SINCE

I loved you

WE

I hated you

FELL

I never knew you

DENNIS LEHANE

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 actually knew. She said this to Rachel when Rachel was ten. That same summer, late into her af-

ternoon 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:

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.

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 and obsolescence. He'd expected to go through that rite of passage with an acerbic lioness by his side, but now he'd go through it alone. It was unlikely he'd find another partner as radiant with intelligence and rage as Elizabeth Childs.

And she had been radiant in her own officious, acerbic way. She didn't enter rooms, she swept into them. She didn't engage friends and colleagues, she gathered them to her. She never napped, rarely seemed tired, and no one could ever remember her falling ill. When Elizabeth Childs left a room, you felt it, even if you'd arrived after she'd gone. When Elizabeth Childs left the world, it felt the same way.

It surprised Rachel to realize just how little she was prepared for the loss of her mother. She had been a lot of things, most of them not positive in her daughter's opinion, but she had always been so utterly there. And now she was so utterly—and so violently—gone.

But still the old question persisted. And Rachel's clear access to the answer had died with her mother. Elizabeth may have been unwilling to provide that answer, but she had unquestionably been in possession of it. Now, possibly no one was.

However well Giles and her friends and agent and publisher and editor had known Elizabeth Childs—and they all seemed to know a version of her that differed slightly but crucially from the woman Rachel had known—none of them had known her longer than Rachel's lifespan.

"I wish I knew anything about James," Ann Marie McCarron, Elizabeth's oldest friend in the area, told Rachel once they were sufficiently lubricated for Rachel to broach the subject of her father, "but the first time I ever went out with your mother was months after they broke up. I remember he taught in Connecticut."

"Connecticut?" They sat on the three-season porch at the back of the house, just twenty-two miles due north of the Connecticut border, and somehow it had never occurred to Rachel that her father could just as easily have taught not at one of the Five Colleges or the fifteen other colleges on the Massachusetts side of the Berkshires but just half an hour south in Connecticut.

"University of Hartford?" she asked Ann Marie.

Ann Marie pooched her lips and nose at the same time. "I don't know. Could be." Ann Marie put her arm around her. "I wish I could help. And I wish you'd let it go too."

"Why?" Rachel said (the eternal why, as she'd come to think of it). "Was he that bad?"

"I never heard he was bad," Ann Marie said with a minor slur and a sad grimace. She looked out through the screen at the stone-colored mist in the gray hills and spoke with a firm finality. "Honey, I only heard that he'd moved on."

Her mother left everything to her in her will. It was less than Rachel would have imagined but more than she needed at twenty-one. If she lived frugally and invested wisely, she could conceivably live off her inheritance for ten years.

She found her mother's two yearbooks in a locked drawer in her office—North Adams High School and Smith College. She'd received her master's and Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins (at twenty-nine, Rachel realized, Jesus), but the only record of that was the framed diplomas on the wall by the fireplace. She went through the yearbooks three times, forcing a snail's pace upon herself each time. She found, in total, four pictures of her mother, two formal, two as part of a group. In the Smith yearbook she found no students named James because it was an all-girls school, but she did find two faculty members, neither of whom was the

right age or had black hair. In the North Adams High School yearbook, she found six boys named James, two of whom could have been him—James McGuire and James Quinlan. It took her half an hour at the South Hadley Library computer to ascertain that James McGuire of North Adams had been paralyzed in a whitewater rafting accident while still in college; James Quinlan had majored in business administration at Wake Forest University and rarely left North Carolina, where he'd built a successful chain of teak furniture stores.

The summer before she sold the house, she visited Berkshire Security Associates and met with Brian Delacroix, a private investigator. He was only a few years older than she was and carried himself with the rangy ease of a jogger. They met in his second-story office suite in an industrial park in Chicopee. It was a shoebox of an office, just Brian and a desk, two computers, and a row of file cabinets. When she asked where the "associates" in the firm name were, Brian explained that he was that associate. The main offices were in Worcester. His Chicopee satellite was a franchise opportunity and he was just starting out. He offered to refer her to a more seasoned operative, but she really didn't feel like climbing back in her car and schlepping all the way to Worcester, so she rolled the dice and told him why she'd come. Brian asked a few questions and wrote on a yellow legal pad and met her eyes often enough for her to feel a simple tenderness in his that seemed older than his years. He struck her as earnest and new enough at the business to still be honest, an opinion he validated two days later when he advised her not to hire him or anyone else for that matter. Brian told her he could take her case and probably bill her for at least forty hours of work before he came back with the same opinion he was offering now.

"You don't have enough information to find this guy."

"That's why I'm hiring you."

He shifted in his chair. "I did a little digging since our first meeting. Nothing big, nothing I'll charge you for—"

"I'll pay."

"—but enough. If he was named Trevor or even, heck, Zachary, we might have a chance of tracking down a guy who taught at one of over two dozen institutions of higher learning in Massachusetts or Connecticut twenty years ago. But, Miss

Childs, I ran a quick computer analysis for you and in the last twenty years, at the twenty-seven schools I identified as possibles, there have been seventy-three"—he nodded at her shocked reaction—"adjunct, fill-in, assistant, associate, and full professors named James. Some have lasted a semester, some less, and some have gone the other way and attained tenure."

"Can you get employment records, pictures in the files?"

"I'm sure for some, maybe half. But if he's not in that half—and how would you even identify him?—then we'd have to track down the other thirty-five Jameses who, if demographic trends in this country are an indicator, are flung across all fifty states, and find a way to get their pictures from twenty years ago. Then I wouldn't be charging you for forty hours' work. I'd be charging for four hundred. And still no guarantee we'd find this guy."

She worked through her reactions—anxiety, rage, helplessness, which produced more rage, and finally stubborn anger at this prick for not wanting to do his job. Fine, she'd find someone who would.

He read that in her eyes and the way she gathered her purse to herself.

"If you go to someone else and they see you, a young woman who recently came into some money, they will milk you for that money and still come up empty. And that larceny, which is what it will be in my opinion, will be perfectly legal. Then you'll be poor and fatherless." He leaned forward and spoke softly. "Where were you born?"

She tilted her head toward the south-facing window. "Springfield."

"Is there a hospital record?"

She nodded. "Father is listed as UNK."

"But they were together then, Elizabeth and James."

Another nod. "Once when she'd had a few drinks, she told me that the night she went into labor they were fighting and he was out of town. She had me and, because he wasn't there, she refused to list him on the record out of spite."

They sat in silence until she said, "So you won't take my case?"

Brian Delacroix shook his head. "Let him go."

She stood, her forearms quaking, and thanked him for his time.

She found photographs stashed all around the house—the nightstand in her mother's bedroom, a box in the attic, filling a drawer in her mother's office. A good eighty-five percent of them were of the two of them. Rachel was struck by how clearly love for her shone in her mother's pale eyes, though, true to form, even in pictures, her mother's love looked complicated, as if she were in the process of reconsidering it. The other fifteen percent of the pictures were of friends and colleagues in academia and publishing, most taken at holiday cocktail parties and early summer cookouts, two at a bar with people Rachel didn't recognize but who were clearly academics.

None contained a man with dark wavy hair and an uncertain smile.

She found her mother's journals when she sold the house. She'd graduated from Emerson by that point and was leaving Massachusetts for graduate school in New York City. The old Victorian in South Hadley where she and her mother had lived since Rachel was in third grade contained few good memories and had always felt haunted. ("But they're faculty ghosts," her mother would say when the unexplained creak snaked out from the far end of a hallway or something thumped in the attic. "Probably up there reading Chaucer and sipping herbal tea.")

The journals weren't in the attic. They were in a trunk in the basement underneath carelessly packed foreign editions of The Staircase. They filled lined composition notebooks, the entries as haphazard as her mother had been ordered in her daily life. Half were undated, and her mother could go months, once even a year, without writing. She wrote most often about fear. Prior to The Staircase, the fear was financial—she'd never make enough as a professor of psychology to pay back her student loans, let alone send her daughter to a decent private high school and on to a decent college. After her book landed on the national bestseller lists, she feared she'd never write a worthwhile follow-up. She feared too that she would be called out for wearing the emperor's new clothes, for perpetrating a con job that would be discerned when she published again. It turned out to be a prophetic fear.

But mostly she feared for Rachel. Rachel watched herself grow in the pages from a rambunctious, joyful, occasionally irritating source of pride ("She has his appetite for play . . . Her heart's so lovely and generous that I'm terrified what the world will do to it . . .") to a despairing and self-destructive malcontent ("The cutting troubles me a bit less than the promiscuity; she's only thirteen for Christ's

sake . . . She leaps into dark waters and then complains about the depth but blames me for the leaping").

Fifteen pages later, she came upon "I have to face the shame of it—I've been a subpar mother. I never had any patience for the underdeveloped frontal lobe. I snap too much, cut to the chase when I should model patience. She grew up with a brusque reductionist, I'm afraid. And no father. And it put a hole at the center of her."

A few pages later, her mother returned to the theme. "I worry she'll waste her life searching out things to fill the hole, transitory things, soul-baubles, new age therapies, self-medication. She thinks she's rebellious and resilient, but she's only one of those things. She needs so much."

A few pages later, in an undated entry, Elizabeth Childs wrote, "She is laid up right now, sick in a strange bed, and even needier than usual. The persistent question returns: Who is he, Mother? She looks so frail—brittle and mawkish and frail. She is a lot of wonderful things, my dearest Rachel, but she is not strong. If I tell her who James is, she'll search him out. He'll shatter her heart. And why should I give him that power? After all this time, why should he be allowed to hurt her again? To fuck with that beautiful, battered heart of hers? I saw him today."

Rachel, sitting on the second-to-last step of the basement staircase, held her breath. She squeezed the edges of the journal and her vision shimmied.

I saw him today.

"He never saw me. I parked up the street. He was on the lawn of the house he found after he abandoned us. And they were with him—the replacement wife, the replacement children. He's lost a lot of his hair and grown spongy above the belt line and below the chin. Small comfort. He's happy. God help me. He's happy. And isn't that the worst of all possible outcomes? I don't even believe in happiness—not as an ideal or as an authentic state of being; it's a child's goal—and yet, he is happy. He'd feel that happiness threatened by this daughter he never wanted and wanted even less once she was born. Because she reminded him of me. Of how much he grew to loathe me. And he would hurt her. I was the one person in his life who refused to adore him and he'd never forgive Rachel for that. He'd assume I told her unflattering things about him, and James, as we all

know, could never abide criticism of his precious, earnest self."

Rachel had been bedridden only once in her life—freshman year of high school. She'd contracted mononucleosis just as she was heading into Christmas break. The timing turned out to be fortuitous. It took her thirteen days to get out of bed and five more to regain the strength to return to school. In the end, she missed only three days of classes.

But that would have been the window when her mother saw James. Which was also when her mother was a visiting professor at Wesleyan. She'd rented a house in Middletown, Connecticut, that year and that was the "strange bed" Rachel had been confined to. Her mother, she recalled now with a disconcerted pride, had never left her during the illness except one time, to get groceries and wine. Rachel had just started watching Pretty Woman on VHS and was still watching it when her mother returned. Her mother checked her temperature and opined that she found Julia Roberts's toothy grin "cosmically grating," before she brought the grocery bags into the kitchen to unload them.

When she returned to the bedroom, glass of wine in one hand, warm, wet facecloth in the other, she gave Rachel a lonesome, hopeful look and said, "We did okay, didn't we?"

Rachel looked up at her as she laid the facecloth across her forehead. "Of course we did," she said because, in that moment, it felt like they had.

Her mother patted her cheek, looked at the TV. It was the end of the movie. Prince Charming, Richard Gere, showed up with flowers to rescue his Hooker Princess, Julia. He thrust the flowers forward, Julia laughed and teared up, the music boomed in the background.

Her mother said, "I mean, enough with the smiling already."

That put the entry of the diary at December 1992. Or early January 1993. Eight years later, sitting on the basement steps, Rachel realized her father had been living somewhere within a thirty-mile radius of Middletown. Couldn't be any more. Her mother had visited the street where he lived, observed him with his family, and then picked up groceries and stopped off at the liquor store for wine in under two hours. That meant James was teaching somewhere nearby, most likely at the University of Hartford.

"If he was still teaching by that point," Brian Delacroix said when she called him.

"True."

But Brian agreed that there was enough to go on now so that he could take her case and her money and still look himself in the mirror in the morning. So in the late summer of 2001, Brian Delacroix and Berkshire Security Associates launched an investigation into the identity of her father.

And came up with nothing.

No one by the name of James taught in higher education in northern Connecticut that year who wasn't already well accounted for. One had blond hair, one was African American, and the third was twenty-seven years old.

Once again, Rachel was told to let it go.

"I'm leaving," Brian said.

"Chicopee?"

"The business. So, yeah, Chicopee too, but I just don't want to be a private investigator. It's too grim, you know? All I seem to do is disappoint people, even when I deliver what they paid me to find. I'm sorry I couldn't help you, Rachel."

It hollowed out something in her. Another departure. Another person in her life, however minor of impact, who would leave whether she wanted it to happen or not. She had no say.

"What're you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm gonna go back to Canada, I think." His voice sounded strong, as if he'd arrived someplace he'd been meaning to arrive his whole life.

"You're Canadian?"

He chuckled softly. "Sure am."

"What's back there?"

"Family lumber business. How's things with you?"

"Grad school is great. New York right now," she said, "less so."

It was late September 2001, less than three weeks after the towers fell.

"Of course," he said gravely. "Of course. I hope things look up for you. I wish you good things, Rachel."

She was surprised how intimate her name sounded when it fell from his tongue. She pictured his eyes, the tenderness there, and was mildly annoyed to realize she'd been attracted to him and had failed to acknowledge it when it could have mattered.

"Canada," she said, "eh?"

That soft chuckle of his. "Canada."

They said their good-byes.

In her basement apartment on Waverly Place in Greenwich Village, easy walking distance to most of her classes at NYU, she sat in the soot and ash of lower Manhattan in the month after 9/11. The day of the attack, a thick dust grew woolen on her windowsills, the dust of hair and pieces of bone and cells piling up like a light snow. The air smelled burnt. In the afternoon, she wandered, ended up walking past St. Vincent's ER, where gurneys were lined up for patients who never arrived. In the days that followed, pictures began to appear on the walls and fences of the hospital, most often with a simple message—"Have You Seen This Person?"

No, she hadn't. They were gone.

She was surrounded by loss so much greater than any she'd experienced in her own life. Everywhere she turned she saw grief and unanswered prayers and a bedrock chaos that took so many forms—sexual, emotional, psychological, moral—that it quickly became the thread and thrum that united them all.

We are all lost, Rachel realized, and resolved to bandage her own wound as best she could and never pick at the scab again.

That autumn, she came across two sentences in one of her mother's journals that she repeated to herself as a mantra every night for weeks before going to bed.

James, her mother wrote, was never meant for us.

And we were never meant for him.