

FOX

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"In my experience, those who beg for mercy seldom deserve it"

It had been four days since fifteen year old Chloe Taylor had supposedly *tweeted* that message. Eleven words, forty nine characters, fifty nine including spaces. Well within the maximum 140 which Twitter allows. Even so, an odd thing for anyone to write, don't you think? But for a fifteen year old who had just graduated from the Jonas Brothers to mild purple Goth? Please.

It was @chlowsonyou's last tweet, time stamped at 23.37. Chloe's body was found in her bedroom the next morning. The buckle end of an expensive Stella McCartney belt was ratcheted tight around her neck. The other end was knotted to the round brass knob on her bedroom door. Chloe's room. The room into whose very fabric Chloe had been imprinted since she was six months old. Chloe's room, with the hand-written sign, on the landing-side door, warning, "Here Be Monsters. Keep Out". Chloe would be in this room for a long, long time after she had returned to dust.

When her daughter had failed to come down for breakfast, her mother Kate had gently knocked before trying to enter. Kate didn't know that the dead weight of her only child's body lay slumped against the door. Chloe's stepfather had moved out the previous month (pre-divorce) and was well on his way by train to his job as a mover and shaker in the City of London. In an unformed, floating panic Kate rushed next door to her retired neighbour Tom. Together they went into the Taylor's large secluded back garden, overlooking Tanners Wood. Tom used a ladder to climb up to Chloe's bedroom balcony window and peer in. His audible cry of despair was echoed almost instantly by Kate's incoherent wounded animal wail that was heard half a mile away.

The police had quickly deemed her death a suicide, even though it would take a Coroner's court to officially complete the legalities. I disagreed. But what did I know, little old me: Melody Fox. At seventeen, and officially blonde, it's hard enough to get people to take you seriously about anything. Mention your musings to the police that something was off and the response is instant. Trust the



professionals. Call me a cynic, but I stopped trusting people at the ripe old age of five. Thank you Darren Jenkins. Stole a kiss. Stole my dinner money. Broke my heart. So yes, I have issues. Do I regret that? I have been known to angst over why I always assume base motives. Then I remember Daisy... the sister I never even knew. Is it weird to remember someone it's impossible to have any memory of, as she disappeared a month before I was born? Gone without a trace. Foul play suspected. Never found.

Yet lately, I have been dreaming about Daisy constantly: dreams which are more like memories of us doing little sister/big sisterly things together. Oh yeah, weird no doubt - but there it is. It's what should have been, but was stolen. This is what makes me a person who knows the price of everything betrayed, and the value of nothing accepted at face value. Ka-Pow. Take that Oscar Wilde.

I just about knew Chloe Taylor. She was two years below me at Camford Grammar School for Girls. Yes, that is *the* Camford, home of Camford University... drop a student from a thousand feet and he'll impale on a dreaming spire. The Camford University of ancient walled colleges which, for over five hundred years, have been the home to the world's greatest minds: scholars, philosophers, poets and scientists. And, if my exams go as planned next year: me too at St. Thomas's college.

The school has a mandatory mentoring programme where senior girls look out for their younger brethren. Chloe was being mentored by Lila McKinney; but Lila had returned to the States when her father was posted back to Washington two weeks ago. Headmistress Miss Harmer ruled her domain with a velvet fist. She was iron-hands on. When Lila left, the Hammer called me into her study and told me Chloe was to be taken under my wing. I should mention I have something of a reputation at school. What can I say? I have an enquiring mind. It seems many people don't appreciate that, unless they need my help. So I wasn't high on the list of choices to be mentor - and by not high, I mean in the basement below bottom.

The Hammer was immaculate in crisp grey and white, as usual. She gazed dispassionately at me with her trademarked all-seeing, all-knowing eye. Most girls crumbled effortlessly under this scrutiny, and would confess to just about anything she suggested, had she been evilly inclined. It never worked on me, and the Hammer knew it - but she just couldn't stop herself trying every time. She glanced at an



open file on her desk (which I assumed was mine) and spoke in her very clipped pre-Mockney BBC accent:

"Melody I want you to take over mentoring Chloe Taylor in Astor House. You only have one other charge at present, so your load will still be light."

"And...?"

She smilingly let my single word response hang before continuing. "And... you are right. There is also an 'and'."

I couldn't believe it. The Hammer seemed almost embarrassed.

"This is strictly between us, Melody, you understand? I have some concerns - albeit minor concerns - about Chloe. I do know her father, sorry step-father has moved out of the family home. She's such a talented musician with a brilliant career ahead... but I'd hate to see her waste her potential. Given your -uh, reputation for..."

The long pause forced me to jump in: "Problem solving?"

The Hammer smiled again. "Yes, problem solving. Why not. I was hoping that besides mentoring, you could, probe a little deeper and see if there is some simple, normal, easily corrected reason."

"Spy on her."

"Spying is such an ugly word Melody."

Two days after Chloe's body was found, Miss Harmer called a special prayer assembly in the Big Hall. It was devastating. The entire staff gathered on the stage facing 400 emotionally charged girls; most of whom were contemplating the crushing reality of loss and death for the first time. Chloe had been the star of the school orchestra. She burned bright and hot, and her ability on the cello was rated as



potentially world-class by those who knew. The orchestra played a selection of her favourite music, leaving her empty chair and music stand to signify our collective loss. The thought that Chloe and her beautiful talent had been lost to the world angered me; and that was when I was still buying the police suicide line. That changed.

All Chloe's teachers went to the lectern to speak a few words about her, through poems, prayers, prose. Then it was Mr Bennett's turn. He had only joined the term before, as a substitute head of music while Mrs Finster was away on maternity leave. Although I didn't take music, I really admired him. He reminded me of my dad in the way he had overcome physical adversity. The gossip had it he was also a child prodigy destined for greatness until a freak accident. Mr Bennett didn't speak of Chloe. He let Chloe speak for herself. He wheeled a large screen into the centre of the stage...

"Girls, staff, teachers - my tribute to our dear lost friend comes from Chloe herself, interpreting J.S. Bach's Suite No. 5 in C minor; which, as you may know, was the moving piece played by her hero, Yo Yo Ma, as the names of the dead were intoned on the eleventh of September, two thousand and two, at the site of the World Trade Center."

He then pressed the remote. It was a YouTube video of Chloe. You could clearly see the date stamp which put the recording at a week old. We all watched Chloe in rapt, sombre silence. Her long, tangled hair was a luscious pre-Raphaelite red, framing her classic oval face, bare except for the Goth-purple lipstick and coal black eyeliner. You could see in her eyes she was in another place; a higher plane. It was as if the camera wasn't even there. It was just her and the timeless music of Bach. It all shone through: the passion, the control, the effortless mastery, and the innocent arrogance that she knew exactly how good she was. And how great she would become. Well, that shone through to me, but then that's one of my passions, noticing things. One thing was clear: this girl loved life. Chloe Taylor did not kill herself. And this other girl became incandescent with rage at that thought.

Detective Inspector Hodge kept me waiting for over an hour at Camford CID. Eighteen years ago Hodge was a humble PC when he was sent out in response to a possibly, (but could have just gone home to mum and dad) missing female student at St. Thomas's College. My sister Daisy was in her



final year studying English and Classics when she vanished without, as they say, trace. My dad was unconscious inside a secret military hospital, missing vital body parts. I was still inside my mum. The constabulary got nowhere in its investigation. No body or real clue as to what happened was ever found by the police. The case is still open, so maybe it's his own personal guilt, but to this day, the now lofty D.I. Hodge will always make time for my dad, or to humour me.

I took my waiting time to see what was out there on Chloe's public life. My trusty Apple MacPro Wi-Fi'd into an unsecured network and within minutes I had scanned Chloe's entire life on all the social networking sites. I call them sociopath networking sites, as they are an open goldmine of personal info for anyone prowling with criminal intent.

My dad had drummed his bleak Hobbesian way of the world into me from Munchkin sized. "Canis canem edit. That's dog eat dog in Latin, kiddo," he would warn while instructing me on discharging a Sig Sauer in a one handed, combat stance on the shooting range at one of his old regiments.

I didn't clock any overt threats to Chloe on her pages, but then she could have edited those out herself. I had to be honest, I hadn't seen the body. I hadn't seen the crime scene. I had no access to the post mortem results. I had nothing except an absolute certainty that Chloe Taylor did not asphyxiate herself, three feet off the ground, in her own bedroom, using a door knob and a belt.

I knew what Hodge's response was going to be when he finally called me into his office. I even ran his likely spiel through my head as I breezed though the large open plan space, with the ten or so desks divided off by head height pin-board screens. About half the desks were missing actual detectives, as they were out: presumably detecting hard. The rest were occupied mostly by men (one woman, it was good to see) either on the phone, checking their computers with the clunky old CRT screens, or sipping cold coffee from plastic cups.

Hodge would point out that most people who know the victim, and not even that well, psychologically resist accepting suicide. Especially in a teenager. There were no signs of struggle. No restraint marks. No evidence that a third party was in the room at the time of death. That's exactly how it went with Hodge.



"But what about the suicide tweet. Mike. Honest to God, isn't that off?"

"Suicide tweet? Cute! I see where you're going Melody. But we're not treating it like a suicide note."

"In my experience, those who beg for mercy seldom deserve it. People don't tend to tweet like that. Let alone fifteen year olds. It's all this weird texting shit-"

Mike bristled at me using even the mildest expletive in his presence:

"-sorry... language."

"Okay, I admit I was slightly bothered by that and I have McKenzie checking into it. But it could just be a famous quote she typed verbatim. Maybe a favourite author? Who knows? I know you don't want to hear it, but there were personal problems at home..."

"Step-father. Kicked out after eight years by the mother who suddenly gets a clue on the man she brought into her little girl's life? Classic scenario. Tell me you're looking into that, right?"

"He seems to have an alibi for the time of death."

"No sexual abuse? She looks an awfully lot like a younger riper version of her mother. Very tempting. If it was suicide, which I have a real gut feel, no way, then maybe he drove her to it?"

Again, Mike bristled. He sees the unforgivable child abuse and cruelty I was suggesting on a daily basis. He and my dad have grown close, and he still thinks of me as a little girl who lost her big sister. I could see he was starting to feel very uncomfortable. This was getting nowhere. If I wanted to get the truth it was going to be on my own.

It was Saturday morning, around ten-thirty, and four days since Kate Taylor's life was stripped away of any lingering meaning. I put on my school uniform and drove my classic Volkswagen Beetle the



two miles to Chloe Taylor's house. The car was a gift from dad on my seventeenth birthday. He only gave me two provisos - or as I call them, orders. 1. I keep a cricket bat on the back seat; 2. I refrain from locating and destroying the state-of-the-art GPS tracker he'd installed somewhere in the car. Oh, didn't I mention? Sure, he's trained to kill. And paranoid. But in a good way. You know what they say.

"Lose one daughter is careless. Lose two is gonna happen over his cold dead body."

To be fair, these are vital attributes when you operate your own successful private security firm placing highly trained, former military specialists around the world. Not bad for a self-taught NCO who left school at fifteen, before leaving behind three limbs for Queen and country.

I drove into the driveway, got out of the car, and got my story straight. For a second, waiting for a response to me ringing the bell, I almost turned tail. Then the door opened and it all fell into place. A slim, attractive woman in jeans and sweater stood in front of me. Her face was puffy, probably from crying and lack of sleep. From the vivid hair and family resemblance to Chloe, I guessed she must be Kate's sister. She did an instant double take when she recognized my school uniform, and stammered out:

"You-you're from Chloe's school."

"Yes... I'm Melody Fox. I-I-uh, I had just taken over from Lila as senior girl mentor to Chloe, last week, as a matter of fact..."

Before I could get out another word, she grabbed me in a mama bear-like hug. It was pathetic and heartbreaking as I felt her sobbing for air through stifled whimpers as she clung onto a total stranger. It was all I could do not to break down and confess my motives. Thankfully she quickly composed herself, stepped back and invited me in. She led me through the hallway to the kitchen at the back of the house. We passed a living room with the television on a Saturday morning kids' programme. Through the half open door I saw a boy and a girl (both under ten) lying on the floor on their fronts, watching a cartoon.



As she busied herself in the kitchen making us a pot of coffee, I found out she was indeed Kate's younger sister Bella (Isabella), and the kids were her twins Jasper and Lucy. Dedicated conmen are really quite dangerous sociopaths who, in another enterprise, could easily turn violent without conscience or regret. They will mask a bottomless pit of lies with a veneer of truth. I did the same in the name of the greater truth. Truly conveying my condolences hid my primary motive. Luckily (for me) Kate was still asleep (sedation, doctor's orders) so all that remained was to get into Chloe's room alone. I had considered using the loo excuse to go upstairs. But there might be a toilet in the hallway. I had that eventually covered by bringing along an old edition of the love poems of Christina Rossetti. I placed the book on the kitchen table where it had the desired enquiring affect. I lied like a pro that I had borrowed the book from Chloe, and I wished to return it. Then the hard part.

"I know this is going to sound-uh, weird... and please, say no..."

"What is it Melody?"

"Could-could I return the book up to her room? On my own. And read out one of her favourite poems. Remember Me. Do that for her... for Chloe?"

Bella's face crumpled, and I honestly wished the ground would swallow me whole at the low point. Then she whispered "Yes, that would be beautiful. Thank you."

I opened the door with the sign, "*Here Be Monsters. Keep Out*". What the hell was I thinking? This was a mistake. I walked in, closed the door and looked around. I stood exactly where her body must have slumped. Her bed faced the window and balcony. On a desk was her laptop. Good, the police hadn't taken it because they didn't consider it evidence. The lead was plugged into the mains, which made it perfect for what I intended. I switched it on and left it to boot up while I scoped out the room to see if anything was out of place.

Chloe's cello was on its stand in a corner, behind it was her chair. The modern steel music stand was in front of the cello. If an inanimate object can look sad, then this was one sorrowful instrument. I



recognised the set up from the YouTube video. This was definitely where she had recorded herself and posted it online. I was wondering where the camera must have been positioned when the familiar Windows theme tune announced the laptop was up. I plugged a memory stick into one of the USB slots and installed the clever software which would let me access the laptop remotely via the internet.

That was that. I was desperate to leave my deception behind and get out, when it struck me. Where *was* that camera placed? Despite my guilt-induced compulsion to flee, I forced myself to sit in the cello chair. Chloe probably missed it because she would have been wielding her instrument and looking at the music on the stand, as opposed to the stand itself. I only saw it because I had seen one in my dad's collection of surveillance gear. A tiny hole has been drilled into the adjustable steel pole which held the sheet music shelf. Into the hole had been inserted a wireless micro-video camera that was less than an eighth of an inch across. A sexy, state-of-the-art gizmo, with a range of two hundred yards. But that didn't matter, as it could piggy back off any nearby wireless network. Such as Chloe's own laptop.

I leaned in to make sure I wasn't seeing things. No. there it was. Then it struck me. I had just switched on the laptop. Whoever placed it could be looking at me right now.

Someone had gone to a lot of trouble with Chloe Taylor. He knew her. He knew her routine. He knew her house, and her bedroom. He knew her musical paraphernalia. He had used that knowledge to coldly kill her. And he was skilled enough to fool the police into thinking it was a suicide. This wasn't the first time he had done this. No way. He was devious, practised and without mercy. He had killed before. Many times was my guess.

Maybe I should have called D.I. Hodge, and told him. But tell him what? I've just entered a grieving family's house under false pretences? Instead I picked up my iPhone and speed-dialled Elvis Hannah's mobile. It rang three times then went to voicemail. I redialled his news desk number. This time he answered on the second ring.



"Camford Times, Elvis Hannah..."

"How's my favourite local reporter?"

"Losing circulation. How's my fave... okay I give up, what are you this week?"

"In need of a little info."

"You'll note my surprise registered zero on the sphincter scale. And I'm about to leave the building, dollface."

"Be round in twenty. Wait."

I clicked Elvis off before he could argue back. The Camford Times used to be in a rather nice Regency building near Camford High Street. But times and property market values change. Their relocation to a soulless industrial estate, on the edge of town, certainly made parking easier.

I made it in ten minutes flat, and was buzzed right in by the bored jobsworth on the front desk of the deserted building. Elvis was waiting with his reporter's persona on max.

"Quid pro moi, storywise. That suicide girl was at your school? Right Melody?"

"What's mine is your front page Elvis. You know that. Need to fire up LOQUACIOUS."

Loquacious is a massive computer database available by subscription to the UK newspaper industry. It's the local equivalent of Lexis Nexis and contains just about every local newspaper entry from the past thirty years. Forget the scattergun results of commercial search engines like Google or Yahoo. Loquacious is a laser scalpel.

"Okay Melody, what do you want?"



"Okay. Enter these values. Suicide. Young. Teenager."

Elvis had almost finished typing before I'd finished speaking. He hit enter. The screen instantly filled with entries with the counter at the bottom of the screen announcing ninety-five pages.

He shook his head: "Shit. That's a lot of dead kids. Be repeats and follow-ups, of course. Where d'ya wanna start?"

"Can you sub-search within the existing results with extra values?"

"Sure."

"Enter gifted, talented and prodigy." The results rebooted into a manageable five pages with about fifteen entries per page. "Okay. Now can you re-order these into time-frames, then geographic regions within those timeframes."

We both sat for five minutes looking at the print out, neither of us saying a word. Because if we said something, that would make what we saw to be true. And if it was true then beware. Here be a monster, right here, right now. Elvis broke the stagnant silence.

"You see it, right?"

"Oh yeah. No doubt. Murder by suicide. Has to be. Three or four a year for God knows how long."

What we saw was the invisible pattern going back at least thirty years. It was like a deadly virus popping up in a specific small locale; then dying down for a while before popping up again in another part of the country. Edinburgh in '93. Eight months later in Kent. Aberystwyth in '94. Hampshire in '95. Its victims were all young, but that wasn't the real link. They were all part of a very special group of extraordinary talent. Many musicians but also dancers, athletes, chess prodigies, maths prodigies, young writers with a gift for prose or poetry. And apparently they all succumbed to the pressures of excellence by killing themselves. Yeah, right.



"One more entry. Type in the whole phrase: *in my experience, those who beg for mercy seldom deserve it.*"

"Sounds like something out of a 1950s pulp fiction wannabee. The Big Sleep Over Easy, or summit."

It took 0.017 seconds for Loquacious to display one entry, dated June 7, 1979. I sped read the breathless feature in the Buxton Leader, about a promising local lad, Sam Whittaker, who was so proud to get his first book published. It was a crime novel in the hardboiled style of a young Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler, set in the badlands of the Pennines. The opening line was printed as a subhead to encourage sales. It was the familiar "*In my...*" Elvis enlarged the small, over-inked photograph of the author for me. Thirty one years younger, there was no mistaking the same sad eyes. Or the plastic prosthetic right hand.

That did it. Now I had something to show Hodges. I fished out the iPhone from my bag and punched in the speed dial for Camford CID.

Elvis picked up his desk phone and handed it to me just as I saw the reason why:

"Forget it, you can't get a damn signal in here. It's the metal building, pathetic!"

"Elvis, can't get a line on this either."

When Melody Fox's face popped up on one of Mr Bennett's five monitors, no one was more surprised than him. Not because she appeared, but where she appeared. He had been watching her for a while, since he realised how special she was. Her specialness wasn't apparent like so many of his projects. He only became aware after common room gossip whispered in semi-awed tones, about the young girl with the forensic mind and the acuity of a supercomputer. But even he was shocked to see her sitting in Chloe's bedroom looking right into the camera he had planted over a month ago. When she leaned in ready for my close up Mr Bennett, he knew it. His usual careful plan, with the exquisite precision of a Bach fugue, lay ruined. The derivation of fugue amused him. From the Latin fuga, from



which both fugere (to flee) and fugare, (to chase) derive. It always seemed apt.

Life is cruel. Young people had to learn that. Sam Whittaker had to when he was fifteen. He was born to lumpen parents on a Pennine hill farm. At the age of two he was taken to Sunday school, where he spontaneously started playing the upright piano in the village hall. By fifteen Sam was quite famous locally, and was offered a scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music. But his halfwit of a sister was always insanely jealous of all the attention her brother received. And for what, playing dead boring music you couldn't even dance to. One day, as Sam was leaning on a stone wall in the farm yard, she picked up an axe and loped off his right hand.

As Bennett hurried in his car, he fully understood his thrill at his closeness to being detected for the first time since he began composing his symphony. Is that why he engineered it? After drugging Chloe at school with his usual slow-acting agent, climbing through her balcony window, and then slowly extinguishing her precious life, he lingered to tweet that damn stupid line into her Twitter account. Before that he had posted on YouTube the video he had recorded, and then shown it in the assembly. But Chloe was magnificent. The world had to feel the pain of the loss he was going to inflict. Did he secretly want to up reveal himself to the world?

His Melody project being in the works, meant he had installed his usual safety devices. This included the GPS locator he had secreted in her car a week ago when he knew his Chloe project was drawing to its inevitable conclusion. It directed him straight to the almost deserted car park on the anonymous industrial estate. "Camford Times? This doesn't look good for me. Just in time methinks." Like all great virtuosos, Mr Bennett had always wanted to improvise. Now was his chance.

I finally had something tangible to tell Hodge, but I couldn't get a mobile signal, and the paper's landlines seemed dead. I told Elvis to keep trying Camford CID, then raced off to try calling from the car park.

Oh that's great security. The uniformed jobsworth had left the reception desk. Anyone could walk unnoticed in or out through the front door, as I was about to. That's when an alarm went off in my head. I turned to investigate behind the desk, just as the fast moving figure was almost on me. I



ducked as Bennett jabbed the 50,000 volt taser where my neck would have been. They're illegal I thought, as I dropped my shoulder exactly like my dad had drilled into me a thousand times. Using his forward momentum, I flipped Bennett up in the air and he crashed head first through the plate glass front door. He lay unmoving, blood oozing, half in and half out of the shattered door. His prosthetic right hand a yard away.

Pausing just long enough to kick him hard in the head, I legged it for my car, pulling out the remote from my bag as I ran. The plan was to take off, then phone. I'd just gotten the car door open when Bennett was on me again. He grabbed my hair and yanked me backwards. He didn't look too good as he spun me around and used his left arm to put me in a choke hold. This was lights out fast unless I did something even faster. This is where steel-capped Doc Martens become a girl's best friend. Raising my left foot I stamped down harder than Thor's hammer. The scream told me I'd hit home. With his grip loosened there was only one logical thing to do. I scrambled onto the back seat of my car and grabbed the cricket bat.

He was coming at me again, face ribboned by the plate glass. I swung like Botham and caught him full on. As he dropped down on one knee gasping, I think he said "mercy" but it was hard to tell. I thought of all that beauty he destroyed. The final blow broke my bat. And him.

