

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF MYSTIC RIVER

DENNIS LEHANE



"LEHANE DELIVERS BIG TIME." *Wall Street Journal*

GONE, BABY, GONE

**DENNIS
LEHANE**

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 HarperCollins e-books

To my sister, Maureen, and my brothers, Michael,

Thomas, and Gerard:

Thanks for standing by me and

putting up with me.

It couldn't have been easy.

And to

JCP

Who never stood a chance.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Anyone familiar with Boston, Dorchester, South Boston, and Quincy, as well as both the Quincy quarries and the Blue Hills Reservation, will realize that I have taken enormous liberties in describing their geographical and topographical particulars. This was wholly intentional. While these cities, towns, and areas do exist, they have been altered according to the demands of story, as well as my own whims, and therefore should be regarded as entirely fictitious. Further, any similarities between the characters and events in this narrative and real persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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The Mother and Child Reunion, as the headline of the...

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Port Mesa, Texas

October 1998

Long before the sun finds the Gulf, the fishing boats set out into the dark. Shrimpers mostly, an occasional pursuer of marlin or tarpon, the boats are filled almost exclusively with men. The few women who do work the shrimpers keep mostly to themselves. This is the Texas coast, and because so many men have died hard over two centuries of fishing, their offspring and surviving friends feel they've earned their prejudices, their hatred of the Vietnamese competitors, their mistrust of any woman who'd do this ugly work, fumble in the dark with thick cable and hooks that slice through knuckles.

Women, one fisherman says in the black predawn, as the captain cuts the trawler engine to a low rumble and the slate sea roils, should be like Rachel. That's a woman.

That's a woman, all right, another fisherman says. Goddamn, yes, sir.

Rachel is relatively new to Port Mesa. Showed up back in July with her little boy and a battered Dodge pickup, rented a small house on the north side of town, took the HELP WANTED sign out of the window of Crockett's Last Stand, a wharf bar perched atop ancient pilings that sag toward the sea.

Took months before anyone even learned her last name: Smith.

Port Mesa attracts a lot of Smiths. A few Does, too. Half the shrimpers are manned by men running from something. Sleeping when most of the world is awake, working while most of it sleeps, drinking the rest of the time in bars few strangers feel comfortable entering, they follow the catch and the seasons, work as far west as Baja, as far south as Key West, and they get paid in cash.

Dalton Voy, owner of Crockett's Last Stand, pays Rachel Smith in cash. Would pay her in gold ingots if she wanted. Ever since she took her place behind the bar, business has jumped twenty percent. Strange as it is, there are fewer fights, too. Usually the men step off the boats with the sun baked straight through their flesh and into their blood, and it makes them irritable, quick to end a discussion with the swing of a bottle, the snap of a pool stick. And when beautiful women are around, in Dalton's experience—well, it just makes the men worse. Quicker to laugh, but quicker to take offense.

Something about Rachel, though, calms the men.

Warns them, too.

It's in her eyes—a quick something that flashes mean and cold when someone steps over the line, touches her wrist too long, makes a sex joke that isn't funny. And it's in her face, the lines etched there, the weathered beauty of it, the sense of a life lived before Port Mesa that knew more dark dawns and hard facts than most of the shrimpers.

Rachel packs a gun in her purse. Dalton Voy saw it once by accident, and the only thing that surprised him about it was that it didn't surprise him at all. Somehow he'd known. Somehow everyone else did, too. No one ever approaches Rachel in the parking lot after work, tries to talk her into his car. No one follows her home.

But when that hard thing isn't in her eyes, and that distance has left her face, man, she lights the place up. She moves up and down that bar like a dancer; every twist and pivot, every tilt of a bottle is smooth and fluid. When she laughs it opens her mouth wide and explodes in her eyes, and