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Aster sits alone under the oak tree in her backyard. She's alone, and the only things surrounding her are weeds, clustered together and working to take over the entire place. Her hands rest limply by her sides, and she looks up at the branches.

Bitterness overwhelms her. It envelops her, seeps into her skin, her flesh, the very atoms of her being, and it does not leave. There lies a rope, hanging from the tree, never taken down. It swings in the wind, carelessly blowing in the breeze, and Aster bunches up her hands into a fist and wants to scream, cry, to feel anything more than this everlasting bitterness.

Aster wishes she could talk to her sister. She always knew how to cheer her up. Mari was always there, *always*, and now, she's not. Aster swallows hard. She knows she has almost a week before her mother will ask her to pack her things; she has seen her mother browsing the internet in search of a new place to move.

She can't blame her mother. They have outgrown this town, like hermit crabs, swapping their old shells for new ones. Aster heads inside. It's grown dark out, with the last rays of the sun dancing in the sky next to the clouds.

Nothing will change tomorrow. She'll wake up, go through the day like it's any other, and then head to bed. Aster has five days left before she needs to pack. Five days left until she leaves her hometown, five days left until she leaves Ria and the stupid, stupid scrapbook behind.

We're sitting under the oak tree, all four of us. Mari, Ria, Tori, and I. It's become almost a ritual for us to gather; every summer, in the first week of break, we meet under the tree, and our friendship will be golden and perfect, and everything in the world will be right. In the summer heat, everything seems to be permanent. The tire swing on the oak tree is occupied by Tori, whose singing is like the sunniest of days. My sister, Mari, enjoys watermelons with Ria, and I have my trusty polaroid camera with me.

Pictures are always better candid. It's the unfiltered joy, the bright smiles on their faces that make me smile at night when I put them in the scrapbook. My scrapbook is almost like a joint project for all of us; its images never fail to make us come together and share a laugh or a fond memory. I feel like I'd give up anything for it, if needed.

The summer sun beats down. My laughter and joy come as easily as breathing. I lift my camera, capture one last picture, and then we head to the lake.

Aster wakes, frozen in place. Warm tears roll down her face, and belatedly, she realizes she must've dreamt again of them. She swallows the lump in her throat, chokes down her emotions, and then goes to the bathroom.

"Honey?" her mother calls, "you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Aster replies, forcing some happiness into her voice. "I'm heading out today. Going to the lake, or whatever."

"Oh?" her mom inquires, "why? You haven't been there in ages! You always used to hang out at your meeting spot with the other girls, but you haven't been doing that recently."

"I need some space for myself, first," Aster explains, "and I need to, well, try and find that scrapbook you know I always used to have lying around."

"Alright, well, good luck! I'm sure you'll find it. I'm glad you're going out a bit more; you've always been so still ever since your sister's passing."

Aster just rolls her eyes, pulls on her shoes, and heads outside. The sun burns. Its heat is overwhelming, and Aster almost regrets her choice to head outside like this. She's positive the signs of her prior tears haven't faded away; her eyes are still slightly puffy, and they're watery too, but that's fine. It's not like anyone that would care would be there in any case.

The trip to the lake is unremarkable. There's no big bad enemy stopping her from getting there, only her own thoughts and the traffic lights. Aster rummages around their old meeting spot. There's still nothing. She sits, crosses her legs, and feels like screaming.

Everything she'd built with her friends. All of it, the scrapbook, the bonds, their treehouse, even, all of it is gone.

The scrapbook was taken by Ria. Their friend group dissolved, and the treehouse is a rotting mess in the backyard, overgrown with vines and speckled in loose screws.

The taste of defeat is heavy on her tongue. She has only a few days left in this godforsaken town, and she can't even find the only thing she was staying for. Ria has some new friends, cool biker kids who don't know a thing beyond trying to become more popular, and Tori has simply drifted away, burying her nose in her studies.

It's like none of them *care*. None of them care that they've lost one another, and none of them care that they lost Mari, and none of them care that she's moving too. All their years of friendship are lost, like water in a sink. Aster is sick, and she is tired, and there's movement from the corner of her eye.

"Who is it?" she calls, suddenly apprehensive. It's only them ~~four~~ three that knew of their hiding spot. The rest of the people either didn't bother coming, or didn't care enough to look inside. She doesn't get an answer, but what she does get is even worse.

It's Tori. And Ria. The two people she really, really doesn't want to see. Aster backs up, preparing to run. Tori looks as pale as a ghost, pale, white skin a sharp contrast to Ria's tanned skin.

"Ster?" Tori asks, tilting her head like she hasn't broken Aster's heart and stomped on it for good measure.

"Tori, don't bother with her," Ria dismisses, crossing her hands. "Aster's been nothing but rude. She drew all over the scrapbook, over every single image of Mari. Can you believe it?"

"You don't get it—" Aster tries.

"I don't get what? I see what I see, and I'm just saying, it doesn't look good for you," Ria scowls.

"You don't get to say that," Aster says, voice quivering. Rage lights up every nerve. "How *dare* you say that." Ria raises an eyebrow. Her careless demeanor shifts into one more ready for a fight.

"Calm down, Jesus," Tori interjects, placing a hand in front of Ria. It's just for show; all three of them know that Ria could easily take Tori on and stop her, and it sends a new burst of rage through Aster's veins.

“You didn’t care when Mari died,” Aster explodes, “none of you—I thought that we were all *friends* and that you’d *care* when she died, but all of you—both of you continued on like nothing was wrong! Like I hadn’t lost my sister, like you didn’t lose a friend.”

“I care!” Ria screams back, “I care so much that sometimes it feels like I’m going to *die*. You have no idea, Aster. You’ve been stuck in your little pity party that you haven’t seen what’s actually happening.”

“Shut up,” Aster snarls. “You took the scrapbook. You took it and I’m leaving in a few days, and I want it back.”

“You drew over all of the images of Mari! You claim to care, and say that / don’t, when all you’ve ever shown is that you’re callous and cruel and you don’t care!” Ria bristles. Tori takes a few steps back, pale complexion now riddled with conflict. “Just stop,” Ria says, tiredly. “I’m trying to move on—”

“All you’ve ever done is move on,” Aster cries. “All you’ve ever done is move on like you don’t care, and never have cared for her. You say you care so much it hurts, but nothing you’ve ever done has proven that. All you’ve done is take, and take, and take until there’s nothing left! Not even my scrapbook.”

“Both of you, stop,” Tori commands. “We’re all in the wrong. None of you are right, and I’m not going to be either. Just, give her the scrapbook back.”

Ria shakes her head. “Not for the world I won’t.” Aster just scoffs and turns away. She pushes through the leaves and leaves the meeting space behind, and her two old best friends along with it. She doesn’t have the scrapbook, and her head is a storm, clashing in a dissonant cacophony of noise.

Her heart is still heavy. There are five days left, and there are two truths that she’s accepted: one, she’s never going to get her scrapbook back, and two, that Ria is a liar, and will always be one.

There is nothing left for her in this town. Aster has five days left, and she can’t wait for them to be over.