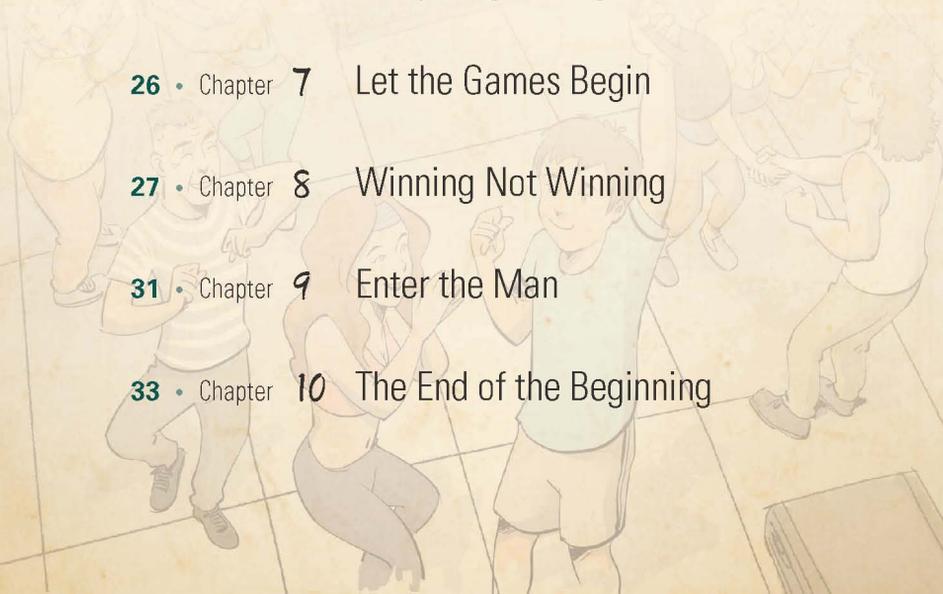


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The Beginning of the End

I'm on the floor. There's a big **kettlebell** next to me. I have to lie down, and with one hand, get it off the floor. Then I've got to push it above my face. I have to hold it high while I sit up. Then I must stand up under it. It's an exercise called the **Turkish Get-Up**. It's very hard. I know I can't do it, but I still have to.

I'm in the Apex Predator **Gym**, Motson. Motson is a small town next to the sea in the north-west of England. The Apex Predator Gym Company is American. It's the 4th of July. In America it's **Independence Day**, an important day. Today's an important day here in the gym, too. That's because right now, the whole future of the gym depends on my success. So, too, does my future as a student. What's more, there's a girl I dream about every night who's watching me.

They're all watching and waiting. They all need me to do this, and we all know I cannot.

Yet I must. I must rise up under this great **weight**, and control it, and hold it high above my head.

Enter the Boy

My name is Noel Bodie, and my story begins in spring. It was the middle of April, and my university year was ending. I would pass all my classes.

But I had a problem.

No money.

I needed money to continue studying, so I had to find a job.

I looked on the internet, and I walked around Motson.

My university is just outside the town. It's a top university. But Motson is a poor town with few job opportunities. Most of the university students come from families with lots of money. They live in nice houses near the university. But living there costs a lot. I looked for weeks before I found something. In the window of the Apex Predator Gym, I saw a **poster** for a job. They asked me to go to an **interview** the next day.

A gym was the last place I wanted to go. Experience told me I didn't belong there. They were for fit people. I didn't want to push and pull weights. I didn't want to grow **muscles**. I didn't want to **sweat**. These things made no sense to me.

But I had to go because of my father. He made my mother and I poor. I walked to the interview filled with fear.

An old man interviewed me. We were in his office under the ground floor. It was a big room with no windows and little light.

He held my **resume**. "Dan Watt," he said.

There was no music, but his arms started dancing.

He's lost his mind, I thought. I didn't like him.

We sat down.

He didn't look like he could work in a gym.

"We're not in the gym here," he said.

It was like he read my mind. I stood up and sat down again.

He said, "I've got good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?"

"The bad news."

He smiled and said, "The good news is the manager's dead."

If that was the good news, I didn't want to ask about the bad news.



"I'm the only person here," he said. "Everyone else is out."

The rest of the staff was **paying their respects** to the dead manager, Dougie Freeman. He died the previous week. His heart stopped when he was using the **rowing** machine and the kettlebells.

"Who are you?" I said.

He put his hand on his heart. "I'm Jasper Healy. I'm the **caretaker**. I take care of this place. That's why my office is down here. I'm under everything." His eyes filled with water, but he looked like he was about to laugh. "The bad news is you're the Chosen One. Just say the words."

"I'm the what?" I said. "Say what words?"

"I do. You've got the job."

"I don't want the job."

He picked up a little model dog off his table, and pointed it at me. "This job needs you." He stood up. "It's all in *The Book of Arnold*," he said. He walked around the table, and behind me. "You need money, and a love story."

I turned around.

He got down on the floor, and closed his eyes.

How did he know these things? I *did* need a girlfriend. What was *The Book of Arnold*?

I wanted to ask, but instead I ran up the stairs and out into the streets of Motson.