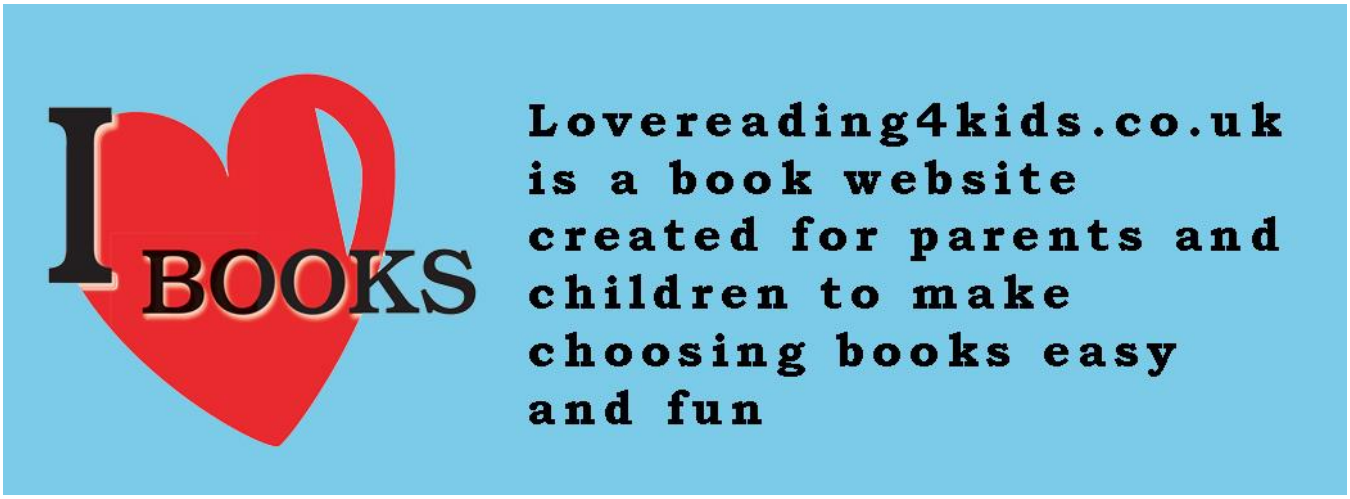


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Chapter One

Tara Bailey stood in the middle of the springy blue floor at Silverdale Gymnastics Club and shivered. It was her first day back in the gym after Christmas and outside it was icy, but the tingle running down Tara's spine wasn't from the cold. It was a shiver of excitement.

"Ready?" asked Clare, her gymnastics coach. Tara bit her lip and nodded. She was definitely ready. In her mind, she'd been ready to do a

backflip for months and months. But actually doing it was something different. She looked down at her feet, positioned neatly together on the floor. She could do backflips – or flicks, as all the gymnasts called them – with support from Clare, but she'd never tried one on her own before.

The last few minutes of the training session were ticking away. It was now or…well, not never…but she wouldn't get another chance until Friday, and two days away from Silverdale Gym *seemed* like for ever.

"Go, Tara!" whooped Megan. Tara grinned down at the floor. The other members of her Acrobatic Gymnastics group knew how desperate she was to do a flick by herself. She'd hardly talked about anything else since Regionals two months ago – the first gymnastics competition she'd ever taken part in. Not only had she won her first ever gold medal, but Tara and her partner Lindsay had also won the chance to compete in the National Acro competition for their level in a

few months' time. Tara still couldn't believe it… and she was training harder than ever to make sure she was ready.

Standing very still, with her arms held by her sides, she prepared to try her first unassisted backflip. She kept her legs straight and leaned her weight back until she felt like she was about to topple over. Then she swung her arms up and pushed herself backwards, off the floor and onto her hands. Another push with her hands, and she was back on her feet again. Tara could hardly believe what had happened. She'd done a backflip without support, and she hadn't even landed on her head!

"Well done!" said Clare. "It was messy, but it's there. Work on keeping your legs together."

Tara nodded, breathless. It had been so quick that she hadn't had time to think about being neat or any of the things she remembered to do when she practised on the trampoline. She tried once more and got all the way over again. But her legs

would not stay stuck together like she wanted, and Clare said her knees were bent.

"Brilliant," whispered Lindsay, as their coach went off to help Megan and Sophie practise punch-front somersaults. "Clare's just being picky."

"No, she's right," Tara replied. "I've got to keep practising until my flicks are better. Just getting over isn't enough." But she smiled at Lindsay to show that she didn't mind Clare's criticism, and she felt secretly pleased that Lindsay thought she'd done well. Besides, she'd managed two flicks in a row for the first time – nothing could ruin her day now.

They watched Megan and Sophie, two older girls in their group. Tara couldn't help feeling a bit jealous when she saw them take a run-up, jump onto both feet and whip their bodies round in tucked somersaults. One day, she promised herself…one day she'd be doing that, too.

"That's enough for today," Clare said to Sophie,

and Tara looked over her shoulder at the clock high up on the wall. The hands had reached six o'clock and training was over.

"Nationals gymnasts!" Clare shouted, as the group began to leave the gym. "I want to talk to you before you go."

Tara still felt butterflies in her stomach every time she remembered that she was one of the Nationals gymnasts. Megan and Sophie were going to the Nationals too, as well as Jasmine and Sam, the most advanced girls in their squad.

"Your routines looked great at Regionals," Clare began, when they'd settled themselves on the floor. "You've had a bit of a break over Christmas, so I hope you've all recovered from the competition and are ready to work hard again! I'm glad to see that most of you have kept up with your stretching, even when you weren't at the gym." Clare paused and looked directly at Megan, who had complained more than anyone about being stiff during their first session back.

"It's important that you do at least a little bit when you have time off."

Tara caught Megan's eye and exchanged a sympathetic grimace with her. During the week away from Silverdale, she'd loved being able to relax and spend more time with her best friends from school, Emily and Kate. But after a few afternoons watching Christmas films she'd missed the gym, and she'd made a big effort to do half an hour of stretching at home every day. She hoped she'd still be able to fit it in when she went back to school.

"There'll be extra training sessions for the National competition, just like there were for Regionals," continued Clare. "They'll start again this Sunday at 9 a.m. I'd like all of you to get working on some new balances for your routines."

Excitement rippled around the group and Tara hugged her knees into her chest. Learning new balances was so exciting! In Acrobatic Gymnastics, gymnasts performed routines in pairs and groups

of three or four. They had to do balances as well as floor skills like backflips and somersaults. Tara had only been doing Acro for half a year, but balances had quickly become her favourite challenge.

Now all her dreams were made up of spectacular routines full of things she'd seen the more experienced gymnasts at Silverdale doing – breathtaking balances and amazing throws and somersaults that she and Lindsay would learn to do sometime in the far-off future. Instead of imagining what it would be like to be a famous singer or a glamorous actress like her school friends sometimes did, she dreamed of being a famous gymnast like Beth Tweddle.

"Wow, my legs ache *so* much," groaned Sophie, when they'd wrapped themselves up in coats, scarves and gloves, and were walking out to the car park.

"Mine too," agreed Megan. "It was nice to have time off for Christmas, but we're paying for it now."

"We'll get used to it again soon," said Lindsay. "Especially with the extra training for Nationals."

"Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and now Sundays too – if Clare had her own way we'd be in the gym every day!" said Megan.

"All day, every day," laughed Sophie.

"That would be so much better than school," Tara said, smiling as she imagined it. Nothing but gymnastics – it sounded like heaven.



Chapter Two

On Saturday morning, Tara woke up to discover that while she'd been asleep, a glittering blanket of pure white snow had covered the whole town.

"It's so white!" gasped Anna, her little sister, who had been looking forward to snow for months and months.

"Will we be able to get to the gym?" Tara asked Dad anxiously, peering out of the