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Since We Fell

Written by Dennis Lehane

Published by Little, Brown

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SINCE WE FELL

DENNIS LEHANE



Little, Brown

LITTLE, BROWN

First published in the United States in 2017 by Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins
First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Little, Brown

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

Hardback ISBN 978-1-4087-0833-0
Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-4087-0834-7

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Little, Brown
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

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In memory of David Wickham,
a prince of Providence
and a real cool cat

Masked, I advance.

RENÉ DESCARTES

PROLOGUE

AFTER THE STAIRCASE

On a Tuesday in May, in her thirty-fifth year, Rachel shot her husband dead. He stumbled backward with an odd look of confirmation on his face, as if some part of him had always known she'd do it.

He looked surprised too. She assumed she did as well.

Her mother wouldn't have been surprised.

Her mother, who never married, wrote a famous book on how to stay married. The chapters were named after stages Elizabeth Childs, Ph.D., had identified in any relationship that began in a state of mutual attraction. The book was entitled The Staircase *and became so successful that her mother was convinced (she'd say "coerced") into writing two sequels,* Reclimbing the Staircase *and* Steps of the Staircase: A Workbook, *each of which sold more poorly than the last.*

Privately, her mother thought all three books were "emotionally adolescent snake oil," but she reserved a wistful fondness for The Staircase *because she hadn't been aware, when she was writing it, how little she*

Love.

Which was impossible.

And yet . . .

There was no mistaking it. Wild, helpless, pure. Blooming and splattering in tandem with the blood on his shirt.

He mouthed it, as he often did from the other side of crowded rooms: I. Love. You.

And then he fell off the boat and vanished beneath the dark water.

Two days before, if someone had asked her if she loved her husband, she would have said, "Yes."

Actually, if someone had asked her the same question as she pulled the trigger, she would have said, "Yes."

Her mother had a chapter about that—Chapter 13: "Discordance."

Or was the next chapter—"The Death of the Old Narrative"—more applicable?

Rachel wasn't sure. She got them confused sometimes.

actually knew. She said this to Rachel when Rachel was ten. That same summer, late into her afternoon cocktails, she told her, "A man is the stories he tells about himself, and most of those stories are lies. Never look too closely. If you uncover his lies, it'll humiliate you both. Best to just live with the bullshit."

Then her mother kissed her head. Patted her cheek. Told her she was safe.

Rachel was seven when The Staircase *was published. She remembered the endless phone calls, the flurry of trips, her mother's renewed dependence on smoking, and the desperate, chiseled glamour that overtook her. She remembered a feeling she could barely articulate, that her mother, never happy, grew even more bitter with success. Years later, she'd suspect the reason was because the fame and the money robbed her mother of excuses for her unhappiness. Her mother, brilliant at analyzing the problems of strangers, never had a clue how to diagnose herself. So she spent her life in search of solutions to problems that were born, raised, lived, and died within the boundaries of her own marrow. Rachel didn't know any of that at seven, of course, or even at seventeen. She only knew that her mother was an unhappy woman, so she was an unhappy child.*

When Rachel shot her husband, she was on a boat in Boston Harbor. Her husband remained on his feet for only the briefest of time—seven seconds? ten?—before he fell over the stern and into the water.

But in those final seconds, a catalogue of emotion found his eyes.

There was dismay. Self-pity. Terror. An abandonment so total it took thirty years off his life and turned him into a ten-year-old before her eyes.

Anger, of course. Outrage.

A sudden and fierce determination, as if, even as the blood spilled from his heart and over the hand he'd cupped below it, he'd be okay, he'd be fine, he'd get through this. He was strong, after all, he'd created everything of value in his life by force of will alone and he could will himself out of this.

Then the dawning realization: No, he couldn't.

He looked right at her as the most incomprehensible of emotions staked its claim and subsumed all others:

I

RACHEL IN THE MIRROR

1979–2010

1

SEVENTY-THREE JAMESES

Rachel was born in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. It was known as the Region of the Five Colleges—Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and the University of Massachusetts—and it employed two thousand faculty to teach twenty-five thousand students. She grew up in a world of coffee shops, B&Bs, wide town commons, and clapboard houses with wraparound porches and musky attics. In autumn, leaves fell by the tubful and choked the streets, spilled onto sidewalks, and clogged fence holes. Some winters, snow encased the valley in silence so dense it became its own sound. In July and August, the mail carrier rode a bicycle with a bell on the handlebar, and the tourists arrived for summer stock theater and antiquing.

Her father's name was James. She knew little else about him. She recollected that his hair had been dark and wavy and his smile sudden and unsure. At least twice he'd taken her to a playground

with a dark green slide where the Berkshire clouds hung so low he'd needed to wipe the swing free of condensation before he could place her on it. On one of those trips he'd made her laugh but she couldn't recall how.

James had been an instructor at one of the colleges. She had no idea which one or if he'd been an adjunct, an assistant professor, or an associate on tenure track. She didn't even know if he taught at one of the Five Colleges. He could have been at Berkshire or Springfield Technical, Greenfield CC or Westfield State, or any of a dozen other colleges and junior colleges in the region.

Her mother was teaching at Mount Holyoke when James left them. Rachel was just short of three and could never say with certainty if she'd borne witness to the day her father walked out of the house or if she'd just imagined it to suture the wound his absence left behind. She heard her mother's voice coming through the wall of the small house they'd rented that year on Westbrook Road. *Do you hear me? If you go out that door, I will expunge you.* Shortly thereafter, the bump of a heavy suitcase on the stairs out back followed by the snap of a trunk closing. The rasp and whistle of a cold engine clamoring to life in a small car, then tires crunching winter leaves and frozen dirt followed by . . . silence.

Maybe her mother hadn't believed he'd actually leave. Maybe once he had, she'd assured herself he'd return. When he didn't, her dismay turned to hate and her hate grew depthless.

"He's gone," she said when Rachel was about five and had begun asking persistent questions about his whereabouts. "He wants nothing to do with us. And that's okay, sweetie, because we don't need him to define us." She got down on her knees in front of Rachel and tucked an errant hair behind her ear. "Now we won't speak of him again. Okay?"

But of course Rachel spoke of him and asked about him. At first it exasperated her mother; a wild panic would find her eyes and flare

her nostrils. But eventually the panic was replaced with a strange, tiny smile. So tiny it was barely a smile at all, just a slight uptick of the right side of her mouth that managed to be smug, bitter, and victorious all at the same time.

It would be years before Rachel would see the onset of that smile as her mother's decision (whether conscious or unconscious, she'd never know) to make her father's identity the central battleground in a war that colored Rachel's entire youth.

Her mother promised to tell her James's last name on her sixteenth birthday, provided Rachel showed a level of maturity that would suggest she could handle it. But that summer, just before she turned sixteen, Rachel was arrested in a stolen car with Jarod Marshall, whom she'd promised her mother she was no longer seeing. The next target date was her high school graduation, but after an Ecstasy-related debacle at the semiformal that year, she was lucky to graduate at all. If she went to college then, a community college first to get her grades up, then a "real" one, her mother said, maybe then.

They fought continuously over it. Rachel would scream and break things and her mother's smile would grow colder and smaller. She would repeatedly ask Rachel, "Why?"

Why do you need to know? Why do you need to meet a stranger who's never been a part of your life or your financial security? Shouldn't you first take stock of the parts of you that are bringing you such unhappiness before you journey out into the world to find a man who can offer no answers and bring you no peace?

"Because he's my father!" Rachel screamed more than once.

"He's not your father," her mother said with an air of unctuous sympathy. "He's my sperm donor."

She said that at the tail end of one of their worst fights, the Chernobyl of mother-daughter spats. Rachel slid down the wall of the living room in defeat and whispered, "You're killing me."

"I'm protecting you," her mother said.

Rachel looked up and saw, to her horror, that her mother believed that. Far worse, she defined herself by that belief.

Rachel's junior year in college, while she was in Boston, sitting in Introduction to British Literary Studies Since 1550, her mother blew a red light in Northampton, and her Saab was T-boned by a fuel truck driving the speed limit. At first there was concern that the shell of the fuel truck had been pierced in the accident, but it turned out not to be the case. This was a relief for the fire and rescue crews who came from as far away as Pittsfield: The fuel truck had just topped off and the intersection was in a dense area by both a senior citizens home and a basement-level preschool.

The driver of the fuel truck suffered mild whiplash and tore a ligament in his right knee. Elizabeth Childs, once-famous author, died upon impact. If her national fame had long since subsided, however, her local celebrity still burned bright. Both the *Berkshire Eagle* and the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* ran her obituary on the front page, below the fold, and her funeral was well attended, though the gathering back at the house afterward was less so. Rachel would end up donating most of the food to a local homeless shelter. She spoke to several of her mother's friends, mostly women, and one man, Giles Ellison, who taught poli-sci at Amherst and who, Rachel had long suspected, had been her mother's occasional lover. She could tell her assumption was correct by the way the women paid special attention to him and by how little Giles spoke. A normally gregarious man, he kept parting his lips as if he wished to speak but then changed his mind. He looked around the house like he was drinking it in, as if its contents were familiar and had once brought him comfort. As if they were all he had left of Elizabeth and he was taking stock of the fact he'd never see them, or her, again. He was framed by the parlor window that looked down Old Mill Lane on a drizzly April day and Rachel felt a tremendous pity rise up in her for Giles Ellison, rapidly aging toward retirement