**Prologue**

**Clare**

It haunts me, this question of guilt. Of responsibility and sin. I see pictures of missing children online and it strikes me that everyone carries out a fully formed, entirely separate existence, with all the intricacies and complexities of my own. Broken backs. Missing limbs. Muscles feeding on themselves. Systems collapsing inwards. Maybe my lot isn’t so bad after all. I wake up and shake off the clod and ask the universe: who is to blame? And the universe tells me: nothing is your fault, and you have no cross left to carry. Go back to sleep.

I spend hours rearranging the food in the fridge. The cheese feels out of place above the chicken but doesn’t belong next to the milk. I toy with the idea of apples next to broccoli, then rest the eggs by the yoghurts, then take the apples out again, removing the tomatoes from their packaging and placing them by the broccoli instead. My coffee grows cold and there are still papers under pillows and if I leave the door open any longer the food will go off anyway. I conclude that I’ve been productive nonetheless and, in the end, everything in the fridge is back where it started.

Some nights, I have a dream in which I am neither dead nor alive. I lie in a hospital bed, legs parted and raised. There is screaming, and as the rhythmic *tap* of blood on the bed sheets aligns with the ticking of the clock, I come to realise that the screams are my own. The blood begins to pour out in great streams, and I am haemorrhaging.  He cleaves me from orifice to orifice, crossing the threshold in a great sundering, and I know two things to be true:

1. This is certainly *my* son.
2. I am no longer to blame.

*Part One*

**Caleb**

*A Beginning:*

**HUSBAND, WIFE, SON** *and* **DAUGHTER** *sit at a dining room table laden with food.[[1]](#footnote-1) Beneath their feet, a Persian rug. To the left, a free-standing door with a small stained-glass window. This is the front door. To the right, a wooden door with chipped paint, peeling. Where possible, the front door should be lit in such a way that sends the colours of the stained-glass wheeling out across the stage at odd, eccentric angles. The kitchen door should remain closed.*

*The* **HUSBAND**, **WIFE** *and* **DAUGHTER** *eat their food voraciously, almost grotesquely, creating a mess of dishes and skin and chicken bones. An improvised belch may be appropriate if a darkly humorous tone is intended. As the audience file in, the three eaters greet them, waving, smiling, as though inviting an old friend in for dinner.*

*A lone spotlight should make it apparent that, whilst the other characters indulge in their feast, the* **SON** *eats nothing at all.*

**Clare**

Many years ago, when I was still a nurse, Caleb and I had taken a trip to a remote little village in Sicily. We had gone, in part, for leisure, and, in another part, for lemons. His grandmother (God rest her soul) had been Italian and was apparently very well known for her lemon tarts. Caleb, being the pragmatist he was, insisted that we recreate her recipe using lemons from the orchard she had planted as a girl.

A sort of pilgrimage, if you’d like.

Evangeline was still an infant at that point, and the journey had not been easy. She slept little, and to make matters worse, Caleb seemed completely disinterested in his role as a father. As I recall, he slept through the entire ferry ride from the Italian mainland. As he recalls, the motion of the boat made him nauseous, and he needed time to recover. Either way, he slept. Eva did not. Neither did I. In those days, I dreamt of a quiet child. A nice, quiet, gentle child. Gentle husband. I dreamt of wine and cheese.

When we arrived, there were no lemons. The baby slept in a drawer in the bedroom, and the lemon trees were barren.

One of the younger gardeners explained to us that an unprecedentedly cold winter had brought on a frost that struck the orchard. None of the lemon trees in the grove survived. No lemons; no lemon tarts. We returned to Surrey empty handed.

It wasn’t until I became pregnant again that we went back. At the beginning of my pregnancy, I’d been visited by all of the normal cravings: alcohol, red meat, cigarettes. The familiar demons that haunt mothers-to-be, the kind that current mothers might give in to when pregnant with their second child. But with those demons came an unfamiliar, undeniable want for lemons. For lemon tarts. A sweet, gnawing, acidic need.

The ferry ride was pleasant the second time around. Caleb took Eva out onto the deck to count the boats in the marina. They both sang me to sleep, heads on belly. Gentle child. Gentle children. Gentle husband.

In the orchard, the grove of lemon trees had almost doubled in size. Imagine that! Each branch bursting with the most perfectly ripe Sicilian lemons! Eva transported them in great swathes to the kitchen, set off balance by the weight, until the space between her arms was nothing but yellow. Caleb spent the afternoon baking batch after batch of his grandmother’s tarts. I watched and rested. Dappled sunlight through the curtains. Jude was both there and not there.

The taste of citrus juice. The warmth of tarts. More lemons than you’d know what to do with.

When Jude was born, we planted a lemon tree in the garden. Pathetic thing. Gives us fifteen, maybe twenty lemons a year.

They’re bitter, though, and waxy, and tough.

**Robbie**

I’m sitting on the edge of the pitch, by the top of the spray-painted track lines, when he comes over, more waltz than walk, to ask if I have a bottle of water. A large one, please. He makes a gesture with his hands.

“I don’t,” I say. “Sorry.”

He puts his fists on his hips and sucks through his teeth. The afternoon is foggy. The sky grey-blue. In the middle of the field, our classmates are practicing football drills.

“I might have a thing of squash in my bag. But that’s back in the changing rooms.’

“Won’t do. S’okay. No worries.”

He sits next to me and starts tearing grass from the soil, dropping the blades in a pile on his lap. A whistle blows and the drill changes.

“Why are you over here?”

I wiggle my leg and point to the black boot around my foot.

He nods. Pulls his socks up. Pulls the sleeves of his blazer down. Looks anywhere but the football pitch.

“You?”

“No kit.” He spins the woven bracelet on his wrist. “What can you do?”

“I thought your group were swimming today.”

“No trunks, then.” He gets to his feet and stretches, brushing the grass from his legs. The fabric ripples in the breeze and he hikes his trousers up to his waist.

“Mr. Garver usually makes me swim in my boxers,” I say.

“Mr. Garver’s a nonce.”

I go for his shin with my good foot. He feigns injury and drops to a squat, leaning back on his heels. He taps on my boot. “Can I sign it?”

“It’s not a cast, knobhead.”

He carries on pulling grass, this time piling it in a little mound by his feet. He plants a long blade on top, upright, like a flag. The drills have stopped, and a match has started. The outliers hover at the edge of the football pitch like specks of dust caught in a sunbeam. Rain hits the rim of my glasses, bouncing off. He opens his mouth and catches a few drops.

Amongst the players, I spot at least three in their school uniform.

I next see him just before the end of the day. The bell isn’t set to ring for another half an hour and the rain falls fast and strong outside. My boot pulls against the carpet as I turn the corner of the corridor.

He’s bent over the water fountain, contorted; back arched, neck craned, one arm on the lever and the other under his stomach. He takes desperate swigs, sucking the water out of the air like a baby bird taking food. His hips are pressed against the metal basin and it’s hard to determine where the fountain ends and his body begins. The stream stops for a moment and he gulps for air. There’s the summer rain on the concrete and the rasping breath and the low frequency hum of a machine in some far-off cupboard.

“Thirsty?”

He jerks upwards and his knee catches the edge of the basin. He laughs, turns, uncoils.

“Gasping.”

There’s a wobble in his voice and he belches. I wonder if he’s going to vomit.

“I take it you didn’t find any water,” I say.

“What are you, Poirot? Your foot going blue?”

I unsling my rucksack and rummage inside. “More of a greeny-yellow. I’ll show you some time, if you’d like.”

“It’s a date,” he says.

My hand meets plastic and I throw him a bottle half-filled with orange squash. He lifts it and swigs it in one smooth, practiced motion. I’m almost impressed.

The light in the corridor catches his earrings as he turns back to the fountain. He belches again.

“You off back to lesson?”

Once the bottle is full, he lifts his head and necks the contents without taking a single breath. Half a litre and no pause. When the bottle is empty, he puts it back to the mouth of the fountain and shakes his head.

“I leave early on Wednesdays. Can I keep this?”

I nod, unsure of what to say. I stare at his red face and watch the way his throat contracts as he drinks.

He picks up his bag from the floor and bounces off towards the front entrance in that easy way that he does. He smells of lemons and sweat.

“Cheers, Robbie.”

I say, “See you tomorrow, Jude.” But there’s already a bottle in his mouth, and water in his throat, and he doesn’t hear me.

**Evangeline**

*first, the smell of lemons*

*too-ripe in the summertime*

*my back to the door. the door open*

*Who’s there?*

*then, the reek*

*of* *decay –*

*I don’t need to turn around to know*

**Clare**

I like to consider myself a patient person. Once, in my twenties, I waited an entire hour for a flat viewing in Guildford. It was near Christmastime. This was, of course, my first independent venture, and I placed a lot of importance on what that represented. The metaphorical value of it all. I suppose I thought that my perseverance would somehow translate to a higher chance of securing the flat. As if someone would miraculously see me, waiting, and think, *God*, *she’s got what it takes to rent.*

     Turns out the subletters had just completely forgotten I was coming. But what I came to realise, standing out there in the snow, was that it didn’t matter if anyone saw. Didn’t even matter if I got the bloody flat. For the first time in my life, I saw my resolve. Frostbite and resolve. I think, in the end, they leased it to a sad little couple from Guernsey, or the Isle of Wight, or somewhere godless like that.

     Jude yawns.

     The waiting room is quieter than usual. The Rake-Thin-Girl assumes her usual position. As always, she is sitting on the farthest chair on the farthest row, head down, scrolling mindlessly through some social media or other.

On one sofa, a man sits with his son. They’re both gentle-looking, unassuming. Slightly too big. I’ve not seen them before. The young boy flicks through a comic book, one of those generic stories that sits in a box in the corner under a pile of teen magazines, never to be changed out. The fat around his hands makes the distinction between his knuckle and finger almost non-existent. Every now and then, his eyes wander towards Jude, then back down to his comic. The father rests his head on the wall, eyes closed. He has the apathetic staunchness of someone who takes themselves too seriously, but who doesn’t concern themselves with others. A politician, perhaps, or a solicitor. His son appears to be the same age as Jude, but there are certain mannerisms, tongue hanging as he reads, the occasional open-mouthed cough, that makes me think he’s younger. I wonder how many times they’ve been here. If, maybe, they’ve been coming longer than us, and our schedules have just always been slightly misaligned. Perhaps this is their first time. No. The boy seems much too comfortable for that. Too familiar with the routine. I think about asking, but this is never the place for idle conversation.

     Jude starts to tap his fingers on the chair. I glance up at the clock. Twelve minutes late. I take a deep breath, fixate on a peeling stretch of wallpaper. There are no posters. No half-hearted motivational one-liners. I appreciate that about this place. It’s feeble, sickly. But it’s trying. There are sofas. There are comic books. There is faint light on five people.

     Eventually, as though willed into existence, the clacking comes. Heels down a corridor. She appears in the doorway, armed with a clipboard. She says nothing, as expected. She just smiles that thin, pitying smile, and Jude stands.

— Do you want me today, too?

     Jude’s already halfway down the corridor. She tilts her head. Not quite a nod.

— If you’d like, Mum.

     My fist doesn’t ball up, not fully. With a click, she spins on her heels, and she’s away before I can stand.

**The Letter on the Desk**



Xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxx xxxxxxx

Xxxxxx xxxxxx xxx xxxxxxxxx

Xxxxxxxxxxx  xxxxxxxxxx

06 Jun 2017 xxxxxxxxxx

Xxx xxx

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

xxxxxxx

xxxxxxxx

xxxxxxx

Dear Mr x x xxxxxxxx

I have now got the results of your latest xxxxx xxxxx. I am xxxxxxx to say that these were all xxxxxx, showing that your  xxxxx xxxxxxx level was xxxxxxx xxx. I think this suggests that you need to xxx xxxxxxx xxxxx in order to keep this in the normal range. We can discuss this during your next review.

Yours sincerely

Dr x xxxxxx

(Your named accountable GP is: Dr Alex Johansson)

**The File in the Drawer**

* Two clinical updates
* One guideline for portion sizes (in household measures)
* Three menu plans
* One pathology test (clinical biochemistry)
* One pathology test (haematology)
* One pathology test (microbiology)
* Twelve blood test results
* Four informational pamphlets
* Six letters from the doctor

**The Box Under the Bed**

* One black marker

1. In some versions, companies have arranged the stage to resemble different locations. For instance, a public swimming pool or empty classroom. One version emulating a hospital waiting room proved particularly effective. However, the only necessary feature of this scene is the dining room table. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)