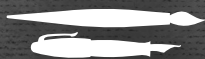


RISE
TO
THE
SUN

LEAH JOHNSON



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OLIVIA

FRIDAY MORNING

My best friend has always been the first person I run to when it's time to blow up my life.

The radio is cranked up as loud as it can go in Imani's SUV, and both of our heads are tilted back, shouting lyrics at the roof of the car. This feeling isn't the explosion I came to her begging for at the beginning of summer three months ago—when I was sad and frustrated and heartbroken *again*—but it feels right. It feels the way things only feel when you're with your best friend in the world, on your way to your first music festival, with the rubble of a disastrous junior year behind you.

Feels like possibility.

“I’m not saying love isn’t real! I’m just saying, statistically, there’s no way every time you claim to have been in love it actually *was love*,” she shouts during the drum solo of the song currently blasting over the speakers.

She opens her mouth for a Twizzler and leans toward me without taking her eyes off the road as she creeps forward in the line of cars. She’s wearing one of her many pairs of designer sunglasses, her only real fashion indulgence, but I can see her carefully threaded eyebrows raise expectantly behind them. I do my due diligence as an A1 passenger and feed it to her.

She chews and swallows before waving a hand around to emphasize her point.

“I read a study about it. On average, you’d have to have at least two long-term relationships, one long-distance relationship, four one-night stands, and one live-in relationship before falling in love even once. You haven’t run the necessary trials yet. The odds of any of your relationships having been real love are pretty low, given the data.”

Imani Garrett and her odds. Imani and her *data*. Sometimes her brain works too hard for her to see what I see—that there’s no way you can math your way into finding love. Like every great love song has ever taught me, it takes trial and error. And if you’re me, it takes more trials than I can count and more errors than should be humanly possible.

It’s hot outside, I can tell by the way the volunteers who wave us forward are sweating through their bright orange FARMLAND

VOLUNTEER T-shirts, but inside the car it's perfect. The air conditioner is humming and the bass is pounding and we're thrumming with anticipation—the best kind of nerves. The kind of nerves that promise a weekend big enough to change something, change *everything*. And despite the fact that Imani is trying to use her pesky logic to convince me that my heart isn't actually working overtime, this is exactly what I need right now.

The frontwoman of the band, Teela Conrad, starts belting, and for the moment, all talk of my catastrophic romantic history and my most recent failed relationship is forgotten.

I live for moments like these. As Imani shouts along to the lyrics and beats her hands against the steering wheel in time with the music, I can almost convince myself that she's as out of control as I am. That somewhere deep down in that brilliant, refined brain, is the same type of restlessness just screaming to get out that exists in mine. Those moments are always fleeting though. Because she will always turn off the radio and become herself once more.

I'm still looking for my off switch.

"Hey, Farmers!" One of the volunteers says as we pull into the check-in station. She smiles brightly at me and I beam my widest smile. I can already tell that these are my people. "You girls look ready for a good time!"

"Yeah, some of us more than others." Imani presses pause on the screen in her dash that's currently controlling the Spotify playlist, and just like that, she's cranky again. As if I could forget

that the Farmland Music and Arts Festival is most certainly not her idea of a good time.

She puts the car in park so we can hop out as the volunteers scour the car for the festival's no-no's: no pets, no weapons, no drugs. As we wait, my loose-fitting mini dress immediately starts sticking to my skin thanks to the humidity of northern Georgia in August, but I keep smiling anyway. Nothing can bring me down today, not even a reluctant best friend and a lifetime of ruined romances and a phone buzzing with text messages from a mom who thinks I'm currently at a weekend youth retreat with Imani's nonexistent church.

I can't even bring myself to feel guilty about the ridiculous, borderline-blasphemous lie I had to tell her to get here.

I'm not religious in the way my mom is, obviously. Her church is in a sanctuary with pews and ministers and a collection plate that goes around for the offering. My church is the press of bodies together in a crowd, the pulse of a bass guitar vibrating under our feet, and a lead singer preaching the gospel of rebellion and revolution and love through beautiful harmonies and perfect chord progressions. Some people find salvation in a stained-glass building, other people find it in a basement punk show.

"This is a bad idea, Liv," Imani says, leaning forward like she's going to put her elbows on the hood of the car, but deciding against it when she remembers how hot the surface of it must be. It's almost like she's reading my mind. "There are so many other things you should be worrying about this weekend. Like, I don't

know, the judicial hearing, perhaps?” Her voice takes on that exasperated and still somehow fond tone it always takes when she’s slipping into mother-hen mode. “It’s taking you forever to decide what to say—you can’t just wing something like this.”

I can’t see her eyes behind her tinted lenses, but I know she’s narrowing them. I don’t want to talk about the hearing. I don’t want to so much as think about it. And I refuse to.

“We’re not talking about that.” My voice comes out quicker and with more edge than I intend for it to. I immediately try to lighten the mood. “We should be talking about the fact that my best friend is a literal genius who is practically being handed early decision to U Chicago on a silver platter!”

I might want the attention off me, but I mean it. Imani spent all summer doing research with a doctor at the University of Chicago, and she’s got a pretty solid in there next fall. She’s brilliant, and beautiful—brown-skinned and self-assured. She’s got it all together. Too bad her big brain hasn’t figured out how to fix mine.

Imani blushes, embarrassed suddenly by my compliment, and says, “Whatever. Don’t try to change the subject. You have to—”

And because the Farmland volunteers are my people, my comrades, my buddies in arms, Imani doesn’t get to finish that statement before we’re getting the all-clear and being directed toward where our campsite is going to be. As much as I love Imani and value her opinion, I’m almost always grateful when her train of thought gets derailed.