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BREAK

THE

FALL



HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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For all the girls before and after



## chapter one

White-hot sparks of agony light down my spine, scorching over my hips and into my thighs. I grind my back teeth together and clench my fists against the pain, blunt fingernails biting into the palms of my hand.

*C'mon, Audrey, it's nothing. Push through it.*

Pounding my knuckles against the muscles of my calves helps distract from the ache as I sit on the floor, legs spread out in a split, waiting my turn.

The only sound in the sold-out arena is the reverberating squeak of the uneven bars lifting up into the rafters. It's been like this for two days. One by one, we go up to the vault or the beam or the bars or the floor and perform while the crowd holds its breath.

I do too. If I don't, it might become too much, and I can't afford anyone noticing how much my back hurts.

Especially not him.

Coach Gibson—or Gibby to those of us on the United States Gymnastics national team—is patrolling the wells between the raised podiums, watching with an eagle eye for any sign of weakness. He's everywhere all at once, cold and analytical, taking in every hesitation, every flinch, homing in on our weaknesses.

He stands to my left, wearing a red, white, and blue tracksuit, arms crossed over the swishy material.

“How’s the back, Audrey?” he asks.

“Great. Ready to go.”

His eyebrows rise, and he hums in disbelief, but he never looks away from my teammate and best friend, Emma Sadowsky, swinging on the uneven bars.

Gibby can stare all he wants; Emma won’t screw up. He knows it, even as he makes a show of looking critically at her handstands and the distance of her releases. She’s perfection.

Something as small as a wince from me, though? That’s basically admitting I’m in too much pain to go on.

Emma is a great gymnast, but even on her best day she’s not better than me on uneven bars. Of course, she’s head and shoulders better than me at everything else, which more than makes up for it. We’ve trained together since we were three, when our moms signed us up for Mommy and Me classes. Now, fourteen years later, we’re at Olympic trials.

She’s definitely going to make the team. As last year’s national and world all-around champion, she’s the favorite to win multiple golds in Tokyo. So far Emma’s accomplished everything we ever dreamed of as little girls, and now winning an Olympic medal is only a matter of time.

For me, just making the team will be a miracle. The pain doesn’t matter. Not really. Aside from the blissful days following a cortisone shot, my back always feels like this. The doctors said I should probably quit, but I told them to shove it. Then I apologized, and we settled for a compromise: retirement after the Olympics.

I only have a few more weeks of gymnastics left. Or, if my next routine goes wrong, just a few more minutes.

With a *thwack* of her feet against the landing mats, Emma finishes her routine with a stuck double layout, her body arched through the two flips in that satisfying way that makes my fourth vertebra twitch. Or maybe that's just from the roar of the crowd, screaming in approval for their golden girl.

Joy for my best friend floods through me as she salutes the judges and then waves to the fans. A spike of excitement courses through my body. The pain fades to the background. It's almost time to compete, and my body and mind are on the same page.

I still have a few minutes to breathe because about twenty yards away, Chelsea Cameron, the reigning Olympic all-around champion, is about to start her floor routine. They keep the routines staggered for the TV broadcast, making sure the fans at home can see everything.

"You nailed that," I say, standing as Emma jumps down from the podium, a fake smile plastered across her face. I've known her long enough to know the difference.

"I know," she says, smoothing back her hair, hands still encased in chalky grips. She's a ginger-headed white girl, and the chalk leaves a streak in her hair just a shade or two paler than her skin. I smile at that. It's usually my own dark hair streaked with the chalk and not hers. "You've got this, Rey."

"I know."

She smiles, a real one this time, and some of the tension in my shoulders loosens despite Gibby still being right here. It might seem like his focus is on Chelsea, tumbling across the floor on the other side of the arena, but I don't doubt that his attention is at least partially on me.

I swing my arms in circles and then stretch them above my head, trying to pretend I'm not completely aware of Gibby's presence, that I'm totally dialed in on the routine ahead of me. He's not much taller than I am, being a former gymnast himself, but the sheer totality of his power in my world makes him seem gargantuan.

He runs a hand through his jet black hair graying slightly at the temples. "Show me what you've got here, Audrey," he says. *Or else*, I add in my head.

Chelsea lands her final tumbling pass. Her days as a top all-around gymnast are long over, but her name still carries the weight of Olympic gold and million-dollar sponsorships. Plus, even at twenty, she's still badass on vault and floor.

I take a deep breath, pushing Chelsea out of my head. Gibby wants to see what I've got on bars, and I have to show him that I belong on the Olympic team, that I'm worthy of my dreams.

*Okay, Audrey, hit this routine and you go to Tokyo.*

The crowd has finally settled after Chelsea's floor, just in time for the announcer to call out, "And now on uneven bars, representing NYC Gymnastics, Audrey Lee!"

My heart leaps at the sound of my name, and a frisson of excitement spreads over my skin. If it's the last time I'm going to do this, I want to remember every detail. I lock eyes with my coach, Pauline. She's chalking the bars exactly the way I like: just a thin layer, nothing that will clump into my grips. A tight smile plays across her face, and I return it.

There isn't time for all the words I want to say to her about how thankful I am and how much I love her and how no matter what



happens, she'll be like a second mom to me, forever. Actually, I'm pretty glad there isn't time to say all that. Crying right now would suck.

The crowd buzzes, but not loudly enough to drown out the thumping of the blood pounding in my ears. The light near the side of the podium is still red, so my eyes flicker over the arena, everyone's devices reflecting the glare of the lights, cameramen hovering at the edge of the apparatus, attempting and failing to be unobtrusive while bits of chalk hang in the air, clinging to everything.

It's beautiful.

The judge at the end of the row gives me a green light, the sign to begin.

Everything else fades away. I lift one arm in salute, the other out to the side, an affectation I developed from obsessing over Russian gymnasts growing up. Then I turn, eyes on the cylindrical fiberglass bars that hold my ticket to the Olympics.

I swing up and into a handstand, holding to show control, but not nearly long enough for the blood to rush to my head, and then fold my body in half, legs straddled in a V and extended fully, all the way through to the tips of my pointed toes. There's barely time to breathe during a bars routine, especially mine. It's one of the most difficult in the world, every element linked to the next in a smooth melody that flows with the creak of the bars and the twang of the wires. Up on the high bar, I release and catch, and then back down to the low, a swing around the low bar and then straight back up again.

It's not flying, but it's as close to it as a human will ever achieve. Now, a giant swing up to a pirouette and down, and then a release into a back layout, my body held stick straight with one, two, three

twists, and land, controlling the smallest step, barely a flicker.

It's done.

A hit routine and a massive sigh of relief. I clap my hands together, the grips sending a cloud of dust up into the air, and salute the judges, maybe for the final time.

Hopping down from the podium, Emma hugs me before I really find my feet. Coach Pauline is next, a woman who knows me better than even my parents. Over her shoulder I catch Gibby's eye, but there's no emotion there. No pleasure or satisfaction, only an unidentifiable steeliness. He looks away.

I'd done what he'd asked, hadn't I?

Was it enough?

"C'mon," Emma murmurs as our coach lets me go. There are tears in Pauline's eyes when I pull away. Tears of joy? Sadness? Both?

I grab Emma's hand and squeeze.

"I knew you had it," she says, squeezing back.

That's what breaks me. I yank her hand and pull her close, the tears starting to gather in the corner of my eyes. "I'm so proud of you. So proud of us."

"Me too." Her voice cracks, but she sniffs past the emotion, something else she's better at than me.

Pauline slides her arms around our shoulders as we pull away. Then together, we walk toward the corner of the arena as the final competitor is announced.

"And now on floor exercise, from Redwood Shores Gymnastics, Daniela Olivero!"

The powers that be knew what they were doing when they

assigned Dani the final spot in the final rotation. Her *The Greatest Showman* routine is super popular with gym fans, and she's pretty spectacular on the floor, with insanely high tumbling and a ridiculous amount of energy throughout.

Up until last year, she was on the fringes of the elite ranks, but everything's sort of come together for her in the months leading up to the Games.

The music gets the crowd on its feet immediately. I look at Emma, and her eyes twinkle back at me. Together, we start dancing along. The choreography of Dani's routine is fabulous, and we've seen it over and over again at National Gymnastics Committee camps.

Sierra Montgomery and Jaime Pederson, two white Oklahoma girls who always do everything together, are laughing at us, but they get swept up in the song too, letting their hips sway with the rhythm.

The music comes to an end as Dani nails her final tumbling pass and the whole arena roars in approval, a wave of sound crashing over us. My pain is a fleeting thing now, a tingle at the back of my mind as every single competitor on the floor starts to give one another impromptu hugs.

I pull away from Sierra and then Jaime and try to catch my breath when I'm nearly bowled over by Chelsea Cameron. Despite barely topping out at five feet tall, she nearly takes me down on impact, her textured brown curls catching against my damp cheek. She's crying and probably not even aware of who she's hugging because we've barely exchanged more than a couple of words over the years. Dani is still hugging her coach, but eventually Emma gets her in a bear hug—as much as a girl who weighs ninety pounds

can bear-hug anyone—and then she’s pulled over to the rest of us.

Bittersweet tears prick in the corners of my eyes. It’s overwhelming, going out and doing everything you can to prove you belong and still not knowing if it was enough.

Almost against my will, my gaze flickers to the scoreboard. I don’t want to look, but I have to. The combined scores from two days of competition are displayed for everyone to see, and before I let my fate be decided by Gibby, I need to know where I stand. Though my vision is increasingly blurry from the gathering tears, I can see my name clearly enough.

1. Emma Sadowsky	118.2
2. Daniela Olivero	118.0
3. Sierra Montgomery	117.1
4. Jaime Pederson	116.3
5. Audrey Lee	115.4
6. Chelsea Cameron	110.5

Everyone finished as expected, though I’m a little surprised at how close it is between Emma and Dani. There are four spots on the Olympic team, and I’m in fifth, but all-around scores don’t matter as much as what Gibby wants. Let’s be real: his opinion is the only thing that matters.

Somehow in the midst of the chaos, I slip on the black tracksuit Emma and I wear. It has the New York skyline emblazoned on the back in silver glittering rhinestones and NYC GYM on the left lapel. Obnoxious, maybe, but gymnastics fashion is rarely subtle. The

tears are really falling now. No matter what happens, this is the last time I'll wear my NYC Gymnastics tracksuit. From here on out, it'll be USA gear or nothing.

*Stop it, Audrey. Enjoy the moment.*

I try to channel Emma and push down the emotion. It only half works. Better than nothing, though. As I shoulder my bag, one of the workers I vaguely recognize as an NGC official is motioning for us to leave the floor. I shuffle in behind the rest of the girls, twelve of us about to be whittled down to four, plus two alternates.

Behind me, the announcer calls out to the crowd, "While we wait for the decision from the selection committee, please join us in honoring Olympic silver and bronze medalist Janet Dorsey-Adams, owner and head coach of Coronado Gymnastics and Dance, on her induction into the NGC Hall of Fame!"

The spotlight follows Janet up onto the floor, where there's a trophy waiting for her. It's pretty cool to be in the Hall of Fame; maybe in a few years I'll be—

"Audrey, come on!" Emma's voice interrupts my thoughts from farther down the hall than I thought she'd be.

I turn to catch up with her, but instead my eyes meet the chest of someone a lot taller than me. We nearly collide, my nose to his pec, before strong hands reach out, holding on to my upper arms lightly. In a quick leading step, we're clear of each other and he releases me. I glance up and gasp in surprise. I know him.

Leo Adams, son of Janet Dorsey-Adams and world champion snowboarder. His mom used to drag him along to competitions

when we were little. We follow each other online, but I haven't actually seen him in person for years.

Wearing a sardonic grin and a THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST LOOKS LIKE T-shirt, he's tall compared to my five feet four inches, maybe six feet or a little more. He's biracial—half Black, half white—and there's a dusting of freckles across the bridge of his nose.

"Hey, Leo."

I inwardly cringe at not having a better opener, and, like, what if I remember his name, but he doesn't remember mine?

This could be bad.

A smile lights up his face, though, and I find myself matching it. "Audrey Lee," he says. *Oh, thank God, he knows who I am.* "Careful. Don't want you to lose your spot on the team for being clumsy."

I let myself smile. "It might be worth the risk."

*What the hell, Audrey? Are you flirting? Must be the high from the competition, and it's made you completely insane.*

"Audrey!" Emma calls again from down the large corridor, her voice bouncing off the concrete walls. She frantically waves me toward her, but I hesitate. She and the rest of the girls are disappearing into the locker room.

It's weird. I've entered some kind of alternate universe where the adrenaline is still numbing my pain and my gymnastics career might be about to end and there's something totally liberating about that thought.

"I should probably . . ." I trail off.

"You should definitely," he agrees, and I laugh.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in fifteen minutes we'll be announcing

the next USA women's Olympic gymnastics team!" the announcer calls out.

I take a step toward the locker room and then another. *Don't look back, Audrey; boys are for a month from now, after you have an Olympic medal. Or two.*

The door swings shut behind me. The rest of the girls are there, even Sarah Pecoraro and Brooke Cohen. They qualified last year as individual athletes. They're going to Tokyo, but they won't have a shot at the team medal like the rest of us—if we make it.

"Where were you?" Emma demands, dragging me over to two empty seats.

"Do you remember Leo Adams?"

"What?" she shrieks. "He's here? Wait, how much longer until they announce?"

She's all over the place, and I don't blame her. She's just won the Olympic trials, but she has to wait like the rest of us, and it's not like I don't need a distraction too.

"Fifteen minutes."

My phone vibrates in my bag. There are a few thousand notifications waiting for me. Being on national TV during the trials process has made social media more than a little bit insane, but I've learned to ignore most of it.

It's the last alert that catches my eye. A mention from @Leo\_Adams\_Roars.

I bite my bottom lip, trying to keep that same smile he prompted from emerging again as I open his account. The profile pic does him justice: the same freckles, the same smile, plus a set of dimples I somehow managed to miss moments before.

“Wow. He’s super hot,” Emma says, probably louder than she meant to.

“Who’s super hot?” Sierra asks, head whipping around from whispering something to Jaime.

“Leo Adams,” Emma supplies for her, pointing to my phone. In an instant, my brief little moment with Leo turns into the distraction we all need.

“Is that Janet’s son?” Jaime asks.

“No, there’s just a random guy with her last name hanging out in the tunnel during her award presentation, Jaime,” Sierra drawls with an eye roll.

“Is he a snowboarder?” Chelsea asks when my thumb hovers over a black-and-white picture of him sitting on a mountain—shirtless—with a board strapped to his feet, the sun rising in the distance.

“A snowboarder who appreciates *aesthetic*,” Emma quips with a perfectly shaped ginger eyebrow raised.

“He won junior worlds last year,” I say casually, trying to pretend I don’t check up on his career pretty regularly. I mean, it’s not like it’s hard. We all post at least once a day, and he remembered my name, so odds are he knows the same stuff about me. Probably. Maybe.

Dani leans around Chelsea from her seat. “Boys who look like him should always walk around without a shirt. Look at those shoulders.”

I nearly have a coronary when Sierra reaches over and likes the picture for me. “Oh my God!” I pull my phone away way too late. I don’t have a ton of experience with boys—forty-hour weeks at



training don't exactly make for epic teenage romance—but I know enough to know that liking a picture from months ago looks incredibly desperate.

Sierra laughs, and the other girls giggle. “It’ll be fine. Look.”

And she’s right. I finally look at the message he wrote.

**@Leo\_Adams\_Roars:** Ran into @Rey\_Lee, literally!

It’s okay. She’s fine. That uneven bars gold is still ours!

#NGCTrials

A knock interrupts, and together our eyes fly away from the screen. The distraction is over. Gibby and the rest of the selection committee are hovering at the door.

It’s time.

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**Jennifer Iacopelli** was born in New York. Growing up, she read everything she could get her hands on, but her favourite authors were L.M. Montgomery and Frances Hodgson Burnett, both of whom wrote about kick-ass girls before it was cool for girls to be kick-ass. Jennifer writes authentically about sports; she covered the Rio Olympic games in 2016 and has made several featured appearances on the famous gymnastics podcast, GymCastic.

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