

"A stunning read [...] simmering with tension and gripping to the final word."

—DEBBIE RIGAUD,

New York Times bestselling author of *Simone Breaks*  
*All the Rules* and *A Girl's Guide to Love & Magic*



*I don't even know if I'm following the choreo.  
I'm moving without worrying about being good,  
without obsessing about getting every move right. All the  
frustration and disappointment I jammed down every time  
I was passed over for a role, all of my yearning to be seen  
bursts out of me in a torrent of unfettered emotion.*

Ballet is Aisha's life. So when her mental health suffers after she's denied yet another opportunity at her elite academy because she doesn't "look" the part, switching to her BFF Neil's art school seems like the perfect plan . . . until Aisha discovers Neil has been struggling with his own issues. Overwhelmed, Aisha enlists the help of a disarmingly cute musician who makes it a little less scary to open up when she needs support.

But when discrimination in her new ballet class awakens old traumas, Aisha must find strength in herself and place her trust in others to make her next move.

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WHEN IT ALL *Synces* UP AMEYAW

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WHEN  
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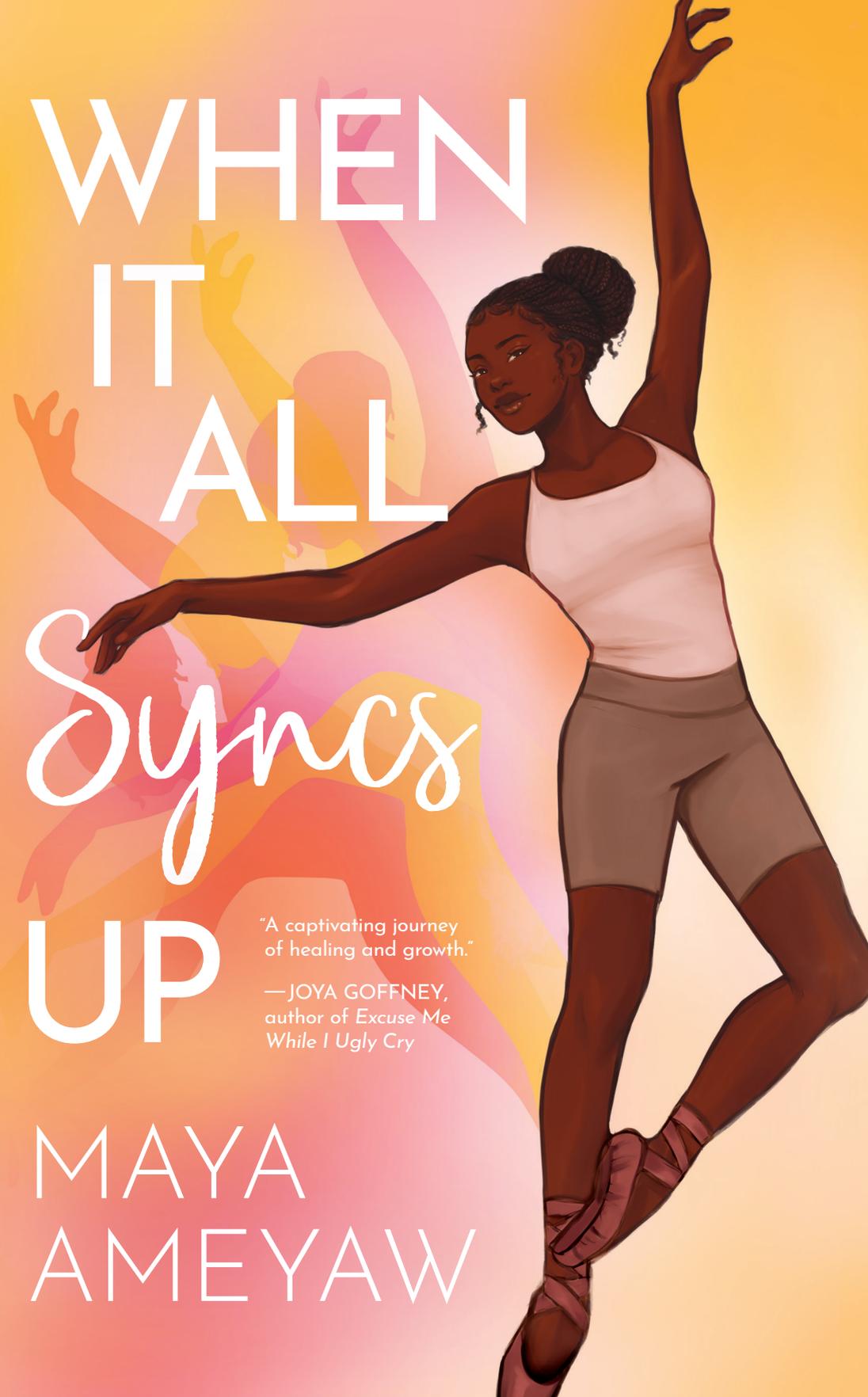
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UP

MAYA  
AMEYAW

"A captivating journey  
of healing and growth."

—JOYA GOFFNEY,  
author of *Excuse Me*  
*While I Ugly Cry*



# Advance praise for *When It All Syncs Up*

“A bold, insightful debut that explores young artists experiencing trauma. Maya Ameyaw writes about the psychological tolls and triumphs of dancing with a captivating freshness that will pull readers into this intense, intimate story.”

—**MARIKO TURK**, author of *The Other Side of Perfect*

“Maya Ameyaw’s storytelling is as expressive and entrancing as the human form in dance. *When It All Syncs Up* is a stunning read—an emotionally complex tale of friendships and first loves that’s simmering with tension and gripping to the final word.”

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“Aisha is every teen who’s struggled to separate their self-worth from the expectations of their parents. A touching story of healing and self-discovery.”

—**RYAN DOUGLASS**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Taking of Jake Livingston*

“With storytelling that’s beautifully dark and moving, Ameyaw crafts a captivating journey of healing and growth.”

—**JOYA GOFFNEY**, author of *Excuse Me While I Ugly Cry* and *Confessions of an Alleged Good Girl*

“*When It All Syncs Up* is a powerful story of finding the light when the clouds roll in. Ameyaw crafts an emotional tale of journeying through mental health dilemmas while dealing with friendship, love, and starting over. A gorgeous narrative of new beginnings, fresh hope, and taking back control.”

—**JOY L. SMITH**, author of *Turning*

“Ameyaw’s debut is raw and real. It contextualizes Black girlhood through the lens of mental health and what it looks like to heal within community. Aisha is strong and soft, a perfect balance in a relatable heroine.”

—**LOUISA ONOMÉ**, author of *Like Home* and *Twice as Perfect*

“At times hopeful and beautiful but also heartbreakingly devastating, *When It All Syncs Up* is a story of love in so many forms. But maybe most important of all, it is about the love we give ourselves, and allow ourselves to be given, even at our most broken.”

—**JONNY GARZA VILLA**, author of the Pura Belpré Honor Book *Fifteen Hundred Miles from the Sun*

“Delicate and fervent, like any good ballet performance, *When It All Syncs Up* is honest, captivating, and fresh. It will stay with you long after you’ve finished the book.”

—**GABRIELA MARTINS**, author of *Like a Love Song* and *Bad at Love*

“*When It All Syncs Up* is a journey that will pirouette into your hearts and leave you breathless. So much more than a story about dance, the pages are filled with depth, tackling heavy issues from a relatable point of view. Ameyaw reminds us throughout of the lengths one will go to for the love of friendship. And how sometimes, finding your own path along the way will offer the surprising self-discovery of courage and strength. I cannot wait to see what’s next from this debut author because I am here for the ride.”

—VANESSA L. TORRES, author of *The Turning Pointe*

“*When It All Syncs Up* is a powerful, needed story of healing. Aisha deals with racism, mental health issues, and bullying, as well as experiencing first love. It’s a story that will resonate with so many teens and help others have more compassion. The honesty, vibrancy, and compelling writing make it an unputdownable book.”

—CHERYL RAINFIELD, author of *Scars and Stained*

“Powerful, moving, and achingly personal, *When It All Syncs Up* is the perfect read for teens who need a book that feels like a friend who understands.”

—KAYLA ANCRUM, author of *The Wicker King*, *The Weight of the Stars*, and *Darling*

WHEN  
IT ALL  
*Synchs*  
UP

MAYA AMEYAW



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# Author's Note

The ultimate intention of this story is to hold space for people, particularly young Black women, who have experienced trauma. This is a story centered around healing and support; however, there are a lot of dark places that are travelled along the way.

Those sensitive to issues of racial discrimination, mental health challenges, disordered eating, and verbal abuse, please be aware that these topics are covered at length throughout this story. There are also a lot of on-the-page descriptions of addiction issues in relation to a supporting character, as well as brief off-the-page mentions of physical and sexual assault of a supporting character. I advise those who find these topics potentially triggering to proceed carefully and at their own pace.

# 1

*“Stop freaking out. You’ve got this, Aisha.”*

Michaela’s voice cuts through the jittery, jumbled thoughts that have me pinned in place in front of my dresser mirror. When I glance at her across my tiny dorm room, her dark eyes are fixed on me, daring me to disagree.

Inhaling deeply, I sink to the floor. The faint chemical musk of carpet cleaner fills my nose. My heartbeat starts to slow down as I contort myself into a split, pressing down hard on my calves.

“You’re right. I worked my ass off last week.”

*“Exactly.”* Michaela’s still focused on me, looking as effortlessly confident as always. *“Warner had to have noticed. You’re definitely scoring an apprenticeship spot.”*

“We’ll see. Wish me luck.”

Jumping up, I cross my room in a few steps. I tap my chest once before tapping hers. My fingers glide off the glossy magazine poster of Michaela DePrince tacked to the wall above my desk next to my Misty

Copeland and Raven Wilkinson posters. I tap Misty and Raven next.

Michaela's airborne form, poised gracefully in a *grand jeté*, is physics-defying. A pattern of tiny vitiligo spots is a beautiful explosion of sparks across her deep brown skin. My own skin is a similar shade but slightly darker.

*"Sweetie, remember what I said about staying out of the sun!" My mom calls out as I skip into the kitchen from the backyard. My shoulders stiffen, but I pretend not to hear her as I twirl my iridescent pink Sailor Moon wand, watching it glimmer in the sunlight.*

Snapping out of the memory, I find myself still staring at the poster. Looking away, my face grows warm like someone is witnessing this, even though I'm alone.

It's pretty sad that I've had a variation of this same fake conversation every morning for the last three years. But being almost friendless forces you to get creative.

I would definitely be completely friendless if Neil knew about my little morning ritual.

"I get that you love Michaela. But it's just a stupid *poster*, Ish." I can almost hear his snorting laugh.

I'm somehow annoyed even imagining Neil saying that. Which is dumb. I should stick to being annoyed with him about something he actually did—missing our weekly virtual dance party last night. I stayed up way too late waiting for him to call, but he must have fallen asleep early.

*All right, here we go.* Time to stop zoning out and talking to myself like a freak.

I grab my hoodie off the back of my desk chair and wrap it securely around my waist over my leotard. Straightening my spine, I perfect

my posture, arranging my face in a placid expression fit for public consumption. Wouldn't want to scare anyone faint of heart with my natural resting bitch face.

Taking a final deep breath, I step out of the warmth of my room into the cool, hushed hallway. The rubber soles of my knitted boots squeak against the sparkling floor.

I squint my eyes almost shut. The rising sun peeking out from the towering crop of evergreens behind the dorms is way too bright through the empty hall's floor-to-ceiling windows.

A door clicks open behind me, and I quickly rummage around in my dance bag for my headphones. Tchaikovsky drifts gently into my ears, and I focus on mentally running through today's choreo. I visualize myself doing my *chainé* turns effortlessly, my turnout flawless as the music swells.

I'm brought back to the present by someone shouldering past me, bumping me off balance from behind. Gritting my teeth for a moment, I force my face back into its unbothered position as I look up from my phone. It's Stephanie, not even stopping to apologize as she books it toward the washroom, her toiletry basket swinging wildly behind her.

*Oh, no worries, Steph. I'm all good.* Containing a sharp glare, I keep moving toward the studio.

Almost everyone is gathered by the windows when I get there. Taking my usual spot close to the door, I don't look up from my phone even as I feel their eyes on me.

There's some faint whispering, followed by the familiar sharp peal of laughter from Noelle. It always reminds me of the sound a cat would make if someone mistakenly stepped on its tail. There are some quieter giggles from her friends, and I turn my music up, a fury of strings

drowning them out. I concentrate on changing into my pointe shoes.

Usually, summer vacation is a much-needed break from Noelle and the rest of the girls but not this year. Everyone else in our level is gone for the summer; there are just ten of us here for the final intensive.

Only five of us are going to move forward to the apprenticeship program at the Western Canadian Ballet, the major company that's partnered with my school. The program starts next week, once the school year is back in session. We've been in the studio all of August—today's our very last day.

I'm trying not to freak out about it too much, but this is the biggest opportunity I've had since Neil and I placed in the Youth American Grand Prix.

But that was almost exactly three years ago—basically a lifetime in ballet. This apprenticeship is my last chance to get back on track with potentially scoring a contract with a respected company.

The Western Canadian Ballet is as good as it'll get for me now. I try not to think too much about what could have been—what *should* have been. I try not to picture what it would have been like if Neil and I won YAGP scholarships to the School of American Ballet, the number one ballet school in North America. SAB is where we always planned to go when we were kids. We worked endless hours preparing for that before—

Squeezing my eyes closed, I shake my head. I can't do anything about the past now. All I can do is focus on nailing today.

Madame Warner enters, and everyone scrambles to their feet to take their places at the barre. Stephanie bolts in a second afterward and takes her spot, flanking Noelle. Warner puckers her wrinkled face, and Stephanie mutters an apology.

Warner turns on the music, and we begin warming up at the barre, starting with our *pliés*. I settle into my usual rhythm, studying my form carefully in the mirror as I move through the positions, bending my knees so they're exactly over my toes. Warner's voice slowly transforms into the voice of my first dance teacher, Madame Dmitriyev. That always happens when I'm in the zone; her deep, throaty voice keeping me in perfect time, yelling out the eight-count in Russian.

Close to the end of class, I feel eyes on me again, and I realize Warner has paused right in front of me. Which she's never done before.

She claps twice, and we all freeze. Her gaze remains fixed on me, and my stomach drops straight to my bowels.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I prepare myself to be reamed out for my form.

*Tuck your zadnitsa!* Madame D.'s voice reverberates in my brain from beyond the grave. I can almost feel the light tap of her cane on my butt, and I resist the urge to flinch.

"Let's see you solo," Warner says, and I blink at her. It takes me a moment to register the meaning of her words.

*Earth to Aisha. This is it. This is your shot.*

I manage a nod and force my shaking legs to move toward the front of the room. Sweat drips down the back of my neck.

I start, keeping my arms graceful and light as I lift them into my first position. I kick my front foot forward and up, my extended toe soaring toward the ceiling.

There's no way in hell I'm going to mess this up—not after everything. I've imagined this moment thousands of times. And now my day-dreams are somehow bleeding into reality.

Letting go, my body fully awakens, and muscle memory sets in. My *chainé* turns are perfectly executed as I float across the room in perfect time with the music. For a moment, I wonder if this is just another vivid fantasy, but when the music and my body stop as one, my heart rams against my ribcage so hard I know I can't be making this up.

Warner's studying me. The room is so silent I can hear birds trilling to each other from the woods outside the window.

Turning to the rest of the class, she lifts a finger in my direction. "*That's* what I want to see."

I can't help the grin that takes over my face. She's been stingy with praise all summer. Warner turns and faces me again; her eyes run the length of my body. She takes in my pink tights and pointe shoes—a stark contrast to my deep complexion. She says nothing to me, but her thoughts are as clear as day in her eyes.

*What a shame.*

The realization hits me with a sickening thud, leaving me breathless. It doesn't matter how closely I followed the choreo. Even though my movements were cuttngly precise, even though my figure—besides my overgrown legs and hips—matches the rest of the girls, my skin never will.

Warner looks away and swivels on her heel as she heads toward the door. "The apprenticeship list is posted in the locker room."

I walk back to my spot by the door with my head held high, consciously keeping my face as expressionless as possible as the other girls shoot me side-eyed glances. I swallow down the acidic rage sprouting within me.

*Stay cool. Just stay cool.* Grabbing my headphones, I switch from

calming Tchaikovsky to my loudest playlist, electric guitars wailing in relentless riffs. I shut my eyes and make myself focus on some winding down stretches.

When everyone else has headed into the locker room, I slowly get to my feet. The sickly-sweet strawberry flavored meal replacement shake I forced down first thing this morning sloshes violently in my stomach.

*You don't know for sure what Warner was thinking. You can't know for sure. You're being paranoid.*

I push open the locker room door and glance at the list on the bulletin board. My name isn't there.

Okay. So I definitely read Warner's face correctly.

A squeezing knot forms in my throat. I manage to take in a full breath, tinged with the classic locker room mix of mildew and body odor.

I want to throw myself on the floor and scream, but I keep perfectly still. This was my very last chance; this was the only way I would ever be able to get anywhere decent with my ballet career—

*Keep it together.*

I collapse onto a bench near my locker, facing away from the other girls. With a flick of my wrist, I sweep some stray braids back into my bun and start untying my pointe shoes.

The tip of my left shoe is a deep crimson. When I get it off, the bandage on my big toe is soaked through. I grab a new bandage and unwrap the old one, discovering what's left of my toenail barely hanging on. Bracing myself, I rip it off.

I think of pain in levels since I'm always in it, my muscles perpetually aching. Losing a toenail usually cuts through the background pain for

a sharp moment, but the wince that crosses my face is only a reflex.

I feel absolutely nothing.

My pulse speeds up to a vibrating hum, and the fluorescent overhead lights start to weave and bob erratically. All sensation in my feet fades, but it's not like normal pins and needles. It's like my nerve endings have all been snipped at once.

A locker door slams, and the room comes back into focus. I run a hand over my sweaty face and rewrap my toe as tightly as I can, fresh blood seeping through the new dressing.

The girls' voices fade and then they're gone, leaving me alone in the locker room. The bone-deep numbness in my feet spreads up my ankles and then my legs before it races through me. Erasing me.

I untether from myself like a ghostly apparition. Somehow, I'm now staring into my own dark eyes, as lifeless as a propped-up doll's.

The utter strangeness of this jars me back into my body again. I bite my tongue to keep from yelling out.

*What the hell is happening to me?*

Trembling, I get to my feet and throw on my hoodie before I grab my bag. When I get out into the hallway, it's empty. Searing midday sun is unabashedly streaming in through the windows now. I should head to the cafeteria to grab lunch, but as if of their own accord, my feet move toward the dorms.

I stare at my phone's lock screen. It's a picture of me and Neil—we're both laughing so hard our faces are contorted, our grins slightly blurred as we throw our heads back. For the life of me, I can't remember what was so funny. It could've been anything. He never fails to crack me up with the dumbest shit.

Since I didn't get the apprenticeship, maybe I could visit Neil before

the school year starts up again next week? Dad should be okay with it; he let me visit him last summer.

The cool surface of my phone is pressed up against my ear, and I become aware of it ringing.

When I hear Neil's voice, I let out a breath of relief.

"You know what to do."

"What?" There's a blaring beep, and I register it's just his voicemail.

This is the first time he hasn't picked up my call. Ever. I stare at my phone in disbelief for a moment before hanging up and calling my dad instead.

"Hey, honey. What's up?" he says through a yawn. "It's late over here."

I wince at myself for blanking on the fact that Tokyo is sixteen hours ahead. "Oh yeah, sorry."

"No worries. What's going on? Did you get into the program?" he asks, his voice perking up. "Congrats!"

I step back into my room. Now that I'm alone, I let my face fall and my shoulders droop.

"I didn't get in." I keep my voice as light as I can manage. "No big deal, though," I add quickly.

I really don't want him to start worrying about me again. Like when he sent me to that horrible clinic before I moved here. Shaking my head, I envision holding a match to the memory and setting it ablaze.

But whatever just happened in the locker room, it wasn't like before. As spaced out as I used to get sometimes, floating out of my own body is a brand-new development in terms of my general screwed-up-ness.

"I know how much this meant to you, honey. I'm so sorry. Are you

all right?”

I kick off my boots and plop down on my bed, stomach first.

“I’ll be okay. I can go to a dance college instead when I graduate.” I say this like it’s a perfectly feasible second option instead of the complete failure that it truly is. The most prestigious ballet companies in the world choose their new dancers through apprenticeships, not college programs.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” His voice gets all syrupy with concern.

“Yeah, it’s fine.” Bitterness almost overwhelms me for a moment, but I push it back down. Stewing over this won’t change the fact that my future of mediocrity is now sealed. “I was only calling to check in . . . Do you mind if I visit Neil in Toronto for a few days before school starts next week? I promise I won’t book a super pricey flight or anything.”

He’s silent for a long moment.

I wonder if he’s annoyed that I didn’t ask to visit him in Tokyo instead. As much as I would really love to see him, he’d probably have to work the whole time I was there anyway. Biting my lip, I fight the urge to ask if he can visit me anytime soon. I know it’ll just make him feel bad if he can’t get time off before Christmas.

“Okay, that’s fine. But I need to ask you something first.” His voice is strangely grave.

“Uh, sure. What is it?”

“Are you and Neil dating?”

I screw up my face in confusion as I wrack my brain for anything that could have prompted this from him. Neil and I met when Madame D. put us together at her dance studio when we were eight.

Before my parents' divorce, he was over at our house almost every day. He's basically family.

"Yeah. We're dating." I snort as I roll over onto my back. "We've been keeping this from you for years. Congrats, you finally clocked us. You're kidding, right?"

I expect him to laugh but he doesn't. "If you're seeing each other now, I'm not comfortable with you staying over at his place like when you were kids."

I roll my eyes toward the ceiling. "You know we're just friends."

He's quiet again for a moment before responding. "I didn't expect you two to stay so close these last few years."

I'm guessing that's because the last time Dad saw him, I wasn't exactly thrilled with Neil. It was the day I left for the academy. We'd stopped at Neil's house to say goodbye on the way to the airport.

*Neil stares down at his front steps, refusing to look at me.*

*My voice is almost gone from screaming. I'm completely beyond caring that Dad can hear me from the car a few feet away. "You promised you wouldn't—"*

I sit up abruptly, suddenly short of breath. *Don't think about it.* Shaking my head, I make myself focus on his voice again.

"I thought you'd make some new friends in Alberta—"

"I thought you liked Neil." Neil and my dad used to be close too, to the point that it irritated me sometimes when they would talk for hours on end about boring-ass sports crap.

"I do. He's a great kid."

Thankfully, Dad has no idea that Neil isn't quite the same sweet little goody-two-shoes he used to be.

"Well, like I said, it isn't like that with us. So can I go?"

“All right. Just check in with Neil’s dad. And one last thing—”

“I won’t visit Mom while I’m in town,” I say in a monotone.

God, why is he so obsessed with thinking I want to see her every chance I get? I’ve always been way closer with him than my mom—even before the divorce. But in the past couple years, I’ve only seen her for brief, awkward holiday dinners before my dad and I would go actually celebrate with Mexican takeout.

“Aisha,” he says warningly. “I know you think I’m being ridiculous. But I don’t feel comfortable with you seeing your mother on your own.”

Why would I even want to see her? The idea of telling her I didn’t get the apprenticeship makes my skin itch like I’m about to break out in hives.

“I promise, I won’t,” I say, keeping the annoyance out of my voice this time.

“Thank you. Let me know when you land safely. Love you.”

“Okay. You too.”

Once I’m off the phone with him, I try Neil again.

I let out a long breath when I get his answering machine. “How the hell are you *still* asleep? Look, sorry this is last minute, but I’m heading back to the city. I can crash at your place, right? Call me back.”

I toss my phone on the mattress and look over at Michaela, Misty, and Raven. I wait for some reassuring words, but there’s nothing. They’re just stupid, silent posters.

That same consuming numbness from the locker room starts to creep up on me again. Before it can overtake me, I jump up from my bed and hastily untack the posters. Not able to bear the thought of crumpling them, I just release my hold, letting them float gently into

the waste can. Turning away, I go to the dresser and empty its contents into my gym bag.

I try to convince myself that a break from this place is all I need. Once I see Neil, I'll for sure feel more like myself again.

# 2

When I get off the plane at Pearson, the continual conspicuousness of being one of the only Black people in a public space subsides. The back of my neck stops prickling from the sensation of being constantly watched.

The faces in the jam-packed terminal reflect a dizzying array of cultures from around the world. I sidestep a pair of zombified parents and their screeching twin toddlers before letting my agreeable veneer slip from my face. Navigating through the crowd toward the exit, I swear under my breath when Neil doesn't pick up my call for the thousandth time.

Humidity blasts me in the face as I step out of the terminal and head toward the taxi queue. I wipe my sweaty forehead, trying to come up with some explanation other than Neil not wanting to talk to me. Maybe he lost his phone charger. Maybe he lost his phone altogether. Neil's not the sort of person who loses track of his things often, though.

Is he upset with me for some reason? He's been a little weird recently, calling me at the oddest hours, but he hasn't said anything out of the ordinary. The last time we talked was two nights ago. I always sleep with my phone on vibrate next to my pillow to be ready if he calls. I'd been so dead asleep I didn't even remember waking up and grabbing my phone. I'd just found myself sitting up in bed, his groggy voice in my ear.

"Ish?"

"Yeah. I'm here." The pitch-dark window reflected my puffy eyes back at me. I rubbed a hand over my face and groaned internally.

Neil usually called me super late once a month, but in the week before that call it had turned into almost every night.

We talked and laughed about nothing like we always did—what teachers we hated, stupid drama at school—anything and everything except for the fact that it was three in the morning. It was getting more and more difficult not to ask him what was going on with him, but I held my tongue. I knew he'd just shut me down like always.

*He lost his phone. He had to have lost his phone.* I try to take a deep breath of hot, smoggy air as I shoot my dad a text to let him know I landed. Shuffling forward in the taxi line, I try Neil again, just to leave him another message that I'm on my way over. There's the click of the line being picked up after only one ring.

I let out a full exhale for the first time all day. "Thank God."

"Uh, hey, Aisha." It isn't Neil's voice.

My mind races for a moment before I realize it's his friend Ollie. We've only spoken on the phone a few times, but I distinctly remember the melodic way my name rolls off his tongue. He says it with two syllables instead of three, the way it's pronounced in Arabic. "This is—"

“Ollie, I’m headed to Neil’s right now,” I cut him off as I inch closer to the front of the taxi line. I plug my right ear and raise my voice above a honking cab. “Are you with him? Why do you have his phone?”

“Wait, you’re in town?”

“Where’s Neil?”

“He’s, uh . . . We’re—we’re—at the . . .” I strain to hear his voice.

Bile scratches its way up my throat as I hazard a guess. “At the hospital?”

Ollie sighs. “Yeah. Mercy General.”

I tighten my grip on my gym bag strap until it digs deep into my palm.

“What happened? Is he okay?”

Why am I only asking this now instead of any of the nights Neil called and things seemed off with him? My mind shuts down for a moment. Another car horn sounds, and I snap back into myself and realize it’s my turn to grab a taxi.

Ollie still hasn’t answered me.

“Is he okay?” My voice is half-strangled as I rush forward and open the cab’s back door.

“You should get down here.”

\*

Outside my window, the sunset ignites the sky for a final moment before it’s snuffed out by the night. All around me, endless dark windows in overgrown skyscrapers start to blink awake. I count the tiny rectangles of waking light instead of the price meter rocketing upward as the taxi inches its way through gridlocked traffic.

Once we're out of the downtown core, traffic eases up as we head toward the city's outer limits. Skyscrapers are replaced by social housing units and dated strip malls that sit only streets apart from lakefront mansions and sprawling golf courses. Neighborhoods filled with smaller mid-century houses are scattered across the divide. Eventually, the cab approaches Mercy General, and I grab my credit card out of my wallet. Thankfully, I found a deal on my flight earlier—the cost of the taxi would've maxed out my card otherwise.

I know I should call my dad and tell him Neil's in the hospital. But I also know he won't let me stay at his place anymore if he finds out.

Maybe he injured himself dancing. Neil quit ballet after I moved away because his dad couldn't afford to let him keep competing professionally or send him to a private academy like mine, without a scholarship. But I know he still does other styles like modern, jazz, and hip hop at his public school. Or maybe he was just messing around doing a stunt like a backflip and broke his arm or something. Hopefully it's not anything serious.

I've never been inside Mercy General before. When I developed tendinitis when I first started pointe work, my parents took me to a specialist at St. Paul's, which is a few miles closer to our old house by the lake. I remember its entrance was framed with an immaculately maintained garden. Mercy General's first level is covered in old construction siding painted with intricate street art.

The emergency room's AC turns my sweat into a wet chill that shoots shivers through me. The small waiting room is half-full and within a few seconds I spot Ollie sitting in one of the tiny plastic green chairs that line the room.

He's a tall, skinny kid in a faded band tee. His deep olive skin tone suggests that he might have a Middle Eastern background, but I don't actually know. I've never met him in person before. I only recognize him from the times he's been over at Neil's place while we were on FaceTime. He's half-stranger, half someone I know a weird amount of personal things about. Ollie is Neil's closest friend besides me, so his name has come up fairly often in the last couple of years.

Ollie's expression fills me with such dread that I can't move. After a moment, I force myself forward until I'm right in front of him. He's standing now, his gangly arms hanging limp at his sides. He avoids my gaze, staring past me at the sliding exit doors. I wrap my arms around myself to keep from visibly shaking.

"What happened?" My voice comes out too loud, but I don't care.

He sits down again, looking like he doesn't know what to do with himself. "I guess Neil got really wasted last night."

"By himself?"

His dad is often out of town for work and never locks up the liquor cabinet. Neil dips into his dad's supply sometimes for our weekly dance nights, and we had a few drinks last summer, but I didn't realize he did that alone.

Ollie nods. "When I dropped by his place earlier . . ." He stops short and hunches in on himself, digging his fingers into his eyelids. I take a slow breath to stop myself from yelling at him to finish his sentence. Eventually, he mumbles into his hands, but I still make out his words. "He wouldn't wake up, so I called 911."

"Fuck," I whisper as my legs give, and I thud into the chair next to him. "Is he all right?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know."

“What do you mean?” My pulse buzzes in my ears, and I can’t catch my breath. “Why wouldn’t he wake up?”

“When I found him, he was . . .” He stops short, taking a deep breath.

I manage a sympathetic nod and clamp down on my tongue since it looks like he’s not processing anymore. He’s obviously having a hard time.

From some stuff Neil’s mentioned in passing, I know that Ollie’s had a bit of a difficult time outside of all this. But I need him to tell me what happened to Neil right now.

After an excruciating minute, Ollie speaks again. He stares down at his hands, a mass of loose curls falling into his face and obscuring his eyes. “By the time the ambulance got to his place, he wasn’t doing so hot.”

That’s all he says, but the weight of everything he’s not telling me slams down on my chest. I blink against my swirling vision, still unable to catch my breath.

“How long ago was that?” I choke out. I grip my knees to keep my hands still.

“A few hours ago. They haven’t told me anything yet. I tried calling his dad, but his voicemail is full. Do you know another way to reach him?”

Tightening my grip on my knees, I shake my head. Neil doesn’t talk about it, but I’ve gathered over the years that his mom died when he was little, before we knew each other. Ollie doesn’t ask about Neil’s mom, so I guess he knows.

He finally focuses on my face for more than a second, studying me for a long moment. His dark brown eyes are rimmed in red. “You live out in Alberta, right? Neil didn’t say you’d be visiting.”

“It was last minute,” I mutter, looking away from him.

Somehow, Ollie has never been around when I've been in town to visit Neil, even though he lives the next street over from him. Last summer, Neil said he was going to stop by, like, three times the week I was there, but he never ended up showing.

We fall into a silence that stretches into a painful chasm.

The quiet hum of the lights and the hushed conversations become muted and distant. All I can think is how I should have tried to talk to Neil about something other than all the dumb things that didn't matter.

I start losing feeling in my feet again, and the numbness slithers up my legs. Curling up in my chair, I hug my knees tight, like that'll somehow keep me from exiting my body.

"Aisha?"

I blink, jolting back into myself. From the way Ollie's staring at me, he must have said my name more than once.

"Are you feeling okay?"

The fact that he's asking me that—considering how messed up he is right now—alerts me that I must really look like I'm losing it. I mean to nod but shake my head instead.

"Here." He reaches into his pocket and holds an earbud out to me.

After staring at it for a moment, I put it in my ear, and he sticks the other in his own. He turns on an old folk song I've never heard before. I close my eyes, focusing on the gentle, calming chords.

After a few hours, I feel like I should give his earbud back to him and listen to my own music, but I don't. Everything he's put on has miraculously kept my mind from traveling to terrible places.

"This is really good," I find myself saying after a while.

Ollie starts out of his half-asleep daze, his head almost bumping mine. "What?"

I point at his phone on the armrest between us.

He hands it over and shuts his eyes again. I take my time flipping through his encyclopedic collection. Even though we've been waiting for hours at this point, I haven't looked through even a fraction of his library by the time we're called up to the front.

We're moved to a smaller waiting room. A nurse, a middle-aged man in scrubs with deep bags under his eyes, shows up and starts asking questions. I can't stop myself from interrupting him.

"Can you tell us where our friend is now?"

"I'll see what I can find out. And where are your parents?"

Ollie stares dully. "Sleeping, I'd guess?" It's a little after three in the morning.

"I'm from out of town," I say quickly when the nurse turns to me. "Can you please let us know if he's all right?" My voice cracks at the end.

The nurse sighs. "I'll be right back."

He heads for the door and closes it quietly behind him. Ollie watches him head toward reception and then turns to me. "Aren't you from here originally? Your parents don't live in town anymore?"

Neil's mentioned things about Ollie in the past couple years, so he's probably told Ollie lots of things about me too. The thought makes my face prickle with heat, wondering if Neil told him anything about my parents' divorce or what happened around the time I left for the academy.

I shrug noncommittally, and he gives me a long, unreadable look.

Guilt tugs at my gut. I tell myself for the millionth time that Neil's going to be all right and I shouldn't worry my dad about this. I can handle it. I don't need to call him yet. Neil has to be okay.

We both turn when we hear the door open and the nurse steps back in.

“Neil Roi’s in room 136. He had a bad case of alcohol poisoning, but he’s in stable condition now . . .” He says more but I can’t concentrate, I’m so relieved. The invisible vice that’s been squeezing my windpipe starts to loosen.

The nurse exits again, and as soon as he’s gone my body betrays me, the sobs I’ve been choking down all night erupting. I wish the scuffed linoleum floor would crack open, dropping me into the earth’s depths. Instead, I’m stuck here while Ollie witnesses this pathetic display.

“Aisha.” Ollie’s hand brushes my back for half a second. “He’s okay.”

I nod, but my face won’t stop leaking. He grabs a tissue from the box on the table and crouches in front of me, handing it over. I can’t meet his gaze, my face burning as I wipe it dry. Ollie’s still crouched in front of me, like he’s at a loss for what to do now.

I clear my stuffed-up throat before managing to focus on him. “Thanks.”

Ollie opens his mouth, but no sound escapes him. He blinks at me with glazed eyes before the space between us is gone. My face is absolutely flaming now. It happened so fast that I don’t know if it was him who moved to wrap his arms around me or if I leaned in first. His hand is on the back of my head, and I find myself pressing my face into his shirt. The harsh fluorescence of the room and every single one of my thoughts are completely blotted out.

The doorknob rattles, and I jerk away from Ollie at the sound, almost knocking him over.

An older nurse enters, hardly glancing at us as she focuses on her chart. “You can see”—she squints at the sheet—“Neil Roi now. Follow me.”