

# *I am Still Here*

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On the day of the funeral, the skies wept for my loss. I appreciated the sentiment but didn't enjoy walking home wet. My sister, on the other hand, seemed to be trying to make up for the sun's absence by being even more perky than usual.

"Think of this as a new beginning," Blair said beside me. "You don't have anything holding you back from your future anymore. I hear Virginia State is taking applications for the fall semester."

"I'd rather stay in my bedroom forever, watching sad movies and eating ice cream to drown my feelings, like my cat just died," I mumbled back to her.

"Wait, we have a cat?"

"That's not the point." I pulled out my keys and unlocked our apartment door, turning on the light as I stepped inside. And then I saw all the things I wanted to forget.

I quickly started picking up the extra blankets, water bottles, and trash bins to shove in a closet. Eventually, I reached the pill bottle sitting on the kitchen counter. *Proven to ease the effects of chemotherapy and improve quality of life.* Bullcrap. My eyes finally leaked the tears I'd held all day as I threw the bottle across the room and sank to the floor.

"It's going to get easier every day that passes, Scarlett. I know how much your heart's hurting right now, so why don't you borrow mine for a while? Then you can give it back when you're ready to piece yourself together again." Blair sat by my side into the night, listening to the choke of my sobs and whispering what I had left to appreciate.

Leaving out what I'd never get back.

I woke on the living room couch, under one of the blankets I discarded yesterday. Although my phone said it was already noon, I had no desire to get up and face the world. Everything brought back memories I'd rather forget, including the sound of Blair tinkering in the kitchen.

"I made lunch," Blair said in a sing-song voice as she entered the room with two plates. She set a sandwich down in front of me and opened the blinds to let in sunlight, causing me to shield my eyes from the glow. "I think we should go out today, and get you some new clothes or a haircut."

"Did you read that in a *How to Handle Grief Guide*? '*Reinvent yourself and it'll be like your loved one never existed,*'" I mocked in a salesman's voice. "'*Who needs sadness when you can get your nails done?*'"

"Haha. But seriously, I think you need to focus on yourself and starting over. Being a caregiver took all of your time, so let's do something for you." She grabbed my coat and threw it on my lap, swiping her car keys as she went. "Let's go."

I had to admit, I did feel better after picking out some new clothes and getting my raggedy hair trimmed. It was also the first time I'd been anywhere but a grocery store or hospital in months, let alone with Blair by my side. The feeling didn't last long, and guilt took its place when I got back into my sister's car.

I expected to go home, but Blair passed the turnoff and continued down the highway. "Where are we going?" I asked her when she made no comment about our destination.

"I told you Virginia State was taking applications, so I scheduled you a meeting with the dean last week. I figured you'd be hesitant to do anything after the funeral." She handed me a letter addressed from the school, telling me I have an appointment today. It was dated a week before the funeral, so I could only guess when Blair had scheduled my meeting.

My heart rate spiked when what I was about to do sank in. “I can’t do this, there’s no way I can talk to someone,” I rambled at Blair to change her mind. “What if he doesn’t like me? What if they think I smell?”

“You smell fine. And I promise it’s going to be fine. You will tell him how you’ve always wanted to be a nurse and take care of people. He’ll admit you immediately.”

“Use the ‘*my only patient just died card*,’ got it.” And with that, I got out of the car to start my life again.

It seemed wrong to be doing new things without her in my life, almost like I was betraying her memory by moving on. Even though I held my college acceptance letter in my hand, my emotions threatened to tumble out of me and spill across my bedroom floor.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Blair put an arm around my shoulder.

“Everything is just so.... messed up. How am I supposed to do any of this? How am I supposed to replace her?” I’d always been the average one, someone unremarkable and ordinary. She was the one everyone had cared about.

“I think it’s time you live for yourself instead of other people. It’s going to suck and sometimes you’ll have to scream into your pillow at life. But it’s not going to get better until you realize how much I love you and want you to move on.”

“You really mean that?” I looked up at her. “You want me to keep going?”

“Of course I do. I think it’s time you give me back my heart and start putting yours back together on your own. I’ll be there every step of the way, cheering you on.”

“Just don’t sing, you’ll make me go deaf.” I put my head on Blair’s shoulder and stayed there until sleep overtook me. When I woke up, she was gone.

I didn't see Blair again after that conversation, although I guess that was to be expected. I had just attended her funeral the week before.