

STRAP BAR

Christi Thomas-McEachern

Royal Fineworks Press
Unionville, New York



Copyright © 2022, 2012
Royal Fireworks Online Learning, Inc.
All Rights Reserved.

Royal Fireworks Press
P.O. Box 399
41 First Avenue
Unionville, NY 10988-0399
(845) 726-4444
fax: (845) 726-3824
email: mail@rftp.com
website: rftp.com



ISBN: 978-0-88092-900-4

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kemnitz
Editor: Jennifer Ault
Book Designer: Kerri Ann Ruhl

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free paper
using vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility. 21mr22

Too Wet!

After our last meet, I knew that Ivan was gonna yell, but I didn't know who would get it.

Would it be at all of us? In Russian? "Lazy Americans. *Blyat!*"

Or would Abraham get, "Do you think *you* can be *me*?"

Or would Ben have to hear, "I pee faster than you run!"

I'd medaled, so Mom wasn't talking about how much the weekend had cost us. But Ben's family had made sacrifices to pay for it, and he hadn't finished in the top ten. And the only time Abraham had stepped on the podium was for our team photo.

Coach Ivan talks to us about winning team trophies; he talks to our parents about college scholarships. He says that focusing on winning individual medals is dumb. That's why he goes outside to smoke during the awards. Dad says that for what we pay, I'd better win a dumb medal.

It was cloudy when Mom parked outside the gym. The fluorescent lights were just flickering on inside. They threw shadows like moving spiders onto the walls and floors, and that got me all jumpy. Some music would have been cool, but I'd seen Ivan's car in the lot, so I didn't turn any on. I knew he was waiting for us "optional" kids to show, and I didn't

want him coaching me by myself—not after the scores we’d posted that weekend. It didn’t matter that *I* hadn’t messed up; when someone choked, we all paid.

Warm-ups always started with fifty laps around the blue floor, no cutting corners. Next came sit-ups, V-ups, push-ups, pull-ups, and, for the kids who hadn’t medaled, throwing up. First one done got to lead stretches. Ivan walked around with a plastic pipe to fix our form during the stretch. A tap on the knee meant roll it up. Two taps meant sink deeper, stretch the hamstrings, turn out the hips. The guys who didn’t fix their legs fast enough got sat on by Ivan, like he was laying eggs on their backs.

I knew we’d start our rotation on the parallel bars, and I wanted to have my grip, not Ben’s dry one, so I took the sandpaper from my gym bag and scraped off one P-bar at a time. I squirted gobs of honey into my hands and smoothed it up and down the wood. The chalk came last: scoop with the right, toss a little to the left, smooth together, and rub until the wood, honey, and chalk gooed into the perfect grip—my grip. Ivan had taught me that. The only other guy who knew our secret was a level ten named Dave. He was fifteen and had been with Ivan since the gym had opened. I hadn’t been there that long—none of the rest of us had—but we’d signed up because training with a one-time Olympic gymnast is important if you wanted to get to the Olympics yourself. I’d been working toward that for as long as I could remember, and I was only twelve.

3:30 p.m. I heard brakes in the parking lot, doors slamming, my friends yelling about homework and rides,

and Coach on his phone speaking Russian. With a hand over his phone, he said, “Bryce, no tramp until after practice.”

I wasn’t planning to go on it, but I nodded, swung my sneakers over my shoulder, and jogged across our blue practice floor to the locker room. Our lockers were to the left, posters of Ivan to the right. Autographed photos from the Visa Cup and the Olympics hung on either side of the mirror on the back wall, so it was hard *not* to feel Coach’s eyes watching me as I changed into my leo, shorts, and shirt because, well, they were.

“Whadup?” asked Stanley.

“Nothing.”

“You’re here early,” said his brother Edward. Edward’s bag hit the floor, his ankle weights clanging against the locker door.

“I get out of school before you, remember?”

Stanley stretched the straps of his practice leo over his shoulders. “Why don’t you chill somewhere? Grab a smoothie or something before you get here?”

“Mom’s doing Corynne’s hair in the car.” My sister was only a level-four gymnast because she liked soccer more. I looked over their shoulders. “Is your dad coaching today?” Stanley’s father was a laid-back Olympic gymnast who sometimes helped out.

Ivan walked by the locker room, his ear still glued to his phone, but this time he was speaking English. Stanley didn’t want Coach’s attention after his high-bar that weekend, so

he stepped behind the door as Kiril walked in. I picked up my gym bag and shouldered past both of them to the P-bars.

Because there were no other level nines or tens, Dave was stuck training with us sevens. He ran a finger over the wood and winked. “Nice job.”

“Thanks.”

Dave walked over to the chalk bowl, his hands scooping and rubbing like he was scrubbing them in a sink. “Don’t listen to them today.”

I stepped to the springboard and jumped a couple of times to test it. “Who?” I asked, but I knew.

“Who do you think?” He nodded toward the locker room. “You beat them.”

I shrugged. “We took first place, team.”

“But *you* took first place all-around. No one else took an all-around spot. By the time Ivan’s done with them today, it’s you they’re gonna be mad at.”

I jumped for the bars and made a straight-leg swing, a second, a third. On the last downswing, I slowly raised my legs side by side until I spread them into a hip-high V. I thigh-sat on the wooden bars, my butt sagging a little between them. I locked arms to check my balance. “How bad will Coach be? I mean, sure, we choked a couple times, but a win’s a win, isn’t it?”

Dave laughed. “I fell on vault. Stanley forgot to let go of the high-bar and took out Ivan in front of a Russian judge.

Edward nailed floor but fell on pommel. Abraham stepped out of bounds how many times? And Ben—

“—was late.” I dropped to a backswing and cast up to an arched handstand—what Coach calls a rotten banana, and that’s not a compliment. Like a slowly spinning Superman, I swung down, through, over, and dismounted in a layout somersault. My toes dug into the mat. No step. “He’s gonna be brutal, isn’t he?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Then I’m gonna get it from everyone.”

Dave stared at me for a long second, like he was going to say something. But before he could, Edward and Stanley walked up, putting on their high-bar grips.

“Let’s do it,” said Edward. He banged his chest, and Stanley flexed one peck at a time to make Dave laugh.

I looked over at the clock. “We’ve got ten minutes.” So we started warming up on the events we liked before the *real* warm-up began with Ivan.

Right at four, Abraham jogged in tugging a t-shirt over his head. He threw his bag against the wall instead of using the locker room. Ben came in late—but dressed—and cut in front of Abraham for the P-bars. Like always, he walked like he knew it all: shoulders back, head kinda tilted. That attitude really ticked off Ivan when Ben didn’t medal.

Dave landed a double-back somersault off the P-bars and saw Ben and Abraham shoving each other to go next. He said to Ben, “There’s a line.”

Ben pointed at Abraham. “Like he won’t fall on cast.”

Dave faked a lunge at Ben, who ducked beneath the P-bars and spun round. He saw that no one had chased him and said, “That’s not funny, dude! Someone could get hurt.”

With a wink at Abraham, Dave walked to the back of the line.

Ben ran his hand over the bar and said, “It’s too wet,” and shot a dirty look at us.

Coach Ivan stepped out of his office and said, “The early bird helps. *He* trains. You just shoot off your beak.”

I saw the clock. It was 4:04 p.m. Three hours and fifty-six minutes to go.

Ben was red in the face when it was his turn to test the springboard: one bounce, two bounces. He jumped and caught himself on locked arms, his legs dangling instead of swinging forward to an L-hold. He dropped down to the sting mat and shook out his hands like they were dripping honey. “It’s *way* too wet!”

Dave pointed at the bars and said, “Just go, Ben.”

“But—”

Dave jerked a thumb. “Or bail! I don’t need V-ups because of you.” His hands were covered in chalk, so he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “The grip’s fine.”

V-ups are sit ups with straight legs and a hollowed back. Your feet and your head can’t touch the ground, and the only position you can rest in is a perfect V, your tailbone grinding

into the floor. They're brutal. The last time Ben popped off, we'd all gotten ten sets of fifty V-ups.

Ivan nodded. It was a threat.

Kiril said, "Oh, come on, Ben!"

Edward climbed up on the block—the blue four-by-four square mat that we use to mount the rings and high-bar. He reached for the nearest ring, the mat rocking like a giant blue dice with his weight shifts. As he swung out to grab the other ring, he said, "Sure missed you at last year's regionals, Ben. Grip there was nice and dry."

Ben hadn't qualified, so all he said was, "Whatever."

Ivan heard it all and yelled, "Line up!"

We stood shoulder to shoulder on the tumble track, a ninety-foot-long trampoline, and faced Ivan silently. He didn't speak until Ben stopped slouching like a baby.

"I see we didn't learn from our weekend." Ivan stared at Ben. "So I will teach you about hard work. Teamwork." Ivan taught best through conditioning. "Laps!"

"Great," Dave said quietly. He looked up, saw me staring at him, and shook his head. "It's not your fault."

I shrugged and waited to see who the other guys would blame when the conditioning really got going. I knew that they could turn on me just as easily as they had on Ben. At any moment Edward could miss a new trick, or Dave could blow a skill he's been doing forever. And when Ivan sees us do stuff like that, he yells, "*Blyat!*"

Kiril's Russian, so I asked him once what it meant. He told me *after* I promised not to use it at the gym because his dad works there. That's Coach Rob, but his real name is Vlyad. When we asked how he got *Rob* from *Vlyad*, he winked. It must be a Russian thing.

The only good thing about conditioning at practice is that Coach is usually too busy playing games on his phone to yell at us. At meets he can't have a phone on the floor, so he has plenty of time to say, "You don't know pain, what hard work is."

The worst was when Ivan complimented me and said, "You see, Abraham, you'll never be like Bryce." When any of the other kids hear that they can't catch someone, they form a new alliance. Today it might be against me.

Halfway through our laps, Ivan ordered, "Edward, pick up the speed."

So Edward growled, "Way to go, Ben."

And Ben complained, "Bryce made the grip too wet."

I guess once you hit the upper levels, friendships at the gym are like revolving doors at big hotels. People are behind and ahead of you in learning stuff all the time. While you never really want someone else getting a skill before you do, you also don't want someone too afraid to throw a new trick. Ivan gives V-ups for stuff like that.

Come to think of it, a hotel's turnstile entrance door, with its four smaller glass doors, is just like an awards stand. There's no room on the podium for two gold medalists, just

like there's no room for more than one person in the turnstile. Problem is that every team needs three guys in each event to beat the top three guys from every other club. How do you cheer for your guys to beat everyone except you without sounding like a creep?

Ivan says that we don't have to worry about stuff like that. We don't need to worry about the numbers, just the skills. To make sure we don't worry too much about one another or the math part, he keeps us busy with conditioning.

“Sit-ups! Ten sets of fifty.”

4:30 p.m. Three hours and thirty minutes to go.