

Time Goes On



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Author's Note

This collection of short stories all revolves around the same collection of characters. They are collected here in the order I wrote them and therefore they are not necessarily in chronological order. This is to let you as the reader get to know the characters the same way I did as the author. However, there is a timeline at the end if you would rather read the stories in chronological order, or if you simply want to orient yourself.

It's Endless Energy

"Are you guys ready to start?" Riley asks, looking back at them. The three of them have been warming up in an open practice room in Alyssa and Riley's studio. Even though they don't all dance in the same studio Alyssa and Grace found a dance competition that doesn't require them to be. They've been choreographing it on their own and getting Taylor, Alyssa's dance sister, turned bonus sister, turned dance teacher's input when they've disagreed; but now they're focusing on cleaning it. Alyssa shares a look with Grace as they nod at Riley.

Alyssa rolled her eyes when Riley and Grace told her about the story they wanted. A good dance should stand on its own without the need for a frivolous narrative, but she's outvoted; 2 to 1. So, she stubbornly goes along with their stupid love triangle plot line. Even though she's very much against the idea of a story, Alyssa almost wishes that they didn't have to stick so closely to tradition in order to make judges happy. It would be nice if Riley didn't have to choose at the end. There's no way it would happen for a competition, but maybe they could come up with an alternate ending, just for them. Alyssa shakes her head to rid herself of the thought, they would probably hate it if she brought it up anyway, and she can't afford to get distracted right now.

The three of them run the first half section by section before Riley goes to see if Taylor is free to look at what they have. Alyssa isn't sure if she's friends with Grace. She thinks that maybe they are. They met at a dance convention last year and anytime they're at the same workshop or convention now they find each other. And sometimes when their school breaks line up, they hang out together. But Riley is really her only other friend, so she doesn't have much to compare it to. Except now they're in a trio together, waiting for Riley to return and the silence between them doesn't feel tense. But Alyssa's always had a hard time making and maintaining friendships. Riley's her oldest friend, and they've both been at their studio, Dance Lab, since they were old enough to walk. Even when they competed on different teams Alyssa always knew she could talk to him.

It's frustrating though when, after watching them run their dance a couple times, Taylor comments on her lack of feeling in the dance. And Alyssa doesn't know how to make it look more "realistic" as Taylor put it.

She's not actually worried about Riley abandoning her for Grace. Then both Grace and Riley gang up on her too, giving her conflicting advice on what to do and how to act more believably. She doesn't mean to storm out of the room, but she definitely doesn't want to cry in front of her friends. She doesn't want to cry at all actually, but it's an unfortunate side effect of being overwhelmed.

Alyssa isn't really sure where she's going. Her sister (the one she lives with), Natalie, is using their shared car, and she was relying on Riley for a ride home. But she just needed out of that room. She ends up in the walkway between the studio and some of the other business. The cool air outside, along with subtly stimming with her hands at her sides (wiggling and flexing her fingers in this case), significantly helps to regulate her. She has at least stopped crying and feels marginally better when Taylor comes out a few minutes later.

"How are you doing?"

Alyssa shrugs at the question. She's cold (running outside in only her leotard and shorts wasn't one of her smarter decisions) but that's probably not what Taylor is asking. "M okay. Just too many people talking at me, telling me different things."

Taylor nods at her, "You freaked them out a little, running out like that. I know you don't always see it, but they care about you. Riley, Grace, me, Nat, we all do."

A week later they're at the high school hosting the competition at 7:30. And then they spend 30 minutes trying to find parking, and locating Taylor when they finally make it to performer check-in. They won't be performing for a few hours, so they find an empty practice room and run through their dance one last time for Taylor before they perform.

When Riley and Grace head out into the audience to watch some of the teams they're up against Taylor pulls Alyssa aside in the hallway. "I know that storytelling isn't your preferred dance method. And you probably don't want to hear this, but what's going to set you apart from the other teams here isn't your technique, it's going to be the emotion you put behind it."

"What if I can't?" Alyssa whispers.

"Come on." Alyssa looks up and sees Taylor walking toward the exit. She gets up to follow her, slightly confused. "What's going on?" Taylor asks after she leads them outside. "I'm asking as your sister, not your teacher," she clarifies when Alyssa still doesn't say anything.

"I don't know. This whole week has been so weird. I thought—" Alyssa cuts herself off and starts over. "Grace and Riley have been trying to help me during our rehearsals this week, but there's really only so much I can learn in a week. I've been trying but I don't know. It's hard," she finishes lamely. Alyssa feels Taylor start to put an arm around her, so she shakes her head, "No, please don't touch me right now." Even through her shirt it feels like there's an exposed wire under her skin where Taylor touched her.

"Okay, well, let's start at the end first, are you going to be alright for the dance, I know you have a few lifts."

Alyssa fists her hands in her skirt and shakes her head to clear her mind. "I think so, but I might need help after, finding a quiet spot where I can decompress." Usually, competitions don't bother her this much, normally she thrives on the stressful and overly chaotic environment. But with everything that's been going on internally, she's not sure she's going to enjoy the backstage as much.

"I'll be in the wings the whole time, so as soon as you guys are done just come find me. Do you have your ear defenders?" Alyssa nods and pats her bag. "Good. I can hang onto them if you want, and we'll come back out here."

"Thanks. I really appreciate what you do for me. Both as a sister and as a teacher. When I first started dancing we didn't know, my parents just thought I couldn't sit still. And when I got my diagnoses I begged them not to tell anyone, I thought I wouldn't be allowed to be competitive. But you already knew when you started teaching, and you've helped me. A lot." Alyssa looks up when Taylor doesn't continue with whatever her pep talk had been. Taylor looks a little at a loss for words, which is weird, because Alyssa doesn't think she's ever seen Taylor speechless.

"I'm glad you felt safe enough to tell me. But you're an amazing dancer and you've proved you earned your place several times." Taylor pauses for a few seconds, "Now, I don't know what's going on in your head, but I think you might be having a hard time because you're trying to act and mask at the same time. You'll probably get better at it in time, but at the moment, you might not be able to split your focus like that. If you're comfortable with it, we can go back to the practice room, and you can try running at least part of it unmasked and see if it helps?"

Alyssa thinks it over, she's never been a fan of dances relying on anything other than technique. She also doesn't love unmasking around people she doesn't trust, which includes everyone who would be watching their performance. "I can try," she finally concedes.

Before she knows it Alyssa is standing backstage with Riley and Grace about to go on for their trio. Practicing with Taylor helped a little, but it's mildly terrifying knowing how many people in the audience are about to see her unmasked on stage. She's double checked to make sure that Taylor has her ear defenders though and she's filled with the giddy excitement that's a precursor to every performance she's ever done, terrified or not. Their dance starts with just Riley on stage so when she's in the wings as their song starts playing, she shakes her hands out before running on stage. She's not sure how natural it looks, but she does her best to act hurt and angry with Riley. And it does feel slightly easier, but also harder in some ways? Because she has to actively focus on being unmasked, since she spends so much time unconsciously masking her autistic traits.

She waits impatiently for the judges to announce their score, all—well most of—her excess energy was burned off during the dance. And she can feel her skin buzzing unpleasantly everywhere Riley held her during their partner sections.

She barely hears their (high) score before she rushes toward Taylor and her defenders. They don't quiet everything, she can still hear Taylor, Riley, and Grace, but everything else is pleasantly muffled. She finally feels like she can breathe again, and she follows Taylor back outside to where they were before the performance. She digs a small piece of bike chain out of her bag and starts fiddling with it to give her something to do with her hands and something to focus her attention on.

Alyssa's not exactly sure how long they're outside, but she finally looks up from her stim toy and she's surprised to find that Grace and Riley are still there. "You guys didn't have to wait for me."

"We weren't going to leave you behind. What kind of friends would we be if we did? We can go back in if you want, or we can stay out here."

They'll go back in for the awards, probably, but right now this is where she wants to be.

A Football Game

Grace knows Alyssa has never danced anywhere but Dance Lab. She knows Alyssa's parents put her in a ballet class when she learned how to walk, and they realized she was never going to sit still again. And that there are days she spends more time at the studio than she does at home. But Grace isn't like that, she grew up taking dance classes at the local rec center. She only asked to join a studio when she decided she wanted to try a competitive team. It's why, during the non-competitive season, she dances with her school's dance team, in addition to all her regular dance classes.

This is her third year on the school team. It's a lot less competitive than her studio, but it's fun and it reminds her more of taking classes at the rec center. Even though she's only on the dance team for half the year she's pretty friendly (although not friends, she's pretty sure Alyssa's her only real friend, and maybe Riley) with most of the girls and she sees them when she goes to the basketball games in the spring.

This is the first year though she actually has people she wants there to support her. Her dad can get a little overzealous with his support, and well, she wouldn't mind if Harley wanted to come to support her but the only times her sister ever comes to games is because her friends want to.

She wasn't friends with Alyssa or Riley last year, and even if they only come for one game, she really wants them there. Grace invites them to the homecoming game, it's by far the most interesting game of the year, even if both teams playing, her school included, suck. When she gets to the school that evening she texts Alyssa with directions on where to sit so they'll hopefully be able to see each other. She never officially got confirmation that either of them were coming today, just that they would try, but she still feels a flash of hurt when she gets a second to check her phone again right before they're about to go out on the field for pre-game and there's no response from Alyssa. She knew it was probably a long shot anyway, they both live across the city, and it's not like they're *that* close of friends (that's a lie, she met up with Alyssa almost every weekend over the summer). That doesn't stop her from scanning the crowd every chance she gets though. Which earns her some disapproving looks from her coach when she's noticeably distracted. Not that it really matters, the stands are so packed that even if they were sitting exactly where she told Alyssa to, she's not sure she'd be able to make either of them out.

After the game, once all her stuff is packed up, Grace starts walking back out to the student parking lot. She thinks about checking her phone, but she figures at this point it doesn't matter. The game has been over for half an hour, and she doubts they stuck around that long, if they came at all.

"Grace!" She brushes it off, her name is common enough that they have to be yelling at somebody else, nobody she knows came to the game. "Grace!" *Wait, that sounds like Riley.* Grace stops and looks around, but with so many people still milling about it's hard to figure out which direction it's coming from. She decides to just stay where she is on the off chance it *is* Riley. If it is, clearly he's seen her, which is more than she can say about him. "Grace!" It's less frantic this

time, but it's definitely Riley. She spins around again, trying to pinpoint where his voice is coming from.

Finally, she sees him waving above the crowd and pushes her way over to where her friends have sequestered themselves slightly inside the visitor's entrance. "You guys came!"

Alyssa nods, wrapping her arms around herself. "Sorry we didn't sit where you could see us. I didn't see your text until after the game started."

Riley nudges Alyssa and gives her a pointed look and it gives Grace the distinct impression that maybe Alyssa isn't telling the whole story.

"And also we were late because I wanted to finish this for you," Alyssa mumbles, reaching into her hoodie pocket. Alyssa's face is slightly pink when she hands over a black and gold friendship bracelet, Grace's school colors. Then Alyssa pushes up one of her sleeves, exposing an identical bracelet on her own wrist.

"Thank you," she says, but it doesn't feel like enough, even as she has Alyssa tie the bracelet on. "And thanks for coming."

Riley shrugs, like it's not a big deal they drove across the city to watch her dance at a terrible football game. "It's not like we had anything better to do on a Friday night," he jokes. "But seriously, this was fun, I mean I didn't understand a single thing that happened on the field, but your team is pretty good. Your dance team," he clarifies when she gives him a confused look. Their football team only managed to score one touchdown the entire game. "We had to sit on the visitor's side, but what we could see looked good."

Alyssa nods in agreement, "I wish we lived closer because I'd come see another game. Well, I'd come to see you again."

Grace feels her face burn at the compliment, but she's hoping she's still flushed enough from the game that it's not noticeable. Because if she acknowledges her crush on her best friend it opens up a whole other can of worms she's not prepared to deal with.

Alice in Wonderland

"Tate?" Alyssa's not even really that surprised to see her here (beyond not seeing her in nearly eight years), the company she recently got a job with is one of the very few willing to work with disabled and neurodivergent dancers; and they're hosting open auditions for Alice in Wonderland. They grew up going to Dance Lab together, but Tate's a couple years younger than she is. They weren't exactly friends, but since Tate had needed accommodations for her dyslexia and Alyssa had them (to a certain extent) for her autism and ADHD they crossed paths a few times, and they were closer than Alyssa was with a lot of other people at their studio.

Tate awkwardly waves but doesn't otherwise say anything. She goes back to intently focusing on her phone, Alyssa assumes it's probably a video of the choreography for the auditions. She gets it, they'll have time to catch up later, if Tate wants to, once the stressful part of the day is over.

The audition itself flies by, and even though it's an open audition, most of the people there she recognizes as part of the company. The cast lists will go up by the end of the week and so Alyssa's doing her best to not think about it until then. She knows if she does it's going to be *all* she thinks about.

"Hey," Tate comes up to her on the sidewalk outside the building after they've been released for the day.

"Hi. Do you live in New York now?" Alyssa mentally kicks herself after asking that. Why would she be auditioning for a company in a city she didn't live in?

Tate nods, "Yeah, I just moved a few weeks ago. This company is actually part of the reason I moved. I, uh, I saw that you posted about getting the job a few months ago, and I'm sure you know how hard it can be to get a job with the dance world being what it is. But I saw they were holding open auditions so I took a chance, I figure, even if I don't get this job I can probably get a job teaching somewhere and audition for the company next season."

"That's awesome! Yeah, this company's pretty cool, there were a couple others I joined for a season, but they didn't last, obviously. If you don't have anywhere you have to be, I'd love to get coffee and catch up."

When they get the email that the cast lists have been posted, Alyssa and Tate go together. Since she's in the company Alyssa is guaranteed a spot, but Tate isn't, and really, exciting or disappointing, it's always better to have someone with you. They both breathe a sigh of relief when they see Tate's name on the lists, as both the Caterpillar and the March Hare. Alyssa finds hers listed next to the Queen of Hearts for one cast (she's pretty sure *that* one is at least partially because "the powers that be" have seen her interact with the kids at the studio more than the adults and she even recognizes a few of the kids in her classes cast as roses and cards) and as a violet and the Cheshire Cat for the other. Even though she's been with this company for a few months now Alyssa still doesn't really have any friends, so it'll be nice to have Tate there too. At least as someone she knows and doesn't mind talking to.

The Queen of Hearts rehearsals, the ones with the full cast where she's not just learning her solo, are one of the first places where she sees just how different this company is from others she's danced with. At least for her personally, she's seen plenty of physically disabled dancers in the months since she started, and Tate at auditions. But this is the first time she's used her own accommodations, and there's something drastically different about knowing abstractly that she's allowed accommodations and actually using them. She's allowed to wear her earplugs to block out the noise of the staffs banging (and being dropped) on the wooden floor. There's a girl in her cast, Evie, who wears ear defenders during their rehearsals, she'll wear more subtle earplugs during the show, but Alyssa's talked to her and apparently she likes the fact that her ear defenders are more obvious, so people know she's not ignoring them on purpose if she doesn't hear them. And it really hits her how much having a studio like this would've helped her when she was younger. As great as Dance Lab was, she was constantly masking and she didn't often have access to accommodations until after Taylor became her teacher, and even then she didn't have as many as she probably needed. She certainly would've never been allowed to wear ear defenders at rehearsals, and she was only rarely allowed to wear earplugs. Or take a break when she starts to get overstimulated, which doesn't happen often if she has her other accommodations. Knowing she has the option though is huge.

Dance became one of her special interests within a few years of starting her first dance class, she would often ask to go early or stay late to watch the older kids. As soon as she learned to read she could almost always be found with a book about dance, dance history, or an encyclopedia of all the styles, anything she could find. Her special interest is part of the reason she's pretty good at picking up new styles and moves. She taught herself some of the movement kinesthetics to better understand ballet, but knowing how and why your body moves the way it does is helpful in understanding how seemingly impossible tricks work. But also, just watching other dancers, and paying attention to how they all danced their own styles.

It's also why, when the full Queen of Hearts rehearsals are over, Alyssa joins the kids to watch the rehearsals that are still going on. Most of the other adults head straight home but any time the viewing area is open most of the kids ask their parents to stay late and watch. And on the days when Alyssa has Cheshire Cat or violet rehearsals she often spots her students, whether they're in the show or not, seated in the viewing area.

During one of their final dress rehearsals at the studio Alyssa brings a giant container of flourless almond cookies to leave on the front desk for anyone who wants one. Despite having moved across the country almost a decade ago Riley still makes the full recipe he used to make with his family, which was even more than their family of five needed, so it's more than enough for the three of them with plenty to bring to work or share with friends.

"Do you know who brought these? They're amazing." Tate asks, holding a cookie when she sits down next to Alyssa on their break between acts.

"Hmm? Oh, I did. Riley always goes overboard making food. I think he forgets there's only three of us—" Alyssa stops herself. They're more or less completely out now, or at least they've stopped hiding it, but she's not sure how the parents of the kids in her classes would feel about it. But then she forces herself to keep talking because people are likely only going to notice if she makes it a thing. Besides if anybody did overhear they likely wouldn't immediately jump to the conclusion of polyamory over roommates, but old habits die hard. "So, I thought I would bring some in. That's only about half, I'm planning on bringing more tomorrow for the other cast too."

They talk for a little longer until they're interrupted by Evie climbing onto the bench with them, "Miss Alyssa, will you help me with my hair for Queen of Hearts?"

"Of course." There are plenty of parents around who usually help with hair and makeup, but the younger autistic girl has always gravitated towards her in the months since the Alice in Wonderland rehearsals have started. "Why don't you go grab your stuff and I'll do it now before intermission is over."

Every show they do together Evie seeks her out for help with her hair, the parents try to talk her into letting them do it, but Alyssa waves them off. Neither of them are in the first act so she has plenty of time to help the younger girl once she's ready.

Tate sits down next to her when Evie runs off after Alyssa finishes her hair. "She seems to really like you."

"There aren't a lot of autistic dancers at the company. And I think I'm probably the only one she interacts with on a regular basis. I know when I was her age I would've loved seeing someone like me. And I hope that by seeing me and being here, she's not going to struggle as much as I did."

"I know what you mean." And Alyssa doesn't say anything in response, because yeah, Tate probably understands better than most people. As much as Riley and Grace can support her through everything, they don't really get it.

You're Not Coming Home?

Natalie really should've thought about the impact moving out would have on her baby sister. Whenever she could Alyssa would climb into her lap, needing to be as close to her as possible, often over either of their parents. Which is why she shouldn't be surprised that Alyssa is crying, planted next to her on the couch of her new apartment, refusing to move.

"Hey Kiddo," Natalie pulls her sister into her lap. "Can you breathe with me?"

"I don't—I don't want to—I don't want to go home," Alyssa says through sobs. "I want to stay with you."

Natalie looks over at their parents because she has no idea what to do. Apparently, they think she wants physical help because her dad starts to make his way towards them, probably to grab Alyssa from her lap so she shakes her head and holds her sister tighter. She doesn't know how to help her sister at the moment, but she knows dragging her out of her apartment kicking and screaming will definitely be the wrong move. She continues taking exaggerated breaths, hoping Alyssa will copy her and start to calm down. It takes a couple minutes, but Alyssa's breathing finally evens out a little, and even though Natalie can tell she's still crying at least she's not gasping for air anymore.

"Why don't you want to go home?" Maybe it's the wrong question to ask with their parents standing right there but she's not really sure what she's supposed to be doing. Usually when Alyssa's like this she knows what to do to help her, but this makes her feel out of her depth. She doesn't have a set of guidelines to help her, it's a whole new thing for all of them.

Alyssa buries her face further into her chest, "Cause you aren't there."

Okay, this is way worse than I thought it was, Natalie thinks. Because she's not going home, that was a decision she made a long time ago. She knew that as soon as she was able, she was going to move out. She has never had a particularly healthy relationship with her parents, only made worse during her time in college, and the only reason it took her this long was because she couldn't afford both rent and tuition. If it wasn't for Alyssa, she probably would've cut off contact with them entirely.

"How about I pick you up after your dance class on Friday?" Natalie chances a glance at their parents, hoping they'll go along with this. "Maybe we can have a sleepover."

Alyssa looks up at her, cheeks tear stained, and her eyes red, but she's no longer crying. "Really?"

Her dad makes eye contact with her, and nods and Natalie feels some tension release from her shoulders. "Of course! Just you and me."

Eventually they're going to have to deal with why Alyssa doesn't want to be at home without her. But for now, this will work.

Runaway

Natalie had been just about to start dinner when there's a knock at her door. Initially she ignores it, living alone as a single woman means she never answers the door unexpectedly. But the knocking gets more insistent, so she checks the peephole. At first, she doesn't see anything, but the knocking continues so she knows *someone* has to be out there. Until the person standing outside her door suddenly gets taller and then she rushes to unlock it when she sees her sister on the other side, looking all for the world like a drowned rat with rain dripping from her hair.

"Hey Kid," Natalie's trying really hard to not freak out because even though Alyssa is at her apartment on a pretty regular basis now, she knows that tonight is a night she's supposed to be home. "Decided to go for a walk in the rain?" she asks somewhat playfully, trying to make her little sister smile.

Instead, Alyssa crashes into her and Natalie jumps a little at how cold her sister feels. "What's going on?"

Alyssa just shakes her head and presses further into Natalie.

"Do Mom and Dad know you're here?"

Another head shake.

"Ok," Natalie pauses to regroup her thoughts and figure out a game plan. "Here's what we're going to do. You're going to change into dry clothes and then you're going to sit on the couch and find something for us to watch while I let Mom know you're here." Natalie keeps talking when she sees her sister about to argue, "I won't make you go home, not right now, but if they don't know you're here, they must be worried about you, it's just so they know you're safe. How did you get here anyway? It's too far to walk, especially in this weather."

"I took the bus," Alyssa whispers, not looking up. *Well, that explains the drowned rat appearance*, Natalie thinks. The nearest bus stop is at least two blocks away and between the rain and the wind, anyone would be soaked after walking through it for that long.

Natalie waits for Alyssa to come out of her room, with the stuffed leopard Natalie gave her a few years ago clutched to her chest, before closing her own bedroom door and scrolling to find her mom's contact in her phone.

The line rings for so long Natalie thinks it might go to voicemail when their mom finally picks up, "Hello, Andrea Wilson."

"Hi Mom. I just wanted to call and let you know that Alyssa's here and she's safe." Natalie sits on her bed and leans her head against the wall that separates her room from the living room. She hears the opening notes of the *Degrassi* theme song play as she waits for her mom to respond.

"Natalie? What do you mean Alyssa's with you? She's here in her room."

Natalie covers her scoff with a cough. Then she takes a second, so she doesn't yell at her mom, "You're telling me you somehow missed Alyssa leaving. Mom, you don't just miss your thirteen-year-old leaving the apartment!" So much for not yelling. Natalie paces around her room. If she hadn't called, would their parents have even noticed Alyssa was missing? It has to have been at least an hour since she left.

"Don't use that tone with me Natalie, this is our annual Christmas Party, something you would know if you bothered to check your email, people have been coming and going all night." Natalie rolls her eyes at that, they talk on a fairly regular basis (not her choice), but no, the invitation *has* to be sent via email. "What time are you bringing her home?"

"Tomorrow morning." Unless her mother comes and picks Alyssa up herself Natalie's not making her go home tonight.

"No. She needs to come home tonight."

Natalie knows there's a reason her sister ran away, even if she won't tell her yet. "If you want to come pick her up, that's fine, otherwise I'll see you in the morning." Natalie's betting on her mom being worried enough about keeping up appearances to not leave the party early. Especially if there are as many people as she says there are.

"This is ridiculous Natalie," her mom doesn't say anything for a minute and Natalie's a little worried that she lied to her baby sister and Alyssa *will* have to go home tonight. "We will see you at 8 AM, not a minute later." And then she hangs up without another word.

Natalie chucks her pillow across the room, and it lands with a soft *thump*. If she wasn't worried about not scaring Alyssa one room over, she probably would've screamed into it. Their parents can be extremely frustrating sometimes. Natalie takes a few minutes to calm down in her room before joining her sister on the couch.

"Are you ready to talk about what happened?"

Alyssa shakes her head and pulls her stuffed animal closer to her chest. "Okay, I'm not going to push. For the moment. But Aly, you can't just run away, what if I hadn't been home?"

Her sister shrugs and mumbles something Natalie can't make out. And upon prompting repeats, "I probably would've gone to Riley's." Natalie drops it after that, there's not much more to talk about until Alyssa is ready to explain what happened.

They watch a few more episodes of her sister's latest obsession, when Alyssa abruptly turns the tv off. "It was too loud at home, and there's too many people. I had class this morning and I thought that I could be in my room when I got home, but there were already people there. At first I was just going to sit in the hallway, but it was still too loud, and I don't know. I just...feel safe here."

The Ropes

They're in between dance seasons and with the summer intensives coming to an end they're all starting to have more free time; and not all the classrooms in the studio are being used. So, Alyssa manages to talk Taylor into letting her put up the ropes they used in a dance a few years ago one Saturday afternoon, after classes are done for the day. It's not a formal class or anything, but some of the younger dancers have stuck around, either to watch, or to ask Alyssa to show them how to climb the way she does. Some of "her" kids (the ones in classes she teaches) have shown up, as well as a few kids who don't know her but heard from their friends what was happening.

Alyssa gets one rope strung up at the front of the room, she won't be able to swing around like she really wanted to, but once the rest of the kids have left hopefully, she'll be able to use the other ropes hung around the room.

Even though technically Alyssa would argue that she doesn't need a crash mat under her rope (Taylor disagrees with her on that, injury liability and all that) she knows that it's a bad habit to teach the younger dancers. A couple of the kids who just tagged along with their siblings take some of the extra mats and work on their tumbling in the corner, but the rest all line up around the edge of the mats Alyssa has set up. Alyssa easily scales the rope practically to the ceiling, climbs about halfway down, and then drops the rest of the way onto the crash mat.

"You don't have to climb that high, just go as high as you feel comfortable." She shows them the safest way to climb up and how to loop the rope around their feet to keep from sliding down as they climb. And of course, how to get down, without just dropping like she did. Most of the kids only go about halfway up, but a couple of them join her near the ceiling.

About an hour later there aren't many kids left, only a handful of hers. And they're mostly goofing off and showing off on the extra crash mats. So Alyssa takes the opportunity to do what she originally wanted to do when she asked to set the ropes up. Taking care to avoid the kids in the corner, Alyssa pulls the rope as close to the wall as she can, carefully climbs partway up, and pushes off against the wall.

"Oof." Alyssa groans when she hits the ground (maybe the crash mats were a good idea after all). The kids all rush over.

"Are you okay?" Presley, one of her oldest students, asks, looking extremely concerned.

Alyssa sits up and tries to regain control of her breathing, "I'm fine, just had the wind knocked out of me." Trying to climb, while swinging on the rope, was certainly not one of her better ideas.

One of the kids must've run off to the office because suddenly Taylor is checking her over.

"I told them I was fine," she argues.

Taylor shakes her head at her, "I just watched you fall at least eight feet. You're not 'fine'. Come on, you're going to come sit in the office with me, we can deal with the ropes and the mats later."

Alyssa playfully rolls her eyes at her sister but gets up to follow her anyway. The remaining kids disperse around the room, putting away the mats without being asked.

"Look, you said you're fine, and I mostly believe you, but I still have to fill out the incident report. So, what happened?"

"I thought you saw it?" Alyssa tries for innocence, but a little bit of snark and sass peek through.

Taylor swats at her, "I saw you fall; I don't know what led up to it."

Alyssa slumps in her chair, "I pushed off the wall and then tried to climb higher and lost my grip."

"Did you hit your head?"

She shakes her head, "No, I fell on my back, but I put my arms down behind me like I learned when I first started tumbling." And now that she's said something about her arms she realizes that her wrist hurts and maybe she didn't brace herself as well as she thought. "Although I think I landed wrong." Upon closer inspection there's definitely some bruising on her right wrist. Alyssa throws her head back when she realizes that Taylor's going to have to call Natalie.

"It looks like you probably sprained it. I'll go get some ice for you."

When Taylor leaves, Presley peeks around the doorframe. "Are you really okay, Ms. Alyssa?"

"I will be. I probably won't be climbing anymore ropes any time soon though. This is why one of the first things you learn in tumbling is how to fall and how to brace yourself. If I didn't put my hands behind me, I probably would've been hurt a lot worse, even with the crash mats."

"And you didn't even want to put them down," Presley giggles.

Alyssa shakes her head, "Yes, thank you for reminding me." From where Alyssa's sitting next to the desk, she sees a familiar man walking up, "Oh, it looks like your dad is here, but I'll see you in class next week?"

Presley smiles and nods, "Yeah. Bye Ms. Alyssa," and then, because her student is a cheeky little brat, "try not to fall off any more ropes."

"Did you hear that?" Alyssa asks, still shocked, when Taylor comes back in and hands her an ice pack for her wrist.

"I did," her sister confirms. "But I also remember you telling me something similar when I rolled my ankle demonstrating a combination during one of your classes when you were her age."

Alyssa scowls at her and goes to petulantly cross her arms over her chest, only to remember her injury. Instead, she rests her hands in her lap and accepts her fate of waiting for Natalie to come pick her up.

The Hoodie

"Whose hoodie is that?" Harley asks, looking at Grace. She looks down, checking which jacket she put on. It's a sweatshirt with a college logo. A college logo for a school neither of them go to. Shit.

"Um," She could lie and say it's Alyssa's. But she's pretty sure Harley knows her girlfriend chose not to go to college, preferring to work as a dance teacher at the studio she grew up at while she figures out her next steps. "My boyfriend's?" She finally admits after a long pause. It's not like she was intentionally keeping her relationship with Riley from her sister, well maybe she was a little bit, but she was sort of hoping that Riley's hoodie of all things wasn't going to be the thing that outs them.

"Oh, I didn't realize you and Alyssa broke up." It would be such an easy out. Because of course her sister jumps to the conclusion that she wouldn't be dating both of them. She's well aware it's not exactly a "normal" relationship.

Grace looks away from Harley. "We didn't," she says quietly, and then chances a glance up to see her sister's reaction.

Harley is staring at her, but Grace can tell she's not entirely sure what's going on. "Does she know?" She asks carefully, clearly not wanting to think of her sister as a cheater, and possibly several worse words going through her head.

Grace nods hesitantly, "They both do. But we're not really telling people, not yet. Aly is worried that she'll lose her job if people find out. Taylor knows and she's fine with it, but she's worried about the parents of her students." Of all of them, Alyssa has the most to lose if people found out. At least right now. Grace and Riley are both still in school, and if (when) it eventually does come out Grace doesn't love the implications it's possibly going to have on her own career she's pursuing as a high school teacher.

"Thank you for trusting me."

Grace can feel a slight blush coloring her face, but she shrugs like it's not a huge deal that she came out to her sister as polyamorous.

"Oh, I should probably text them. Let them know you know." Grace opens their group chat and finds a selfie Riley took of him and Alyssa. They're curled up on the couch in Alyssa's apartment, and Alyssa's glaring a little at the camera obviously not thrilled with the picture being taken. There's another one below it but Alyssa has a small smile in this one, Riley's chin hooked over her shoulder. "Oh my God, Harley! Look at this picture Riley just sent from their date night." She hands her phone over with the second photo displayed.

Harley frowns at the photo, "Why would he send that to you?" She hands the phone back over.

Grace looks back down at her phone and smiles softly, "Because he thought I would like it."

"Aren't you jealous they're on a date without you?"

Grace shakes her head and looks up at her sister again, "Not right now. I won't lie and say I've never been jealous, but jealousy is normal. And y'know, we're all adults and we have adult conversations about our feelings." Then she amends, "Usually. Alyssa and I can both be pretty stubborn."

Harley playfully shoulder checks her, "Yeah, I did grow up with you. But this is normal then?"

"For us, at least, yeah. I mean, we don't *have* to send each other pictures of our individual dates, but it's nice to see each other happy."

Timeline

July 2005	You're Not Coming Home?
December 2012	Runaway
April 2017	It's Endless Energy
August 2017	The Ropes
October 2017	A Football Game
December 2021	The Hoodie
Spring 2028	Alice in Wonderland

Mattie Hernandez is a multi-award-winning author. They are proudly queer and neurodivergent, facets of their identity that almost always show up in their work. Mattie is currently a college student majoring in Biology and minoring in Literature and Writing Studies, hoping to eventually work in a lab and continue with creative writing. In their free time you can find them goofing off with their friends, knitting and crocheting, rewatching their favorite shows, or going to the zoo and rambling off animal facts to anybody who will listen.