CHAPTER 1

The Day the Motivation Left

LOCKER NOTE #2

“Not built for this” is a story, not a measurement.

Six people came down the basement stairs on the first Tuesday of February, and every one of them looked like they had been promised a different gym.

Eli Marsh came first, in a delivery company fleece, carrying a gym bag that still had its tags on. Dana Okafor came next, in scrubs under her coat, holding a coffee she had clearly been awake for. Tomasz Wrona nodded at me and said nothing, which I would learn was his default and his gift. Marisol Vega arrived with a color-coded planner. Caleb Hurst, twenty-two, shoulders like a door frame, bounced down the steps two at a time. And last came Ruth Delaney, seventy-one, retired from driving a school bus for thirty-four years, in a canvas tote and walking shoes. She was ten minutes early and sat down on the bench by the door with a crossword.

“Walt isn’t coming,” I said. “I’m Nora. I’m going to be running this room.”

Nobody asked where Walt was. I think they had all been told the same story I had.

“Before we touch a bar,” I said, “I’m going to tell you what I’m not going to do. I’m not going to motivate you.”

Marisol looked up from her planner. Eli looked relieved, then worried, as if he had been counting on being motivated.

“You’re all motivated right now. That’s why you’re here at six in the morning on a Tuesday. It’s a lovely feeling and it will be gone by the third week. Maybe the second. I’d like you to plan for that, so it doesn’t surprise you.”

I had not planned to say it that way. It came out sounding like something Walt would say, and I felt the odd small pang of borrowing a dead man’s coat, except Walt wasn’t dead, he was just gone.

We did the work. Goblet squats, rows, a light bench press. I watched six people discover which parts of their bodies they had been ignoring. Caleb did everything easily and a little too fast. Dana swore quietly at the rows. Tomasz did every rep the same as the last one, like a man laying pipe. Ruth stood at the end of the line with a ten-pound bar and did her sets without hurry, counting under her breath.

Eli took longest. On the bench he got the bar up for five reps at one thirty-five, and on the fifth his arms shook so hard that I put two fingers under the bar. He sat up and looked at his hands.

“This is where I stall,” he said. “Every time. Three months I’ve been trying to get past this weight at home.”

“Everybody stalls somewhere.”

“Not Caleb.”

He was right. Caleb had warmed up with two hundred and twenty-five pounds and made it look like he was waiting for a bus.

At the end of the session the others went upstairs, and Eli lingered at the bottom of the stairwell tying a shoelace that did not need tying. He didn’t look at me when he said it. He said it to the shoelace.

“I’m just not built for this. Some guys are. I’m not. I figured I’d come anyway, you know, see.”

“Eli.”

“It’s fine. Honestly. I’ll be fine.” He stood up and climbed the stairs.

The stairwell is narrow. At the top, Ruth Delaney was bent over, retying a shoelace of her own, and she gave me a small, polite nod as I went by. I nodded back. I thought nothing of it. I want to be clear about that, because later I thought about it a great deal.

On Thursday, at five-forty, I found Eli in front of locker 107 holding an index card.

His face had gone the color of the cinder block wall. He held the card out to me without a word.

NOT BUILT FOR THIS IS A STORY, NOT A MEASUREMENT.

The same slanting capitals. The same pressure, like someone had tried to carve it.

“Did you do this?” Eli asked.

“No.”

“Because you were the only person standing there when I said it.”

“I know.” I was thinking exactly the same thing, and I didn’t like how it sounded out loud. “Eli, I swear I didn’t. I’ll find out who did.”

He didn’t believe me. I could see that. But he put the card in his pocket, and I noticed he didn’t throw it away.

Why motivation leaves

Here is what I should have told Eli on Tuesday, and what I’ll tell you now.

Motivation is a feeling. Feelings follow your sleep, your mood, your blood sugar, the weather, and whether someone cut you off in traffic. They are real, but they are poor instruments for navigation. Basing a training plan on motivation is like basing a travel plan on a friend who is brilliant at parties and useless when you move house. Wonderful company. Not around when the boxes arrive.

The first few weeks of any new program run on novelty. Everything is new, everything is a little exciting, every sore muscle feels like evidence. Then the newness wears off while the results haven’t shown up yet, and for a stretch of time the work is boring and the payoff is invisible. This is the stretch where most programs die. It isn’t a character flaw. It’s the predictable gap between the high of starting and the point where the behavior runs on its own.