

**HEADS I WIN
TAILS YOU LOSE**



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HEADS I WIN; TAILS YOU LOSE

by

Lynne Fox

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Dedicated to
my parents and my son,
Elliott

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My love and appreciation to you all.

Lynne Fox

CHAPTER 1

‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.’

Well, I tried to let the Lord choose the time but I do feel I’ve waited long enough. It isn’t as if I haven’t given Him enough time; it’s been *seventeen years!* For someone so omnipotent, I would have thought that was more than enough but apparently not.

As a child I believed that Divine Intervention would balance the books if I just prayed long enough and hard enough. I went to church twice *every* Sunday for years; my head bowed, my knees dimpled with patterns from the heavily embroidered hassocks, the words of my prayers so familiar that I could feel their form in my mouth like soothing sweets but as time passed the words only seared like bitter lemons.

So, I no longer ape the contrite humility of the congregation, passively waiting for celestial intervention; instead, I’ve taken matters into my own hands. After all, there’s only so much disillusionment a girl can take.

I was nine when our family tragedy happened; too young then to actively pursue revenge. It was a difficult pill for me to swallow but swallow it I did and I learnt to play the long game.

The ‘long game’ is something DCI Munroe has little time for. All those years ago, when he was merely a Detective Sergeant, it was clear, even to my young eyes, that he was

a man driven by his need to succeed; to gain results and quickly.

As he had walked the path to our front door, the darkening sky had unburdened itself of a summer squall so that he stood in the centre of our lounge, slowly dripping into the carpet. I watched, fascinated, as a thin stream of water ran down from the hair plastered to his forehead and onto his nose before gathering, a glistening orb, suspended at the tip. I silently counted the seconds until it dropped.

Tall, almost six foot and painfully thin, Munroe had exceptionally wide shoulders, his torso tapering to a narrow waist and hips giving the impression of an inverted triangle delicately balancing on its point yet this seeming fragility belied an overpowering presence. The scent of pipe tobacco, exaggerated by the damp that had infused his clothes and person, reminded me of decaying leaf mould, as though he'd just wriggled out from under some lichen-covered stone.

My family shrank under his scrutiny, pressed back into their seats; Mother alternately twisting her handkerchief or dabbing theatrically at her eyes; Father varying between expressions of incredulity at what Munroe was saying and querying looks of doubt in my brother, Matt's direction. Matt, blank-faced, simply looked stunned and I? I was ignored; a thing of no consequence, barely acknowledged.

Since then, Munroe has never been far from my consciousness. Through the ensuing years of schooling, on to my degree course and then to my current employment at a Further Education college, the desire for revenge has never left me.

During the early years I could do little more than scrutinise the local police website and local papers, cutting out or making notes of any references to DS Munroe; all such snippets kept in a box on top and at the very back of my wardrobe. Yet time, as it passes, brings with it new opportunities, new solutions.

I grew up and as I grew DS Munroe moved up the ranks, eventually becoming a DCI and moving to where we both now live. Endover is a leafy suburb approximately fifteen miles from central London that boasts a police HQ covering three counties. Although the residential areas have slowly increased, expanding outwards, the town centre has remained relatively compact so it's not unusual to encounter people you know or, at least, recognise when out and about. Lawns, flowerbeds and several benches adorn the walking precincts tempting shoppers to stop and linger on warm summer days; a theme taken up by the cafes and pubs encouraging al fresco dining.

The police HQ is situated on the outskirts of town, flanked on one side by a sports stadium and on the other by a man-made lake that provides some of the gentler water sports, along with fishing and wildlife reserve. I wonder if Munroe pays these benefits any attention at all.

I moved in autumn to the staccato of crisp leaves disintegrating under my feet as I trudged up the path to my rented apartment, carrying my few belongings. I became settled during early morning mists that lingered, hanging in heavy droplets on boughs denuded of leaves. I watched Munroe and his family in their new home during the first few months of winter as we all hunkered down against the biting winds and I bided my time.

Almost two years have now passed since Munroe and I moved so why, you may ask, have I not completed my task? I've wondered that myself, but it really isn't that easy. If I were the Almighty I could have just cremated him with a massive lightning strike, wiped my hands and had a cup of tea - job done - but, for a mere mortal, things are somewhat more complex.

I've read lots of things about how other people have done it; poisoning, a car accident, pushed under a train, shot, stabbed, strangled, suffocated - Man's ingenuity when faced with disposing of another is amazing but as I reviewed the

options and played out likely scenarios in my head, I came to realise that I didn't want him dead; I want him to suffer - years of suffering and to achieve that will require a degree of subtlety.



It's cold in the park this lunch time. I tuck my coat tighter around my legs to fend off the spiteful wind. I guess it is a bit silly spending my lunch break here on such a day, the library would have been cosier, but I need the isolation, I need to think, to focus and I'm always so easily distracted. Like now, I can't take my eyes off a snail that's making its laborious way along the ground at my feet, its tell-tale trail of slime glistening in the cold sunlight, repulsively beautiful. I raise my foot, hover my shiny new boot above it, tantalisingly close. The snail, oblivious, continues on its way until I bring my foot down with clinical precision, smashing its shell into myriad pieces, leaving the snail naked and writhing in the wreckage of its home. I can't help smiling at the analogy it represents.

I settle back on the bench, pulling up my collar a little further, sinking down into the folds of the cashmere scarf that had been a grabbed-for afterthought as I'd hurried from the college. I like this area of the park, even on a day like today. It isn't used very much, probably because it seems to form a dead end and it isn't as manicured as the main areas but it's well away from the playground so always affords some quiet; a cherished interlude from the hubbub of college life.

The whole area is bordered by a mixture of deciduous and evergreen trees and autumn is once again painting the canvas with her vibrant colours. Rhododendrons and azaleas have been allowed to run rampant, smothering smaller plants yet I know that under their foliage a mass of

crocuses and snowdrops are waiting in the cold earth, ready to assert them come spring.

Lost in my daydreaming, something nudges my subconscious making me stiffen slightly, all my senses on full alert. I glance about me but nothing seems to have changed and then I notice the smell, sickly, cloying with an underlay of stale urine. I turn to my right to look behind me when a hand grips my left shoulder. Turning instinctively toward it I'm startled by a dirty, sore-rimmed mouth inches from my own.

I cringe, bringing my hands up to my nose, desperately trying to block out the stench of stale cigarette smoke and alcohol. 'Get off me!' I twist my body violently away, wrenching free from the nicotine-stained talons that are digging into my shoulder. The tramp makes another grab at me. His long nails catch on my scarf and for one terrifying second I fear he's going to use it to strangle me. With a strength I wasn't aware I possess I grab hold of my scarf and wrench it free. He stumbles as I yank it from his grip and grabs for the back of the bench to steady himself. I don't wait around but dart forward, my bag flying open behind me and I don't slow down until I reach the main entrance to the park.

Supporting myself on one of the brick pillars that form elaborate gate posts, heaving air into my lungs, I can see the tramp hasn't followed me. I can't believe I managed to run so fast, especially in my new, knee-high boots with the three inch heels. I glance down. The toes are badly scuffed and one heel seems a little loose, damaged by my sprint. The bastard! I only bought them last week!

I look up and glare in the tramp's direction. He's arguing with someone. I can't make out whom, as the tramp's shielding my view, but his anger is unmistakable; arms flailing, body pitching forward, his raised voice a guttural slur, the words indistinct at this distance. He raises his arm, I think to strike but no, it's a futile defensive move. He

slumps to the ground and I see one of my students, Barry Mason, standing over him.

Barry remains for a second or two, apparently transfixed by the body of the tramp lying at his feet then seems to pull himself together, throwing the rock he's holding deep into the overgrown herbaceous border that forms a backdrop to the bench.

He turns his gloved hands palm up, inspects them and then, brushing them off, turns and looks in my direction. I cower behind the brick pillar, unsure whether he's noticed me but his gaze seems distracted. He gives a shrug of resignation and turns, walking behind the bench and disappears into the foliage.

I remain where I am for a minute, maybe longer, expecting Barry to reappear but he doesn't. I'm puzzled. There must be another way out of the park behind the overgrown border that I'm unaware of.

So many questions are hurtling around my mind. Why did Barry assault the tramp? How long had he been there? Did he see the tramp accost me? Does he know the tramp? I wonder if I should go back, see if the tramp is alright. If I were a good citizen I should get on my mobile and inform the police, call for an ambulance. I look down again at my ruined, expensive boots.

I glance at my watch, almost two o'clock and I'm due to teach at two thirty. I sling my bag over my shoulder and, without a backward glance, hobble on my wonky heel back to the college.

CHAPTER 2

I spend a lot of time thinking because I'm naturally logical and methodical and I like to plan; a belt, braces and piece of string person. I know this is irrational as no-one can plan for *every* eventuality but, nonetheless, I have to try because it's all part of the game I set myself; the challenge; my reason to exist.

I cast my mind back over the years and visualise myself sitting on the stairs, my arms hugging my knees, folding in upon myself for comfort. I can just see my parents in our lounge, framed by the edge of the door and the wall; like a tableau of idyllic married life. They'd been drinking, they often did, and as always with them the booze raised voices and loosened tongues. It was then I discovered that I was a Mistake; an error of judgement; something to be marginalised and preferably ignored.

I didn't understand it at the time; I was only six, so I went to Matt, my big brother. He looked at me kind of funny and turned his head away, then suddenly swung round, grabbing me and throwing me onto his bed, tickling and telling me I was so gorgeous he wanted to eat me! I giggled and squirmed and shrieked and the moment passed but its undertone, the sense of something wrong, of an unjustified unkindness, lodged deep in my subconscious. Like a festering boil it swelled as the years passed until I

discovered the means to lance it. The game I play is my scalpel and I now wield it with ruthless precision.

I pour myself a large glass of Chenin Blanc and curl up on the sofa with my album memories of Matt. Closing my eyes I recall the afternoon I'd found the album.

A young girl, my world had irrevocably changed; my brother had recently died so, as a way of keeping him with me, I decide I will make an album of Matt's life. I traipse round the usual book stores but lack of enough cash and the seeming sterility of new books soon has me making my way to my favourite bookstore; the second hand bookshop at the top of the hill.

Once a dwelling house of some standing, the former home of a local dignitary, its front two rooms are now filled floor to ceiling with shelves crammed so tightly it's often difficult to extract the items you want.

Using my shoulder for leverage, I push against the resistance of the entrance door's strong spring and stumble down the step into the shop, the jangling of the brass bell discordantly announcing my arrival. As the door wrenches itself free of my grasp it slams back into its frame, dislodging a shower of fine dust that floats gracefully in the sunlight before settling on every surface within reach, including me.

I stand for a second, breathing in the muskiness of aged paper, sensing the inherent dampness of the building brush against my warm skin and absorbing the fecund silence of millions of words caught between covers, waiting to be released once more into human consciousness.

I pass swiftly through the front rooms on my familiar route out into the back garden where, in summer, a round metal table and chairs and a couple of wooden benches allow customers to sit and browse for as long as they please. The garden rises quite steeply via a crazy-paved path to an outbuilding, little more than a glorified shed, but it holds treasures that have entranced me since Matt had first

brought me here on my eighth birthday to choose my gift. It was only fitting that I should end my search here.

The outbuilding houses a miscellany of items that have mostly seen better days; dejected looking works with worn covers, dog-eared pages sometimes defaced with comments by previous readers but it was this that, to Matt's amusement, I loved.

Browsing through these old, discarded tomes, I find thoughts scribbled in the margins, corners of pages turned down to mark points of interest, sometimes phrases underlined or highlighted and I feel I have a window into other minds; I observe without being observed. It's a good feeling.

It's the album's cover that catches my eye; worn leather, the charcoal-brown of singed toast etched with a filigree of fine lines, like tiny veins. Under the caress of my fingers it feels warm, a living thing. I lift it to my nose and inhale the dust of years, its animal and human scent. Inside are black pages made of an absorbent substance, reminding me of blotting paper but more substantial; here and there photograph corner tabs remain glued to the pages, with occasional annotations in white ink, written in a beautiful copper-plate hand; sad reminders of someone else's treasured memories.

'Y'know, you could use a bit of Dubbin on that cover; real leather it is, high quality once. Just needs a bit of TLC to stop it cracking any further.'

The bookseller, his skin as crazed as the cover of the album, leans in toward me, his fingers gently brushing the album surface as he speaks.

'How much is it?'

He takes it from my hands and turns to the inside back cover.

'Five pounds.'

Carefully, I count out the coins from my purse.

'Oh, I've only got four.'

My voice breaks in disappointment as I hold out my hand, the coins displayed as evidence. He looks at my outstretched palm, its contents shining in a shaft of light from the open door and reaching out, scrapes the coins toward him with yellowed nails; a chicken scratching in the dirt.

‘That’ll do, young lady.’

I turn, hugging the album to my chest and step out into the winter sunshine. As I round the corner, out of sight of the second hand book shop and its owner, I pop into the sweet shop and spend my salvaged pound.

I’ve been adding photos and cuttings to the album since my brother’s death. Matt, fifteen years old, holding me as a baby, looking for all the world more like a proud father than my sibling; Matt pushing me on the garden swing; Matt helping me balance on my first bike; Matt teaching me tennis; Matt always there; where my parents should have been and then No more photos, just newspaper cuttings with sensational headlines; grainy images that blur the chiselled line of his jaw and dull the startling blue of his eyes as though he was already drifting away from me, fading into that “long goodnight” from which there is no return.

I pour myself another glass of Chenin Blanc as I take some stir fry out of the fridge; it will go nicely with the piece of fresh salmon I bought on the way home. I find preparing food a relaxing, therapeutic activity, it acts as a balm to my over-active mind which at the moment is fixated upon Barry. I keep musing about how events can completely alter one’s perception of people.

For instance, Barry stands just over six feet; he has a shock of black, permanently tousled hair and the deepest, darkest eyes fringed with lashes that girls spend hours trying to achieve with layers of mascara. His skin has darkened to an attractive bronze by all the hours he spends outside and he has a lean, toned body that attracts all the

college females, both staff and students, something to which I'm not immune myself.

Barry has been in my class for the past six months. Learning about art history is not his main subject, he's actually on the Small Animal and Wildlife Course but under the ethos of our Principal, Paul Whitlow, all students are compelled to take a subject outside their main area of interest. The Principal apparently believes this will turn them into more 'rounded' members of society. Complete rot of course but who am I to argue.

Just why Barry chose art history became apparent one afternoon when he asked if I could give him some additional help.

Being new at the college I was keen to make a good impression and my desire to please over-rid my better judgement. As Barry and I sat in the empty classroom, his text book open on the desk before us, Barry moved his chair closer to mine and leant so close that his face was only inches away from my own. His breath smelt of sweet peppermint and his aftershave had a heady, musky base that elicited a slight fluttering of response deep in my belly.

'You know, you have the most beautiful eyes.'

I look up into Barry's face and calmly appraise him. 'Thank you, Barry but you really shouldn't say things like that. Now, what were you having difficulty with?' I prodded the book.

'Keeping my eyes off you, what else?'

'I think you'd better stop, Barry, before you embarrass yourself.'

'I'm not embarrassed. Are you?'

I pushed my chair back and stood, trying to assume some authority, which isn't easy when you stand a diminutive five feet three. 'Out, Barry,' I said walking past him and opening the door.

He obediently rose from his chair and made toward me, 'See you tomorrow,' his smile both inviting and seductive.

I wasn't surprised that Barry fancied me, most men do, especially as I look younger than my twenty-six years, but I was quite confident that I had the measure of him - just a cocky little oik trying it on - until now that is.

The morning after my lunchtime encounter with the tramp I arrive early for my class to find the room abuzz with excited chatter. This is a small group of only ten students and all but one are in a conclave of animated conversation.

'So, what's got everybody's interest this morning?'

The group reluctantly break formation and take their seats.

'Haven't you heard the news?' Terri Westacott leans forward on her desk, her long hair pooling on the surface in front of her, a shimmering cascade of barley yellow.

'What news is that, Terri?'

'The murder in Melsham Park.'

'What?' The surprise spills the exclamation from my lips and my eyes dart over to where Barry Mason is sitting. Immediately, I switch my gaze back to Terri but not before I catch a flicker of concern flit across Barry's face.

Barry sits silent, his chair tipped onto its hind legs, but I sense his attention is focused in my direction.

'I bet it's that tramp that's been hanging about the college grounds.' This time it's Stephen Blake who takes up the tale.

I swallow hard. 'And what makes you think that, Stephen?'

'Cos he's not there this morning and he's been hanging around for a couple of weeks now. Haven't you seen him?'

I vaguely recall seeing a shadowy figure lurking near the woods that form the right hand boundary of the college grounds but I hadn't associated it with the tramp that had so frightened me. 'I think it's a bit early to be surmising as to who it is but I'm sure we'll all find out in time, once the police have completed their enquiries. Now, can we get down to some work please?'

There's a resigned shuffling of bodies as books are tossed heavily onto desks.

I find it difficult to keep the lesson on track as my mind is racing. It seems I may have a murderer sitting in my class who may or may not know that I was a witness to his act. Cautiously, I observe Barry during the lesson. He seems unruffled by the earlier exchange but that could just be bravado.

A murder investigation will undoubtedly be instigated which will surely involve DCI Munroe. If the body in the park is that of the tramp, then I have a hold over Barry that could prove useful but I need to take time and think things through. Munroe has a daughter, Lily, on whom he dotes and she's about Barry's age. Maybe, if I can get the two together ... a DCI's daughter and a murderer. I can feel a slight smirk develop as the idea gels but first I need to find out more about Barry.

I can't deny that the end of session bell is a relief and in my haste to leave I drop some of the papers I'm collecting up. As I bend to retrieve them a large pair of Nike trainers clamp down on top of them. Barry bends down to my level and looks straight into my eyes, a searching, penetrating stare. 'I'll help you with those.' He gathers up the papers and hands them to me, holding on to them just a fraction longer than is necessary so that I have to practically tug them out of his hand. 'Seems like it would be a good idea to stop going to the park for a while, yeah?'

'Thank you for your advice, Barry. I'll bear it in mind.'

I can't think he'd be quite so cocky if he does know what I'd witnessed.

At home that evening, I review events. Let's face it, I don't know yet if the body in the park is that of the tramp, for all I know he may have only been stunned from the blow and I didn't go and find out, did I? In any case, why would Barry want to kill him? Admittedly they appeared to be

having an argument but that, in itself, is hardly a reason to kill.



Everyone has an Achilles heel; locate it and you have the means to manipulate.

I realise now how little I know about any of my students; they've simply been voids that I try to fill with the requirements of the curriculum. I need to rectify this especially where Barry is concerned.

Mulling things over, I'd bet my salary that the body in the park *is* that of the tramp, it's too much of a coincidence not to be but I can't accept that Barry's attack upon the tramp was simply a random act; perhaps there's something in Barry's background that precipitated such violence. If I'm to manipulate him I need to understand what makes him tick. Just attempting to blackmail him with my knowledge of his crime may not be enough. I need to know which buttons to press.

Barry's personnel file at the college seems the most logical place to start but I know the Principal's secretary, Janet Stevenson, guards all such information with the tenacity of a bulldog so it's not a simple case of merely asking to view the file, she'll undoubtedly demand a detailed explanation of why. Somehow, she must be distracted and removed from the office.

Walking from the college car park the following day I notice some lads hanging about the bicycle sheds and have a 'light bulb' moment. Going straight to Janet's office I inflect genuine concern into my voice.

'Janet, did you come on your bike this morning?' I know that she did, she always does.

'Yes, why?'

'Well, I don't want to worry you but I think some lads are doing something to your bike.'

‘What! The little shits!’ Thrusting back her chair Janet moves with surprising speed considering her immense bulk, such that I have to press myself against the wall to avoid being knocked over as she storms out the door.

Quickly, I open the cabinet drawer. Janet is meticulous in her filing and labelling so locating Barry’s file only takes a few seconds. I scan its contents; the most interesting entry being that against Next of Kin where is entered ‘Foster Parents’. I quickly scribble a note of their address and Barry’s current address and mobile number. There’s no time for anything else, I can hear Janet puffing back down the corridor and hastily make my exit before she returns.

I’m fortunate that today is my slack day for teaching and I’ve the whole of the afternoon free. I spend some time in a quiet corner of the college library with my laptop, devising a brief questionnaire and flyer.

Returning home I study my wardrobe. As a child I always enjoyed dressing up, pretending to be someone else, creating an imaginary world over which I had control. Now, as an adult, I find the skills I practised back then pay dividends. I eventually choose a smart business suit and low heels. The blonde wig and specs complete the picture. Inclining my head in greeting I admire my reflection. It always astonishes me how so little can create such a transformation.

Barry’s address is on the outskirts of town, a little way out in the countryside. I hate this kind of rural driving, finding that I’m holding my breath every time I negotiate a blind bend. I just know that at some point I’m going to encounter a tractor taking up the whole road and will have to back up for miles.

I don’t know what I expect to find but it isn’t the rough looking smallholding in front of me. I can see a few goats, hens and a couple of pigs milling about a large enclosure. The house is a two up, two down farm cottage but without the proverbial roses around the door, chocolate box image.

Glancing up, the roof tiles are moss covered and in places, clumps of grasses poke their heads above the guttering. Heavy rains must cascade over the side, my assumption evidenced by a three feet wide shadow of damp running down the wall to the left of the front door.

The windows, small paned and sash, are blind with grime; it must be like looking out through cataracts, images clouded and indistinct. Wreathed in an air of neglect the cottage strikes me as a shelter of necessity rather than a home. Just looking at it makes me feel depressed.

I coast past in my car a couple of times; there doesn't seem to be anyone about and the lane is equally deserted; the house standing beside the one straight piece of road in an otherwise tortuous and narrow country lane. What shall I do? I can't keep driving backwards and forwards like this, it's ridiculous; oh, but all that muck! I grit my teeth and on the third pass I will myself to turn in at the gate. The car tyres squelch in the cloying mud. For god's sake, I only had this cleaned yesterday!

Pulling up as close to the front door as I'm able in an attempt to walk as short a distance as possible I open the car door and gingerly start to step out when the sound of bird song is shattered by vicious snarls and barks. Two Doberman hurtle toward me from around the side of the building. Christ! I throw myself back into the car as a waft of rancid, warm breath caresses my face just as I slam the door. Jumping up, teeth bared and slobbering on the glass, their attack instinct borders on insanity.

Oh God, where are my keys? I duck down and rummage in the footwell. I can't see or feel them anywhere and then I realise, I must have dropped them outside. The dogs are still frantically jumping up and clawing at the door. I'd like to smash their heads in.

The cottage door opens and a man in his mid-fifties, swarthy and solid-framed, steps out, carrying hunks of raw

meat. 'Hitler! Goering!' He slings the meat over towards the shed and the two dogs vanish as swiftly as they'd arrived.

As he saunters over my skin creeps as though a thousand tiny insects are running over me. He leans down, one hand supporting himself on the roof of my car and motions me to lower the window. I give the briefest shake of my head as I stare wide-eyed into his unrelenting gaze. He dips slightly, reaching down and comes up dangling my keys at the glass. 'If you want to drive out of here, you'd better open the window, luv.' His mouth creases into a sarcastic smirk as his gravelly voice vibrates through the car.

Reluctantly I lower the window a couple of inches and put my hand up for the keys. The man dangles them just beyond my reach, his hand carrying the smell of dead meat, bringing bile up into my throat. 'Not until you tell me why you're here.'

I make a huge effort to swallow and give what I desperately hope is an appealing and conciliatory smile. 'Is this where Barry lives?'

'Who wants to know?'

'I'm from West Park College. He has this address on his personnel file.'

'Then I should think it's a fair bet that this is where he lives, wouldn't you, luv?'

My hackles rise at his sarcasm but I bite my lip.

The man lets out an exasperated sigh, 'Look, luv, this isn't getting us anywhere. Why don't you just step out of the car? I'm not going to hurt you, I promise. The dogs won't bother you while I'm here and *my* bark is definitely worse than my bite.' His face creases into a grin that is mirrored in the crinkles of his eyes; a deceptive yet enticing transformation. He takes a couple of steps back from my car door and holds out his hands in a beckoning stance.

My mind is racing. I can't drive off as he still has my keys and, in any case, to leave having learnt nothing would make the whole escapade futile. Taking a deep breath I treat him