



AMBER OLIVER



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About the Author

For Black girls everywhere and for my family

It's beauty in the struggle, ugliness in the success.

-J. COLE

What's the world for if you can't make it up the way you want it?

—Toni Morrison, Jazz

t was only mid-May, but it was already hot enough to make the shorts I'd worn under my dress stick to me like a spy suctioned to a skyscraper in an action movie. As soon as Alicia and I got into my apartment, I threw both living room windows open and hoped the breeze would cool our sweat-slicked skin.

The familiar afternoon sounds of my block cut through the transitory quiet. Ambulances blared down Grand Concourse as they raced toward certain tragedy. Old island-born men slung spitfire swear words at one another as they slammed dominoes down on plastic tables. High schoolers fresh out of class lobbed endearments loudly—*stupid*, *big head*, *my heart*, *primo*—like water balloons. To my neighbors, this day was as regular as the last. But for me, this day—one I had been waiting on for a long time—felt morose, bereft of the joy I'd hoped would mark the occasion.

At my celebratory lunch after the ceremony, Mama had called me lucky. Lucky for being the first one in our immediate family to successfully navigate undergrad and, now, grad school. Lucky for emerging from academia triumphant with two shiny degrees in music in tow. But I didn't feel lucky. I felt late and broke.

After lunch, Alicia and I stopped by Mama and Marvin's for a few minutes. Marvin, Mama's boyfriend of the last eleven years, hadn't been invited to the graduation festivities. There weren't enough tickets left for him, so Mama said he'd hang back and give me a gift at the house.

As we entered the two-bedroom prewar apartment, I could see him lying on the beige carpeted living room floor in front of the suede sectional, snapping pistachio shells in half. The opening credits for *American* Gangster flashed on the flat-screen. A half-empty two-liter bottle of Pepsi sat beside him.

Alicia had waved at Marvin, taken a seat at the small wooden table between the sofa and the kitchen, and busied herself with her phone. I waited by the front door. I didn't want to be there longer than I needed to.

"So, Billie," Marvin said. He stood up and gave Mama a kiss, then reached into the pocket of his sweatpants and pulled out a pink envelope. "This is just a little something for graduating. Congratulations."

I accepted it gratefully and secretly hoped he could read the contempt in my smile. I opened the envelope and pretended not to notice the fifty-dollar bill that fell out of the greeting card and floated to the floor as I read. I swept the bill closer to me with my foot to pick it up later. "Thanks, Marvin."

"What you gonna do now that you're finished?"

I'd grown to hate this question. Over the years, too many random people—fourth cousins and great-great-aunts, nosy customers at the CVS where I worked, neighbors—had felt comfortable sharing their opinions on what I should do with my life. But the answer was simple, really. I had wanted to work in music since I was thirteen years old. Music had always found the empty grooves of my body and filled them in with strings and woodwinds, brass and percussion. Nothing but the poetry of words and the rhythm made me feel so thoroughly whole and understood. Everything I'd done so far was supposed to lead me to the career of my dreams. But the road to gainful employment in the industry of my choice was littered with bullshit. I was thousands of dollars in debt. I had taken a year and a half off school to work, stringing multiple part-time jobs together to help support Mama. And I had no full-time job prospects in sight.

I had interviewed at so many different imprints at labels across the city over the past couple of months, trying to line up an entry-level job in A&R, but I had yet to be picked. It was the same story as when I finished undergrad. HR had told me in emails, We are so impressed with you and would love to keep you in mind for future positions. Unfortunately, we have decided to go in a different direction. Later, on LinkedIn, I'd see that

someone else got the job instead, someone they thought might fit into the culture better and who happened to be an Ivy League frat boy or the bleached-blonde niece of some executive.

"Well, um. I'm still trying to get a job at a record label. I had an interview at Lit Music Productions a couple weeks ago, so we'll see."

"Well, good luck. And hey, if it don't work out, try something more practical, like a city job. I heard the tests for the MTA is opening up soon. That's a better move anyway, with the stability and benefits."

At my place, Alicia and I sank into the run-down sofa and silently scrolled on our phones, worn out from all the talking and smiling and cheering of the morning.

But I couldn't deny that Marvin's comments had fucked with me a little. I checked my email, just in case an offer from Lit had miraculously dropped into my inbox, but there was nothing.

I sucked my teeth, went to the kitchen, and returned with two cans of margarita-flavored hard seltzer. I placed one on the scuffed faux-walnut coffee table in front of Alicia. I popped open the tab on the other and took a sip, instantly regretting it as the salt-and-metal flavor slid down my throat.

"Do you think Marvin was right?" I asked. "Should I look for other jobs? I mean, I do need to pay my bills, and it's been, like, weeks since I've heard from Lit. It's crazy because I thought it went well, you know? I talked about my passion, mentioned some of the artists they signed that, like, helped form my musical taste. I talked about my internship experience. And still nothing. I don't know what more they want."

"Forget what Marvin said. I don't want you to focus on Lit or any other label either. This day is about you and the fact that you did it, Billie. I'm so proud of you, girl! I know it's gotta feel good to be done after all them years of school."

My chestnut-colored skin collided with her sunbaked sand as I plopped down on the couch next to her. She nudged me back playfully with her shoulder, then slipped off her heels, relaxed into her seat, and slid one leg beneath the other. Awkward as the pose was, her posture was perfect. Years of hip-hop and ballet classes had made her lithe, her muscles taut.

If I was lucky for anything, it wasn't the education—that was all hard work, two or three shitty part-time jobs to survive, and sneaking into latenight artist showcases at bars in the Village, Uptown, the Lower East Side, deep Brooklyn, Flushing—it was that I had a forever best friend who understood me and who had also given herself over to the same thing I had: music, art, the power of our bodies.

"I don't know if *good* is the right word," I said.

"Since when is graduating with a master's not good?" she said, laughing.

"I guess...I don't know. Like, I've been giving my all to this, and I thought I'd be further along by now. I'm twenty-four, Leesh. Twenty-five in three months. So no matter what label I end up at, if I even end up at one, I'll be the oldest assistant there. And then it'll be, like, at least five years before I can save enough to move out of this bum-ass apartment. Years before I can make a name for myself. It's all so fucking bleak."

I took another sip of my drink. Despite the taste, I needed the buzz of alcohol to ward off the sense of hopelessness attempting to set up camp in my body.

"It ain't been but six hours since you graduated, and here you go thinking about five years from now." Alicia waved her manicured fingers at me. "You need to loosen up. Celebrate your wins for once instead of worrying about the next thing."

She had a point. I was used to preparing for some future something—music-industry networking events where I could hand out my business cards to executives from the big three, trips to shows where I could try to get an interview with the artist for my growing social media pages, and my dream career plan that outlined my trajectory from A&R assistant to director of A&R.

I first learned about artists and repertoire in middle school. For a presentation ahead of career day, my teacher had asked the class to research careers we wanted to explore and to find out what we'd need to do to pursue them. In my investigation, I learned about what A&R did—how it discovered new talent, helped create new sounds, cultivated and provided guidance to musicians who eventually made an indelible mark on the world. I had been fascinated by the idea of working in A&R ever since.

Alicia said, "Why don't we go out tonight? Let's go to Avia, where we can dance. Once you let that loud music get in you, I know it'll cheer up your depressed ass."

We'd been going to Avia most weekends since it opened a few years ago, and each time it was an adventure. Because their music game was unmatched, Avia was one of the only spots in the city that made people feel comfortable enough to let loose instead of performing thirty-second routines for the internet. They'd bump Top 40, basement house, endless amounts of rap and hip-hop, alternative R&B and EDM and Afrobeat. Underground joints that only a few of us dispersed throughout the space knew.

It was Alicia who first brought me there, before it ever popped on TikTok and Reels. Since she freelanced as an entertainment writer and moonlighted as a backup dancer, she was plugged in. She always knew where the party was, how to find an old friend in a crowd, how to charm people so she could go back to them later to ask for favors. She also knew how to drag me out of a funk when all I wanted to do was sulk and think about how I was going to pay my bills over the next few months.

"Can't we listen to music and chill here?" I asked. "I can order some food and whatever. You know I love Avia, but I'm not in the mood to be standing all night."

"See, now that's where you're wrong. I know exactly where we'll be sitting tonight." A sly smile spread across her face, and I knew I was in for some nonsense.

I threw a side-eye her way. "So you planned this, huh?"

"Nah. It's not even like that. I was on Instagram earlier, and I saw Dre and them say they're gonna have a section there tonight. They were already lit, waving bottles around on Live."

"Dre from high school? I didn't even know you were still cool with him."

"I'm not. We have mutuals...and I saw he started dating Raven. Posted her right on his story, all hugged up and shit a few weeks ago, so I added him to see if..."

She trailed off, and I knew better than to ask. She was back to stalking Raven's social media. It was an unhealthy obsession she'd cycled through before, one that sharpened the pain of her heartbreak until it broke open again, mangled and bleeding. Raven was the first girl Alicia had ever been with. The relationship had lasted longer than either of them expected—two whole years. It was good until Alicia discovered Raven in bed with a coworker, someone Alicia had been suspicious of, in the studio apartment Alicia had inherited from her grandmother. The next night, Alicia showed up at my house. She was usually dressed to kill, but there she was at my door at three in the morning in a bonnet, stain-riddled sweats, and slides, with fat tears sliding down her bare face.

We ended up lying on the sofa together that night, with a thick, fuzzy blanket spread out atop us, as she sobbed and alternately cracked jokes to make herself smile. We listened to sad music—Toni Braxton, Keyshia Cole, all of Jazmine Sullivan and Kehlani and Summer Walker. We stuffed our mouths with Smartfood popcorn, Sour Power Straws, and cheap vodka and Sprite that we poured into ice cups we'd gotten from the bodega downstairs and hoped the snacks would help stuff down the heartache.

"I know you loved her," I said now. "Probably still do. But the way she did you was messed up. You deserve more than that."

"I know, I know. I couldn't help it," she said. "Ima delete Dre after tonight, I promise."

"Fine, I'll go. For you."

She flashed a smile at me and pulled me into a hug.

Months ago, when my excitement about graduating was fresh and outweighed my pessimism, I had made a playlist for this occasion. Playlists were my thing. I loved the intimacy of curating a musical mood, so I made it my duty to be the one in charge of it in shared spaces—car rides, living rooms, baby showers, sweet sixteens. Today's playlist featured songs about

money, confidence, success—all the things I hoped would soon come to me. Now that we were going out, I threw on the playlist, hoping I could channel some of that energy.

The first song on the list poured out of the soundbar and flooded the room with thumping bass. The song came out my freshman year of high school, the same year I met Alicia. Alicia and I would arrive at the metal detectors at the entrance of our school at the same time every morning, carrying breakfast sandwiches, Doritos, and Arizona iced teas in black plastic bags. After we undressed ourselves of earrings, bookbags, phones, keys, and jackets and then redressed, Alicia and I got to know each other on the way to the homeroom class we shared. We ate our food in the back of the classroom to avoid our teacher's detection and became fast friends when we learned that we lived close to each other, came from fucked-up families, and loved all the same songs and music artists.

After the song had been out awhile, Alicia convinced me to make up an embarrassing dance routine with her in the basement community room of her grandma's building. No one but the two of us would ever see it. But the power of the vocals and the thrash of the raucous beat would always burrow inside me like it was brand-new. I would never cease to be bowled over by its genius.

The next song was a Remy Ma joint. I appreciated the way the loud, brash horns announced the beat, similar to the way New Yorkers announced themselves—like there was no way you couldn't pay attention, like there was nothing that could stop you from noticing something so bold.

The first time Alicia and I heard it, we were at a freshman college party, and when Remy's confident flow layered over the beat, we knew, as we rocked our shoulders and raised our cups in the air, that this would be our anthem. "Nothing could stop me," we sang as we drank and danced and hoped, in the back of our brains, that this confidence would see us through to finals.

Remy led into other Bronx rappers. Cardi B with her unmistakable accent and inimitable swag. ScarLip, who professed her love for the city with

an old-school vigor. Each of the women gave a voice to people from the Bronx who were too often written off as secondary, insignificant. I'd have killed to work with artists like that one day if a label gave me a chance, artists whose music represented people like me and showcased the spectrum of Black creativity.

Time rolled by slowly as we switched from shitty seltzer margaritas to vodka sodas, listened to more money-making, independent-minded anthems —hoping to inspire myself into a more positive mood. We stalked our old friends and crushes on social media, noting the ones who were still hanging out in front of their buildings every weekend, taking pictures with their weed and their one bottle of Casamigos split among several other grown-ass men.

We got ready leisurely, putting on our makeup and squeezing into our tiny outfits one layer at a time, rotating in and out of the mirror and dancing to the music. No more money-making anthems. I switched us over to something with more bass and shouted, "Ayeee," behind Alicia as she bent over to twerk to Pop Smoke.

Perfecting a full-faced look was an elusive thing beyond my expertise, so I settled on lining my almond-shaped eyes with shakily drawn eyeliner and added mascara too, hoping no one would see the clumps unless they got too close. My twist out had gotten smushed in the back from lounging on the sofa, so I fluffed it into place, then swiped some brown lipstick onto my full lips and topped it with clear lip gloss.

Alicia stood behind me—her head two inches higher than mine—flipped her wavy hair to her back, and blotted a makeup blender covered in tawnycolored foundation on her face.

"So what's good with your man these days?" she asked. "Outside of today, I haven't seen bro in a minute."

I moved out of her view in the mirror and perched on top of the closed rickety toilet seat.

Alicia and Lucas had grown close over the four years he and I had been together. Whenever we all linked, his passion and her verve made a smooth combination that left me contemplative as they debated different sides of a point or exchanged punch lines that left us howling with laughter.

"He been mad busy with teaching at the community center lately. That's where he went after we finished lunch. He been tryna find a venue for Sunsetlandia, too, so our schedules have been a little off. Hopefully I'll be able to catch him awake when I get back."

"Oh, okay. Not your man being booked and busy." Alica carefully wiped away excess eyeliner with a twisted strip of toilet paper.

I laughed. "Yeah, I guess so."

As we inched toward midnight, it was time to make our way to Avia so we could walk in during my favorite part—when the DJ switched from chill vibes to club bangers and people forgot their inhibitions. The part of the night when people stopped their chitchatting, two-stepping, and live-streaming to unleash themselves on the dance floor. I loved watching people's bodies, the way they surrendered to infectious beats, their pelvises thrusting and booties shaking in carnal desire.

The Uber rolled up as soon as we made it downstairs. We slid into the back seat, and the driver switched the music from Panjabi MC's "Dhol Jageero Da" to some new song by another goofy rapper with a forgettable name who couldn't manage to stay on beat. When I'd heard the rapper on SoundCloud last year during my nightly artist research, even with his offbeat rapping, I knew he would pop. He had that kind of sound that was working these days—fun, frivolous, and soaked in nonchalance.

I also knew the underlying reason the Uber driver would think that I'd like this too, that I'd be interested in only a particular sound, a particular kind of music. It wasn't worth getting angry over, but the irritation still simmered beneath. Instead, I focused my energy on the time we were about to have and popped earbuds into my ears. I turned on a new song by an upand-coming neo-soul singer I found on a Fresh Finds playlist on Spotify the other night, her rasping voice atop a subwoofer bass loud enough to block out the world around me.

As we neared the corner of Eighteenth Street and Eleventh Avenue, I said, "You can pull over here."

Alicia scooted out of the car, and I followed, making sure to check the seats for anything we might have left behind: a phone, a dropped earring, an uncapped lipstick—like drunken lovers or the wet-faced and newly single, such things were no strangers to an Uber's back seat.

We walked off to the side to smoke the rest of the blunt we'd started at my apartment. As we walked, I noticed Alicia's strappy stilettos. I was wearing sensible block heels I could stand in all night.

"Did you bring some other shoes with you? I know your feet gon' hurt with those," I said.

"Damn. I ain't even think about that." Alicia took a pull. "Actually"—she smirked as she passed me the blunt—"we're sitting with Dre, remember? I think I'll be just fine."

"Okay, but, like, you're gonna do all the talking, right? I don't want them to think this is some high-school-reunion-type shit. I barely liked them back then."

Whether it was an old acquaintance like Dre or some stranger, I despised socializing at parties. I hated small talk, the way it never amounted to anything, how devoid it was of real substance. I wasn't interested in any of it. What I really wanted out of a party, out of Avia, was to be taken over by the music. I wanted to dance with abandon. To come out of a song sweating and shaking, my body still caught up in the beat.

Whenever I got stuck in a conversation I didn't want to be in, Alicia, bless her, would see me in distress—my mouth set in a straight line—and press a drink into my hand. She'd slowly switch places with me, her steady smile and direct eye contact a distraction as I made my way back to the dance floor, to the reverberant song pulsing around us.

"Yeah, I got you, girl," she said.

I tossed the blunt to the ground and stepped on it until the orange glow turned to ash.

We only waited in line for fifteen minutes before we were let inside. The club—large and dimly lit, highlighted here and there by red and white lights that flitted around every few minutes—was inundated with bodies, making it feel crowded and lively. At the front of the club was coat check, but when Alicia and I discovered that they had raised the price of each checked item to eight dollars, we scoffed and held on to our jackets and ventured farther into the space.

On one side of the venue was a long, sleek metallic bar. In the middle of the room was a dance floor surrounded by comfy white sofas set up in a U formation so that the bottle-service buyers could be in the middle of the action.

The music was already bumping. The DJ harmoniously blended hits from Megan Thee Stallion to GloRilla, Dua Lipa to Troye Sivan, Tyla to Burna Boy.

Alicia and I got our first well drinks of the night and nursed them through thin straws and scanned the crowd.

As we looked out at the club around us, people were already unleashing. Bodies gyrated close to one another as the beat pulsed through them. Bodies pushed and pulled together, some in sync, some desperate and clinging to one another. The men danced behind the women, especially now that we were in the old-school reggae set—that sultry, wine-inducing music—of the night, and they pushed themselves closer, touched the slick bare skin exposed through cutouts in dresses. Our pale-skinned counterparts jerked to the music in spastic movements. They pumped their fists into the air randomly, unconcerned with rhythm or the personal space of those around them.

"Look." Alicia pointed a silver-clawed finger toward the sofas. A small group of twentysomething men sat on the cushions, some on the backs of the sofas, their feet digging into the plush seats. "There goes Dre."

"Oh yeah," I said, squinting. "That's him. He still got that big-ass head." We snickered. "But he's cute, though. Looks good with a beard."

"Of course he does. Beards be doing the hard work. Will take a man from ninja turtle to fine real quick."

We cackled loud enough to make people look in our direction.

"A'ight," she said. "Let's go over there and see what we can do."

"Ugh, fine. But if they start acting weird, we out."

But she didn't hear me. Alicia was already walking toward the men.

I followed behind her.

All the men looked up as we approached.

"Hey, Dre, long time, no see," Alicia said.

"Oh shit. Alicia, it's been a minute. You're looking good." Dre stood up to give her a hug. "And, Billie, it's been a minute. You're looking good too." He inched in for a hug, and I positioned my body sideways, offering him my left side, the side farthest away from my face. I tried to smile. People liked that.

"So what brings ya here to my spot?" Dre said, smiling wide, motioning toward the other men on the sofa, as if to say he was the leader of this pack.

I tried to stifle the reply that cropped up in my head, but I was too used to the banter that I'd developed with Dre way back when, when sarcastic insulting and flirting were interchangeable. "Oh, this is your spot? Your name written on the sofas or something?" I asked.

"Aha, you got jokes," he said.

Alicia nudged me and glared. "Oh, well, you know, we out here celebrating. Billie graduated with her master's today."

"Oh, word? Congrats. That's dope. Why don't ya sit with us? We got drinks and shit."

Alicia and I exchanged glances. "You ain't got to tell me twice," she said. She grabbed a cup off the clear table and filled it with ice followed by a shot of Don Julio before topping it off with cranberry juice. She smirked at me as she searched the sofa for a place to sit.

Not wanting to waste a free drink, I made myself one too.

Alicia was now squeezed between two guys who vied for her attention. I spotted an open space on the arm of the sofa near her.