

## The Crush

*Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.*

Every breath I took was magnified. Every tap of Cormac's foot deafened me. Every creak of the stands made me twitch. Each eye was focused on me, and alone I stood under the spotlight of one thousand hungry stares, eager for me to fail. I could see their hands, white knuckled and strained, gripping the edge of their seats as if it they would fall and not I. Food was forgotten in their hands, drinks suspended halfway to their gaping mouths, and all chatter had ceased. It was the crushing silence of the dead that would cushion my fall to the earth should I fail. It was the thought of my impending mortality and an eternity in oblivion that I feared as I took my first steps.

*Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Stamp. Stomp. Stamp. Stomp.*

I raised my head high and took a breath; inhale, exhale, inhale. My hands did not shake as I held them out beside me, my legs did not quiver below me as I danced lightly across the beam. Stepping lightly and dancing sweetly, I wound my way around the arena, every eye watch my every graceful manoeuvre until even time was forgotten and here was where I was supposed to be. Here I was at the end of my safety. Here, on this platform, I put my life in the hands of a much greater force than God. I put my life in my own hands. There was no net; only the hungry flames that would welcome me warmly should I miss a step. There was no soft mattress to fall on; only the powdery arms of sawdust and sand who would kiss me an eternal goodnight should I fail to hold my weight.

*Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Stamp. Stomp. Stamp. Stomp. Blink. Blink. Blink. Blink.*

The cool steel of the platform below my feet did nothing to calm my racing heart. Lightly, lightly, I stepped, I reached, I grasped. Breathe; inhale, exhale, inhale. I twirled slowly for the audience, all watching me as if I were a new creature that they had never before laid eyes on. I raised my arms above my head and stood daintily upon my toes, my eyes locked with Cormac's; *don't mess this up, sis*, he pleaded with me silently. His foot still tapped the floor, he was my rhythm, he was the one who really decided the moment I would test my simultaneously strongest and weakest feature; the faith I had in myself.

*Tick. Stamp. Blink.*

Cormac blinked twice. I performed a set of flawless flips and spins, my breath came heavy as I landed hard on my hands, my toes pointed to the heavens, my long plaited hair falling down down down towards the straining flames. The rising heat made my hands slick with sweat and my arms began to protest my weight. Tired and sore, my muscles screamed at the work they were doing, even though I'd done this everyday for years, tonight they protested louder than ever before. Yet I kept still, I kept my composure, I didn't deviate from my mask; the audience couldn't see my fear or the effort it took to keep myself so perfectly balanced on the edge of the platform, thirty feet above flames, forty feet above sawdust and sand. Breathe;

inhale, exhale, inhale. Smoke began to sting my eyes, sweat ran down my body and dripped off the end of my pixie nose, my breath came short. I clenched my teeth and breathed; inhale, exhale, inhale. It had been twenty six seconds since I began to hold myself, it was eighty four seconds until I would let myself fall. Eighty four agonising seconds for Charlie to take his position on the platform opposite me. Eighty four seconds until I put my life in my slippery, shaking hands.

*Tock. Stomp. Blink.*

I didn't think time could move so slowly, but I had been wrong. Each tap of Cormac's foot was another second passed. Sixty one, sixty, fifty nine, fifty eight; less than a minute now. My arms shook below me and I watched the upside-down world. Eyes still fixed on me, hungrily devouring my willpower as they waited waited waited for me to slip. Every two or three seconds a glance would be cast toward Charlie; a momentary interest in the hunky young man ascending the ladder, one perfectly placed step after another, until he stood upon the platform in all his handsome grace. The audience was not half as enraptured by his ascent as they were in my unknown fate. The danger I was in was infinite, the possibilities that could go wrong were endless and there was only one miniscule sliver of a chance that I would get this right. Practice doesn't make you perfect, it just makes you forget that there's still that one chance in a million left – that one chance that you might fail. Practice makes you forget that you haven't used it up and that it is there, waiting, always waiting for its big appearance on the stage of life. Twenty eight seconds, twenty seven seconds, twenty six seconds left. Charlie took his position gracefully and looked over at me. I blinked once; promise me this won't be my last fall, I begged in that small lapse of light. Charlie grinned down at my audience and kicked the rope off his pedestal; it swung through the air with a terrifying whoosh and swung to and fro until it came to a halt. Eight, seven, six, five blissfully safe seconds until I fly. Charlie winked at me; *breathe little albatross, this isn't your one in a million*. His voice echoed in my head as it always did before I made my fall. Four seconds...three more seconds...two... Charlie took a step closer to the edge and held up his arms like a finished gymnast. He looked up at the stars and I saw him murmur a prayer. Every eye in the arena was on that rope, on my body, on Charlie's smile. Every single person in their chairs held their breath, every single one of them wanted to know what came next. The suspense was just too much; the danger was just too intense. One glorious second left.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

That was the thing about humans; we loved the thrill of danger until we stared it in the face, and then the sad truth of it was that we were all scared. That was life's big secret; deep down everyone is scared of oblivion, everyone fears that no one will catch them.

*Stomp. Blink. Blink.*

I tensed and pushed myself backwards off the platform. The world spun as I did; somersaulting and spiralling through the air, its intangible embrace in no way slowing my decent. I saw the end of the rope and my heart stopped; I had another full rotation to complete in the space of half a rotation. I was going to miss my cue. This was going to be my one in a

million. Popcorn fell from stilled fingers, air didn't move through lungs, hands grasped at steel seats, and I fell down. Down. Down. The strange thing was that I wasn't surprised at this realisation, it didn't take me by surprise at all. I accepted a long while ago that this fall was inevitable, but even that acceptance couldn't stop the sudden fear that bloomed in my chest. I glimpsed Charlie as he realised that I wouldn't make it, and I saw even Cormac stand uncertainly. One thousand prying eyes watched hungrily as I tumbled one more time and closed my eyes ready for the sweet embrace of the rising smoke.

*Blink.*

One woman screamed. Two men started forward. Three children began to cry. Four seconds and I would be in oblivion.

*Tock.*

One moment I was swan-diving through the air toward the fire, and the next all the air around me stopped moving and a pain shot down my legs. *Improvisation*, the ringmaster's voice barked in my head, *if something happens that's not to plan, don't look surprised, just continue on with it, for the show must go on.* And I did. I spread my arms wide and smiled brilliantly. There was a pause, not a thing happened. Not a whisper was whispered. Not a breath was breathed. Not an eye was blinked. And then all at once, as if they had rehearsed it, the audience stood and cheered and clapped and laughed. The danger they had been waiting for had pleased them; they had no idea that none of it was rehearsed; they had no inclination that my life had nearly come to an end. This popcorn munching audience was so taken by the danger, by the thrill, by the imminent possibility of failure that they ignored the threat to my safety. Thank goodness for Charlie, I thought as I looked up at him. He was clutching my spindly ankles in both of his warm hands, his face was the mask of the performer, but I knew from the tightness of his grip that this was about the hardest trick he'd ever performed. He held the rope between his legs and was using every ounce of strength to keep us from falling twenty feet to the cold ground. Artistically, I manoeuvred myself so that I climbed up Charlie's body, climbed up the rope and, with a performance that didn't disappoint the crowd, loosened the rope from the roof enough for Charlie to leap gracefully to the ground through the flames. He grinned and bowed at the crowd and then held his hands up so that I could do a somersault from the rope and land with my hands on his, balancing upside-down above his head. I grinned and pushed off, landing daintily on my feet. My feet, my dear feet, so grateful to feel solid earth beneath them; the prickle of sawdust and the pinch of sand. My legs shook with fear and relief as I bowed to my audience. Cormac came to stand beside me, he took my hand, Charlie took the other, and like a child I was led from the arena. I was led away from the scene of my almost death. Away from the people who thirsted for the nail biting danger we provided. Away from the souls who would see my death as entertainment. Away from the ringmaster who would only take their money and claim it to be part of the show. Silently we walked into the change rooms where I sat at my dresser and looked in the mirror and finally I was able to stop. Finally I was able to

*Breathe.*