CHAPTER 1

The Verdict

Day 1, Monday evening

Nora's apartment was the upper floor of a narrow gray house on Fisher Lane, and its main feature was a window that looked directly at the neighbor's wall. She had decided years ago that this was a kind of privacy.

She came in at 7:15 with a bag of groceries she had not meant to buy, because she had gone to the store for batteries. There were no batteries in the bag. There was cereal, a lemon, and an enormous jar of pickles, which her gray cat Pickle regarded with the offended look of a creature who has seen his name used lightly.

She ate the cereal standing up. Then she did what she always did after a day like this. She sat down on the floor with her back against the couch and let the trial begin.

It ran the same way every time. The prosecutor in her head was fluent and well prepared. He did not shout. He read out the evidence in order, like a man who had done it a thousand times and still enjoyed it. *Missed dentist. Borrowed umbrella. The Hadley schedule. The time you forgot Tessa's birthday dinner and said you had food poisoning. The college years, which we will not discuss. The file.*

And then the verdict, delivered gently, almost kindly, so that it slid in without resistance: *You're careless, Nora. Everyone else manages. You just don't try hard enough.*

She had heard that sentence in so many voices that she had stopped noticing it was a sentence at all. It sounded like a fact, the way "the kettle is hot" is a fact.

Pickle climbed onto her lap, turned around twice, and settled with great ceremony on the one thing she had been trying not to look at.

It was a manila envelope, a little bent, with a clinic's name in the corner. *Helen Marsh, PhD, Clinical Psychology.* Under that, in a small and politely worried font: *Adult ADHD evaluation, intake materials.*

She had booked the appointment four months ago, at one in the morning, in the heat of a particularly bad week. In the daylight she had felt like a fraud. Surely real ADHD was for people who bounced off walls, not for people who simply could not find their keys. She had rescheduled once because she had decided she had nothing to bring. She had rescheduled again because she forgot she had booked it, which was, she realized, a rather good piece of evidence in itself. Both times the receptionist had said "No problem at all," in a voice so unbothered that Nora had nearly wept.

The first session was Thursday of next week. The envelope had been under a pizza menu for a month.

She slid out the pages. A form, a questionnaire, and a typed letter.

Dear Ms. Halloran, To help me understand your experience, please write down three recent examples of situations in which you struggled. Include the date, what happened, and what you were thinking at the time. There are no wrong answers.

At the bottom, in smaller type: *Please also note anything you are certain you did well this month.*

Nora read the last line three times.

She could not think of one thing.

* * *

What a verdict is made of

Let us stop the trial for a moment, because the prosecutor in Nora's head has a trick, and it is worth seeing how he does it.

He takes events and turns them into character. The dentist appointment she missed on Thursday is an event: something that happened, at a certain time, with a cause. "I'm careless" is not an event. It is a verdict about who she is, and it is much heavier. Once a verdict like that is in place, every new missed appointment gets filed as more proof. Nothing ever gets filed on the other side.

Many adults with ADHD carry this verdict for years, sometimes for decades. They were the child whose teachers wrote *bright but doesn't apply himself* or *could do so much better if she tried.* They

became the adult who is brilliant on Tuesday and lost on Wednesday, and who is told, kindly or not, that the difference must be effort.

There is another way to look at it. ADHD is not a shortage of attention. It is a difference in how the brain steers attention, how it starts tasks, holds plans in mind, tracks time, and settles feelings. The person with this difference often has plenty of attention. It just goes where the brain sends it, and the brain does not always take instructions. The next few chapters look at this more closely. For now, one idea is enough: *a wandering mind describes how a brain works, not what a person is worth.*

You are also in large company. In a 2024 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, researchers estimated that about 6 percent of adults in the United States, roughly 15.5 million people, had a current ADHD diagnosis. About half of them had received that diagnosis as adults. Think about what that second number means. Millions of people spent their childhood and early adulthood with the wrong story about themselves, and only later got a different one.

A caution belongs here, and it will come back. Only a trained clinician can tell you whether you have ADHD. Many other things, from poor sleep to anxiety to thyroid problems, can make a mind feel foggy and forgetful. If this chapter sounds like you, that is a reason to get a proper assessment, not a reason to diagnose yourself. Nora is doing exactly that, even if she is doing it late and slightly sideways.

Four things the verdict gets wrong

The old verdict rests on a few beliefs that sound sensible and turn out to be mistaken.

It assumes that a person who can focus on some things can focus on everything, if only she wanted to. In ADHD, attention responds strongly to interest and urgency, which is why the same person can read for four hours and then fail to answer a two-line email.

It assumes that ADHD belongs to hyperactive boys. Many adults, and many women in particular, have a quieter version. The restlessness moves inside, and the struggle shows up as lateness, lost items, and a tired, anxious sense of never being on top of things.

It assumes that intelligence protects you. It does not. Bright people with ADHD are often told for years that they have "so much potential," and that sentence, however kindly meant, becomes another weight.

And it assumes that shame is a motivator. We will spend a good deal of this book showing why it works the other way around.