

A woman in a white dress is dancing on a stage. The background is a vibrant, multi-colored gradient with a digital glitch effect, featuring horizontal lines in various colors (red, green, blue, yellow, purple) that create a sense of motion and energy. The woman's arms are raised, and she appears to be in the middle of a performance.

WHEN IT ALL Syncs UP

MAYA
AMEYAW

WHEN IT ALL Syncs UP

AMEYAW

2

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

MAYA AMEYAW

© 2023 Maya Ameyaw (text)

Cover design by Zainab's Echo
Cover art by PeachPod
Interior design by Zainab's Echo

Edited by Claire Caldwell
Copy edited by Debbie Innes
Proofread by Mary Ann Blair

Special thanks to Ameerah Holliday for her contributions to this work.

Annick Press Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

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.”

/

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

Michaela's airborne form, poised gracefully in a grand, just 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 postish." 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

/

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 annual 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

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. It 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 inch.

"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. T is is it. T is 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 chain of turns are perfectly executed as I float across the room in

/

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 com

/

“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 o the plane at Pearson, the continual conspicuousness

/

“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 lake front 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.

/

“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 stu Neil’s mentioned in passing, I know that Ollie’s had a bit of a di cult 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.”

at’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. ey 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 nally 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?"

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 ts him. He