



Off Balance: A Memoir

By Dominique Moceanu

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In this searing and riveting *New York Times* bestseller, Olympic gold medalist Dominique Moceanu reveals the dark underbelly of Olympic gymnastics, the true price of success...and the shocking secret about her past and her family that she only learned years later.

At fourteen years old, Dominique Moceanu was the youngest member of the 1996 US Women's Olympic Gymnastics team, the first and only American women's team to take gold at the Olympics. Her pixyish appearance and ferocious competitive drive quickly earned her the status of media darling. But behind the fame, the flawless floor routines, and the million-dollar smile, her life was a series of challenges and hardships.

Off Balance vividly delineates each of the dominating characters who contributed to Moceanu's rise to the top, from her stubborn father and long-suffering mother to her mercurial coach, Bela Karolyi. Here, Moceanu finally shares the haunting stories of competition, her years of hiding injuries and pain out of fear of retribution from her coaches, and how she hit rock bottom after a public battle with her parents.

But medals, murder plots, drugs, and daring escapes aside (all of which figure into Moceanu's incredible journey), the most unique aspect of her life is the family secret that Moceanu discovers, opening a new and unexpected chapter in her adult life. A mysterious letter from a stranger reveals that she has a second sister—born with a physical disability and given away at birth—who has nonetheless followed in Moceanu's footsteps in an astonishing way.

A multilayered memoir that transcends the world of sports, *Off Balance* will touch anyone who has ever dared to dream of a better life.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A rousing, intimate memoir... relentlessly candid.” (Vogue.com)

About the Author

Dominique Moceanu is the youngest American gymnast to win an Olympic gold medal, and the youngest to win a Senior National All-Around Title. She lives near Cleveland, Ohio. Visit Dominique-Moceanu.com.

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Chapter 1

SISTERS

When you have traveled the world, won Olympic gold, *and* gone through a very public court battle against your parents all by the age of seventeen, surprises don’t come easy. Discovering my sister Jennifer, though—*that* was a surprise.

On December 10, 2007, I found out that I had a second sister. I was nine months pregnant and about to take my college semester finals. With swollen feet and body parts bigger than I had ever imagined possible, I couldn’t even squeeze into a school desk anymore. But earning a college degree was a promise I had made to myself—and third trimester or not, I was going to get those finals done.

Cleveland was cold, rainy, and gray in a bona fide Ohio winter way. All I wanted to do was finish my exams, cuddle up under a blanket with some hot chocolate, and wait for the imminent arrival of my firstborn. But alas, that was not yet in the cards. I was headed for a study session right after a quick stop at the post office.

Earlier in the week, I’d missed the delivery of a piece of certified mail, and the notice had been sitting on my desk for several days. Lugging my backpack full of business textbooks to my car, I felt baby give me a stern kick. I almost lost the certified letter notice in a cold gust of wind and rain. Little did I know, this tiny three-by-five-inch piece of paper would turn my life—past, present, and future—upside down.

As a competitive gymnast, my life has always been filled with challenges that would ultimately define my future. From day one, I was taught to be prepared at all costs. And yet, pulling into the post office parking lot that day, I couldn’t have been more unarmed, unguarded.

After finding my place in line, I did finally wonder *who* might have sent me a registered letter. Only my family and personal friends used my home address. Looking out a nearby window, I saw that the rain was getting heavier. I needed to get home. I couldn’t afford to dawdle at the post office. The holiday season lines were longer and slower than usual, and I was getting antsy just standing there when I had so much to do. It seemed that everyone but me was sending packages or cards to relatives across the globe.

I finally got to the front of the line, received my package, and walked out into the rain.

As I awkwardly tried to dodge puddles, I stole a peek at the label on the envelope. The bubbly cursive letters

seemed so personal, but the name on the return address was completely unfamiliar to me. Back in my car I tore open the package and pulled out a cluster of items: a typed letter, a bundle of photos, and some court documents. *Please tell me I am not being sued!* Then I caught a glimpse of something familiar on one of the documents—my mother's and father's handwriting.

The cover letter was a page and a half of cleanly typed words, unequivocal in meaning, straightforward in sentiment. But my head began to spin as I struggled to make sense of even the simplest words.

I've known my whole life that I was adopted ... and that my biological last name was Moceanu.

I read the letter slowly—again and again. Breathless and stunned, I sat behind the wheel, staring out the window at the cars driving in and out of the parking lot—a stream of mothers, grandmothers, uncles hurrying in the rain with their holiday packages.

Her name was Jennifer and apparently she was my long-lost sister given up for adoption by my parents in 1987. The letter explained that Jennifer had always known that she was of Romanian heritage, but that it wasn't until she was turning sixteen that her adoptive parents decided to share the details of her birth. They revealed to her the names of her biological parents, and me, her biological sister. She wrote that she had been waiting four years to contact me directly.

I feel that I have one chance to show you and prove to you that I'm not some crazy person ... I'm sure after seeing all of the papers, you'll see that I'm serious.

Is this possible? I thought. I tried to think back to 1987. I would've been six years old when Jennifer was born. Was my mother even pregnant? Why couldn't I remember? My life has been one bizarre adventure, filled with highs and lows, one headline after another ... but a secret sibling? I sat in my car for what seemed like hours, repeatedly examining the contents of the package. The information was presented meticulously, like a jigsaw puzzle, each piece carefully and intentionally placed next to the other. The evidence was overwhelming.

The photographs hit me the hardest. The girl in the images looked exactly like my younger sister, Christina, born in 1989 when I was almost eight years old. Eventually I could see that while it was definitely not Christina, there was no doubt that she was a sister nonetheless—*my* sister. The resemblance was uncanny.

I have another sister!

How could something like this be kept a secret?

I was an only child for the first eight years of my life. My parents, Romanian immigrants, struggled to provide me a better life than the ones they had left in their homeland. They worked hard to give me every opportunity in life, and once I showed natural talent as a young gymnast, they spent every last penny on my

training. My father (“Tata”) often worked several jobs just to meet the financial burden of my escalating coaching and gym costs. My parents even relocated our family from city to city and state to state whenever necessary to meet my evolving gymnastic needs. According to Tata, I was destined for greatness, so I did my best not to disappoint my parents. By the age of seven I was a serious, committed gymnast, and by the age of nine I was receiving national attention and regarded as one of America’s hopefuls. Standing on the podium at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta and receiving a gold medal was the crowning jewel in a successful gymnastics career and, most certainly, the confirmation that my parents’ sacrifices were not in vain.

I took another look at the photos, took a deep breath, and called my parents in Houston.

“Hello?” Mama answered groggily.

“Did you give up a baby for adoption in 1987?” I blurted out. I knew I caught her by complete surprise and gave her a morning wake-up call she’d never forget, but sitting in my car, in the rain outside the post office, I needed answers.

Silence.

I felt a strange combination of emotions whirling out of control. I looked at my belly, my unborn baby, while images of my own childhood raced through my head. My parents were devoted to me and worked tirelessly to provide me with everything they possibly could. They wanted me to have every opportunity in life. But what I longed for most in my early childhood was a bigger family—brothers and sisters. The birth of my sister Christina in 1989 was one of the happiest days of my life. I remember Mama bringing her home from the hospital and how everything instantly seemed sweeter. A baby sister—she was everything to me. We did everything together and today remain the closest of friends. How could it be that Mama had another baby before Christina? Another sister? This didn’t make any sense.

“Mama, you have to tell me—is it true?” I pleaded.

“Yes, it’s true,” she said quietly in a voice I hardly recognized. I had been so close with my mother my entire life and truly thought that I knew everything about her. I suddenly felt a distance from her, and I didn’t like it one bit. I couldn’t understand how or why she would keep this from me and Christina. I’d expect something like this from my father, who is a born salesman and a master at gently twisting the truth when it suits his needs. He never had a real need to lie outright, since he could wrap you up in his stories in a heartbeat. What he omitted was oftentimes more telling and more important than what he actually said. But *not* my mother. Mama was a straight shooter, honest to the core. Or at least, that’s the Mama I knew.

“How could you have kept this from me?” I cried into the phone, both of us knowing there was no possible answer that would satisfy me. Tears flowed down my face; the floodgates had opened and I couldn’t stop. I was a complete mess.

I heard my mother crying on the other end of the phone, too. Mama has always been my rock and confidante, and her pain has always been my pain. But at that moment, I felt a total disconnect, which made me feel confused, angry, and alone.

I had so many questions, so few answers. My emotions were running in every direction, moving so quickly I could barely keep up. The raindrops hit the car roof like little metal hammers.

I felt paralyzed, retracing the steps of my life. Every photo ever taken, every holiday spent, all of our

childhood memories—there should've been *three* sisters. My life reshuffled, restructured in a matter of minutes.

Just like that, with the rip of an envelope, I had a sister and her name was Jennifer. She was born October 1, 1987, the day after my birthday. We are exactly six years and one day apart.

Jennifer would have been the *middle* sister. Why was she given up for adoption when Christina and I were allowed to stay?

Jennifer had provided contact information, and I was tempted to call her right away, but first I had to learn more. Anyway, I was in no mental state to talk at that point.

“I wanted to tell you, and I almost did many times. I just couldn’t find the words,” said Mama.

I was disappointed for so many reasons, but most of all I felt betrayed that she had kept this from me all these years. She had been the one I could trust and the one I relied on to always tell me the truth. I felt angry, sad, deceived, and vulnerable. I had always been open with Mama and confided in her things I have never shared with any...

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