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Opening extract from

A Perfect Ten

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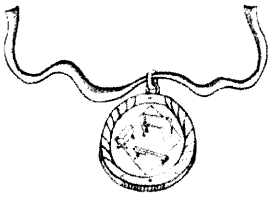
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The night before the Intermediate, Mike gives us his usual spiel.

'Perfection. That's what we're looking for in gymnastics. It doesn't matter how simple or how difficult your moves are, they've got to be faultless.'

'Yeah, yeah,' mutters Sophie in my ear. Her boredom threshold is super-low. 'We've heard it all before.'

'In your case, Sophie,' says Mike, who doesn't miss a trick, 'that means concentrating on what you're doing instead of eyeing up Jason.'

'Cheek!' she splutters, then adds hopefully, 'Are the boys on tomorrow?' We burst out laughing.

'That's not important,' he says, frowning at her. 'What *is*, is getting a good night's sleep and turning up on time. And that applies to all of you!' His expression changes and he grins. 'We're going to wipe the floor with them tomorrow, you watch!'

We cheer and break up into small groups, heading for the changing rooms, Romilly, Sophie, Hannah and me, chatting together as usual. We're the Jimmies. (Gym-ies, get it?)

I love this bit, the night before a competition when all the weeks of practice are over and your routines are so ingrained in your head you could do them in your sleep. And I do. Them in my sleep, I mean. Maybe that's why I never make a mistake, not like Romilly at last year's Intermediate when she froze in the middle of her floor routine because she couldn't remember what to do next and cost us the team gold. Trust Rommy.

I watch her rummaging through her bag for something, amongst the screwed-up, out-of-date forms she should have given her mother to sign and the piles of unwashed kit. Unlike mine, her mother never goes through her stuff. 'Yes!' She locates the chocolate bar and brandishes it triumphantly. 'Want some?'

'Please.' I slip my top on and sit down on the bench to pull my trackie pants over my trainers. They catch on the soles and I tug them and there's the sound of tearing. Flip.

'You'll get in trouble with your mum,' Rommy says. She snaps the chocolate in two and automatically hands me the bigger half. I'd never do that. I wish I could but I'm one of those people who just has to have the biggest

piece, if you know what I mean. Rommy's more generous than me. Plus she always seems to have an unlimited supply of chocolate. 'Here you are, eat it up before she sees you.'

We munch companionably as we gather our stuff together and leave the sports hall, shouting goodbye to Mike and the others. He waves a hand and calls, 'Don't be late tomorrow!' As if!

Outside the leisure centre, Mum's waiting in the car park. I cram the last of the chocolate in my mouth and thrust my arm round Romilly's shoulders, squeezing her tight.

'See you tomorrow,' I say indistinctly through a mouthful of chocolate.

She hugs me back. 'Sleep well!'

I wish. Mum says I've always been the same. I was terrible as a baby, kept them up all night, not like Amber who was an angel and who slept round the clock from day one.

'That's why we didn't have another one,' she'd said over breakfast one morning when I was nine. 'I never had a wink of sleep with you.' Dad muttered under his breath, something like, 'Thank goodness for that, four's more than enough!' and ruffled my hair and called me his 'little contraceptive'. I remember Ben hooting and Amber making sick noises and Mum spluttering, 'Don't

say that in front of her!' and I asked, 'What's a contraceptive?' But then everyone fell about screeching like a herd of hyenas, even Zac who probably didn't get it either, so I got cross and took myself off and looked it up myself in the big dictionary. It said 'coitus interruptus', which sounded important but didn't mean a thing to me, and then it said, 'a preventative of pregnancy' and I still didn't see how *I* could prevent a pregnancy, a condition I knew all about because my friend Hannah's cat had just had kittens. But I wasn't going to ask them again because I HATE being laughed at. Thirteen-year-old Amber enlightened me anyway.

'They meant you were such an awful baby they didn't want any more kids after they had you,' she explained.

I was so angry I punched her and she thumped me back, and we continued squabbling in the car on the way to school. I still didn't really understand but now I know Amber had got it wrong. After they had me they didn't want any more kids for one good reason only. Why would they? Their perfect family was complete: two boys and two girls.

And in case you're wondering why I can recall this conversation from four years ago so accurately, it was because it took place at breakfast time THAT MORNING and I can remember ever single detail of THAT MORNING as if it were yesterday. I'd had a

disturbed night, and Mum had been up and down to me. I know what it was. I had this comfort blanket sort of thing I used to take to bed with me, and it had disappeared and I couldn't sleep without it. I was convinced Amber had taken it and hidden it somewhere. Anyway, Mum was shattered – it took her back to how permanently tired she was when I was a baby and never slept.

I think that silly contraceptive incident was the last time I can remember Mum laughing out loud.

I still don't sleep well, but that's another story, and at least I don't keep every one else awake all night any more.

Mum leans over and opens the door for me. 'Is she going to let you down again?' she asks, nodding towards Rommy who's cramming her ponytail under her crash helmet, astride the back of her stepdad's motorbike. 'Dangerous things,' she shudders, then says automatically, 'Put your seat belt on.' She ought to make a tape; she says this every time I get in the car, even though it's the first thing I do.

'No! She's learnt it really well this time,' I say, springing to Rommy's defence before I have time to remember my mouth is full, but it's too late. Mum darts a look at me as she eases out of the car park.

'What are you eating?'

'Nothing.'

'Chocolate! It's chocolate, I can smell it! Eva, what have I told you? Supper's ready when we get home and that will spoil your appetite and you'll . . .'

'. . . get spots. I know. Sorry, Mum, it was only a tiny piece.' I lie convincingly. It takes years of practice. You have to with a mother like mine, who sees danger in everything, including a harmless bar of chocolate.

'It's for your own good,' says Mum, peering anxiously from right to left before she edges her way cautiously out into the stream of traffic. 'You want to fit into your leotard tomorrow.'

'I'm not fat!' I object fiercely. Mum sighs and pats my knee.

'No, sweetheart, you're not. You're just right. But you're not naturally skinny like Amber. You need to watch what you eat. You can't afford to let the weight creep on if you want to be a top gymnast, can you?'

I don't answer. There's no point. Mum can win these arguments hands down. She conjures them up from nothing, breathes life into them, nurtures them to a triumphant conclusion and then moves on speedily to the next topic of concern, and it's impossible to stop the momentum.

I don't want to upset her anyway. Which is exactly

what I would do if I dared to say, 'Actually, no one's ever asked me if I *do* want to be a top gymnast.' I hate it when she's upset, properly upset I mean, when she gets in a state. So I keep quiet and start scanning through the itinerary for tomorrow with my feet comfortably up on the dashboard.

Second mistake. 'Eva! You've torn your tracksuit bottoms! I bet you pulled them on over your trainers. How many times do I have to tell you?'

'Sorry.' No point in lying about this, she's not stupid. A deep, heartfelt sigh escapes from her. My heart sinks. I've done it again. There's no doubt about it, I'm a huge trial to her.

At home I go upstairs to take a shower before supper. Heavy rock's belting from Zac's room where he's practising his air guitar bare-chested with a towel round his waist, just out of the shower. I go to grab it but he sees it coming and jumps back, kicking the door shut in my face. I love you too, Zac.

There's no sound from the loft where Ben hangs out, so he must still be at training. He's going up to Oxford University in the autumn, my big brother, to study physics and he's got a scholarship just because he's good at rugby and they want him to play for the university. Jammy or what? Dad's over the moon. Ben's going to his old college and it's a big deal for him.

When I go past Amber's room, I glance in through the half-open door automatically. My sister's bedroom is immaculate as usual: pink throw neatly folded across the purple bedspread, fluffy cushions and soft toys scattered artlessly over the pillows, books and CDs tidily arranged on the shelves.

My room looks as if a bomb's hit it. I grab the towel I dropped on the floor last night after gym and head for the shower. I forgot, Zac has beaten me to it. It's steamy and an upended shower gel bottle is leaking its sticky contents on to the shower tray; the towels are even damper than the one I'm carrying and, most gross of all, I can see a number of Zac's dark-brown hairs clinging to the tiled walls. Time to use Mum and Dad's en suite, methinks. I nip in quick before anyone notices. What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over, that's my philosophy.

There's been enough grief in this family.

Dad's home. His suit is hanging up on the wardrobe door and the shirt he wore to work today is protruding from the dirty washing-basket in the bathroom. He's 'something in the City' and I'm not sure what that *something* is, except that it's to do with investments, unit trusts, stocks and shares and all sorts of other dull-sounding, soul-destroying things. What I *am* sure of is, *he* thinks it's boring too, because every day, when he comes

home from work, he kind of creeps in looking wary and wearisome and the first thing he does is strip off, like he's a snake sloughing off a second skin that's too tight and restricting. Then he goes for a run in his shorts and T-shirt and when he comes back he looks fresh and alert and invigorated, more leonine now (like a lion, or a panther, in his case) than ophidion (snake-like).

I love words. I like collecting new ones but, even better, nowadays I'm becoming much more aware of how they fit together. They can be really powerful, you know. Like, it's not so much what you say, it's *how* you say it. Maybe one day I'll become a writer. Or a politician. Someone people will listen to and take notice of.

Mum wants me to be a doctor. Someone who listens to others then mends them. Only I'm no good at mending things. I'm more the type of person who breaks things up. I'm good at that.

Like Rommy and Sophie for instance. They were best friends for years, right since the start of their primary school. I got to know them when we all started at Portland High together in Year 7, all fresh from our feeder primaries and looking eagerly around to find all the new friends our mums had promised us we'd make. They were sitting in front of Hannah and me and I noticed Rommy straight away because she had a really long plait right down her back, which she could almost

sit on. I've persuaded her to have it cut now and she wears it in a ponytail like the rest of us. In fact, mine's the longest now.

When I found out her name I was soooo jealous. Romilly. It sounds really pretty, not like Eva. I hate my name, it's so old-fashioned, I mean NO ONE'S called Eva nowadays. I was named after my gran, Mum's mother, who died just before I was born. It's not fair, why couldn't Dad have chosen it? He got to choose Amber which is cool.

Anyway, it wasn't long before I realized that out of all the girls in my class (I didn't bother to inspect the boys, I had enough of those at home) it was Rommy I wanted to be best friends with. She was funny and easy to get on with, one of those people who's always happy and who'll fit in with what you want to do. Everyone liked her but she was Sophie's mate.

It wasn't difficult to wriggle my way in though. I invited her home for tea a few times and she got on really well with everyone, especially Zac who probably fancies her. (She definitely fancies him; she never stops going on about him.) Mum was a bit funny at first because Rommy lives in the council flats at the other end of town but even she liked her, you can't help it.

Anyway, after a while she started coming to gym club with me (I've been going since I was five!) and she got

to really like it. She's never going to be as good as me because she started too late, but she's good enough now to be in the same team. Soon we were spending all our time out of school together and Sophie didn't get a look-in, even though she joined the gym club too (spurred on by Rommy who was feeling a bit mean for neglecting her). I didn't worry about Hannah, I mean everyone needs to find their own friends, don't they?

In the end, it all worked out OK, because Hannah was already at gym club anyway; we'd both been doing it since the year dot, only I'm better than her. Soon we were all in the same competition team along with a few others in our age group from other schools. Now we do all our training together as well as go round in a group at school and everyone knows us, Rommy and me, Hannah and Sophie, as the Jimmies. And I really like this name because my surname is Jamieson so I feel as if it's my gang, named after me, which it is in a way.

Only now, Rommy and I are best friends. I make sure of that. Oh. And everyone calls her Rommy now, not Romilly.

I make sure of that too.

'Eva! Supper's on the table!'

I towel my hair roughly, run a comb through it and pull on my pyjamas. Early night tonight!

Downstairs, everyone's sitting round the kitchen table

with plates of lasagne in front of them. Ben's come in from training and is talking rugby to Dad at one end of the table. Mum's at the other end, pouring glasses of water. Zac's sitting impatiently the other side of Dad, his face a picture of torture as his plate of food steams provocatively in front of him. I slip into the chair next to Mum.

'Sorry.'

'Right, now we're all here, we can start,' says Mum reprovingly, holding a basket in front of me. 'Garlic bread?' I help myself to two slices.

'One's enough, Eva,' Mum says quietly. I put one back and start eating supper.

Opposite me, Amber's chair stands empty.