

# NOW

It takes me a second to realize I'm not in Jordan's bed.

My head is pounding—a throbbing ache at my temples—and before I pry open my eyes, I'm struck by how bright the light is on the other side of my lids. I reach a hand out, expecting to feel Jordan's warmth beside me, envisioning his smile, the crooked tooth that only makes him cuter. I've been waiting half my life to wake up next to Jordan Parker.

Instead, my hand touches what feels like grass, wet with morning dew. That's when I open my eyes. Because I'm not in bed at all. I'm on a lawn chair in Jordan's yard.

I scramble to sit up, and as I do, a wave of nausea rolls through me, my stomach twisting. I'm not sure whether it's from the alcohol still coursing through my system, seeping out my pores like sweat, or whether it's from the knowledge that Jordan and I did not sleep together last night, in any sense of the term. That somehow I ended up on this chair and I can't exactly remember how I got here.

I stumble to my feet, noticing then that my shoes are missing, the hot pink high-tops Olivia and I bought together last week. We'd wanted to match. When you match with somebody, it proves to the rest of the world you're important; you're part of something. And everyone wants to be part of Olivia.

Now both my shoes are gone, one foot totally bare, the other covered in a slimy wet sock. My knees are bruised, but I don't remember falling. Actually, I don't remember much of anything. Dinner with Olivia and Katie at the place downtown with the endless breadsticks and the waiter that never cards; piña coladas and margaritas and daiquiris, because the best drinks are the kind you can take pictures with, that make it

look like you're on vacation and make everyone else on Instagram jealous.

I remember leaving dinner, arms thrown around each other's shoulders, laughing so hard in the Uber it felt like I might pee. Then later, dancing to Lana Del Rey in Olivia's room, helping her apply the perfect smoky eye. The feel of Jordan's arms around me when we got to his house, the way his cheek felt scratchy against mine; the smell of him, something earthy and exciting, a thrilling reminder of our plan for later.

But the rest of it is a blur. How did I get out here on the lawn? And why didn't anyone bring me inside?

I pull my phone out of my pocket—thank god I haven't lost it too—and check the time. It's nine a.m., which isn't as late as I'd usually sleep after a party, but isn't that early either. I must have been out here for hours. I don't have any texts, which is unusual. In the mornings, my phone is typically buzzing like crazy—conversations happening on every app about the night before. *Did you see Brett and Darlene making out? How drunk was Katie? You looked so hot last night. Love ya, babe. Love ya love ya love ya.* But right now, it's quiet, the screen darker than it's been since sixth grade, back when I was still Pukey Penelope. Back before Olivia discovered me.

I can't help the buzzing fear that something is wrong. Because if everything were normal, I wouldn't be out here. There's something I can't remember, something I'm pretty sure involves Olivia. I can feel it in my gut. And I'm scared of what she might say.

Olivia has always had a way of telling the truth to your face and making it sound like a kindness, her dazzling smile tricking you into thinking she's on your side. *Maybe next time, don't be such a sloppy mess. Girls like us are better than that.* It's just I'm not usually on the receiving end of it—not since we became best friends. These were comments meant for Katie, who's always a little too eager and embarrassing; for Myriah, who cries in school over bad grades; for Romina, who always ditches us to hang out with the guys. No, I'm always on Olivia's good side, the one she laughs about it with later.

But maybe I'm overreacting. I probably told my friends I was heading home and then couldn't get a ride or something. I bet this chair just seemed like the best option at the time. When I go inside, everything will be totally normal. Olivia will be asleep on the L-shaped couch with Katie, grumbling and hungover, but happy to see me. *I knew you wouldn't disappear before breakfast sandwiches!* she'll say, laughing and

unpacking the eggs and cheese and muffins we bought yesterday to prepare for today's hangovers. Jordan will be upstairs in his room, the bed with the fresh sheets he washed just for us, because last night was meant to be special. Our first time.

Jordan and I officially started dating last December, but I've been in love with him for years. He finally asked me to be his girlfriend right before winter break, and then Olivia was dating Jordan's best friend, Kai, by Christmas. I love that we got boyfriends at the same time, and even though Kai is one of the most annoying people on the planet, I deal with him for Olivia's sake.

Last night was supposed to be perfect—the final night of our junior year, the first day of summer, officially seniors, the ones in charge of everything.

Now I'm not so sure.

I'm still in my junior class shirt, the one we all wore to school yesterday so everybody could sign them. Some of the signatures are smudged now, the Sharpie running from the wet grass. My hair is still in its twin braids, same as Olivia's, hers blonde to my brunette. I don't want to see my face. I'm sure it's a disaster. I really went for it—full contour, highlight, brows. I wanted to look like the kind of girl Jordan would be proud of. I'll have to run to the downstairs bathroom to clean up before I see him.

Raising a hand to shield my eyes, I turn toward the house. Sun roasts the back of my neck, the heat of it making me dizzy. I squelch through the damp grass in my sock to the sliding glass door that opens up to the TV room and try to pull it open, but it's locked. Peering inside, I see Katie asleep on the couch in a position that can't be comfortable, one foot on the floor, an arm thrown above her head. I knock on the window, and she startles awake. When she sees me, a wave of emotions passes over her face—first a smile, then a grimace, finally settling on confusion, her eyebrows knitted together, frown lines on her forehead that are sure to cause wrinkles. It makes me nervous.

It makes me even more sure something is wrong.

She stands up from the couch, coming over to me, dodging piles of trash—cans, red cups, spilled chip bags—that have become a maze on the floor. Katie's got these unruly black curls that are almost bigger than she is, and right now, they've tripled in size from her night on the couch. She unlocks the sliding door

and pulls it open, just barely, not enough that I can fit inside.

“Penny,” she says, almost a whisper. “What are you still doing here?”

“What do you mean?” I say. “Come on, Katie. Open the door.”

She glances behind her. “I really think you should go.”

“But this is my boyfriend’s house.” Even right now—even feeling like this—I can’t help the little burst of pride that blooms inside me as I say it. Katie claims to have a boyfriend too—a guy named Matt she met at summer camp and never stops talking about—but none of us have ever seen a picture, so we’re not sure he’s real. “You can’t block me from Jordan’s house, Katie. That doesn’t make any sense.”

Katie presses her lips together in a tight line. “I’m trying to help you.” And there it is again—the buzzing in my chest. Something went horribly wrong last night, and Katie knows what it is.

“I guess I spent the night on the lawn?” I try to put a smile in my voice. If I can pretend this whole thing is funny, then maybe everything will be okay.

“I thought you went home,” she says. “After everything that happened.”

“Katie, what happened?” My stomach clenches. The nausea is worse now, and I’m sweating in earnest, the sun on the back of my neck unrelenting.

“Penny, you should leave.”

This isn’t how things work with Katie and me. I’m usually the one in control, the one on the better side of the door.

My brother once told me that popularity wasn’t real, that I should stop worrying about something that doesn’t matter. But he’s a guy, so of course he doesn’t get it. I told him I could rank every girl in our class in order. Olivia is number one, obviously. I’m number two, and Katie is number three. Darlene is number fifteen, because even though she’s weird, people still hang out with her to buy weed. Sarah Kozlowski, who doesn’t wash her blue hair—who pricked her finger once in biology so she could study her own blood under the microscope—is number fifty-six. Dead last. It’s not something that’s ever really talked about; everybody just knows. It’s important to know your place in the world. It gives you a road map of how to act—who to be friends with, who you’re allowed to date, who you need to avoid at all costs.

“Katie,” I say again. “Please let me into the house.”

“Fine.” She sighs heavily and pulls open the door wide enough for me to squeeze by. Inside, the hot summer air is trapped with the stale stench of trash and sweat. There are other people in the room, I realize. Danny Scott is asleep on the other side of the couch, and Romina and Myriah are curled up on an air mattress in the corner.

“Thanks,” I say to Katie. “I’m gonna get cleaned up. I feel like roadkill.”

“You *look* like roadkill,” she says back, which I should have expected. She shakes her head, pausing before she adds, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I love the fresh air.” I know I sound ridiculous, but I can’t make any of this a big deal. Not if I want the story to go away.

I’m about to walk into the downstairs bathroom when I’m stopped in my tracks by a familiar voice. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Olivia has just appeared at the top of the stairs and she’s looking at me like I’m the enemy. Her blonde hair is out of her braids—so that we no longer match—and her skin is fresh and dewy; Olivia’s hangovers don’t show on her face. She’s still in the same junior T-shirt as I am, and I can see my message for her there, right over her left boob: *love you forever*. I want to read it to her, make her remember I’m the girl that put it there only yesterday.

“Hey, Liv,” I say, forcing out a laugh. “You’ll never believe where I slept last night.”

“I don’t care where you slept.” She folds her arms, looking down at me with a sneer.

“Oh . . . okay,” I say, still hesitant. “Should we start breakfast?” We’ve made breakfast sandwiches at every sleepover since middle school, and even though our sleepovers have now turned into parties, we would never let the habit die. Maybe right now, the sandwiches will make everything better—will smooth over whatever went down last night.

“So you’re just gonna pretend you don’t remember?” Olivia puts her hands on her hips, and I know that eggs will not magically fix anything.

“I *don’t* remember, Olivia. I mean, I remember parts of last night, but if we got in a fight or something,

I'm sure it wasn't a big deal." My voice is really wavering now, and my nose starts to itch as I hold in the tears. Katie sits down on the end of the couch, watching us with big eyes. The others are waking up now too—Danny yawning and pulling out his phone, Romina and Myriah laughing quietly, whispers back and forth like the hiss of snakes. I can't cry, not in front of an audience.

"How convenient for you," Olivia says.

I rack my brain, trying to think of anything I could have said to offend her. But everything yesterday was so *fun*. It wasn't a real school day—the teachers dismissed us early because we were all so hyped up on summer. We gathered in the field to sign each other's shirts, but Danny had sneak-attack pelted us with water balloons, and soon it was all-out war—Olivia and I teaming up on Jordan and Kai and dropping balloons on them from the second-story stairwell. Then we'd gone home and dried off and gotten ready to go out, laughing and dancing around in her room. Olivia had been excited about Jordan and me. She'd looked up silly sex tips online—the ridiculous ones from *Cosmo* that I swear no one has ever tried in real life. We'd read one that suggested throwing a handful of pepper into the guy's face while in the act and died laughing so hard Olivia fell off the bed. I'd brought a little pepper shaker to the party with me as a joke and when I showed her later, she'd screamed.

Whatever had happened to ruin all that must have been bad.

"If I said anything that hurt your feelings," I say, "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry," Olivia repeats, her voice flat. "Well, that changes everything."

"Where's Jordan?" I start walking up the stairs, pulling off my sock when it squelches into the carpet. Whatever happened between Olivia and me, I know Jordan will take my side. I need him to tell me that everything is going to be okay.

"Why would you care?" Olivia laughs, but there's no humor in it, and suddenly I'm terrified. Is this all about Jordan?

"Liv, what are you talking about?" My voice catches, and I have to clear my throat. "I love Jordan."

She steps to the side, blocking me from passing. Jordan's room is across the hall at the top of the stairs. I can see the bumper stickers on the door: KEEP TAHOE BLUE, BOB MARLEY, SANTA CRUZ BEACH

BOARDWALK.

“You should have thought of that last night,” she says. “But wait, you can’t remember anything.”

“You don’t live here,” I say. “Let me talk to him.”

She pauses and then smiles. “Okay. Let’s talk to him. That sounds fun.”

She steps aside, and I walk past her and up to the door. I push it open and then there he is, lying on the bed, a sheet twisted around his bare torso, dappled sunlight shining through slits in the closed blinds. He’s beautiful—tan skin and clean, hard lines. I’m not the only one obsessed with Jordan—we’re all half in love with him. I’m just the lucky one who actually got him.

“Jordan,” I say, coming into the room and sitting down on the edge of the bed. I glance behind me and see Olivia hovering in the doorway, watching. There’s a peal of laughter from downstairs, someone telling someone else to “shut up.” I want to close the door. I want Olivia to leave. But I want to smooth things over with her, so I don’t say anything.

“Jordan,” I say again, tapping him lightly on the shoulder. He groans, shuffling around under the sheet, and then jerks awake, his eyes flashing back and forth between Olivia and me before settling firmly on my face.

“Penny,” he says in a gust of air. “What are you still doing here? I thought you went home last night.”

“No, I . . .” I trail off, not wanting to fill him in on the rest of the details. I’m holding my breath, waiting for something else to go wrong. “I’m so sorry about last night . . . if something happened.” I don’t know what I’m apologizing for, but it seems like the right thing to do.

“Penny doesn’t remember anything,” Olivia says, taking steps into the room. “She has *amnesia*.”

“I just drank too much.” I turn back to her, the tang of the piña coladas, margaritas, and daiquiris still sharp and sweet in the back of my throat.

“You were a mess.” Jordan sits up, and the sheet falls down around his waist.

“I know,” I say. “I know, and I’m sorry.” *Are we okay? Do you still love me?* That’s what I really want to ask. Jordan has always been too good for me, our relationship so tenuous.

“Come on, Penny,” Jordan says. He reaches out like he’s going to take my hand for a second and then

pulls back, clearly mad at himself for doing it. “This is seriously unfair. You do something fucked up, but you don’t remember it, so then you don’t have to feel guilty?” His words cause a flare in my stomach, the feeling like I’ve lost control of my car on the freeway.

“What happened, Jordan?” I’m trying to keep my voice steady. “I love you.” How can I make him believe it? I repeat the words in my mind, like I’ll be able to imprint them on Jordan’s heart. *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

Olivia sits down next to me on the bed. “Well, maybe you should have thought about that before you made out with my boyfriend.”

“What?” For a second I think Olivia must be joking. It’s a well-known fact that Olivia’s boyfriend, Kai, and I don’t get along. And besides that—I would never do anything to hurt Olivia.

But then, there’s a flash of memory—I’m leaning into Kai, my hands in his hair, a feeling of want pooling in my stomach. I instinctively shake my head to make the image go away. It’s not a full memory, not exactly, just a flicker of feeling. It’s like what we learned last year about Plato’s cave; I can’t see the image, just a shadow of the image reflected onto the wall.

“Do you need me to repeat it?” Olivia asks.

“Jordan.” I turn to him. “I didn’t. I wouldn’t do anything with Kai. I don’t even *like* Kai.”

“Olivia walked in on you guys kissing,” he says. “In the laundry room.”

And I know it’s true. I can see the basket of folded clothes upturned on the floor, can feel my back pressed against the washing machine, can remember leaning in to kiss him, trying to convince him I wasn’t that drunk, him pulling away. It’s all there in my memories—a horrible movie reel of terrible decisions.

*No no no no no.* It doesn’t make any sense. Last night was supposed to be special. I’d been planning it for weeks. Why would I ruin that? Why would I ruin that with Olivia’s *boyfriend*?

“I’m . . . sorry,” I say, my voice weak. I know *sorry* doesn’t cover it. I know there isn’t anything I could actually say to make this better. I’m the worst person in the entire world.

I remember lying with Olivia on her bed last night before the party, the conversation drifting from Jordan and the questionable *Cosmo* sex advice over to Kai. “I just can’t figure him out right now,” she’d



said, unsure. “I feel like we’re drifting apart.”

“What if you stuck an ice cube down his pants?” I’d suggested with wiggling eyebrows, referencing one of the stupider tips we’d read.

“Yeah, that’ll win him over.” She’d laughed and then we’d moved on, like the conversation hadn’t even happened. And I’d made everything so much worse. She’d been upset about things with Kai and instead of being a good friend, I’d *kissed* him.

“I think you should probably leave,” Jordan says now. “I don’t really want to do this anymore.”

“Do this like . . . this conversation?” I ask softly. “Or, like . . . *us*?”

“I mean, I don’t think we should be together.”

I feel bile rise at the back of my throat, tears stinging the corner of my eyes. I have to get out of here before anything gets any worse. I can’t cry in front of everyone. Worse—I can’t throw up. Pukey Penelope will *not* be making another appearance. I’ve worked so hard for this, to be here in Jordan Parker’s bedroom, to be best friends with Olivia Anderson, finally a girl everyone else wants to be—a girl with friends who make her feel like she matters.

There’s no way they’ll still want to be friends with me. I wouldn’t want to be friends with me.

“Did anything happen last night with you and Olivia?” I ask Jordan, working at a hole in his sheet with my fingernail. It’s the question that’s been nagging at me, a sliver of unease in the back of my mind. It’s the way her hand is still on his shoulder, how she’s sitting on his bed like she belongs there. This problem with Jordan is fixable—I know I can get him back, so long as Olivia hasn’t gotten to him. In a competition against Olivia, anyone would lose.

“Anything going on with me or Jordan is none of your business,” Olivia answers. “You lost the privilege to know anything about us when you stuck your tongue in Kai’s mouth.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, even though I know it’s not enough. “I don’t know why I kissed him. It doesn’t make sense. I love you guys.” I shake my head, trying to clear the memory away, like if I can forget it happened, everyone else will too. I know that’s why I couldn’t remember it when I woke up. It was self-preservation.

My mind flashes again to the way Kai's hair felt between my fingers, his hands on my back before he pulled them away. I wish I could make this all his fault, but I know it's not. He'd tried to stop me, but I'd kissed him. And I'd *liked* it. That's the worst part.

Because besides the horrible fact that he's with Olivia, there's also this: Kai ruined my life in elementary school. And yeah, maybe we grew up and were forced to hang out, but I've never quite gotten over it.

According to chaos theory, a butterfly flapping its wings can cause a tornado all the way across the world, events flowing outward like ripples on the surface of a lake. All of this started when Kai moved to our town from Hawaii in fifth grade—Pukey Penelope, my friendship with Olivia, falling for Jordan; all the moments of my life built one upon the other.

And this right now? This is the freaking tornado.

"I have to go." I stumble out of the room and down the stairs, holding my breath so the tears don't fall.

I can hear Olivia's footsteps behind me. "Yeah, get out!" Her voice is sharp as a knife, her words twisting in my gut. Katie's eyes are wide, mouth hanging open. Romina has her phone pointed in my direction, and I see the light that means she's recording. Soon my misery will be posted all over social media. Soon the whole school will know what I did.

I pull open the screen door and race out into the yard, Olivia right behind me. The sprinklers are on, and I run through them, the cold water shocking me awake. My bare feet squelch through the grass and then I'm on the blacktop, tar burning hot from the sun, and running down the driveway. It's not until I'm out onto the street, around the corner, where I know Olivia can't see, that I start to cry.