


LISA SCOTTOLINE

#1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR



*What
Happened
to the
Bennetts*

A NOVEL

“Taut and tense from the first page to the last.”

—Riley Sager

ALSO BY LISA SCOTTOLINE

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After Anna
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Most Wanted
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Come Home
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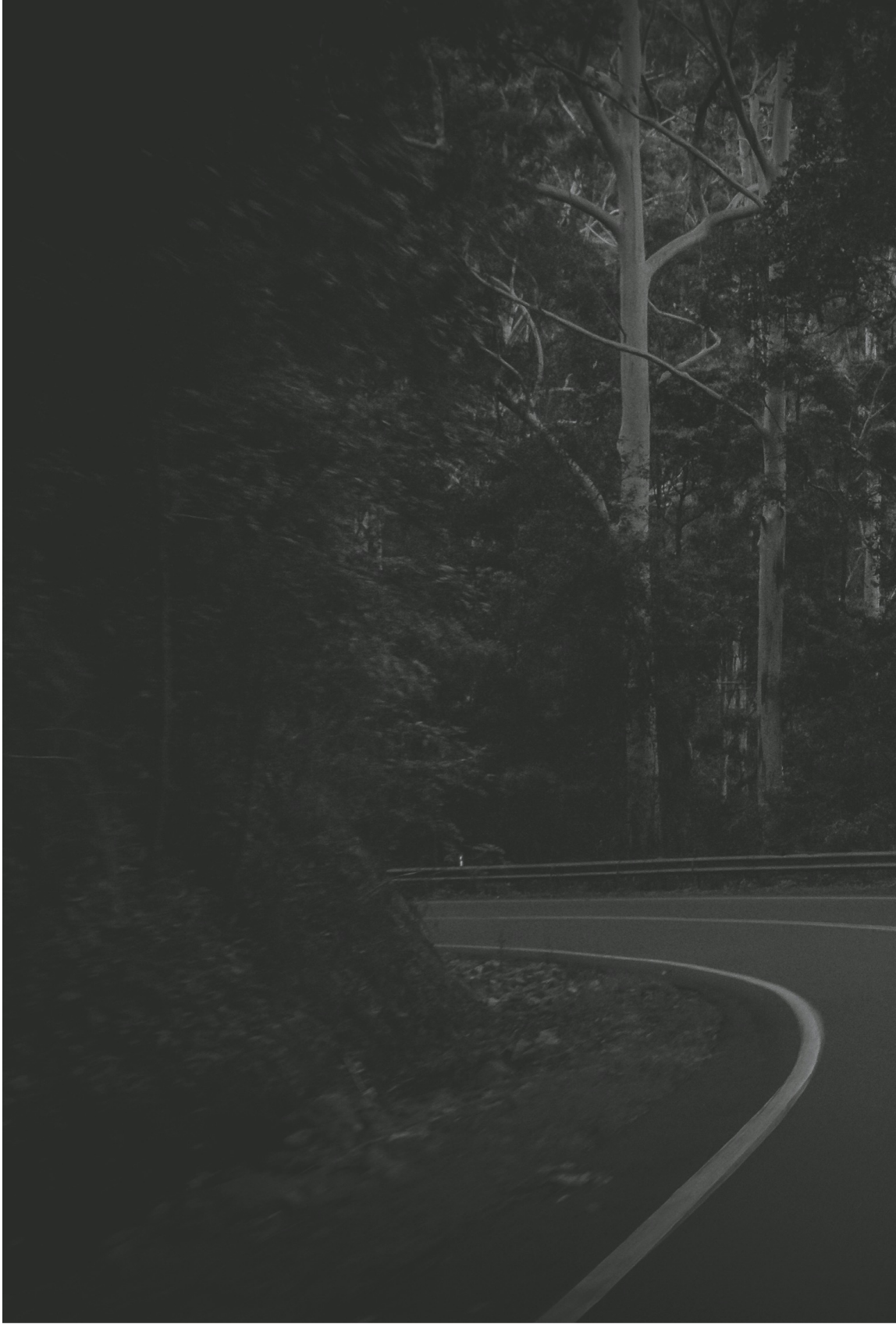
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Have a Nice Guilt Trip
Meet Me at Emotional Baggage Claim
Best Friends, Occasional Enemies
My Nest Isn't Empty, It Just Has More Closet Space
Why My Third Husband Will Be a Dog



WHAT HAPPENED TO THE BENNETTS

LISA SCOTTOLINE

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They're all for Francesca, with lots of love



PART ONE

Nothing good gets away.

—John Steinbeck's letter to his son Thom, 1958

Chapter One

I glanced in my rearview mirror at the pickup truck, which was riding my bumper. I hated tailgaters, especially with my family in the car, but nothing could ruin my good mood. My daughter's field hockey team had just beat Radnor, and Allison had scored a goal. She was texting in the back seat, one of a generation that makes better use of opposable thumbs than any prior.

My son Ethan turned around next to her, shielding his eyes against the pickup's headlights. "Dad, what's up with this guy?"

"God knows. Ignore him."

"Why don't you go faster?" Ethan shifted, waking up Moonie, our little white mutt, who started jumping around in the back seat. I love the dog but he has two speeds: Asleep and Annoying.

"Why should I? I'm going the limit."

"But we can *smoke* this guy now."

We had just gotten a new car, a Mercedes E-Class Sedan in a white enamel that gleamed like dental veneers. Ethan said the E stood for his name, but I said Exorbitant. My wife and kids had lobbied for the car, but I felt like a show-off behind the wheel. I missed my old Explorer, which I didn't need a tie to drive.

"Dad, when I get my license, I'm gonna *burn* guys like him."

I heard this once a week. My son counted the days until his learner's permit, even though he was only thirteen. I said, "No, you're not. You're gonna let him pass."

"Why?"

"We have a right to enjoy the drive."

“But it’s boring.”

“Not to me. I’m a scenic-route kind of guy.” I moved over to let the pickup pass, since Coldstream Road was a single lane winding uphill through the woods. We were entering the Lagersen Tract, the last parcel of woodland preserved by Chester County, where Nature had to be zoned for her own protection.

I lowered the window and breathed in a lungful of fresh, piney air. Thick trees flanked the road, and scrub brush grew over the guardrails. Crickets and tree frogs croaked a chorus from my childhood. I grew up on a dairy farm in Hershey, home of the famous chocolate manufacturer. I loved living in a company town, where the air smelled of sweet cocoa and corporate largesse. Everyone worked toward the same goal, even if it was capitalism.

“He’s not passing us,” Ethan said, bringing me out of my reverie.

I checked the rearview mirror, squinting against the headlights. Moonie was facing backward, his front paws on the back seat and his ears silhouetted like wispy triangles.

“Come on, Dad. Show ’em who’s boss.”

“That’s well-established,” I said. “Mom.”

Lucinda was in the passenger seat, the curve of her smile illuminated by the phone screen. She was a natural beauty, with gray-blue eyes, a small nose, and dark blond hair gathered into a loose ponytail at the nape of her neck. She had been on Facebook since we’d left the school, posting game photos and comments. Great save by Arielle!!! Lady Patriots rock!!! Woohoo, Emily is MVP!!! My wife never uses fewer than three exclamation marks on social. If you only get one, you’ve done something wrong. Or as my father would say, *You’re in the doghouse*.

Lucinda looked over. “Jason, speed up, would you?”

“You, too? What’s the hurry?”

“They have homework.”

“On Friday night? Have you *met* our kids?”

Lucinda smiled, shaking her head. “Whatever, Scenic-Route Kind of Guy.”

“Aw, I feel so *seen*.”

Lucinda laughed, which made me happy. I love my wife. We met at Bucknell, where she was an art major and I was a work-study jock slinging mac and cheese in the dining hall, wearing a hairnet, no less. She could’ve had her pick, but I made her laugh. Also she loves mac and cheese.

“Dad, listen to this.” Allison looked up, her thumbs still flying. She could text without looking at the keyboard, which she called her superpower. “My friends just voted you Hottest Dad.”

I smiled. “They’re absolutely right. There’s a reason I was Homecoming King.”

“Dude, no. Never say that again.” Allison snorted, texting. “We don’t even have that anymore.”

Lucinda rolled her eyes. “Allison, who came in second?”

I added, “Yeah, what troll came in second?”

Allison kept texting. “Brianna M’s dad.”

I scoffed. “Ron McKinney? Please, no contest. I got the bubble butt.”

Allison smiled. “Stop it!”

“I bet I can twerk, Al. Show you when we get home.”

“Nobody twerks anymore.” Allison snorted again, texting away. “OMG, they’re saying you look like Kyle Chandler.”

“Who’s that?”

“The dad from *Friday Night Lights*. We watched it together. You remember. Also the dad in *Bloodline*.”

“What’s that?”

“A show on Netflix.”

“Never saw it.”

“Anyway, you look like him, except he’s way hotter.”

I smiled. “Okay, but can he twerk?”

Allison burst into laughter, and I glanced in the rearview mirror to see her, but the headlights of the pickup truck were too bright. The outline of her head bent over her phone, then I saw the bump of a skinny headband, and the spray of shorter hairs coming from her double ponytail. Those ponytail holders were all over the house, and I fished them from the dog's mouth on a weekly basis.

Ethan kept twisting around. "Dad, if I were driving, I'd speed up."

Allison added, "Seriously."

"Me, too," Lucinda joined in, still on her phone.

"Okay, I'm convinced." I pressed the gas pedal, and the Mercedes responded instantly. We accelerated up the hill, hugging the sharp curve to the left.

Oddly the black pickup truck chose that moment to pass us, a dark and dusty blur roaring by with two men in the cab. It crammed us against the guardrail, and I veered to the right, barely fitting on the street.

Suddenly the pickup pulled in front of us and stopped abruptly, blocking our way.

I slammed on the brakes and we shuddered to a stop, inches from the truck. We lurched forward in our seat belts. Lucinda gasped. Moonie started barking.

"It's okay," I said, instinctively reversing to put distance between us and the truck. I scanned for an escape route, but there wasn't one. I couldn't fit around the truck. I couldn't reverse down the street because of the blind curve.

Two men emerged from the pickup, illuminated by our headlights. The driver was big, with shredded arms covered by tattooed sleeves. His eyes were slits under a prominent forehead and long, dark hair. His passenger wasn't as muscular, but had on a similar dark T-shirt and baggy jeans. The driver said something to him as they approached.

I inhaled to calm myself. If it was road rage, I could defuse the situation. I had a year of law school, so I could bullshit with anybody.

Otherwise I was six foot three, played middle linebacker in high school, and stayed in decent shape.

Lucinda groaned. "Should I call 911?"

"Not yet."

"Dad?" Allison sounded nervous.

"What do they want?" Ethan stuck his head between the seats, and Moonie barked, the harsh sound reverberating in the car.

"Don't worry. Lucinda, lock the doors."

"Okay, but be careful."

I climbed out of the car and closed the door behind me, hearing the reassuring *thunk* of the locks engage. The men reached me, and I straightened. "Gentlemen, is there a—"

"We're taking the car." The driver pulled a handgun and aimed it at my face. "Get everybody out."

"Okay, fine. Relax. Don't hurt anybody. This is my family." I turned to the car and spotted Lucinda's phone glowing through the windshield. She must have been calling 911. The carjackers saw her at the same time.

"Drop it!" The passenger pulled a gun and aimed it at her.

"No, don't shoot!" I moved in the way, raising my arms. "Honey, everybody, out of the car!"

Lucinda lowered the phone, the screen dropping in a blur of light.

Allison emerged from the back seat, her eyes wide. "Dad, they have *guns*."

"It's okay, honey. Come here." I put a hand on her shoulder and maneuvered her behind me. Lucinda was coming around the back of the car with Ethan, who held a barking Moonie, dragging his leash. They reached me, and I faced the men.

"Okay, take the car," I told them, my chest tight.

"Wait." The passenger eyed Allison, and a leering smile spread across his face. "What's your name, sweetheart?"

No. My mouth went dry. "Take the car and go."

Suddenly Moonie leapt from Ethan's arms and launched himself at the men. They jumped back, off-balance. The driver fired an earsplitting blast, just missing Moonie.

My ears rang. I whirled around.

Allison had been struck. Blood spurted from her neck in a gruesome fan. She was reeling.

No! I rushed to her just as she collapsed in my arms. I eased her down to the street. Her mouth gaped open. Her throat emitted gulping sounds. Blood poured from her neck. My hand flew there to stop the flow. The blood felt hideously wet and warm.

Allison's lips were moving. She was trying to talk, to breathe.

"Honey, you've been hit," I told her. "Stay calm." I tore off my shirt, breaking the buttons. I bunched it up and pressed it against her neck. I couldn't see the wound. It scared me to death. "Lucinda, call 911."

"My phone's in the car!" Lucinda grabbed Allison's hand, beginning to sob.

Suddenly the gun fired again behind us, another earsplitting blast.

We crouched in terror. Lucinda screamed. I didn't know who had been shot. I looked around wildly, shocked to find that one carjacker had shot the other. The driver stood over the passenger, who lay motionless on the street, blood pooling under his head. The driver dropped the gun and ran to the pickup. I spotted his license plate before he sped off. A sudden brightness told me another car was coming up Coldstream.

"Dad, here's Allison's phone!" Ethan thrust it at me. My bloody fingers smeared the screen, which came to life with a photo of Moonie in sunglasses.

I thumbed to the phone function and pressed 911. The call connected. I held the phone to my ear to hear over the dog's barking.

The 911 dispatcher asked, "What is your emergency?"

“My daughter’s been shot in the neck. Two men tried to carjack us on Coldstream Road near the turnpike overpass.” I struggled to think through my fear. Allison was making gulping sounds. She was losing blood fast, drenching my shirt. My hands were slick with my daughter’s lifeblood, slipping warm through my fingers.

“Sir, is she awake and responsive?”

“Yes, send an ambulance! Hurry!”

“Apply direct pressure to the wound. Use a compress—”

“I am, please send—”

“An ambulance is on the way.”

“Please! *Hurry!*”

Allison’s eyelids fluttered. She coughed. Pinkish bubbles frothed at the corners of her mouth. “Daddy?”

My heart lurched. She hadn’t called me that since she was little.

I told her what I wanted to believe: “You’re going to be okay.”