

BOLANLE

Okay, Bolanle, he's gone for sure.

He came by looking for me and by heck, he stayed long this time. My first clue? A pack of cigs half-consumed and a crumpled can of Budweiser lying carelessly on the kitchen table. Not to mention the putrescent air that pervades the living room and the whole house in fact.

Sickening. I suck in my breath to block any more of *him* from wafting into my nostrils.

I escaped this time. I can never predict when he'd burst those doors open, drag me up to my bedroom and forcefully strip me of my clothes to torture me. He has been doing that since before I was old enough to speak, but I will never get used to the horror.

I glance around the kitchen and my gaze magnets to the wooden table; right next to the can—that has his name engraved on it, as sharply as it is in my memory. *Justin.*

I can feel my heart hammering its way out of my chest, so I dart toward the door for a taste of the cool late spring breeze. I gasp for moments, allowing the clean air to caress my sweat-slick face and dampened hair.

I'm starving, and I desperately hope that Aunty Shola or Maureen have been by the grocery store. I'll rather kiss a toilet seat than go to Walmart. The place is swarming with the “worst *de la worst*” of this town—which is pretty much everybody. I loathe the prying eyes how the prying eyes of those women that bore into my skin and their obnoxious, never-ending guessing games as to why I turned out to be a monster.

A sudden shrill jolts me out of my reverie. It's a bicycle with Kevin on it. He lives a few blocks away and as usual, he is not charmed to see me, but that won't deter me from saying hello—or waving awkwardly at least. He reluctantly returns the gesture and accelerates his pedaling to get past my house...away from me.

Shocking.

He's only twelve years old, but old enough to hate me—or fear me—like everybody in this neighborhood. I don't get it though, I am not a monster. I am only a broken woman who has spent most of her twenty-nine years of existence battling pain, PTSD, depression, and self.

Okay, I bet that sounds scary.

But has it always been so grey with me? There has to be a time that I took short breaks from licking the pots clean in sorrow's kitchen.

Folarin.

But he left me.

Thoughts of him flood my mind, and I blink back the tears that fight to come out. It's been three long years since he left—or I let him go.

I had to. I remember how he almost gave up going to Yale...for me. He was so sick in love, he could not choose a shot at pursuing his dreams—without me in it—over me. I remember how it warmed me up to be so special to someone, but no. I could not bring him down with me. It'd be too cruel.

So, I made the decision for him. It's perhaps the most decent thing I could do for him, but it still hurts like the devil. I miss him so much.

I am rudely interrupted once again from wallowing in angst, this time by a growling stomach. *Ah, food.* I get back inside and shut the door to begin my frantic search for anything to appease the gods of hunger.

First, this place needs to be rid of Justin's demonic debris. I get to it. Maureen will make a fuss about my cleaning up his mess again, but I do it anyway.

The house is spick-and-span in no time, and I excessively spritz the stale air with lavender fragrance to eliminate Justin and his filthy essence. Bless Aunt Shola and her coupon-cutting superpower that got us forty-seven cans of *Febreze* within three months. How else can we afford so many?

Money is a luxury these days, but we get by, thanks to my aunt. She somehow pulls off feeding this crazy family with her tiny income provided by the state. Officer Carl is another angel in my life; he shows up to save the day with burgers or bread when things get too rough, as he did on that night twenty years ago when I lost my parents. Since that sour incident, he makes it a duty to check up on his favorite *Bolanle Kekere* from time to time, and it means a lot to me.

So you see, I may be lonely, but maybe I have a few people left in the world who care. *Just maybe.*

Ugh, the stubborn stench of cigarette smoke still lingers in the room, so I lift a window to let in some air. I won't be here sweating my ass off if our errant repairman had shown up to fix the broken air conditioner yesterday like he promised.

I'll have to see if Maureen knows someone else—for lesser money.

Screw hunger and Walmart, I'll risk starving to death until Aunt Shola comes home. In the meantime, let me relieve my achy heart...with music.

The piano is my succor from the harsh cards that life deals me; my grandmother taught me how to play when I was little and nothing is more therapeutic—well, except seeing my student, Anita play.

She'll walk in any minute now, and I need to get in the right mood for today's lessons.

Her parents, like a few others who have seen the light, are not of the opinion that I am the Grim Reaper the town claims I am, and they let me teach their kids piano lessons—my only source of income.

Anita learns very avidly for her age and she has been working hard to master all the songs in her beginner's book. She may be only nine, but she is an innocent angel who also watches over me in a way. She senses it when my mood is dark and *Mary Had A Little Lamb* becomes eerie and intense. I can't bear to terrify her, so I try to lighten up and radiate happiness.

Until she comes, I occupy my worn, wooden bench seat, cursing silently at being so damn sweaty. I brush my thick hair off my neck and twist it into a messy bun. *Bliss*.

I lay my fingertips on the aged ivory keys and shut my eyes momentarily, allowing my mind to be plagued by myriad reminiscent thoughts about my brittle existence. Undeniably, there have been peeks of sunshine, but far too many rainy days. I have spent more time fighting through each day than living.

I seal off my thoughts and yield myself to the haunting sounds from *The Secret Letter* that fill my home. The great thing about music is that it doesn't save your life; it gives you the strength to save your own life. I don't play this piece from memory, but from my soul.

Music is my external heartbeat, an extension of my pain and sadness, and in my attempt to let go of my painful memories, they come rushing back. And it makes me wonder if I can truly forget. *No*. No, I can't.

Not when Justin still exists as a thorn in my flesh.

Not when I mourn Grandma's empty bedroom—even death hates me.

Not when the love of my life is far away without me.

Not when I can't even eat when I want to.

But with just me and my piano, I can catch a breather, albeit short-lived. I can silence the maddening roars of my horrid past. Reduce them to whispers.

I refuse to give in, so I strike up the music, immersing myself in the symphonies that throng my being, and drowning my woes therein.