

Eloise Smith

WINNER *Takes*



GOLD

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*To children who dream
and adults who cartwheel.*



1

THE SPARKLY GRAVESTONE

‘**H**ow you doing today, Mum? I’ve something to show you. Watching?’

Pearl raised her arms to the cloud-streaked June sky. A breeze fluttered through her dark, shiny ponytail. Feet together, she focused on a line of trees at the far end of the cemetery. She blew out through dimpled cheeks. This was the hardest part of her tumble sequence. The part she kept getting wrong. And which most twelve-year-olds would never attempt, even on a tumbling floor.

She began her sprint. Despite her small frame, she quickly built speed. She moved powerfully along the grassy avenue dividing the rows of graves. She counted

five perfectly measured steps before launching into a front handspring. Her fingers pushed off the newly cut grass, still damp with morning dew. Blood rushed to her head, but she was used to it. Her body locked as she flipped in the air. Landing, she flew back up. For a moment, she was weightless. Just limbs, joy and energy. Glittering granite and sky flashed past. Mid-air, she curled up. Her knees crushed against her chest as she spun. *Release now*, whispered the breeze. She straightened out as the ground hurtled towards her. Just in time, her feet connected with grass, in front of the last gravestone.

Her body compacted down. She half-stepped forward, steadying her position. She frowned, hoping the error wasn't obvious. Then flexed her arms up in a 'V', waiting for applause. A front handspring tuck deserved a clap, even with a tiny mistake. Mum's gravestone remained silent. Pearl sighed and let her arms drop.

Fishing in her tracksuit pocket, she pulled out a tube of superglue and a single silver sequin. She unscrewed the cap, taking in the inscription on the stone:

Renshu Chui-Bolton
Wife to one,
Mother to two,
Inspiration to gymnasts,
Ray of sunshine to all.

She carefully glued the sequin over the 'i' in 'sunshine'. It joined a throng of sequins adorning the inscription. One for every visit. Twice a week for a year now. She popped the cap back on the superglue and surveyed her handiwork.

'Getting much cheerier.'

Mum didn't disagree. Pearl looked around the cemetery. The other graves looked tired: wilting flowers, weather-bleached photos, a discarded bottle. Not like Mum's – Bagley End's brightest gravestone. It had fresh carnations too, that were magically changed every week. Pearl wasn't sure who by. Certainly not Dad, who was too busy with his extra shifts to visit very often.

She slipped down into crossed legs. She put her shoes back on, taking her time. She cleared her throat.

'So, Mum. Thing is . . .'

She paused, straightening her feet in front of her.

'What if I don't get selected for the squad?' The words tumbled out, fast and awkward.

A bee buzzed in the grass.

'I mean. I should. I will. I have to!' she gabbled. 'I've done enough training, haven't I?' Though no training was ever enough to know for sure. Not even twenty-five hours a week. The gravestone didn't respond. However, Pearl knew exactly what Mum would be thinking.

'Light up the world with your shine,' Mum had said on the last video call, before the doctor's masked face appeared, serious eyes masking nothing.

'I'll shine brightly for you, Mum,' said Pearl quickly, nodding at the gravestone. 'I'll win gold in Paris, just like we dreamt. I won't let you down, I promise. Whatever it takes.'