

Part I: Therapy

Tolani hesitated at the entrance before slowly making her way to the red couch in the room's centre. Usually, it took seconds to cross the space, but today she tried to make it longer, slow down time, and even halt it altogether. It wasn't the couch itself that was the problem; she had grown quite attached to it in recent weeks. The couch was made of sturdy leather and had clearly been around for a long time. Its cushions were firm, making it hard to find a comfortable position without sinking too much. On hot days, her arms would stick to the patches on the couch, and it would make faint creaking noises when she tried to get up at the end of each session. No, her issue wasn't with the couch. It wasn't even with the therapy sessions the domestic violence shelter had "advised" her to attend. It was with **this** session, this particular one where she'd expose her most vulnerable thoughts to her therapist—a kind-looking middle-aged woman who met Tolani every Thursday between 5 and 6:30 pm.

When she got to the foot of the couch, Tolani considered turning back. Did she have to do this? Who cared what the shelter thought? She was fine. She didn't **need** this, especially not today's session. It didn't matter that she had been the one to suggest bringing in her journal, hoping that reading about her past experiences on paper would spare her from reliving them. None of that mattered now. All she knew was that she was scared. She couldn't do this, and no one could make her.

"Hi, Tolani. You're a bit early today," Miss Uyai greeted with a hesitant smile.

Miss Uyai's presence silenced Tolani's thoughts. What had she been thinking? The shelter offered free therapy sessions to its clients, and Tolani had voluntarily signed up for a weekly slot. She was the one who had suggested bringing her journal. No one was pressuring her to do anything, **be** anything here. She was safe.

"Yeah, I wanted to be settled by the time you got here" Tolani replied as she sank into the familiar red couch.

Miss Uyai nodded, sitting on the lone chair opposite Tolani. "So, how have you been?"

Tolani went through the motions as she did every session.

"How was your week?"

"Did you make any friends?"

“Did you feel overwhelmed or stressed this week?”

“What caused it?”

“How did you deal with it?”

She answered as succinctly as possible, but tension crept into her body each second they spent not discussing the sparkly pink book on her lap.

Ask me, please ask me already.

Finally, Miss Uyai's gaze turned to the book. "And I see you brought the journal in."

Sighing, Tolani leaned back into the couch. "I was hoping you'd get to that already."

"You don't have to read the entries to me if you're not ready, Tolani. In fact, you never have to read them if you don't want to. We're here to find the best way to work through what happened."

"I know, and I appreciate it. It's just... these entries were written as it all unfolded, you know? I've never gone back to read them. I guess I'm hesitant to revisit it, that's all."

"That's perfectly normal. You're doing a brave thing by reading it, I hope you know that. "

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, I'm here to listen. Start wherever you feel comfortable, stop when you like, and we can discuss whenever you're ready. You set the pace, okay?"

Tolani nodded, flexing her fingers and opening the page she had bookmarked as the day she met the man of her dreams—the day her nightmare began.

Part II: Love

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*Feb 18<sup>th</sup>*

*I met a guy today. He was so... different, you know? Kind, funny, and oh my god! He said the smoothest things, there's a real sweet mouth on that one.*

*His name is Haruna, Ali Haruna. I met him on the train (I know right?!?! Who needs romcoms anymore when you can meet potential Mr. Right on the Metro).*

*I was taking the train to the National Theatre, and as usual, I was late. I got my ticket and started rushing towards the door, then I slipped.*

*I remember closing my eyes and thinking, 'Oh God, not today' and just kind of waiting for my back to hit the floor. It never did though, thankfully. I opened my eyes and saw Haruna holding*

me up, and I think I forgot how to breathe for a second. Dark skin, big brown eyes, a strong jawline and lips that looked like sin; the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on (the strongest arms too, he was holding on to me tight!).

He helped me stand up straight and asked if I was alright. Honestly, even if I wasn't before, I was immediately I got a whiff of his cologne. Girl, let me just say... wow!

We got on the train, sat beside each other and that's when he introduced himself. Said he works in tech, has two younger sisters, was on his way to a party, amongst other things. He did most of the talking, I was so shy, all I did was smile, laugh and nod.

He took my number before we got to my stop and promised to call. I've been looking at my phone anxiously all evening.

Maybe it's too early to say this, maybe I'm just being a hopeless romantic again, but I really think he might be the one. I mean, 'Omotolani Ali' does sound great, doesn't it?

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Mar 24th

Haruna called! Only took him four weeks, but he called!! I was getting ready to go on my Friday evening walk when my phone rang. Perfect timing! We had more than enough time to talk.

He apologised for not calling sooner and mentioned a huge work project, I understood. Clinicals haven't given me much free time either, and I've tried my best to enjoy my week off while studying for my next exams.

He asked if he could come pick me up on Sunday so we could go see a movie. I said yes! Why not? He's asked that I be ready by two o'clock. I'll be ready by one :)

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Mar 26<sup>th</sup>

The movie sucked soooo bad. I've never been a horror girl so I was largely uninterested. It was a good choice though because I got to act scared and lean into him for 'comfort' at a point. After that, he had his arm around me for the rest of the movie which was really cute!

We stopped by the arcade after the movie to play a few games. It was fun and hilarious, we won so many prizes. I think we made an excellent team, 'Dr. & Mr. Haruna Ali'. I can hear the wedding bells already!

I'm going to marry that man! I can already imagine how cute our kids will be. And spoiled too! A dad in tech and a doctor mom? Talk about winning the birth lottery!

Okay, I sound silly now. Maybe I should slow down, but I kinda really don't want to xD

*We're going out again in a week, I can hardly wait! <3*

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Apr 1st

I'm a girlfriend!!! Yes, you read that right!

Tolani is Haruna's girlfriend!!!

Who would've thought I would be in love with a guy I met on the Blue Line a little over a month ago, so random yet so perfect. We talk about everything and nothing, I really think this relationship is endgame for me. Also, the other day I mentioned how I was on my way to meet with a realtor and he asked me to move in with him.

I know, right? I know! He must be crazy! xD

But... I said yes. So I guess I'm kinda crazy too lol.

I mean, why not? My rent is due by the end of the month and I don't have to go to school till October, it's just five months after all, right? Plus, it'll be fun living with my BOYFRIEND!

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*Jul 29<sup>th</sup>*

*Haruna came back super late last night reeking of alcohol and a strange perfume, oddly feminine. I think he might be... I hope I'm wrong. He's been staying out a lot these days. I tried asking him where he'd been 3 days ago and he just blew up. Started talking about how I don't let him live and I'm always smothering him. I've never seen him like that, it really scared me. I think it might just be nerves though, we've officially been together for over three months now. Maybe that has him scared. I'm sure everything will settle down eventually.*

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Sept 25th

It's been a while since I wrote here. Life's been busy, especially with clinicals ending soon. But it's more than that; Haruna's changed. Always drunk, rarely home, and when he is... he hurts me. I can't pretend it isn't happening anymore. I was ashamed to write here, because how could I stay if the truth was staring at me every time I opened this book? But, I've decided I'm leaving

today. I won't come back after my shift tonight. School starts in a week, I'm entering my fifth year of med school, I don't need this. I'm going to be a doctor, save lives. I can't do that if he takes mine.

Part III: Lies

Tolani closed the book, tears streaming down her face. Reading it was harder than she expected but she'd done it. Over the past few weeks, reading the journal had taken her back to those dark days. Days when everything felt mute and life lost its sparkle, but now, she'd reached the best part—the part where she left, where she started getting better, where she was safe.

Sniffing, she glanced at Miss Uyai, who wore a concerned look.

Miss Uyai took a deep breath and said kindly, "Thank you for sharing your journal with me. I can see you've been deeply affected by this, struggling with your memories."

Tolani nodded, her voice a whisper, "I just want to forget, you know? Move on with my life."

Miss Uyai sat forward, her expression compassionate but probing. "I have to be honest, Tolani. My job here is to help you, and that means addressing some concerns."

Miss Uyai had carefully chosen her words, and she watched Tolani's reaction closely. Tolani's eyes darted around the room, and her fingers trembled as she clutched her journal.

"Tolani, tell me why we're here."

"I... I don't know what you mean—"

"These Thursday sessions, why were they set up?"

Tolani's heart raced as confusion washed over her. Suddenly, she didn't feel so safe. She felt the walls closing in, she couldn't breathe.

"The shelter set them up to help me work through my trauma. Why else would we be here?"

Miss Uyai leaned back, her expression unwavering, noticing a subtle shift in Tolani—a realisation that her story wasn't believed, a silent admission that she knew the truth.

“Tolani, think carefully. Is it possible your memories are... false?”

“Are you saying I'm lying about what I went through?”

“I'm not saying that.”

“Well, it certainly sounds like you are!”

“Okay, okay. Let's take a different approach. The last entry, was that the last time you saw Haruna?”

“Yes, I left that night and I never went back. I had to get out with my life before I left in a casket.”

Silence filled the room. Miss Uyai sighed. “Tolani, you don't remember calling the police and confessing that you killed Haruna?”

Tolani's face turned pale, her voice trembling, “Wh-What are you talking about? I didn't kill anyone!”

“Yes, you did. A week after Haruna was found dead in his home, you called the police, sobbing, and told them you had stabbed him. You turned yourself in, don't you remember?”

Tolani shook her head, pondering Miss Uyai's words. **Had** she killed Haruna? It seemed possible. Maybe during an argument, she'd gotten scared. She was usually the one who cooked, so she might have been making dinner. Perhaps she ended up hurting him while trying to protect herself. A strange mix of relief and pride washed over her. She had protected herself.

“Tolani, are you still with me?”

“Yes, sorry. I...don't remember any of this. But it's possible, right? I might've defended myself and now I've blocked out the memories.”

Miss Uyai hesitated briefly before saying, “Well, it's definitely a possibility. Our brains have a way of protecting us from things that are too overwhelming. But Tolani, Haruna isn't the only one, is he?”

"What are you talking about? What do you mean, 'Haruna isn't the only one'? I've had other boyfriends, if that's what you're asking. Is that a problem?"

"I'm asking about more than just an ex-boyfriend, Tolani"

Miss Uyai reached for a folder on the table. She took out a series of photographs, placing headshots of various men next to one another. A growing sense of dread washed over Tolani. She recognized these men, all six of them, including Haruna.

"Can you identify any of the men in these pictures?"

"Yes, I...I recognise all of them."

Leaning closer, Tolani traced the outlines of the photographs, thinking back on the relationships she'd had with each of them.

"What does this have to do with Haruna?"

"Well, all six men were found dead in their homes with similar stab wounds: one to the back, one to the stomach, and one to the heart. The perpetrator left the knife in the sink, almost as if they planned to return and wash it. Strangely, all these men had a girlfriend who mysteriously vanished after their deaths."

Tolani looked up from the pictures, a sudden realisation dawning on her. "You think *I* killed them?"

"It's not just a thought anymore, Tolani. Detectives had hit a dead end until you turned yourself in. The killer left evidence, but their fingerprints weren't in any database. Each victim's family knew the girlfriend by a different name: Grace, Chioma, Sharon, Rumi, Simi, so there wasn't any luck on that front either"

Tears welled up in Tolani's eyes as she vehemently shook her head, her voice trembling, "No! That's not true! Yes, I change my name often, but it's because I'm trying to protect myself! All those men hurt *me*. I could never... I would never-"

"The erratic movement across state lines didn't help. The first victim was in Abuja, then Benue, Enugu, Jos, Benin, and now Lagos. You were a difficult person to track, Tolani."

Tolani panicked. She had to escape, didn't feel safe. She jumped out of her chair, heart racing, and rushed toward the door with one thought.

Get out, get out NOW.

She flung the door open and almost crashed into someone. Two nurses stood there, wearing identical compassionate expressions. They were waiting for her, to lead her back to her room in the hospital.

"Tolani, come with us," one of them said gently, offering a reassuring hand.

Tolani's breath caught in her throat as she realised there was no way out. She was completely trapped, and the gravity of the situation hit her. But, a **killer**? She wasn't a killer, she was a **victim**. It didn't matter what evidence they thought they had, she was innocent.

"I'm being framed! Get your hands off me! I'm innocent, can't you hear me? I SAID, I AM INNOCENT! Let me go!! Let me go!!!"