As I sit at my old piano, my fingers gently caress the keys and the room is filled with a familiar, mournful song. The song waltzes slowly and sadly around the room, filling it with ghosts and memories of the past- my past.

I think about James. I remember James so clearly. However, I don’t remember what happened, exactly; the bits I do remember are a blur. There were lots of colours and shouting, strong hands and loud voices. And of course, the guns. The deafening, never-ending sound of gunfire, pounding, pounding, pounding through my skull. My heart begins to ache as I remember how it felt when I helplessly held him in my arms.

If only I hadn’t hesitated, if only I’d got to him in time, if only he’d stayed hidden from the enemy, then he might still be here with me now.

I remember…

\* \* \*

The battlefield was like an orchestra of loud, horrifying noises- non-stop gun fire, explosion after explosion and the blood-curdling shrieks of grown men crying out for help all collided together making a dreadful, terrifying racket.

James and I had stopped briefly to take cover behind a wall. I caught his eye and he managed a weak smile, which brought me some comfort even in the circumstances. We’d get through this just as we’d got through all other battles- together.

The enemy were so close that we could almost feel them breathing down our necks. My heart thumped against my ribcage and fear gripped me firmly, refusing to let go.

I knew we didn’t have much time. I knew we had to move and James knew it too. He stared at me, his face stern with concentration, waiting for my signal.

There was no time. It was now or never. He had to go.

James trusted my judgement. I gave him the nod and without hesitation, he went.

An ear-splitting bang. Confusion. Another bang. Panic. Another bang. A flash. A scream.

James.

He lay motionless on the floor, his body limp, almost lifeless. Desperate, confused, shocked, I sprinted over to help him. He couldn’t die, not now, not after everything we’d been through.

I scooped him up in my arms and held him close to me. His blue eyes that were once full of life and mischief were now cold and black like the winter sky. His lips parted. “Go. Go now. Save yourself,” he whispered weakly.

I didn’t have time to say goodbye. I didn’t have time to say or do anything but hold him tightly in his last moments. As I felt his body become still and heavy, a wave of grief began to flood through my veins like poison and my whole body was racked with uncontrollable agony.

However, a voice began to echo over and over again in my head. “Go. Go now. Save yourself. Go. Go now. Save yourself…”

I had to move. I had to leave him. I had to get out.

I had to do it, for myself, for James, for the family I’d left at home. Feeling sick and breathless, I moved, I left him there and I took cover.

\* \* \*

Now, whilst I sit at my old piano, the song slows down, drawing to a close, and I think about what happened. I think about how I came home to my family, but James didn’t. I think about how I met my beautiful wife and had a beautiful family- children, grandchildren- but James didn’t.

I think about how it could have been me. What if it had been me, not James?

I close my eyes and think about him. I remember him so clearly- he was brave and fearless.

As the mournful tune comes to a stop, the final note echoes around the room and lingers gently. I listen and I know that somehow, James is still with me now.