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DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY

by

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Chapter One

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I stand at the edge and stare down into the pit. The air is thick with chalk and sweat. I look down.

Then I jump.

I can feel myself spinning. I can hear Xan's voice. Higher! Tighter!

Xan looks at me. Not bad. More height..

I nod, do it again. And again and again.

After I finish practicing the double layout I go over to the beam. It stands in front of me, sturdy and strong. This is what I fell in love with the first time. This is the thing I loved most when my mom brought me to the gym and tried to hold my hand across the first one, when I let go of her and demanded she let me do it by myself. She did.

Now I can do whatever I want on it. It does what I say. Xan says that the beam is my bitch, which is certainly accurate.

Xan looks up at us as we hop on. Group assignment: stick fifteen flight series, she tells us. If anyone falls we all have to do it again. If anyone wobbles too much, we all have to do it again.

I set myself and arch my body backwards through the air, my hands finding the beam just in time. I do it again. Then I do it with no hands. I land steady each time.

One, Xan says.

Hannah does the same thing I just did. It's a popular combination.

Two.

We make it to eight and I'm trying my new mount sequence. My foot slips off on the front tuck. For a second I think I'll catch it but then I'm off.

Okay, Xan says, start over.

I do it again. This time I land it. This time we make it to fifteen.

Xan nods. Good, she says. Now stick fifteen leap series.

We get this one in one try and Xan is pleased.

Stuck dismounts, she tells us. Three each.

I have a punch double front. It's a blind landing and my air sense has to be exact to land it. I'm not very consistent with it yet.

But this time I get three out of four stuck.

Xan says, Okay. Full routines. Go.

I don't fall once. I wobble three times. After I'm off, Xan tells me things: don't drop my shoulder on the Arabian. Chest up on the double front. Leg higher on the L-turn.

Okay, I say. Okay, okay.

She says, Again.

I do it again. Then a couple more times.

At the end she says, good practice. And we leave.

I put my stuff in my car, buckle my seatbelt, blast the music. I shout the lyrics out the windows. I'm always a little high after practice.

I come home and my mother looks up and kisses my cheek. Hi, honey, she says.

I say hello and get a salad out of the fridge. I eat fast and then I go upstairs and get lost in homework for a little while before I collapse. I can't find math very interesting

because the only geometry I care about is at what angle I need to release the bar to do a perfect Pak, and the only geography I care about is who is up and coming in China, Russia, Japan and Romania. I like books, but I don't have so much time for them. I read after a meet, to calm down, and a little before bed for the same reason, and I read on Sundays, which is my day off.

Sometimes I read during class but mostly I rework my routines, see if I can get my start value up. I have to try. Xan says, don't push it Mads, your routines are solid, don't push it. But I want to push it. I want to be the best.

It's not an Olympic year, she says. There isn't as much at stake. You're on the national team.

I try to explain that I don't care that I'm on the national team. I want to be the best. I want to win every mock meet at every training camp. I want to be the best gymnast in the country, and then the world.

That's fine, Xan says, but you don't need to do it all right now. We're years from the Olympics, Lily.

I say, I need to pull ahead now and stay there.

No, she says. If you do that you'll break. You have to peak at the right time. Lily! Are you listening to me?

I'm listening, kind of. But I don't see how I can lose. I have to be the best or there isn't any point, and she knows it. I'm sixteen, I remind Xan. Time is running out.

She says, don't be so dramatic, your age won't change the fact the Olympics are still three years out. And then she says, and you need to be in shape for Nationals. You can't throw so much that you jeopardize a spot on the Worlds team.

I say that I know that. Of course I know that. If I go to Worlds—I will go to Worlds—then it will be my second one. Nothing can break.

So I collapse into bed and my dreams are always the same. I'm flying and then I win.

At school people don't get it. I arrive late, missing that homeroom thing. I haven't been in years, because I have morning workout. I don't have a lunch or free period—I eat between classes, rushing to get my four in, and then I go to the gym right at 2. People see me in class and wave but they don't say much. They don't understand my world. Theirs is this place, all this school bullshit, boyfriends and girlfriends and lunch and

homework. They don't seem to see that it doesn't matter. All of this can be done later. There is always time to learn algebra. But my body will crumple eventually. A body can only defy gravity, can only bow to will, for so long before it rebels. I have to finish before mine does.

My world is the gym. My world is just this: the quiet that surrounds me when I stare down a piece of equipment or look along the floor. The chalk in the air when I clap my hands. My hands hitting the floor or the beam or the vault, my body twisting and flipping, my hands flying off the bar and grabbing again, my feet pushing off to order my body to do something that should be impossible. That is my world. Four walls, four events. It's just me and my body. One of us has to win.

So I sit in class and sketch out my routines, drawing over and over, jotting down skills and start values. I'm pretty smart and I pay some attention but mostly I sit there and dream.

My mother thinks I'm crazy. My classmates do, too. They go and eat pizza and go to parties and I go to the gym. I spend more time there than I do anywhere else. My mother asks me about it all the time. Are you sure it's a good idea, Lily? she asks. Are you sure it's a good idea to put everything into this?

Yes, I say. Yes, it is. It is the only option.

I'm trapped when I'm not at the gym, when I have to sit somewhere and be quiet. I need to move. I need to rush around. I need to fly. I was not meant to sit and be still. I wasn't built for that. My body is tiny and wiry, my hands are strong and callused, my legs have muscles in places most people have just skin. My body has nothing extra. It's just the muscle I need, the sinew and bone that it takes for my body to do what I demand of it.

Nationals are here fast. They always are. This year they're in Boston, which is nice enough I guess. My parents prefer it. It doesn't matter so much to me. Arenas are the same everywhere.

We fly together, Xan, Hannah, Reese, Iz and me, to get there early for training. Our parents will come later. I've known Iz since I came to RevGym. Hannah is younger, just turning senior this year, and Reese is younger still. She's still in the junior competition but she's good. She won't win if that girl from Plano hits, but she'll medal.

Hannah and Iz probably won't and they know it. Hannah's too young to medal anyway. She is a solid gymnast and maybe she'll make a few international teams, but not the major ones. She's headed to NCAA, really. Iz is the closest thing I have to a best friend but her gymnastics is not as good as mine. Its close, but it isn't as good. I'm not arrogant, its just a fact. And she's second in the country on vault. She's so good there. She hasn't gone pro because she wants to do NCAA. I haven't gone pro either because my mother wouldn't let me. She says we can't afford college unless I get a scholarship. I say, if I go pro, I'll make enough money, but she still wouldn't let me. Xan says its good. I say, I'm the defending national champion. I should have sponsors.

Iz tells me to shut up, already, about the pro thing.

The hotel is pretty, and Iz and I dive into our rooms and jump on the beds for a minute, a relic from our first meet where we stayed in a hotel. Predictably Xan knocks a second later and yells at us to STOP JUMPING GIRLS.

Reese and Hannah come in a minute later. They are both shaking with nerves. It's Reese's first Nationals ever. I say, come sit on the bed, it'll be fine, but it's hard to calm her down.

We spend a week working out. The equipment is OK. I don't like as much as the equipment at my gym, where I know every square inch, but it's fine. I hit most of my warm ups, bomb a few. I'm worried but not too worried.

The juniors are first. We all hug Reese and tell her good luck and watch her from the stands. We've had a workout already and now we sit. I'm eating an apple. Xan is running around, calming Reese, helping her.

She does well. Some steps, a wobble or two on the beam, but she's fourth going into day two. We hug her, congratulate her. Xan smiles and tells us to have some protein, and we all take some almonds and go to the practice gym.

The senior competition starts at four and the arena is pretty full. It'll be more crowded on Saturday.

We march in wearing matching warm ups. Xan looks at all three of us. Good luck, she says. You can do it.

Thanks, we say.

Iz and I are in the leaders group, going in Olympic order. She's before me. I take off my warm ups, put my earbuds in and put my iPod in the band of my leo. Then I stand and watch and stretch and bounce and try to stay loose. A girl from Iowa lands

on her back. A girl from California sticks a lovely DTY, doing a round off onto the vaulting table and twisting twice off. Iz is next and she does the same vault but with an extra half twist. She doesn't stick it but she doesn't need to, the start value is so much higher than anyone else's on this event.

I hug her when she comes off, hand my iPod to Xan, and step onto the podium. I am barely aware of the announcer, on vault, from Revolution Gymnastics, Lily Madigan! I salute, run as fast and as hard as I can. I know they are taking pictures now and I know my face will look insane, like I am not really human. Which is fair. I hit the springboard hard, fly off, push off the table with my hands, lay my body out flat, twist twice, land. People cheer. I look at my score. Pretty good. Xan nods and then goes off to spot Hannah on bars.

I hit bars all right, too. I don't quite manage to hit every handstand, but I am close. I finish beam nicely, sticking my double front. I leave the double layout out of my floor for now, I'll pull it out Saturday, but I end up in first place anyway. I am congratulated and I smile and nod and cannot wait to leave.

On Friday we just do light workouts. On Saturday we're back in the arena. In the morning, Reese gets a bronze. Great work! we shout at her. Congratulations!

I do not tell her that I would never be happy with bronze.

I hit my vault better this time. On bars, I can feel myself higher on my releases, can feel the air beneath me. I soar from bar to bar and when I release the bar and curl my body around and around and land solidly on my feet, no moving, I know I'm going to win.

I should be more nervous about my beam mount sequence, but by now I can feel it in my body that I'm going to win. And I'm a go big or go home gymnast, and so I run towards the beam and do a front pike on. I land and there are screams in the arena but I hardly hear them before I do my neat front tuck. I know I have the most difficult beam routine in the country and probably the world and everyone wants to know if I can do it. I dance a bit and then I do two back handsprings, leap and land, and then I fly into the air for my layout, my body stretched completely out, and I land on two feet and don't pause before I swing down to the beam, straddling it, but it's not painful, the way people think it is. Unless you miss, but I don't miss. My leaps are wide. I set up for my Arabian, standing still and then suddenly

jumping, turning halfway, and flipping. I do not move. My leg stays up all the way through my turn. I run towards the end of the beam and jump hard, push through my legs, chest up, and flip twice forwards and land and don't budge. This time I hear the screams.

My floor music starts and I'm off. I throw the double layout. I hop at the end, which I'm not pleased about. I dance for a moment, smile at the crowd, leap as high as I can. I do my double pike, landing well, and I dance a tiny bit more—I don't love this dancing business because if I wanted to dance I would take ballet but America likes their pixies dainty. My 2.5 twist. And then my dismount, a half twist and two back flips with my legs piked and my feet barely touch the floor before I throw myself into a front layout, and I land and do not move. The crowd roars. I grin, toss myself into my finishing position as the music stops. I'm up and I wave and the crowd roars more. Xan hugs me hard. Well done, kiddo, she says. Well done. That'll be gold.

It is.

How does it feel to be the national champ two years in a row? journalists ask me.

Great, I say.

Plans for Worlds? they ask.

I'll be there, I say.

The Olympics?

It's on my radar screen, for sure. I'd like to be there.

I don't know why they bother asking. We all know that I'll be at the Olympics, unless I get run over by a bus.

Iz came in fourth and she comes to hug me and I know she must be heartbroken. Fourth is the worst in gymnastics, just out of the medals. Good job, I whisper to her. I'm sorry.

Hannah is eighth and just happy she stayed on everything. Seniors are scary, she tells me seriously, and I laugh.

I guess, a little, I say.

At home we take a day off and then we're back. Xan tells us we did well, says that for Worlds selection we need to do even better. We all have private meetings.

Really well done, she says. Really, Lily, you were close to perfect.

I nod. Wait.

Settle down a little, she says. I know you want it and I know you have to want it, but slow down a little. One day you're going to push too hard, Lily, and then it'll be over.

I don't know how to slow down, I explain.

She says, I know. Just breathe. Just remember to do your skills the way you know how. Rush less.

I tell her I'll try.

Good, she says. Now. Go. And work on that double lay. You need to land it better.

I nod. And then I go and work on my double lay.