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The Teacher

Written by Katerina Diamond

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Chapter 1

The Headmaster

Jeffrey Stone looked over the sea of despondent young faces as he gave assembly, occasionally glancing up at the steel frame of the atrium. At this time he had no idea that come the morning he would be discovered hanging from it by his neck.

The crisp white shirt collars and fresh faces stared forwards, past Jeffrey and into the space beyond; waiting for that bell. Everyone loved the idea of assembly until they were actually in it and were painfully reminded of the tedium. This ceremony was a strange limbo between work and rest; the calm before the storm. Jeffrey felt as though the clock was louder than his voice. With every tick and pause he expected the bell to ring, to rescue him from the apathetic gaze of both students and teachers. All feigning interest and failing; trying not to excavate their twitching noses. Jeffrey was always as relieved as

they were when the end finally came, no longer forced to regurgitate anecdotes that no one wanted to hear, least of all himself.

The first clue to his forthcoming demise came when Jeffrey returned to his office and found the parcel on his desk. Tentatively he tore open the brown paper, as though something about the size and weight of the gift was familiar to him, from a time that he had tried to put out of his mind. Jeffrey's face paled as he stared at the contents of the package. It was an old German book. Of course he knew what it meant. It's not as if this was a bolt out of the blue but it had been twenty years since he had seen this book, twenty years since he had given it as a gift to someone; a ghost. The book was a surprise, but not the unspoken message its very arrival conveyed. It meant the end.

He put the book in the desk drawer, he would deal with it later. He picked up the wrapper and scanned it for information, he saw the handwriting, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as it occurred to him the package had been hand-delivered. Why now? What was different about today? Not that today wasn't as good a day as any to die but over the years Jeffrey had presumed he had been forgotten. Got away with it, maybe. But now he knew that he had not.

He walked through the intricate wainscoted corridors for what he assumed would be the last time, running his fingers along the grain of the oak panels, the arabesque carvings almost worn down completely. Churchill School for Boys had been his home for so long. He wondered who would take his place. This building was centuries

old, important to the history of the city of Exeter, one of a handful of gems that survived the Baedecker raids in 1942, Hitler's retaliation on Britain for bombing the towns of Lubeck and Rostock in Germany. It was a calculated attack by the Luftwaffe on the five most beautiful cities from a tourist-information book. During the raids a selection of the population hid in the underground tunnels built originally to bring fresh water into the medieval city. Now the city centre was a mish-mash of handsome old buildings either side of the road that ran straight through from east to west with large, ugly, square brick consolation structures squeezed in between them to hide the gaping holes where the shells had hit. Exeter was still littered with history but was an unforgettable testament to the atrocities that had befallen the country. But not this building, the school stood proud and alone, nestled among trees, a remnant of another time. The rich emerald ivy, always so thick and strong in the summer term, clung to the deep terracotta-red brick structure as though it were trying to pull it back into the ground, to reclaim it. This was one of the reasons he had so much love for the place. The traditional and exquisite among the ugly; the truth laid bare for all to see. This was his school, from the moment he had stepped through the gates as a student he was overwhelmed with a sense of belonging. Yes, Jeffrey could not imagine himself anywhere else.

'Mr Stone?'

Jeffrey turned around to see Avery Phillips walking towards him. Avery was the head boy. His gait displayed a confidence seldom found in the young academics at this school. Avery presented Jeffrey with an envelope.

'What's this?'

'It's the money from the fun run at the weekend, sir. We raised over five hundred pounds.'

'Marvellous, could you take it to the school secretary, though?'

'Yes, sir.' Avery turned about face and headed back down the hall.

'Actually, Avery, would you mind coming to my office for a moment, I have an errand for you.' Jeffrey stood to one side as Avery turned back and manoeuvred past him to take the pole position.

They walked briskly, Jeffrey trying to maintain focus on the back of Avery's head and not those beautiful broad shoulders, or further down. Many a wet Friday afternoon was spent watching Avery and his cohorts scrumming in the mud, wading through the thick gravy in their black shorts, clawing at each other with a carnal rage that plagued Jeffrey's dreams at night; he thought of these sixth formers and his chest would tighten with desire, and other parts besides.

Avery stood in front of the office door so that Jeffrey would have to lean in close to open the door before he could step inside, a wry smile on his face. Jeffrey often felt that Avery was a game player. As he lounged in the chair opposite Jeffrey's desk he sat in what seemed to be the most provocative position, slumped right back with his knees apart, his thighs pulling hard on the seams of his uniform. His head was tipped down and his eyes burrowed into Jeffrey's soul.

'I'll write you a pass, Avery. I need you to go off campus and deliver this note for me.'

'Yes, sir.' Avery's eyes were dancing and the curve of his mouth was somehow conspiratorial, like he knew this was to be their secret.

'It's of the utmost importance that no one knows about this, Avery, no matter what happens.'

'Of course, sir.' He leaned forwards, never breaking eye contact once.

Jeffrey scribbled HE HAS RETURNED on to a piece of paper and stuffed it inside an envelope, writing the name STEPHEN on the front. On a separate piece of paper he scribbled an address and handed both to Avery.

'Take it there, tell no one.' Jeffrey paused, waiting for Avery to leave but Avery held his gaze. 'Oh!' said Jeffrey, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a wad of notes. He handed them all over and the boy smiled. 'I can trust in your discretion?'

'Absolutely, sir.'

Jeffrey knew he could trust Avery because there was nothing he liked better than keeping secrets, Jeffrey had heard the tales of blackmail in the dorms, with compromising photos, exam cheats and even as much as him having dirt on the teachers – who was sleeping with who – to use as possible bribery material for better grades. Yes, Avery was a grade A student. If this hadn't been the end then Jeffrey would never have given the note to the boy, but it was and so no matter the consequences, he had done his part.

Jeffrey peered outside and watched from his office window as Avery left the school; leaving the sanctuary of the grounds. As Avery closed the gate behind him Jeffrey surveyed the area, looking across the empty

courtyard at the more modest structure of the boarders' residence. He wondered for a fleeting moment how much time he had left. He should probably call his wife, but what would he say? He picked up the phone and stared at the keypad for a few seconds before dialling zero.

'Hold all my calls for the rest of the day, please, Elaine, I have some important paperwork to get through.' Jeffrey sat in his chair and looked out of the window at the boys running through the grounds; nothing had changed much over his employment at this school, the world outside was different now but here inside the walls of this tribute to a past long since forgotten there was still a gratifying feeling of tradition and ritual that had stood the test of time.

The school day progressed with the usual tedium – he worked through his papers, tied up as many loose ends as possible – but occasionally Jeffrey's mind wandered back to the curious book in his drawer. Jeffrey had always been so careful that no one knew about his proclivities, aware that it would be a career ender for him and he really did love his job, if people only knew how these boys made him feel. For almost thirty years Jeff had worked here, thirty years and no trouble as yet.

The wish to escape the grounds as soon as possible became evident about an hour before the final bell rang. The classrooms got noisier and during the final break of the day the corridors buzzed with the noise of the children who would ordinarily obey the stringent rules

about the noise levels around the establishment. When the time finally came, silence overtook the main building as the boarders made their way back to the halls and the day students got on their buses and went home.

He pulled out the book and felt the outside; even the touch of it brought back memories like an old familiar friend. His heart thumped as he traced his fingers across the title of the book: *Das Geschenk*, The Gift. He opened the book and started to read, his German wasn't what it used to be but he knew this book well anyway. A firm believer in the old ways, Jeffrey had acquired this book for its historical relevance, for its insights into his 'condition' and how to change it. The book itself was out of print, rare and hard to find. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to get this, and he knew who. It had been a companion to him when he had been searching for answers about himself, about why he was the way he was, why he needed to surround himself with pubescent boys, why even the smell of a woman left him feeling cold.

The half-light of the summer night pulled in and Jeffrey opened out his laptop, sure that he was now alone in the building; even the cleaners would be gone. He plugged in his mobile device, not wanting to use the school's network, and logged into a secure online photo storage website, furtively listening out for any noise in the school before entering his password. Folders and folders, each titled with a different year group, and within that a different name in alphabetical order: Jason, Marcus, Robert and so on. Jeffrey's favourites. He wasn't one of these idiots who kept the evidence on his

hard drive, he was smarter than that, and he paid good money for his security on the dark net. He clicked the first folder titled 'Daniel' but it would not open, asking for a secondary password – this was not supposed to happen. Panicking, Jeffrey tried to open the other files, but he couldn't. He wanted them gone, deleted, but he couldn't access them. No one knew about these photos, not even the boys themselves. Who could have found out, and how?

He found himself humming an old tune, he stopped but the music continued from somewhere else in the building, faint and familiar. His heart sank, his time had come. Mahler, dark at the best of times, rang out like a toll bell, the all too familiar melody signalling an end that had been written in the stars for decades now.

Jeffrey opened his office door and looked down the corridor, listening. The music was coming from the main assembly hall. He started walking and the music grew louder and more distorted with every step. He remembered the symphony well, today had been full of nostalgia for a time that maybe he shouldn't yearn to return to, a time when he caused so much pain.

This particular piece had the appropriate amount of thrill and dread for Jeffrey's purposes at that time, deliberately ironic that it should be the last thing he ever heard.

He opened the double glass doors and screwed his eyes shut at the volume of the music, the distortion cutting through him. On the elevated platform at the front of the vast room was a chair, hanging above it

was a noose. To the left was a table, covered in a red velvet cloth, almost ceremonial in its appearance. On top of the table was a beautiful black wooden box. The music stopped but his ears continued to ring as they adjusted to the silence.

'Hello, old friend.' A man's voice, he didn't recognise it, but it had been so long.

'What do you want?'

'This is not about what I want. This is what must be done.'

'Why today, after all this time?' Jeffrey was afraid to turn around and look at his downfall.

'You don't know what today is? It's been eighteen years. Eighteen years since I saw exactly what kind of monster you are.' The voice was so slow, so completely resolute; it was not as he expected.

'If you think I'm going to hang myself, you've got another think coming.' Jeff looked up at the noose.

'I don't think, I know,' the man whispered with such resolve that Jeffrey understood he was not making a request.

'You'll have to force me and there will be evidence, they'll know it wasn't suicide,' Jeffrey's voice was panicked as he searched for a way out of this; feeling more pathetic with every word he uttered.

'One way or another, you die today. It just works out better for me if it looks like suicide, but I'm happy to do it the fun way.'

'You wouldn't!'

'I would! Make no mistake. I was there, remember? I saw what's inside you. I saw the sickness.'

‘You wouldn’t tell anyone. Who would believe you over me?’

‘The pictures you took speak for themselves. The pictures you took of me back then, not to mention all the other boys since. I see you got rid of the hidden cameras in the changing rooms. Worried someone would figure out how much you like young boys?’

‘How did you know about those?’

‘I have been watching you. I put a key logger on your computer. That means I’ve been able to see every key stroke entered, every website, every password, every message you ever sent anywhere. I also put a VPN in. A private network so I have had access to your computer for several weeks now, not just access, but control.’

Jeffrey moved slowly towards the table, aware that the contents of the box could be almost anything, almost certain that it wouldn’t be anything as merciful as a gun. He could feel the man was standing close behind him, almost close enough to touch, he thought about reaching forward to pick up the box and swinging it round hard, smashing the bastard’s face in. But what if he was wrong? What if he wasn’t that close? What would he do to him then? Jeffrey couldn’t risk it.

‘I never touched any of them!’ Jeffrey whispered, aware of how disgustingly feeble he sounded.

‘But it’s only ever a matter of time when it comes to people like you, Jeffrey. You’ll do it again, you won’t be able to stop yourself. But even if you don’t, you could have a heart attack right here at your desk and when they go through your drawers they’ll find that flash drive. I have seen those pictures on those files. I’ve

seen how you watch the boys. How long before you aren't just looking any more? People find those files and they draw their own conclusions.' The voice was so cold, so completely emotionless, not even mocking, nothing. 'Don't forget I saw first-hand how much you like to watch.'

Jeffrey drew in his breath as he felt a hand on the small of his back, slowly travelling upwards, gently sliding between the protruding bones of his shoulders. He imagined the hand on his bare skin as it reached the back of his neck, stroking tenderly, brushing through the sweaty tendrils of his dishevelled hair. His body stirred at the welcome touch of masculine fingers.

'Stop it!'

'I bet you imagined this a hundred times when I was younger, back when I was your type. You wouldn't have told me to stop then,' the man whispered in his ear. 'That's how you like them, isn't it, Mr Stone? Well I'm sorry I'm not that boy any more. I'm a man now.'

'What's in the box?' Jeffrey finally asked as he exhaled.

'Go on and have a look. I know how you like choices, so I'm giving you a choice.'

Jeffrey's hand hovered over the lid of the box. It was hand-carved and valuable, made from black ebony with an undecipherable image etched into the surface. His mouth dried as he opened it to reveal what was inside. It took every muscle he had to hold himself upright as he stared at the contents, feeling the blood drain from his face as the room began to spin.

'Do you know what that is?'

'Yes,' Jeffrey said, although he could no longer hear

his own voice over the sound of his heartbeat in his ears. He looked down at the pear-shaped metal device.

'It's beautiful, isn't it? Look how delicate the embossing is, the level of detail on those leaves,' the voice said, so close to his ear now he could feel the warm breath on his skin. 'Why don't you pick it up?'

'No.'

He felt the man's hand grip the back of his neck, he was strong. The man's body pressed against him in a way that both aroused and terrified Jeffrey. He caught the first glimpse of the man as his hand reached for the instrument in the box. It was big and strong, unfamiliar and yet there was something like déjà vu coursing through Jeffrey's memory.

'There really is something for everyone. I thought this was particularly appropriate for you. The Pear of Anguish. You know, back when these were invented, they believed the sentence had to fit the crime and the punishment should be carried out on the part of your body that had sinned.' He moved even closer to Jeffrey, his grip tightening and his voice lowering to a deep whisper. 'You're a liar and a sodomite . . . Where do you think I should put this?'

'Please . . .' Jeffrey offered futilely.

'Do you remember how these work?' He released Jeffrey and took a step away, taking the pear with him, beginning to pace. 'If I turn this screw at the end then the sides start to expand out, eventually making the circumference three times larger. Let's say, for example, I put it in your mouth. Of course, first I would have to get it past your teeth – that's likely to knock a couple

of the front ones out. As it's expanding, of course, it will force most of the rest of them out of their sockets. Without anaesthetic I am sure you can imagine how painful that will be.'

'Stop . . .'

'Then your jaw will dislocate, which will most likely cause swelling in the back of your throat, not to mention how old this is, it's probably rife with bacteria. By the time your airway closes over you will be in so much pain I doubt you will even notice the lack of oxygen. It will be a slow death, hypoxia most likely, as one by one your major organs shut down. The flow of oxygen will be pitiful, but still enough to keep you alive and in agony for a good few minutes. In terms of pain, a minute may as well be for ever.'

'Enough!' Jeffrey shouted, his voice reverberating. He stared down at his clenched fists. They were white with fear.

'Of course, that's only if I put it in your mouth . . . You're not likely to die the other way, although I suspect you'll wish you had.'

'You'll get rid of the photos if I do this?' Jeffrey's heart was in his throat as he looked up at the noose, understanding that he had no choice, that this had always been the only possible end for him.

'You are getting the easy way out, Jeffrey, trust me. I promise I will destroy any evidence if you do this one thing for me. I would rather not draw too much attention to your death. You owe me this much.'

Jeffrey stood up on the chair, the feet sliding against the highly polished wooden floor. Once his neck was

inside the noose all he needed was two seconds of insane courage and the decision would be out of his hands.

'I can't.' Jeffrey's voice broke and his eyes prickled with tears, warm, wet fluids ran down his leg on to the chair and floor.

'This will all be over in a few seconds, you can do it, I believe in you.' A little warmth from the cold voice? 'Isn't that what you used to say to me?'

Jeffrey filled his lungs with as much air as possible, as though that might help in some way. The chair wobbled a little and he grabbed hold of the rope; he just couldn't keep his balance. The man finally walked out from behind him and they stood face to face. The man pulled the black hood from his head and looked Jeffrey proudly in the eyes, this was the last thing Jeffrey would ever see. Jeffrey kicked the chair and his feet dropped, for a second he thought he might be able to touch the ground but his feet danced around desperately searching for some leverage and found just more air. The rope burned with each tug but he felt like he had no choice but to struggle, his body still grasping for life whether he wanted it to or not. Then came the darkness, and as his eyes blurred to a sliver, the smile.