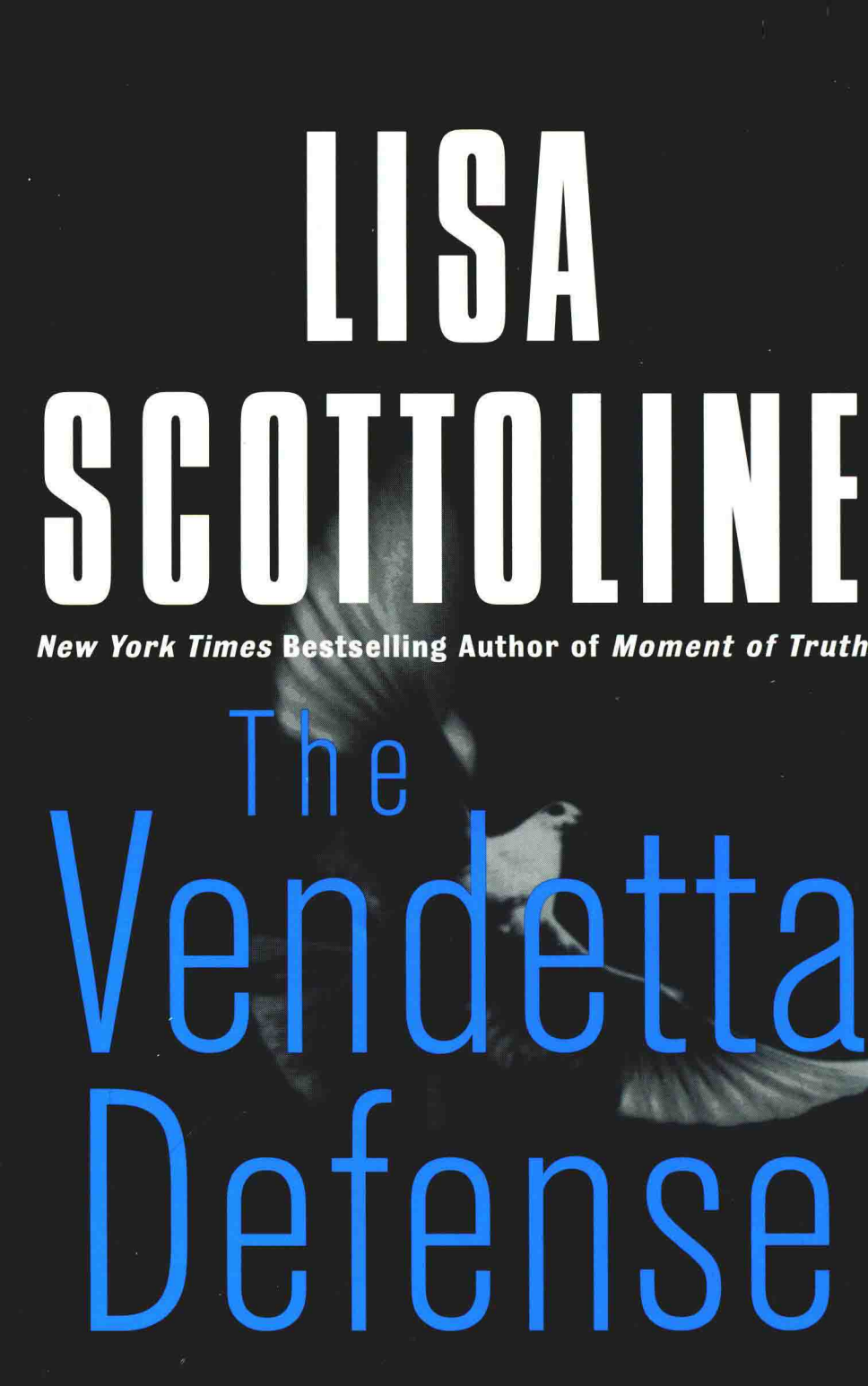
LISA SCOTTOLINE

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Moment of Truth*



The Vendetta Defense

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THE VENDETTA DEFENSE

Also by Lisa Scottoline

Moment of Truth

Mistaken Identity

Rough Justice

Legal Tender

Running from the Law

Final Appeal

Everywhere That Mary Went

To the Honorable Edmund B. Spaeth, Jr.,
who taught me, and all his clerks, about the law,
about justice, and about love.

With eternal thanks, and the biggest hug ever—

Thanks, Judge.

BOOK ONE

The conclusion arrived at then has been and always will be the same until I cease to exist; on the score of integrity there is no assault to be made upon me. My political work may be valued more or less, this way or that, and people may shout me up and howl me down, but in the moral field it is another matter.

—BENITO MUSSOLINI,
My Rise and Fall (1948)

Italians! Here is the national programme of a solidly Italian movement. Revolutionary, because it is opposed to dogma and demogogy; robustly innovating because it rejects preconceived opinions. We prize above everything and everybody the experience of a revolutionary war.

Other problems—bureaucratic, administrative, legal, educational, colonial, etc.—will be dealt with when we have established a ruling class.

—From a June 6, 1919,
program of the Fascist movement

I grandi dolori sono muti.
Great griefs are mute.

—Italian proverb

1

The morning Tony Lucia killed Angelo Coluzzi, he was late to feed his pigeons. As long as Tony had kept pigeons, which was for almost all of his seventy-nine years, he had never been late to feed them, and they began complaining the moment he opened the screen door. Deserting their perches, cawing and cooing, they flew agitated around the cages, their wings pounding against the chicken wire, setting into motion the air in the tiny city loft. It didn't help that the morning had dawned clear and that March blew hard outside. The birds itched to fly.

Tony waved his wrinkled hand to settle them, but his heart wasn't in it. They had a right to their bad manners, and he was a tolerant man. It was okay with him if the birds did only one thing, which was to fly home. They were homers, thirty-seven of them, and it wasn't an easy job they had, to travel to a place they'd never been, a distance in some races of three hundred or four hundred miles, then to navigate their return through skies they'd never flown, over city and country they'd never seen and couldn't possibly know, to flap their way home to a tiny speck in the middle of South Philadelphia, all without even stopping to congratulate themselves for this incredible feat, one that man couldn't even explain, much less accomplish.

There were so many mistakes a bird could make. Circling too long, as if it were a joyride or a training toss. Getting distracted on the way, buffeted by sudden bad weather, or worse, simply getting tired and disoriented—thousands of things could result in the loss of a precious bird. Even once the first bird had made it home, the race wasn't won. Many races had been lost by the bird who wouldn't trap fast enough; the one who was first to reach his loft but who stopped on the roof, dawdling on his way to the

trap, so that his leg band couldn't be slipped off and clocked in before another man's bird.

But Tony's birds trapped fast. He bred them for speed, intelligence, and bravery, through six and even seven generations, and over time the birds had become his life. It wasn't a life for the impatient. It took years, even decades, for Tony to see the results of his breeding choices, and it wasn't until recently that his South Philly loft had attained the best record in his pigeon-racing club.

Suddenly the screen door banged open, blown by a gust of wind, startling Tony and frightening the birds in the first large cage. They took panicky wing, seventeen of them, all white as Communion wafers, transforming their cage into a snowy blizzard of whirring and beating, squawking and calling. Pinfeathers flurried and snagged on the chicken wire. Tony hurried to the loft door, silently reprimanding himself for being so careless. Normally he would have latched the screen behind him—the old door had bowed in the middle, warped with the rain, and wouldn't stay shut without the latch—but this morning, Tony's mind had been on Angelo Coluzzi.

The white pigeons finally took their perches, which were small plywood boxes lining the walls, but in their panic they had displaced each other, violating customary territories and upsetting altogether the pecking order, which led to a final round of fussing. "*Mi dispiace*," Tony whispered to the white birds. *I'm sorry,* in Italian. Though Tony understood English, he preferred Italian. As did his birds, to his mind.

He gazed at the white pigeons, really doves, which he found so beautiful. Large and healthy, the hue of their feathers so pure Tony marveled that only God could make this color. Their pearliness contrasted with the inky roundness of their eye, which looked black but in fact was the deepest of reds, blood-rich. Tony even liked their funny bird-feet, with the flaky red scales and the toe in back with a talon as black as their eyes pretended to be. And he kidded himself into thinking that the doves behaved better than the other birds. More civilized, they seemed aware of how special they were.

The secret reason for the doves' special status was that they were beloved of his son, who had finally stopped Tony from releasing them at weddings for a hundred fifty dollars a pop. Tony had thought it made a good side business; why not make some money to pay for the seed and medicines, plus keep the birds in shape during the off-season? And it made Tony happy to see the

brides, whose hearts lifted at the flock of doves taking off outside the church, since you couldn't throw rice anymore. It reminded his heart of his own wedding day, less grand than theirs, though such things didn't matter when it came to love.

But his son had hated the whole idea. *They're not trained monkeys*, Frank had said. *They're athletes.*

So Tony had relented. *"Mi dispiace,"* he whispered again, this time to his son. But Tony couldn't think about Frank now. It would hurt too much, and he had birds to feed.

He shuffled down the skinny aisle, and his old sneakers, their soles worn flat, made a swishing sound on the whitewash of the plywood floor. The floor had held up okay, unlike the screen door; Tony had built the loft himself when he first came to America from Abruzzo, sixty years ago. The loft measured thirty feet long, with the single door in the middle opening onto a skinny aisle that ran the short length of the building. It occupied all of Tony's backyard, as if the loft and yard were nesting boxes. Off the aisle of the loft were three large chicken wire cages lined with box perches. The aisle ended in a crammed feed room, the seed kept safe from rats in a trash can, and there was a bookshelf holding antibiotics, lice sprays, vitamins, and other supplies, all labels out, in clean white shelves.

Tony prided himself on the neatness of his loft. He dusted the sills, cleaned the windows with the bright blue Windex, and scraped the floor of the cages twice a day, not once. It was important to the health of his birds. He whitewashed the loft interior each spring, before the old bird season; he had done it last week, experiencing a familiar pang—the chalky smell of the whitewash and its brightness reminded him of the white liquid shoe polish he used to paint over the scuffs on Frank's baby shoes, when his son had started to walk. Tony remembered the shoe polish—they didn't make it anymore—he would paint it on the stiff baby shoes with the cotton they gave you, stuck on a stick inside the cap like a white ball of dandelion seeds. Even though it dripped it worked okay.

Tony shook his head, thinking of it now, the chalky smell filling his nose like the fragrance of a rose. The bottle of polish had a blue paper label and a little circle picture of a blond-haired, blue-eyed baby who didn't look anything like baby Frank, with his jet black curls and his big brown eyes. Somehow Tony had the idea that if he painted the watery polish on Frank's baby shoes, his son would look like all the American babies and one day

come to be one, even though Frank had the black hair and no mother. And when it actually happened and Frank grew up to take his place in this country, Tony was just superstitious enough to think that maybe it was the shoe polish.

Tony had to stop thinking about his son, though he couldn't help it, not this morning, of all mornings, and he tried to concentrate on the first cage of doves, appraising with failing eyes their condition. The doves were settling down, roosting again, and they looked good, no big fights during the night. Tony worried about the fights; the birds were territorial and always bickering about something, and the white birds bruised easily. He wanted them to look especially nice and stay healthy. For Frank.

Tony shuffled down the aisle to the second and third cages, which held the multicolored birds, mostly Meulemans with their reddish-brown feathers, and Janssens. There were other breeds in shades of gray and brown, and the common slateys; a slate gray, their eyes generally the same dark brown. Tony liked the nonwhite breeds, too, the ordinariness of their plumage reminding him of himself; he wasn't a flashy man, not a *braggadocio.* He didn't have the strut that some men had, going about like cocks. It had been his ruin, but now that he was old, it didn't matter anymore. It had stopped mattering a long time ago. Sixty years, to be exact.

His thoughts elsewhere, Tony watched the Janssens cooing and stirring without really seeing them. The breed name came from the Janssen family who had bred them, and the other names from the other families who had bred them; Tony had always dreamed that his family would produce its own strain of birds, but he wouldn't name it after himself. He knew who he would name it after, but he didn't get the chance. Many of the best breed stock came from Belgium and France. Italian pigeons also made good racers, but Tony wouldn't have much to do with them, especially the so-called Mussolini birds. Anybody who had lived during Mussolini wouldn't want anything to do with a Mussolini bird. *Chi ha poca vergogna, tutto il mondo è suo.* He who is without shame, all the world is his. *Mussolini* birds!

Tony was an old man with old memories. He wished he could spit on the loft floor, but he didn't want to dirty it. Instead he stood trembling until the anger left him, except for the bitterness in his mouth. Shaken, he idly inspected the Meulemans, and they seemed fine, too. Only Tony had had the terrible morning. An awful morning; the worst he'd had in a long time, but not the

worst he'd had in his life. The worst he'd had in his life was sixty years ago. That morning then, and this morning now. Today. Tony had thought he would feel better after, but he didn't. He felt worse; he had committed an act against God. He knew that his judgment would come in heaven, and he would accept it.

His thoughts were interrupted by the Meulemans, cooing loudly, wanting to be fed, and his dark eyes went, as always, to his favorite bird of all, a Meuleman he had named The Old Man. The Old Man and Tony went back eighteen years; The Old Man was the oldest of Tony's pigeons, and to look at him, Tony wasn't sure who was the Old Man, him or the bird. The Old Man roosted peacefully in his corner perch in the second cage, his strong head held characteristically erect, his eyes clear and alert, and his broad breast a still robust curve covering his feet. Tony remembered the day the chick hatched, an otherwise typical slatey, apparently unremarkable at birth except for his eye sign. Eye sign, or the look in a pigeon's eye, spoke to Tony, and The Old Man's eyes told Tony that the bird would be fast and smart. And he had been the best, in his day.

"Come sta?" Tony asked The Old Man. *How are you?* But The Old Man knew exactly what he meant, and it wasn't, *"How are you?"*

The Old Man regarded the old man for a long time then. Tony couldn't help but feel that the old bird knew what he had done that morning, what had been so important as to keep Tony from feeding his birds on time. The Old Man knew why Tony had to do what he had done, even after all this time. And Tony knew that The Old Man approved.

It was then that Tony heard cars pulling up outside his house and in the alley right behind the loft, on the other side of the cinderblock wall. There was the slamming of heavy car doors, and Tony knew that they were police cars.

He had been expecting them.

But the birds startled at the sudden sound, taking flight in their cages, and even though Tony knew that the police were coming, he felt the hair rise on the back of his neck, as it used to so long ago. He froze beside the cages as the police shouted English words he didn't bother to translate, though he could, then they broke down the old wood door in the backyard wall, one, two, three pushes and it splintered and gave way to their shoulders and they burst into his yard, trampling his basil and tomatoes.

They were coming for him.

Tony didn't run from them, he wouldn't have anyway, but he remembered he had yet to feed his birds. He would have to hurry to finish before the police took him away. He shuffled to the feed room even as he caught sight of the police drawing their black guns silently, pointing instructions to each other, and two of them sneaking to the back door of his house like the cowards they were, little men hiding behind black shirts and shiny badges.

Tony's gut churned with bile, and it struck him with astonishment that the deepest hate could rage like a fire for so many years, never burning itself up.

Dwelling with perfect comfort alongside the deepest love.

2

"Come on, it's lunchtime! Let's go," Judy Carrier heard the other associates saying as they grabbed their light coats and bags. It was the first day of real warmth after a long winter, and evidently spring fever struck lawyers, too. Everybody at the Philadelphia law firm of Rosato & Associates, except Judy, was escaping. She remained at her desk trying to draft an antitrust article, though the sun obliterated the legal citations on her computer screen and the chatter in the hall kept distracting her. It was hard to work when you were eavesdropping.

Suddenly Anne Murphy, who called herself only Murphy, popped her head in Judy's open doorway. She was one of the new associates, her lipsticked lips expertly lined and her dark hair tied back into its typically fashionable knot. "You wanna go to lunch?" she asked.

"No thanks," Judy answered. She usually gave others the benefit of the doubt, but she was hard-pressed to respect women who drew lines around their lips, like coloring books. Judy wore no makeup herself, and a daily shower was her idea of fashionable. "I ate already."

"So what? Come on, you haven't taken lunch in weeks." Murphy smiled in a friendly way, though Judy suspected it was the lipliner. "It's gorgeous out. Walk around with us."

"Can't, thanks. Got an article to do, on the *Simmons* case."

"You can't even take a walk? It's Friday, for God's sake."

"No time for a walk. I really can't," Judy said, knowing that the walk part was bullshit. Murphy didn't walk, she shopped, and shopping made Judy want to kill indiscriminately. What was the matter with these baby lawyers? Judy didn't like any of them. Graduates of the Ally McBeal School of Law, they thought being a lawyer meant wearing skirts that met the legal definition of in-

decent exposure. They weren't serious about the law, which is the only thing Judy *was* serious about. She thought of them as Murphy's Lawyers.

"Oh. Okay. Well, don't work too hard." Murphy gave the white molding a good-bye pat and wisely disappeared, and Judy listened to the familiar sounds of the office emptying out, the gossip trailing off toward the elevator banks. The elevator cabs chimed as they left, bearing lawyers into the sun. Rosato & Associates was a small firm, only nine women lawyers and support staff, and for the next hour or so, whatever telephone calls the receptionist didn't answer would be forwarded to voicemail. E-mail would go unopened, and faxes would wait in gray plastic trays. The office fell silent except for the occasional ringing of telephones, and Judy felt her whole body relax into the midday lull that was a long, deep breath before the afternoon's business began.

She knew she was supposed to feel lonely, but she didn't. She liked being on her own. She sipped coffee from a Styrofoam cup amid federal casebooks, stacks of printed cases, scribbled notes, and correspondence that covered her wooden desk and the desk return on her right. Her office was small, standard issue for midlevel associates at Rosato, but the clutter reduced it to a shoebox. Judy didn't mind. She didn't think of her office as messy, she thought of it as full, and felt very cozy surrounded by all her stuff. Nobody needed a nest more than a lawyer.

Papers, memos, law school texts, novels, and copies of the federal civil and criminal rules filled the bookshelves across from her and the shelves behind her, under the window. Three large file cabinets sat flush against the side wall, their fake-wood counter hidden by twenty thick accordion files from *Moltex* v. *Huartzer*, a massive antitrust case, which was redundant. A tower of potential trial exhibits at the end cabinet threatened daily to topple. Blanketing the walls were dog, horse, and family photos, certificates of court admission and awards Judy had received as law review editor and class salutatorian, and diplomas from Stanford University and Boalt Law School. Judy was the firm's true legal scholar, so her office, while a mess, was a highly scholarly mess.

And her friend Mary wasn't around to nag her about it. Mary DiNunzio had worked with Judy since they had graduated from law school, but she was taking time off from work after their last murder case; since then Judy's nest hadn't felt much like home. She took a reflective sip of coffee, eased back in an ergonomically

correct chair whose cushions stabbed her in the back and shoulders, and crossed her legs, which were strong and shapely but completely bare. In Judy's view, pantyhose was for Republicans, and now that Mary wasn't here, she was getting away with that, too. Judy and Mary disagreed about practically everything, including Murphy's use of lipliner.

On impulse, Judy pulled open her middle drawer and shuffled through ballpoint pens, parti-colored plastic paper clips, and loose change until she found a red pencil she used to edit briefs; then she dug again in the drawer for the mirror Mary had given her. Judy usually used the mirror to check for poppy seeds between her teeth, but now, her red pencil poised, she appraised herself in its large square:

Looking back at her from the mirror was a broad-shouldered young woman whose bright blue dress, yellow T-shirt, and artsy silver earrings made her look out of place against the legal books. Her hair was naturally blond, almost crayon yellow, and hacked off in a straight line at her chin; her face was big and round, reminding her always of a full moon, and her eyes were large and bright blue, as unmade-up as her lips. Her light eyelashes were mascaraless, her nose short and bobbed. An old boyfriend used to tell her she was beautiful, but whenever Judy looked at herself, all she thought was *I look like myself*, which was satisfying.

She puckered up in the mirror. Her lips were in between full and thin, of a normal pink color. Hmmm. Judy raised the red editing pencil close to her lips. The color match was perfect. And she was a good artist. Watching herself in the mirror, Judy took the pencil, moistened the point, and sketched across the top of her lip. The red pigment smelled funny and felt cold but was blunt enough not to scratch, and she drew a light line on her top lip, outlined her lower lip as well, and puckered up again for the mirror.

Not bad. You could see the red penciling, but her mouth looked bigger, which was supposed to be good these days, when lips like hot dogs ruled. The phone started ringing at reception, but Judy ignored it. She smiled at the mirror and looked instantly friendly, in an ersatz-Murphy I-ignore-the-phones sort of way. Apparently you couldn't beat office supplies for makeup. Maybe she should take a Sharpie to her eyelids. Paint her fingernails with Wite-Out. Who said being a lawyer wasn't fun? She set down the pencil, picked up the phone, and punched in a number.

"So how do I look?" Judy asked when Mary picked up.