The Teacher

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Short Stories

The Lost Boys
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The Teacher

A **DS CROSS** THRILLER

TIM SULLIVAN



An Aries Book

First published in the UK in 2024 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781804545652
ISBN (E): 9781804545638

Cover design: Ben Prior

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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For James Maw,
my erstwhile partner in crime. One of the funniest
and most talented people I know.

1

The victim's head was at a grotesque and unnatural angle to his body, which lay crumpled like a pile of laundry that had been thrown down the narrow staircase. The victim was a white male, probably in his eighties and quite tall. There was a long smear of blood where his head had made contact with the wall as his body slid down it. His neck was, in all likelihood, broken. One thing was beyond question, however. Alistair Moreton was very much dead. His dog, a large German shepherd, lay nearby, watching protectively as the police team did their work.

'Why call in the murder squad?' DCI Ben Carson asked the young PC who had been first on the scene. Carson sounded like he was in an episode of a US crime show from the fifties. He was attending the scene with DS George Cross as Cross's usual partner, DS Josie Ottey, was moving house. Carson's referencing the 'murder squad' – tantamount to talking about himself in the third person, thought Cross – was par for the course. He was often prone to these moments of self-aggrandisement. They irritated the hell out of Ottey when she was within earshot, but Cross rarely noticed, as he was generally too engrossed in whatever they were working on.

'He was alive when he fell,' explained PC Trevor Bain nervously.

'And how do you know that?' asked Carson, looking to Cross for approval of his demand for precision. None was forthcoming.

'You can tell from the amount of blood on the wall from the head wound. But I also noticed defence wounds on the deceased's hands,' replied Bain.

'From the fall, presumably.'

'I don't think so,' said Bain who was then immediately alarmed that he had just contradicted a DCI so brazenly. He took a deep breath and awaited the deserved reprimand.

'Why not?' asked Carson.

'Because they are puncture wounds, not consistent with a fall. More consistent with an attack.'

'Good work,' said Carson like the man manager and encourager he fancied himself to be. But in truth he was just trying to imply that he knew this full well himself and was testing the young officer. Training on the job, as it were.

'Consistent with the puncture to the chest, as well as what appear to be bites to his legs,' said Cross who was kneeling over the body.

'Do we need to call animal control?' asked Carson casting a nervous glance at the Alsatian who was still, seemingly, observing the scene.

'What makes you so sure they are dog bites?' asked Cross, standing up from examining the body. Something Carson hadn't done. As a rule he never did. The truth was he had something of an aversion to dead bodies. Bit of a problem when it came to being a senior member of the Avon and Somerset Major Crime Unit (MCU). He'd managed to solve this by claiming he was more use in the office coordinating the investigation than at the scene. He said it gave him an objective overview of the case they were working on.

'It would make more sense if it was a dog,' he said as assertively as he could manage. 'Was the stab the fatal wound? The cause of death?' Carson was, as always, in need of quick answers, whether accurate or not.

'I have no idea. The forensic pathologist will tell us,' Cross replied.

'Pretty obvious, I would've thought,' continued Carson.

'He has a massive injury to the back of his head. By the look of things a possible broken neck, either of which could have

been fatal. Do you have any idea of the depth of the stab wound to the chest?' asked Cross.

'Of course not,' spluttered Carson.

'Yet you seem convinced it's the cause of death,' said Cross before leaving the room.

'Can someone get that dog out of here?' commanded Carson in an attempt to show everyone that he was really in charge.

But the animal had followed Cross out of the room. It was as if he was sure Cross was the one who'd have answers as to how his owner had died. Cross walked across the entrance hall into the living room.

It was a small cottage – probably eighteenth-century, Cross calculated. The ceilings were low with the occasional forehead-cracking beam, stretching wall to wall. The windows were leaded in a diamond formation which made the interior fairly dark, even when it was a bright day outside. There was a worn, plum-coloured velvet sofa opposite an open fire which was situated in an exposed brick wall. Also a leather armchair which wouldn't have looked out of place in a Pall Mall gentlemen's club. It had a brass reading lamp on a stand at its side. The previous day's copy of *The Times* was lying folded up on the floor, revealing a completed crossword in beautiful, meticulous, tiny handwriting. There were copies of *The Spectator* magazine, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Educational Supplement* strewn on the floor surrounding the chair. A copy of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* was open on a small table next to it. On the book a pair of half-moon reading glasses, and next to them a glass of whisky, with about a finger of Scotch left in it. There was a pipe in an ashtray, together with a soft leather pouch filled with tobacco and a silver tamping tool. The end of the pipe had been bitten down. Cross was pretty sure if he examined Alistair Moreton's teeth, he would find them to be worn down and brown from holding the pipe in this mouth. There was a box of Swan Vesta safety matches. It spoke of a different era. The room itself had

the sweet aroma of a thousand smoked pipes, also evidenced by the brown patina on the walls. The nicotine had given it a stain like a paint finish that many a fashionable interior designer might have been proud of.

The dog lay down in front of the armchair, presumably his habitual spot at the feet of its master. Cross looked at it for a moment and reflected how frustrating it was that this animal was probably a witness to what had befallen Moreton and yet wouldn't be able to tell them a thing. The dog noticed Cross's staring, got up, pushed its nose against the police officer's leg, mouth open, panting. Cross bent down to console it. This came perfectly naturally to him in a way that never happened with people in this kind of situation. He'd never had a dog, which had been a source of regret, but something he still thought about rectifying when he retired. As he stroked the dog, he looked around the walls of the room which were covered floor to ceiling with bookshelves. There were also piles of books, stacked on the floor. Moreton had obviously run out of room for his vast collection. But then Cross noticed something about the dog's mouth. Perhaps he had something he could tell them after all.