in this part of the building are laid with carpet. Doctors' privilege. It's easy not to be heard if you don't want to be.

A folding partition separates the rear lobby from the main meeting room. The concertina screen is definitely not soundproof. He should have no problem hearing what is to be discussed on the other side, as long as he keeps quiet himself.

He doesn't wait long before he hears a knock on the door, then footsteps and the door being opened.

'Professor Bronnally! Good of you to come.'

He recognises the voice of Doctor Campbell.

'May I introduce you to the archdeacon, the Venerable Nicholas Sternby?'

This is a surprise. He hadn't expected a third guest at the meeting.

'We've met before,' says a deep, hoarse voice. The professor?

'I see.'

'Always a pleasure, Professor.'

So that must be the archdeacon. Why is he here? If anything, it's proof that he guessed right, that whatever the doctor wants to discuss has relevance to the high and mighty. He hears drinks being poured and the creaking of chairs as the doctor, professor and archdeacon sit down.

'Gentlemen, I know you are wondering why I have asked you to come here tonight. Forgive me for arranging our gathering at this late hour. It's easier to speak freely when children are in their beds. I know that what I have to say will be of interest.'

The doctor pauses for a moment, but the other two don't respond.

'Gentlemen, I have invited you to inform you of a new programme of research that my department will start implementing from Monday. You may wonder why that is of relevance to you. Trust me, gentlemen, it is! Hugely! In my email I was unable to give you much detail. It would have been unwise. In any case, you have grasped the importance and urgency behind my written words and have accepted my invitation, for which I'm grateful.'

The doctor is a smooth talker. He pauses again, but again the others don't interrupt.

'The research programme that will commence after the weekend will change the way we understand things, not just in a clinical sense but also philosophically and spiritually. It will change everything! That's why I felt it was important to invite you tonight and why I'm pleased you accepted my invitation. Let me be clear. I would like you to be in on the case. I want your cooperation. I want your knowledge. And I want your blessing, so to speak.'

'Why don't you come to the point, Doctor Campbell? Tell us what you didn't want to write in your email.'

'I shall, Professor Bronnally, I shall, shortly. It's important however to accentuate the importance of this moment in time. A turning point, gentlemen! A turning point in history. I'm asking you to come in on this case and I promise that it will be no disappointment. What we're about to start will be of enormous significance to all of our fields and of equal benefit to us all, but there will be no turning back. I must be clear about that.'

'Tell us what you want to tell us, Doctor Campbell.'

The archdeacon's voice, softer than the raw tone of the professor. 'I'm sure we shall honour your trust.'

'I sincerely hope so,' the doctor says. 'For the sake of all of us.'

His tone of voice is suddenly less smooth. Is he threatening his guests?

'Then, let me start at the beginning. You will be aware that this institute, the Jacobs Zweiger Clinic, played a pivotal role in the last two decades of DNA research and calculations, brought to a conclusion last year with the completion of the human genome puzzle. The human genome, gentlemen! The full blueprint of our human DNA. Scientists are now able to identify every single building block, every molecule in the human body. From here on it's child's play. Another few years of research and experimentation will enable us to fix any fault, any short-circuiting within the body. We shall soon be able to engineer even better bodies, stronger and more resistant.'

He pauses, but only briefly.

'Of course this is no news to you. The moral issues of our hard-won knowledge have been widely debated. Archdeacon, you yourself have voiced your point of view publicly in your elegantly written columns for the Sunday supplements. Do we have the right to intervene with nature? Should we be playing God? Forgive me to put it bluntly, Archdeacon, but the question was raised again and again in debates and discussions. Does our scientific understanding of the human genome put us on a par with our maker?'

This time the doctor leaves the archdeacon no chance to respond.

‘In my view these questions have little relevance. Neither should it matter whether one is a believer or not. As a doctor, a scientist, my personal and professional morality instructs me to gather as much knowledge and understanding as I can. Why should we hold back? Why shouldn’t we do all that is within our reach to make better humans, to continue from where evolution has brought us to date, but do it faster? I see no problem there. Yet, at the same time we should also be brave enough to ask ourselves why. Why should we create new human bodies on a planet that is already bursting at its seams? More people who will be healthier and live longer, who will make more demands on our limited resources of food, transport, electricity, heating. We have no need for more people in this world. What we need is the ability to make our lives more meaningful.’

The man in black is hardly breathing. His concentration is tense. Where is the doctor taking this? But the professor is clearly losing his patience.

‘Come to the point, man,’ he says. ‘I have no need for a lecture on philosophy. Say what you have to say.’

‘Philosophy is your expertise, Professor,’ says the doctor. ‘My concern is with reality. And my reality is that from next week my team will start collecting data on meaning. We shall start to lay bare how meaning is constructed in the human brain. The genome research has shown us how the human body ticks. Now we need to work out why. We need to make sense of making sense. Only when we understand the process of creating meaning will we become masters of mankind.’

‘Collecting data?’ asks the archdeacon.



The professor remains quiet.

'I can count on your discretion, gentlemen?'

Silence. The doctor continues.

'The research will focus on the construction of meaning in the semantic lobes. Yes, we know where it's done, we just need to find out how. We have been establishing a network of trusted surgeons throughout the country to collect data for us, with a particular interest in children. A logical choice! Children are curious. In their minds meaning is still actively constructed. No, there's no need for concern. No harm will be done. Just a few additional tests on patients already undergoing treatment. Completely harmless! The little patients will notice absolutely nothing of it, but nevertheless help our research considerably.'

At that moment the mobile telephone in the pocket of his leather jacket beeps once. What an idiot he is! He hardly ever uses the thing. Why hadn't he checked that it was switched off? He is not waiting to see if they've heard him. In less than five seconds, by the time Doctor Campbell forces open the partition, he has already crossed the corridor and is back in the stairwell.

Downstairs he doesn't trouble himself to keep from view. He walks straight past the reception and out through the main doors towards the car park where he left his motorbike. No one will try to stop him. There's hardly anyone around anyway. Besides, what would they hold against him? Visiting a hospital, even when it's a private clinic, could hardly be classified as a criminal offence.

He unchains his helmet from the bike, puts it over his head and zips up his leather jacket. He swings his leg over

the seat and turns the key in the ignition. He moves the gear handle. The bike roars.

From the Jacobs Zweiger Clinic's car park he turns left into Fulham Road. He crosses the river at Putney and follows the South Circular towards Richmond, where he'll stay tonight. It isn't time to go home yet.

What to make of what he has heard? He feels worried. Since his own meeting with Doctor Campbell last Wednesday he had known that the man was up to no good. He knew that the doctor was a member of an obscure group of scientists. Only after much persistence had the doctor granted him an interview, under the pretence that he was writing an article about the human genome for an arts magazine. Even then the doctor hadn't given him much time. There was something suspicious about the man. He couldn't put his finger on it. When the doctor had left his office for just half a minute he had quickly flicked through the doctor's diary and spotted a brief note about the meeting tonight.

Now he knows he had been right. Brain tests on child patients without their knowledge! That certainly is information to pass on to the press. If only he had been able to hear more. Would the professor and archdeacon have protested? How foolish of him to stand there with his phone switched on.

He can't control his bike with only one hand, so he pulls into a bus stop. He fishes the mobile from his pocket. It's a text message from Steven. 'Kasparov sleeping on my bed tonight. See you tomorrow!'

What a perfect gift that little kitten had been for Steven's birthday. He admitted it was a kind of pay-off,

to make up for him not being at home much for his eight years old son. In any case it was one that was very happily welcomed into Greystone House.

He pulls back on to the road. 'Children are curious.' The doctor was certainly right about that. Steven certainly is. But the words 'additional tests' give him the creeps. 'No harm will be done!' If this new programme of research is so innocent and harmless, then why is this strange trio meeting so late at night?

His rear view mirror lights up in blue. There's hardly any other traffic on the road. The emergency vehicle behind him is nevertheless approaching with its sirens full on. It must be on an urgent mission. The lights catch up with him quickly. He makes sure to drive on the far left, leaving the ambulance all the space it needs to overtake him.

But when the vehicle is level with him, its deafening sirens screaming out, it holds back. It doesn't rush on past him. He looks sideways into the driver's cab of the ambulance. For one moment he sees the face of the driver looking straight back at him. Suddenly the ambulance moves left, into his lane. Is the driver drunk? But by now he is unable to speed up himself and get ahead, out of the way of the screaming and flashing vehicle. The ambulance knocks into him violently. He has no chance at all of keeping his own two wheels straight on the road. He feels the bike slide away from under him. He holds on to the handlebars until his body hits the tarmac and he has to let go. The impact of the crash bounces his body up in the air again. Time slows down. 'Steven,' he thinks. 'I must tell Steven.' Then he is thrown mercilessly against the crash barrier at the side of the road.