

**Bewaji's Ankara Adventures: A Novella (The Aso-Ebi Chronicles, Part 1)**

By

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## Chapter 1

"Hello."

"Hi, Bewaji. It's me, Seun."

He did not have to announce his name. As soon as she saw "Unknown Number" on her cell phone's screen, she knew who was calling her. Although Seun was not the only friend who called her from the United States, he *was* the only one who called regularly. Regularly, as in once a week, not once a month. Normally, Bewaji would not have minded answering his call, but she was a bit hesitant this time around - she was standing in line at a motor park, waiting for the next bus to arrive; just another inconvenient consequence of fuel scarcity.

It was not that she did not have the time to talk to Seun there and then. No. The problem was that she had this pet peeve: she hated listening to people carrying on loud, personal conversations in public places. And she was at a bus park, the grand-daddy of all public places. There were several people already doing this right there on the queue: the middle-aged man in the shabby brown suit, yelling at someone over the phone that he was running late and was not going to take a taxi; the slender multi-tasker with the short dreadlocks and pink lipstick, who was also on the phone, and chewing gum with all her mandibles as if that art was going out of fashion. She never lost her gum-chewing rhythm and miraculously, kept up with the conversation too. Finally, there was Bewaji Bankole, the under-employed graduate, already on her way back home from her job as a part-time clerk at a travel agency. It was just 2:00 p.m.

The only reason she was already on her way home was that her boss had to travel out of Lagos that afternoon, and in his words, he could not "leave a clerk alone in his office where money was concerned." Bewaji hissed inwardly when she thought of the accompanying look of distrust Mr. Lawal had given her when he made that remark. The only other employee at the travel agency, Mr. Ifeanyi had given her the "please-ignore-him" look from the across the room where he stood looking up names in a directory. Bewaji had held her tongue at that moment as she remembered what Mr. Ifeanyi had told her about Mr. Lawal and his bad experiences with former employees. He had every reason to distrust his clerks as they had stolen several thousands of naira from him. So, he was not being overly cautious. She knew that she had to earn his trust. Meanwhile, she would do whatever it took to retain this job because *in a land where water is scarce, every drop counts*. Whatever she was earning from this job, however little, was still better than what she *used to* earn: zero.

"Are you there? Hello-o, Bewaji!" the voice on the phone demanded, more urgently than before.

"Time to break my own rules, I suppose," she thought to herself.

She responded in the affirmative. Really, she wanted to know why Seun, who usually called her on the weekend, was suddenly calling her on a Tuesday afternoon.

"Yes, I am," she replied calmly. "What's up?"

"Plenty o. Do you have time to spare? I need your help, big time!"

"Fire on."

And she listened as Seun told her a rather surprising story. Seun was a third year Business Administration student. Being that it was summer, he was not taking classes. Instead, he was interning with a company, which sold electronics in California. His supervisor, a middle-aged white woman named Connie Burnell had grown quite fond of Seun. It was not hard to see why.

Seun was an easy-going, good-natured guy in his early 20s, who made friends easily. Like his friends, mostly the female ones, told him repeatedly, he was just so easy to talk to. Well, Connie who was old enough to be Seun's mother had shared a closely-guarded secret with Seun during lunch one day.

She was a divorcee with three children, but she still nursed the hope of re-marrying one day. She had tried to jumpstart her post-divorce dating life by going on several blind dates, but none of them had worked out. In fact, as Connie told Seun that afternoon, she would have to be declared medically blind and crazy to pursue a serious relationship with any of those men. So, she had turned to the internet, searching for love.

In the middle of telling Seun all of this, she suddenly said: "Bawo ni?"

The look of shock on Seun's face drew such a forceful burst of laughter from Connie that the other employees at the cafeteria turned their eyes on the odd pair. The attention did not last long though as they eventually turned back to their lunches and conversations. So did Seun and Connie.

In a tone of excitement, and without even trying to hide her amusement, Connie explained to Seun how she came to know the Yoruba greeting for "How are you?" She told him that she had a Nigerian friend who had taught her a few words of Yoruba, including that all-too-common introductory line. But that was not all.

This Nigerian "friend" was a man in his early 30s, according to her, who she had met in an online chat room. His name was **Olu Ade**.

"Are you kidding me? Olu what? Ade what? What happened to the rest of his name? I mean, that cannot possibly be his full name," Bewaji interrupted in an irritated voice. Here she was lining up for a *yeye* bus whose fare had quadrupled overnight, and yet Seun was giving her some lame sob-story about one *oyinbo* woman chatting with Mr. Fake Name online.

"Na wetin concern me?" Bewaji wondered.

"That's what I thought too," Seun continued. "I told her immediately that the guy sounded like a complete 419, but she insisted that I was wrong."

"So what does any of this have to do with me? Why not just leave her to her own devices?" Bewaji queried impatiently. This conversation was dragging on and the sun was beating her mercilessly.

Bewaji was chocolate-skinned and certainly not worried about getting darker under this sun. However, she *was* worried about dehydration. Pure water was a no-no for her. How long would it take before this bus arrived?

"I was going to leave her alone, but ..." Seun began.

"But what, Seun?" Bewaji asked sharply.

"She errr ... cooked dinner for me," Seun said hesitantly. Bewaji started laughing. There is nothing like a well-cooked, delicious meal, cooked by a woman to turn a man's head. Or in Seun's case, his heart.

"So, she made *efo-riro* for you and so you changed your mind, *abi*?" she teased.

"Not exactly," Seun replied, with a tinge of embarrassment in his voice.

Connie had invited Seun over to her house and cooked dinner for him. But what is dinner without conversation? Over a bottle of cheap wine, she had told him more about her Nigerian friend, Olu Ade. He lived in Lagos. Olu told her that he was a primary school English teacher and loved working with children.

"Oh please!" Bewaji scoffed. "Let me guess: Connie thought he'd be good with her kids too, right? How predictable!" Bewaji said in a mocking tone. How people could be so gullible was

beyond her. She was quite sure no one would tell her that kind of rubbish and get her to believe it. But then again, what was that thing the Pastor had said the week before? Oh yes: Let he who thinks he stands take heed lest he falls. Well, that did not apply to her. She *knew* for sure that she could never be swindled. That warning was for those JJC's - newcomers who were not street-smart. She was no JJC.

Seun affirmed what Bewaji had assumed: that Connie had taken a liking to this man who she had never met. They spoke regularly over the phone, with Connie, of course, doing most of the calling.

"She actually showed me his picture, Bewaji. I took one look at the guy and concluded that he was could not possibly be in his 30s. He must have lied about many other things too. I voiced my suspicions, but she insisted that he was an honest person," Seun said.

"What happened to Skype-ing? I mean, it *is* 2007."

"I know. According to her, Olu Ade does not have a webcam. In fact, he does not have a lot of things: a car, a house, a wife, kids, and apparently, he doesn't have a lot of money. Connie sends him money regularly. I mean, she gets paid bi-weekly and she sends a certain percentage of her paycheck to this guy. A complete stranger."

"Are you serious? These *oyinbo* people sef! *Na only person wey don chop belle full go dey do dis kain tin.* She must be quite comfortable or else she wouldn't bother. So, Mr. Roberts, what does this have to do with me? Bewaji asked for the umpteenth time that day.

"Well, I've grown quite fond of Connie. I see her more as a friend now than my boss and as her friend, I feel like I owe it to her to let her know the truth about Olu Ade. As far as I am concerned that guy is scamming her big time and I can't just fold my hands and watch my friend get ripped off. My internship ends in a month and I wanted to find out if this man she's been gushing on and on about is real or if he is who she thinks he is. I have discussed it with Connie and she's on board with my plan. She thinks I'm being overly-cautious, but in her words, she thinks it's *cute* that I care so much."

Bewaji giggled. Seun hissed and continued.

"So what's in this for me? And how come you didn't ask any of your sisters or even your brother, Gbolade to do this for you ehn? Bewaji asked, wondering what excuse Seun would give.

"Well, the thing is, Bewaji," Seun said, his voice suddenly getting softer, "you're pretty good at this sort of thing."

"Snooping around? Are you calling me a poke-noser?" Bewaji asked, trying to sound a little offended. Truthfully, she knew what Seun was getting at, but refused to admit it at that stage.

"No. Uncovering the truth," Seun said in a serious voice. "You're the one person who came to mind for the task. I'm sure you won't disappoint me."

"I certainly hope so, Seun. I'll need more details, but I have to go now. My bus is here," Bewaji said, as she hurriedly put away her phone and made for the bus. The people in front of her had already entered and it was a wonder that no one had jumped the queue and "rushed" the bus. As she rode the bus home, the only thought on her mind was Seun's strange request, and how she would fulfill it.

## Chapter 2

By the time Bewaji got home, she had more questions than answers plaguing her mind. Seun had asked her to investigate this case. Had she given him the impression that she was some kind of macho-woman or jobless person? Well, technically, she was *semi-jobless*. But, really, couldn't he find someone else to do it? His younger brother - Seun had three - Gbolade would have been better suited for the task, or maybe even a trained policeman. Wasn't this sort of thing dangerous?

"For whatever it is worth, I'll do it. I **want** to do it." That was it. Bewaji's mind was made up.

Minutes after she entered the house, she regretted her decision. Not only was there a pile of dishes which her younger brother, Seye, had so generously left for her to wash, the house was also a mess! And her parents would be back from work at any moment.

"This boy is spoilt. I can't imagine raising my children to neglect housework like this. Not even the boys," she muttered under her breath as she gathered the pillows strewn all over the floor as if a tornado had ripped through the house. She could not imagine what games he had played with his friends to leave the house in such disarray. Her parents would not hear any excuses if they saw the sitting room in that state. Since she was the eldest child, it was her job to make sure the house was clean. Simple. She knew instinctively that the same pressure would never be put on her for household chores if she was a man.

With the gender inequality debate firing away in her head, she began to clear the sitting room. She did not even bother calling her brother to help her. He would just ignore her. As she worked across the room, she suddenly remembered that dinner was not yet cooked. So, she temporarily abandoned Operation Clean-Up-and-Shut-Up and dashed to the kitchen to put some rice and stew on the fire. She was still chopping up the onions and garlic to season the meat, when she heard a knock at the door. It was Arinola, one of her closest and dearest friends.

Arin was a petite, confident woman who was the same age as Bewaji: 24. They had both met at a hair salon on campus a few years back and had remained good friends over the years. The duo had talked about being on each other's bridal train whenever either of them got married. Arin, who looked quiet was actually the more talkative of the two women.

A few weeks ago, she had told Bewaji of her engagement to Bosun. However, Bewaji had rejected Arin's offer to be on her bridal train. Her excuse? Age. At 24, she felt that she was *too old* to be playing the role of a bridesmaid. Naturally, Arin had disagreed, citing countless examples of aunts, cousins and any woman she could think of, who were bridesmaids in their late 20s and even 30s. Bewaji did not budge. So, Arin took her vexing to the next level: she threatened to break off their friendship over the issue. Bewaji remained resolute and refused to change her mind. She stuck to her guns like the stubborn person that she was.

It was Arin who finally gave in, and they both came to a consensus: Bewaji would be one of the *Ore Iyawo* (friends of the bride). That way, she could be part of the Arin's wedding without necessarily being a bridesmaid. However, being an *Ore Iyawo* automatically meant that she would have to buy the two separate *Aso-Ebi* (family cloth) fabrics for each ceremony: one fabric for the traditional wedding, and a different fabric for the white wedding.

Although this new arrangement would be more expensive for Bewaji, she did not mind. As far as she was concerned, she was still better off than the bridesmaids who would, more than likely, never wear those "shiny" satin gowns again, once the wedding ceremony was over. She

on the other hand would leave the wedding with two new outfits which she could wear everywhere, except to work.

The common practice was for the bride-to-be to first pick her fabric of choice at the shop of the fabric seller. Afterwards, she would let the people who wanted to buy the fabric know which one she had chosen. Then, they would go the fabric seller's shop to pick and purchase the number of yards of fabric they required to make that spectacular outfit. Within the context of a wedding, the circle of people who formed the '*aso-ebi buyer's club*' included relatives, friends of the bride, friends of the groom and unfortunately, anyone else who *knew* about the wedding. As bad as it sounds, it was quite common for complete strangers (mostly women) to randomly hear about an upcoming society wedding and invite themselves to the event. That, of course, meant that they would also go through the trouble of tracking down the seller of the *aso-ebi*, buy several yards of the fabric, give them to tailors to make elaborate outfits, and of course, show up for the wedding. Or birthday. Or any celebration, for that matter. Bewaji did not seem to mind such wedding crashers, but Arin *did* mind. In fact, she minded so much that she had devised a way to avoid falling victim to such chameleons, as she called them. Instead of giving out the name and address of the shop where she got her fabrics from, she pre-purchased many yards and hand-delivered them to each person who requested them in advance. Unbelievable! And that was what brought her to Bewaji's house that Tuesday evening.

After exchanging pleasantries the way 20-something year olds are wont to do, rife with lots of accusations and counter-accusations of one person not calling the other often enough and the ensuing "forgiveness" session, Arin brought out one of the two *aso-ebi* fabrics she had chosen. She had run out of the red and gray Ankara fabric she had chosen for her traditional wedding. But, she had close to 10 yards of the blue and yellow ankara fabric she planned to use as *aso-ebi* for the white wedding. It was this ankara fabric that she pulled out from the black nylon bag she had brought with her. That single dramatic move drew out a series of gasps, followed in quick succession by typical insincere remarks like "Oh, it is so beautiful" and "*Ore mi*, you have fantastic taste!" Of course, Bewaji made these comments to praise her friend, even though she would never have picked that particular design by herself. She would have preferred that her friend used lace instead of ankara, but kept her opinions to herself. Regardless of Arin's taste or lack thereof, she would support her wedding by making use of the fabric she had chosen. It was the best thing to do at that point.

The ankara fabric in question was one of those Holland Wax ones with a simple floral pattern. The pattern was simple: mostly blue background with a profusion of yellow flowers. But Bewaji felt uneasy. The problem however was not with the fabric. It was with Bewaji *herself*.

In spite of the *Aso-Ebi* craze that was sweeping across the country, with ripple effects going to Nigerians in the diaspora who had also caught the *Aso-Ebi* bug, Bewaji detested the whole idea. You see, she prided herself on being unique and standing out in a good way. *Aso-Ebi* reminded her of ugly school uniforms and the even uglier boarding school house-wears. All three outfits had one thing in common: they were not special. To her, they were geared to make everyone look alike, and that was her beef with the trend: she wanted to stand out, not look like every other person.

An array of friends had tried to convince her otherwise, citing all kinds of reasons. The most popular argument her friends raised was this one: "If you get a good tailor to sew a distinct style, then you'll stand out." But Bewaji refused to listen. They raised their arguments in vain.

As a rule, she avoided buying or wearing *aso-ebi* to friends' weddings or other events. She usually chose another outfit for these special occasions. Even though she had agreed to be part of Arin's *ore iyawo*, she still felt conflicted: should she just throw aside her deeply-held beliefs and philosophy on the issue to comply with her friend's request or look for a quick excuse to avoid the obligation? With Arin looking so intently at her with those tiny, intelligent eyes that seemed to bore into Bewaji's soul, she decided to try a last-minute avoidance tactic. There were two separate courses of action. Plan A was to throw Arin a bait, that is, use the "I-have-no-money-for-*aso-ebi*" excuse, and see if Arin would fall for it. If that failed, then Plan B would kick in: she would insist that she could only buy 6 - 8 yards, which was enough for just one outfit. As it turned out, Arin had only brought the Ankara fabric for the white wedding, so it looked like Plan B would work that day. However, being a methodical person, Bewaji decided to start with Plan A. She cleared her throat and began:

"Arin, I know I promised to buy your *aso-ebi*, but I'm broke. You know the issue with my job now ..."

Arin did not even wait for Bewaji to finish. She was ready for her.

"I knew you would use that as an excuse. That's why I am giving you the *aso-ebi* free of charge. And since I seem to have run out of the *aso-ebi* for my traditional wedding, you can just *fashi* and make arrangements for just the white wedding. No hard feelings. I didn't know if you wanted to tie gele with your outfit, so I added it just in case," Arin said coolly, as she showed the astonished Bewaji the royal blue head-tie she had chosen to match the ankara fabric. But she was not done.

"If you want, I will pay for the tailor to sew your outfit too. All you need to do is show up for the wedding. The traditional wedding is the day before the white wedding. And of course, you know the shop of the tailor I normally use, Mr. Rasaq, abi? He'll be expecting you anytime this week. So you see," Arin said leaning back on the upholstered chair, a sly smile spreading across her face, "you have no excuses." Arin was clearly enjoying her momentary win for all it was worth.

Bewaji was speechless. Although she knew her friend was generous and had a stable job at a local bank, she had not expected this level of generosity from her. She thanked Arinola profusely. The two women were discussing suitable styles to accentuate Bewaji's tall frame and sexy curves, when Bewaji's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bankole, walked into the room. They had arrived from work hungry and tired and in no mood for frivolous discussions.

After greeting Bewaji's parents, Arin left. Bewaji hurried to her room with the blue and yellow ankara fabric that was now hers. As she ran her fingers across the patterns that wound seamlessly across the fabric, she allowed her mind to wander. What style would she end up with? Her mind settled on one, just as her mother called her to complete the cooking. But not before she asked Bewaji if she planned to starve them all to death before nightfall. Bewaji almost responded in the affirmative. Almost. But she didn't.

Chuckling to herself, Bewaji returned to the kitchen wondering how eventful one single day had been.

### Chapter 3

Two more weeks passed, before Bewaji heard anything from Seun. Actually, they texted back and forth during that period, but there were no phone calls. When Seun finally called, he had a good explanation forthcoming.

At some point, according to Seun, it seemed like Connie was no longer interested in finding out who her mystery lover was. She refused to address the issue whenever Seun brought it up, and had even begun to avoid him at work. Seun had decided to back off, pending the time when Connie would be ready - if ever - to commence the investigation. So, they all waited. They did not have to wait long.

One Thursday afternoon, Connie approached Seun with a puzzling question:

"Where you come from, do *all* your relatives *always* fall sick simultaneously? I mean, I know Africa has lots of diseases and hunger-stricken people, but do people really fall sick that often?"

Seun had ignored Connie's irritating, back-handed remarks to Africa as a country, and had also chosen to ignore what he termed the "Western misconception of an entire continent," and decided to address Connie's question. If there was anything he had learned as an immigrant living in America, whenever Africa or more specifically, Nigeria was mentioned in a sentence riddled with negative imagery and unpalatable adjectives, reacting in anger was **never** the answer. In the words of his friend, Priye, he had to "pick" his battles. And at that moment, Connie's questions pointed to a more troubling issue.

After questioning her further, she had explained to Seun that up until then, she had sent this man money whenever he talked about needing money for a business-related purpose. He had never actually directly asked her for money until now. All of a sudden, his father was lying ill in the hospital with bronchitis and needed a certain amount of money for urgent medical treatment. Two days later, he had called her in the middle of the night (which was of course, early in the morning at his own end), to alert her that his pregnant sister had suddenly suffered internal bleeding, and needed money for blood transfusion to save her life. Connie had immediately rushed online to send him \$ 500 from her own personal savings account. But that was not all.

Less than a week later, he had called her again on a Sunday afternoon, claiming that his sister had caught a rare strain of tuberculosis and as such needed some rather expensive drugs for her quick recovery. When Connie asked him if this was the same sister who was pregnant and needed a blood transfusion some days before, his reply was that this was another sister. In fact, he continued, this was his step-sister, the daughter of his father's second wife, but who was very close to him being that they were born a week apart.

"Something is not right. There was something about the way he had a ready answer for every single question I asked, that raised my suspicions. Plus, he took that opportunity to pick a fight with me, and said that I wanted his sister to die of a curable disease."

Connie had told Seun all these things on a Thursday afternoon. On Friday, Seun finally called Bewaji and gave her the update.

Seun called Bewaji when she was preparing to leave for a night vigil in church. In fact, she was literally heading out of the door when her phone rang. By the time Seun had finished bringing her up to speed on the latest developments, Bewaji was convinced more than ever before that something fishy was going on, and she wanted to know what it was. The truth was that stories like Connie's were quite common. Bewaji had read about some of them. But this was the first time she would be involved, first-hand, in un-masking one of those involved in

these "romance scams." Indeed, Bewaji had already concluded that this was just another romance scam. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing in the facts that suggested an alternate theory or explanation for the relationship that existed between Connie Burnell and Olu Ade.

After offloading the gist that had been burning a hole in his throat for almost 24 hours, Seun excitedly added that Connie had already sent the \$ 300, which she had decided was Bewaji's investigation fee. After accepting Seun's explanation that \$ 300 was an appropriate fee for an investigation of such a nature, and after reassuring Bewaji that any other unforeseen expenses would be duly compensated, he gave Bewaji the particulars of the Western Union Money Transfer including the secret question, secret answer and information of the sender. The only thing Seun left out was the "secret handshake," which Bewaji would need to give the agent at the Western Union branch, when she went to retrieve the funds. But, she felt sure it would be unnecessary.

As she boarded the single bus that would take her close enough to her church, she almost skipped for joy on her seat. Not only was she \$ 300 richer, she was also about to embark on an adventure, the outcome of which could potentially change the lives of two people living on two vastly different continents.

## Chapter 4

As soon as Bewaji collected the money and converted it from dollars to naira, she went back home to save the money in the small wooden box with a narrow slit on the top, under her bed. Picking up the nylon bag that housed the ankara material for Arin's upcoming nuptials, she counted a few naira notes from her latest stash, and headed to the only tailor she could trust with her clothes: Mr. Rasaq. Everyone called him "Baba Mufu" because his eldest son was called Mufutau.

His shop was located somewhere in Bariga, and that was where Bewaji was headed that Saturday afternoon. Seun had promised to text and e-mail her more details of Olu Ade before the weekend was over, as soon as he got them from Connie. The details included: Olu Ade's address (the one Connie always included on the Western Union form when she sent him money), his cell phone numbers (he had three of those), and of course, his pictures.

As at the time Bewaji was leaving the house, she had not yet received any text or e-mail from Seun. It was not until she was almost at the tailor's shop that she realized that she had forgotten both of her cell phones at home. Of course, at that point, she could not turn around to go back and get them. She would have to complete her errands without her phones. She felt naked. It took her forgetting her phones at home, to realize just how much she depended on them. She had no idea what the time was, etc, but figured that she could survive without her phones for one day. It was in this state that she arrived at Baba Mufu's shop.

Baba Mufu's shop was really a bottom flat that had been converted to a tailor's shop. He had a few apprentices working for him: two girls and a boy. All three of them looked like they would rather be elsewhere than the tailor's shop that afternoon. And it was not just the typical boredom you find with teenagers. You could sense their discontentment. This was probably because Baba Mufu was notorious for under-paying his apprentices. And they cursed him for his unabashed stinginess.

The first thing a person would notice as he or she walked into Baba Mufu's shop was the color of the wall. The walls were painted a sickly pink color that reminded one of two things: one, the color male students prayed would never be used for their school uniforms; and two, the color of the inside of the whale's belly as Jonah must have beheld it after that fish swallowed him. In fact, if one ever wondered how Jonah felt in the belly of the whale, he just needed to go and stand in Baba Mufu's shop for two minutes. Just two minutes. That was the full experience without the attendant motion sickness.

As at the time Bewaji walked into the spacious shop, there were at least ten other customers waiting to see the tailor. Clearly, his business was doing well. It was doing so well that Bewaji had to stand and wait for a customer to vacate one of the plastic blue chairs in the make-shift reception area, before she could rest her tired legs.

With both manual and automatic sewing machines scattered all over the shop, posters of fashion models - who looked nothing like Baba Mufu's customers - visibly glued to the wall with cello tape, and with bits and scraps of different fabrics hanging from tables and scattered across the floor, it was a miracle that the tailor and his assistants were able to pull out beautifully crafted outfits from the assorted mess in his shop.

Unsurprisingly, all the customers were women - older women who had either brought new fabrics to the tailor to work his magic or else they had come with completed outfits, peeking out from nylon bags of different colors. Clearly, the customers with the completed outfits had come

back with some sort of complaint for the tailor and were not enjoying the 'wait' period. The customers with untouched fabrics seemed to have accepted their fate and were more patient.

One of the women, the youngest looking one in the group, and the one with the least amount of eye-offending makeup, was chewing gum and intermittently stomping her feet as if the combination would hurry the tailor and his workers along faster. It was not working, and the feet stomping continued. As Bewaji stared at the woman, something odd happened: the woman got up, walked up to her and said to Bewaji: "I know you." It sounded a lot like *that* cheesy, pick-up line that restless teenage boys typically used to approach girls they were interested in: "Excuse me, have we met before? You look like someone I know." Yes, that line. But, this "I know you" was from a woman in a tailor's shop.

Bewaji was shocked. Who was this person and how did she know her? She certainly did not look familiar to her at all.

"I'm sorry, ma. I don't think we've met before."

The woman laughed, exposing a chipped tooth in the top row. That was when it hit her. She took another look at the woman again, and confirmed that she was the one. But the woman had beat her to the introduction stage, and decided to refresh her memory.

"You're calling me 'Ma' as if I'm an old woman. It's me, Senior Rita. Rita Bassey from FGC Ogbomoso," the woman said in a crisp, clear voice.

She was right. Bewaji could not believe her eyes. How had she failed to recognize her the first time? This was Senior Rita, the single person who had made life in secondary school a living hell for Bewaji, when she had just transferred to Ogbomoso from another school in Auchi. The junior girls called her "Senior Rita" but her own classmates decided to Europeanize her name. *They* called her 'Senorita.' Looking at her now, it was hard to believe that Rita had wielded so much power over Bewaji at one point. Without Bewaji's consent, she had decided to become her school mother, but instead of protecting and guiding the junior student, Bewaji, like other school mothers did for their school daughters, Senorita had decided to turn her into a *school house girl* instead.

Beyond the regular chores that junior girls were expected to do, Senorita would find countless other assignments for Bewaji to do. She made it her duty, in fact, to go and ask other senior students for useless tasks such as folding socks and arranging them in neat piles for each day of the week. Then, she would pass on the assignment to Bewaji who had to comply. But as God would have it, Senorita left the school prematurely when her father got transferred to Sokoto. The day she left was the day Bewaji began to actually enjoy her life in secondary school. It was the same person who now stood before her in a tailor's shop in Bariga. What a small world!

Naturally, after recollecting the hell Rita had put Bewaji through, there were no hugs or tears of joy at this unexpected reunion. In fact, if Bewaji had known she would be there, she would have avoided coming to see the tailor that day or else she would have come with a cane specially marked to flog the wicked senior. Unfortunately, Bewaji did not come prepared to execute the latter course of action. She would have to be civil.

"Oh, it's you. Ah, I did not recognize you o. How have you been? What do I call you now?" Bewaji said, glancing at the gold, wedding band on her finger.

"I'm now Mrs. Adekunle. You can call me that."

Rita was about the same height as Bewaji, but she was fair-skinned. Back in school, she had been very skinny, but a combination of childbirth and 'good living' had transformed her body to a

plus-sized one. From where Bewaji stood, she could not see a waist line. But then, it was hard to see anything under a boubou.

"I brought this lace to the tailor to help me sew *iro* and *buba*," Rita said, pulling out an expensive pink lace fabric with silver rhinestones, from a plastic bag in her hand. "A friend of mine is celebrating her 40th birthday. That's what this is for."

"Oh, I see," Bewaji said in an uninterested voice. She did not want to listen to the rest of Rita's banter. She knew it was just a matter of time before she started asking her about her career, family, marriage, and all the other things she was not willing to discuss at that time. She had to think of a way to excuse herself quickly ...

Just then Rita's phone rang. Instead of leaving the tailor's shop to answer her call, she just turned her face away from Bewaji, she slowly pulled out a silver Nokia phone, the model that had just been released a month before, and began to talk in a very loud voice. She beckoned to Bewaji to hold on while she answered the call. Bewaji saw this as a sign from heaven and promptly moved away from Rita. The tailor and his apprentices did not seem to be in a hurry as the line of people in front of her remained the same. No one else had entered the shop since she arrived.

Bewaji approached one of the female apprentices and asked her for the restroom. Actually, the word Bewaji used was 'toilet.' Same thing. The apprentice gave her directions and Bewaji set out to find it. There was probably a restroom located in the same building where the shop was located, but Baba Mufu had insisted that only he could use that particular one. Everyone else, including the customers had to use the other restroom located in a detached building behind the house. Bewaji had expected to find a barely functional toilet but was pleasantly surprised to find that the restroom was clean with a strong smell of industrial-grade disinfectant. Since the toilet did not flush by itself, there was a drum of water and a small plastic bucket nearby for help.

As soon as Bewaji was done easing herself, she began to fill the bucket with water to flush the toilet. Just then, she heard the sound of a man's voice. It was coming from the direction of the open window of the toilet, with an old mosquito net covering. The man was on the phone, and he sounded like he was arguing with someone.

Something told Bewaji to go and look for the person on the phone.

"But why? What's my business with a man talking on the phone?" she asked herself. But, the urge was strong, so she decided to obey. She would neither lose nor gain anything by looking. Besides, technically, she was not eavesdropping. Anyone speaking on the phone in a voice that loud, and *in public* for that matter, did not have a reasonable expectation of privacy. But there was a problem. She knew that if she left the restroom to go and see this person, he might have left before she arrived there. So, she put down the black lid of the toilet seat, and climbed on top of it. The window was now at eye-level. She carefully put aside the stick of Drummer air freshener that sat right under her nose on the window sill. Then, she looked outside the window.

The mosquito net was old and dusty, but she could still clearly make out the silhouette of a man. Apparently, the small building where the toilet was located was very close to the fence surrounding the entire house. Jagged green and white pieces of broken glass lined the fence from edge to edge. It was to deter thieves from scaling the fence. Just beyond the fence lay another group of flats with a spacious compound. The man on the phone was standing in that other yard, very close to the fence. He wore a red cotton t-shirt and had a bald head. That was all Bewaji could make out from where she stood. The man was still talking on the phone and must have been really agitated because he kept gesticulating wildly with his free hand as if the person on the phone was in front of him and only he could see him or her.

"I said I need that money NOW! Why are you people like this?! I know I have never asked you for this amount of money before, but it is not too much. Two thousand dollars is a mere chicken change to you for goodness sakes! Didn't you say you loved me, eh, Connie?"

Say what?! Did Bewaji just hear that? Just to be sure, she held her breath and listened again. Sure enough she heard this stranger repeat the same name at least five more times in a string of angry outbursts. Connie. How many Nigerians were named Connie? Bewaji could not believe it. In all likelihood, this was the person she had been hired to find: Olu Ade. And he was on the phone with Connie. Or could it be someone else? There was only one way to find out. She had to follow him and find out where he lived, if possible.

Alarm bells were going off in Bewaji's head at this point. What if this guy was armed with a gun? What if he found out who she was? And the 'what ifs' kept piling up.

"Look, this sort of thing does not happen every day. I have been coming to this tailor's shop for years, but never used his toilet. On the very day I used it for the first time I got to hear a stranger on the phone calling the name of the one person involved in an alleged romance scam. What are the odds? I am definitely going to go through with this." And with her mind made up, she quickly got down from her perch on the toilet seat, narrowly missed falling into the drum of water, and quickly flushed the toilet. She washed her hands and rushed out of the restroom.

As soon as she got outside, she ran as fast as she could out of the tailor's compound and into the next compound. The rate at which she rushed into this *other* compound so startled a woman selling food items there, that the latter screamed in fright.

"Aunty! Na wetin dey pursue you? You see armed robber?!" the woman shouted in a voice mixed with terror and anger.

Bewaji did not see this woman when she had spied on the stranger from the restroom. She did not know that the front of one of the bottom flats, the one facing the gate, had been converted to a neighborhood convenience shop.

"Madam, abeg make you no vex. I dey find one man like that ..."

And she proceeded to describe the bare details of the stranger that she knew. As she was describing the man, she kept looking over to the spot near the fence where she had seen him standing. There was no one there. The woman confirmed what she suspected. The man on the phone had left just minutes before Bewaji arrived. He had come to buy a bottle of Coke, and had just finished it when his phone rang.

Bewaji did not even hide her disappointment, which prompted the woman to ask her why she was asking for this man. Bewaji cooked up a story about how he was the friend of a friend, who she had not seen in a long time. The woman looked like she did not believe a word of Bewaji's story, but still nodded her head in agreement. Just then, a young girl came to buy a tin of milk and the woman abandoned Bewaji to attend to her customer. Bewaji took that as her cue to leave and turned to exit the compound. As she turned to go, the woman called after her:

"Number 38 for this street," the woman said, pointing at a house down the road. "Na him house be dat. Na my customer."

"Thank you, Madam," Bewaji replied gratefully.

At this point, she knew that she needed to confirm the proper address for Olu Ade from Seun before taking any more steps. Since her phone was at home, that would have to wait. As Bewaji made her way back to Baba Mufu's shop, she accosted Rita, who was on her way out. She must have concluded her business with the tailor as the plastic bag with the lace fabric was no longer in her hand.

"Make sure you don't go and sew one of those strapless gowns that all these young girls are wearing nowadays. That style won't suit you," Rita said coyly as she walked past Bewaji. It was obvious she still thought she was the junior girl she used to bully in school. Bewaji just ignored her unwarranted advice and smiled. That was the exact style she had in mind for the ankara fabric in her bag. And by telling her *not* to go with that style, Senorita had confirmed that that would be the most flattering style for her body. She marched to Baba Mufu. She was ready.

"Dem go take!" she muttered to herself as he took her measurements.

## Chapter 5

When Bewaji got home that evening, Seun still had not sent the additional details on Olu Ade. How on earth could she verify that he was the person she had narrowly missed in Bariga? And what if it was just a coincidence? And why was she involved in this again? For \$ 300? She was still battling these thoughts and the doubt that came with them when her phone rang. It was Seun. He apologized for the delay, saying he had been out of town for a couple of days. He had just e-mailed the details to her and would text the address Connie gave him. Minutes after their phone conversation ended, Bewaji's phone beeped and vibrated. She had a new text message. It simply read:

*Olu Ade's address: Number 38, Adesina Street, Bariga, Lagos*

Bewaji could not believe her eyes. This was too easy! Baba Mufu's shop was on Adesina Street, and that woman had confirmed that the stranger on the phone lived at Number 38. Now, all she needed was the actual photograph of this person. For that, she would need to check her e-mail.

"I'll do that after church service tomorrow," she decided.

The very next day, after the church service ended at around 1:00 p.m., Bewaji made her way to a nearby cybercafé to check her e-mail. She had never used this particular cybercafé before, but regretted it considerably by the time she was done. The snail speed of the internet connection was the least of her complaints. At the top of that list was the nosiness of the patrons. It was just ridiculous.

The computer station where she sat waiting for the yahoo mail website to open up was right smack in the middle of two older gentlemen. The man on the right was in a chat room and he said each word he typed aloud. That was how she knew what he was doing. The man, on the left, on the other hand, seemed to be clueless as to what the computer was for. Or maybe he was just pretending. Instead of using his computer, he kept glancing at Bewaji's computer screen. He did not even try to hide it. When the website finally pulled up and it was time to enter her password, she looked over her shoulder to find the man's eyes glued to her keyboard. She was furious! She shouted at the man to keep his eyes on his screen, which he did grudgingly.

After that annoying hiccup, she logged in and saw the pictures of the person Seun had e-mailed to her. The first picture was of a young man, sitting down in a studio, one leg crossed over the other, ankle to knee. He looked like he was around Bewaji's age, but yet Seun had said this man was in his 30s. Could he have lied about his age to Connie too? It was possible.

The man was bald and dark-skinned man with a small gap in his teeth. He looked to be of average height, possibly about 5' 7" with a blunt nose and thick lips. He had absolutely no facial hair. He looked so ordinary and unassuming that Bewaji might have walked past him in the street and not known who he was. He was not handsome by any standard, but had what could be called an 'honest-looking' face. Ironically, his involvement in the entire affair was allegedly not-quite honest.

In the second picture, the same man stood under a large tree with his arms wrapped around the tree trunk as if the tree was planted for his sake. Finally, in the third picture, he stood outside a gate which used to be red, but was now a rusty brown color. In the corner of the picture, above a light switch or door bell - one could not tell which it was - the number of the house was painted in faded black paint on a cream-colored wall. It was Number 22.

Bewaji was puzzled. Why was this man standing in front of a house with a number different from the one he had given Connie? She was just confused. She had printed out and paid for the three pictures Seun had sent and was about to leave the cybercafé when she suddenly had an idea.

"That's it!" she said aloud, snapping her fingers together at the same time. The peeping tom on her left looked at her in amazement. He looked like he was going to ask her what "it" was, but the words died in his throat when she gave him a nasty look that said "Don't even think about it." As she made her way home, the idea kept growing. By the time she got to her room, it had developed into a full-scale plan. She picked up a pen and began to make a list of items. When she was done, she put the list aside. Then, she took a pencil and sketched a woman's face. When she was satisfied with her drawing, she scribbled two words under it: *Iya Olu*. Smiling, she pointed at it, and said: "Tomorrow, I will become you." The woman smiled too.

## Chapter 6

The following day was a Monday, which meant that Bewaji did not have to be at work. She only worked from Tuesday to Friday. Even though Monday was a free day, she still had to get up early along with everyone else. However, after everyone had left the house, she had time to herself. As soon as she heard her parent's car leave the compound, she sprang into action.

Her parents never locked the door of their bedroom when they were not at home. That made Bewaji's job easier. She went into her mother's closet, and took out an old ankara *iro* and *buba*, along with the matching *gele*, which was really just the rest of the fabric that was left unused. This particular outfit had belonged to her grandmother, but the latter had left it behind on the very last visit to their house. Today, Bewaji was borrowing it for her "investigation."

Next, she fetched all the items on her list from her own closet, including makeup and an old tattered wig. She taped her previous night's sketch to her mirror and began to alter her appearance with the makeup. As a member of a drama group on campus, she had witnessed the transformation people underwent to prepare for their on-stage performances. Although she did not have the luxury of a professional makeup artiste to help her, she had seen enough to know what to do. Her goal was to change her face from that of a 24 year old to the face of a woman approaching 60. The entire process took about an hour, and by the time she was done, even she agreed that she looked like a grandmother. She donned the wig, and wore her grandmother's old clothes, being careful to tie the wrapper very loosely around her waist, the way older women did. Finally, she rubbed some of the makeup on her back of her hands. There was nothing more unconvincing than a person with the face of an old woman and the hands of a youth. Oh no! Her hands would not betray her real age. Before she left, she took a few more minutes to practice her gait and speaking voice to her satisfaction. She took some money and wrapped it in the folds of her wrapper. Then, she set off for Bariga.

As she walked slowly down the road to the junction where she would take a taxi, a thought suddenly occurred to her. Why not test out her disguise to see if it really worked? After all, she chose to take on the personality of an older woman for two reasons: one, she knew that people were more responsive and willing to answer questions if they came from an older person. This was something she had witnessed time and time again. Two, she had not been able to silence that voice in her head that kept yelling "Danger, danger!" whenever Olu Ade's name came to her mind. So, it made sense to go as someone else. That way, he would not be able to recognize her if she ever ran into him elsewhere. That last bit was important because Bewaji had discovered that she lived in a very small world, and in Lagos, the world seemed to be even smaller.

To test out her disguise, she stopped by an electrician's shop not far from the junction. The man had been to their house on many occasions and even knew her parents. He would have recognized her instantly. However, the minute she entered his shop, he rose from his chair and greeted her with a "Good Morning, Madam." Bewaji could have skipped for joy. He did not recognize her. She asked him for directions to another street, and he provided them. As she walked away from his shop, she knew she could fool just about anyone that day. Her parents may not even have recognized her either. Perfect.

Bewaji boarded a taxi and asked the driver to drop her off a few houses away from Number 38. Her plan was to find a spot across the street where she could sit and watch the house before making her move. As she looked around, she found the perfect spot. There was a shoemaker's shed across the street from Number 38. She asked the shoemaker if she could sit in the shade of

his shed while she waited for one of the neighbors she had come to visit. The man, who looked like he was a Northerner, agreed. It seemed like he was used to getting similar requests on a daily basis. So, she sat there, watching and waiting.

As at the time she sat down at shed, it was close to 12 noon. For the first thirty minutes, nothing eventful happened. Random people walked past: hawkers, newspaper vendors, women with babies on their backs. All sorts of people. And of course, various vehicles also drove past. But the gate to Number 38 remained shut. Meanwhile, Bewaji - or shall we say *Iya Olu* - began to make inquiries about the neighborhood from the shoemaker. She did not want to draw attention to the fact that she was interested in that particular house, so she asked him about a couple of the houses in the neighborhood as well. The shoemaker, who had been at that spot for more than five years, was quite knowledgeable on the inhabitants of the houses. The house to the left of Number 38 was a group of flats. According to the shoemaker, the landlord lived on the premises. He was a widower, who lived on the ground floor, and was notorious for chasing young girls. He especially had a *thing* for female hawkers. But that was not all. On the right hand side, there was a smaller group of flats. On the second floor of the three-storey building, a man who lived there had recently impregnated his house girl. His wife was six months pregnant with their third child.

"So, what about the house in the middle?" Bewaji asked, pointing to Number 38. It was a duplex with an upstairs veranda facing the street.

The shoemaker told her that the house belonged to a Dr. Musa. He was not a medical doctor, but he had a PhD in Biology. His wife was a primary school teacher.

On hearing the words "primary school," Bewaji sat up. Seun had mentioned that Olu Ade was a primary school teacher. But yet, this shoemaker was telling her that Mrs. Musa whose husband owned the house *was* also a teacher. She had to ask more questions.

"Do they have any children?" she asked, leaning a bit closer to the shoemaker, who had picked up a leather sandal and was carefully putting stitches around the sole. Without looking up from what he was doing, he told her that the Musas had just two children: a boy and a girl. They both attended the primary school where their mother taught health science. Apart from them, there was only one other person who lived in the house and he was a non-relative.

"His name is Justice, and he's the houseboy. He is also the driver, cook, security guard, washman, and anything else Dr. Musa and his wife need him to be. Talk about the devil ..."

Lo and behold, no sooner had the shoemaker dropped this revelation, than the gate swung open and out strolled Olu Ade, who Bewaji now knew to be Justice. He wore a blue pair of shorts and cream colored t-shirt, which made him look like he was going out for P.E. He had a blue and green woven basket in his hand. As he turned his back to them to padlock the gate, Bewaji observed him from behind like she had done previously. She was sure he was the same person she had seen from the restroom for one reason only: the peculiar shape of this head.

There was a boy in her primary school who used to get teased a lot for his odd-shaped head: it looked like a bean seed. So, kids with their uncensored words nicknamed him "Beans," a label he was never able to get rid of throughout his primary school days. Bewaji did not know what happened to Beans, but the man across the street who the shoemaker called Justice, could pass for his twin. Head-shape wise, at least.

"He is on his way to the market. His madam insists on getting fresh foodstuff every day, except for Sunday," the shoemaker continued. He had pulled out a tin of thick evo stik glue and was applying it to another leather slipper whose sole was pulling apart from the shoe frame. Bewaji was just about to ask him what he knew about Justice, when a customer appeared. He

wanted his shoes polished immediately. The shoemaker temporarily abandoned his evo stick project, and went to attend to the customer. Bewaji knew that she could not ask any more questions at this stage. Instead of waiting for the shoemaker, she decided to look for more answers elsewhere.

Looking across the street to the group of flats to the right of Number 38, she saw a mini-kiosk which the gateman had setup beside the entrance. He sold basic items like cigarettes, candles, matches, chewing gum and even condoms. Yes, condoms. Apparently, the man who had impregnated his house help - he lived in one of those flats - had not patronized the trader to buy the latter item, despite the kiosk's proximity to his house. This thought crossed Bewaji's mind as she made her way to that very spot. She knew the day was going and she still had not really used her disguise for its *specific* purpose. Well, that was about to change.

As she crossed the street, she pulled out a rolled up piece of paper from where she had tucked it into the fold of her wrapper. It was the first picture of Olu Ade, or *Justice*, which Seun had e-mailed to her. The gateman who seemed to be quite chatty greeted her with a "Good Afternoon, ma." Bewaji smiled. He would never have done that if she had come as her 24-year old self. She asked him what his name was. It was Tajudeen.

"Taju, I am looking for my son. He lives in one of these houses, but I seem to have misplaced the address. Here is his picture. Do you know him?" Bewaji asked, handing over the paper to Taju.

"Ah! So na you be the person wey born Justice? He resemble you sef!" Taju said enthusiastically. Bewaji laughed and told Taju that people said he looked more like his father. Whether this was true or not, we shall never know. Taju told her that Justice lived in "that house" and pointed to the now-padlocked gate of Number 38. He said that she could sit and wait for Justice who, it appeared, was not currently available. Bewaji accepted his offer and sat down.

She knew that at this point, she had to glean all the information she could before Justice got back, because when he returned, her game would be up. So, she began with more specific questions:

"I know you people call him Justice, but that is not the name we call him at home. Did he ever tell you his real name?" Bewaji asked, hoping for a good answer.

"Emmm .... Let me see," said Taju, scratching his head as he dug through the archives in his brain. "Folu ... No, that's not it ... Bayo ... No .... Olu? Olu? Yes, Oluwole Towobola. That's what he told me."

"Yes, that's the name his father and I gave him," said Bewaji. She was a tad bit worried that these lies she was telling were flowing too easily, but for the meantime, they were working their magic.

"So, Ade is not his last name. Where in the world did he get that name from?" Bewaji wondered, as she thought up the next question to ask Taju. She would figure it out later.

"Ehen, Taju. You know Olu ... sorry Justice is not getting younger, and you see him more often than I do. Do you know if he has a girlfriend?" Bewaji asked, trying to sound concerned, the way a mother would.

"Ah, didn't he tell you? Maybe he is hiding it from you. I don't know if he has a girlfriend, but he usually comes to this place to pick up calls from a woman. She is the one who usually calls him. Even sometimes in the middle of the night, he comes here to answer calls from that woman. He said his Oga must not find out about it. But, Mama, your son is doing well o ... he

might soon buy you a car or even an okada. Wouldn't you like a motorcycle, Mama?" Taju said grinning widely. Bewaji was genuinely puzzled. What could he possibly mean?

"Ahn, ahn, Mama hasn't Justice been sending you money? He said his Oga increased his salary o. He even has some dollars. But he said Oga's friend gave him the dollars. Mama, don't tell me you didn't know?" Now Taju was the one who looked worried. Bewaji looked like she was hearing this news for the first time and he could see it.

"Okay, Mama, when he comes back you can ask him all these things. Ah, here he is. Justice, come here!" Taju yelled. Bewaji had made the mistake of sitting with her back to the house she came to watch. So, she had not seen Justice arrive on the back of a motorcycle, with a basket full of groceries in his hand. And now he was coming towards them. Bewaji was going to be exposed.

Without another word, she leapt to her feet, and called to the same motorcycle driver who had just dropped Justice off in front of Number 38. Taju and Justice watched in amazement as an "old woman" leapt on the back of the okada and sped away. As the okada rider drove off, Bewaji heard Taju telling Justice that that was his mother. She also heard the anger mixed with fear in Justice's voice as he told Taju that his mother had died five years ago. By then, Bewaji was out of reach and gone for good. And, she knew exactly who Olu Ade was.

## Chapter 7

Arinola's wedding fell on the Saturday of the same week. And Bewaji had a slight problem on her hands: the tailor's shop was on the same street with Justice and his palaver. Even though she was properly disguised, she was still scared to go back to that neighborhood. So much for planning! How on earth would she get her dress from Baba Mufu without physically going to Bariga? The answer came knocking on her door that afternoon. Literally.

Seye, her brother knocked on her door while she was still debating what to do. He came to borrow a pen from her, something that happened fairly often. He was always borrowing something. As soon as she opened the door, she began to plead with him to do her a small favor: could he please pick up her dress from the tailor? Of course Seye's next question was: "Why can't you pick it up yourself?" Bewaji could not explain to him in detail why she was not able to do so, but she told him she just did not have the time to go there. Which was not true, and Seye did not buy her excuse. The only other option was to bribe him.

"Okay, I'll do your chores for two weeks. How about that?" Bewaji said, kicking herself for making such a raw deal with her brother. It was not like he did much around the house anyway. Thankfully, he agreed and said he would pick it up on his way back from school on Thursday.

Meanwhile, Bewaji tried to reach Seun to update him on her latest discovery, but all her efforts to reach him were in vain. E-mailing him was out of the question. He had specifically told her that Connie wanted to hear the details over the phone. So, she waited and waited for him to call her, but he never did. Bewaji began to worry.

On Thursday evening, she tried on her new outfit for the first time ever, and it fit perfectly. She was amazed at what Baba Mufu had put together within less than one week. The man was a professional. All that remained was for her to go to both weddings on Friday and Saturday. She had still not heard anything from Seun.

On Friday morning, she was about to go for Arin's traditional wedding, when her phone rang. She expected it to be Seun, but was sorely disappointed when she saw that it was her boss, Mr. Lawal, who was calling her. She had taken permission from him to attend this wedding. Why was he now calling her in the morning?

"Bewaji! Hello-o! Bewaji, are you there?" Mr. Lawal said half-shouting, half-yelling into the phone.

"Yes, sir. I am," she replied, trying to sound calm.

"I need you to come to the office right away. Mr. Ifeanyi's wife took to bed this morning, and he cannot come to work. I have to see a client in Makurdi this afternoon. So, you have to manage the office for the entire day."

*Crap! Today of all days. Why had she even answered her phone?*

"Alright, sir. I'll be there in an hour," Bewaji said reluctantly.

"I guess I should be grateful he did not pull this on me on the day of the white wedding," she grumbled to herself as she changed into her work clothes. So instead of going to feast and dance at Arin's traditional wedding, and possible score a few dates, she would be stuck at the office, answering calls and dealing with crazy clients. Life was just so unfair!

Fridays at the travel agency were known as "Trad Fridays." Employees were allowed to wear any modest traditional attire of their choice on those days. So, instead of the usual light colored blouse and dark colored skirt Bewaji usually wore to work, she chose a different outfit for that day. She wore a knee-length black pencil skirt and paired it with a blouse made from

another Ankara fabric. Coincidentally, that fabric was the same as the one she had worn for her disguise as *Iya Olu*, but she felt sure that no one would recognize her because this was not *iro* and *buba*.

As soon as she arrived at the travel agency, Mr. Lawal left. Not quite long afterwards, a few customers came in to book domestic flights. That was around 11 o' clock. Afterwards, no one came in, but the phone kept ringing almost non-stop until 12 noon. Bewaji was about to take her lunch break when two people walked into the agency: a woman and a man. The woman led the way, while the man walked behind her. They both wore designer sunglasses. The woman wore a knee-length purple, halter dress and carried a large, yellow leather bag. Her shoes matched the bag. The man wore a navy blue polo shirt with a white collar on white trousers. His feet were clad in a pair of white sneakers. They both looked well put together. As the woman approached the desk where Bewaji sat, the man lingered near the entrance, still talking on the phone. She could not really see his face clearly from where she sat, but the shape of his head already told her what she needed to know: the man was none other than Justice, a.k.a Olu Ade.

At this point, Bewaji began to wonder if this man was not following her. Why did he pick this travel agency of all the hundreds in Lagos? And why on earth was he dressed so well? Wasn't he a house boy? And most importantly, who was this woman with him? Bewaji did not have to wait long to get answers. The woman spoke:

"That's my boyfriend," she said, taking off her sunglasses and pointing at the man near the door who was still talking on the phone. "He's paying for my trip to the UK next month. What flights are available? Wait, do you guys accept dollars? He has dollars. Excuse me! Are you listening to me?" the woman began angrily. Bewaji had been using her eyes to multi-task and was certainly distracted. One eye was fixed on the person in front of her, while the other followed the man who was still standing by the door. She suddenly remembered the ankara fabric she was wearing and began to panic. What if he recognized her or the fabric, at least?

"S-o-r-r-y, Madam," Bewaji said apologetically, even though she felt sure that she was at least three years older than this woman.

"I said I need to book a flight to the UK next month. What flights are available?"

Bewaji began to search for available flights on her computer screen. Just then, Olu Ade got off the phone and began to approach the desk. Bewaji was really scared. In a last minute attempt to hide her face, she used her left hand to shield her face, and bent her head downwards, while her right hand moved the mouse.

"Honey, is she asleep? Excuse me, are you sleeping?" Olu Ade asked, hovering over Bewaji and trying to get a closer look at her face. Bewaji just ignored the rudeness behind the question and responded in the negative. How could someone who was working on the computer be sleeping at the same time? Rubbish!

Bewaji informed them of the available flights. After selecting an economy flight for the following month, it was time to pay. Bewaji still had her head bowed. Tilting her head away from their gaze, she told them that she needed some form of identification for both the payee and the passenger. It was part of their procedure, according to her. They both produced their ID cards and Bewaji took them and left briefly to make copies. Before she placed the cards on the photocopier's scan bed, she quickly looked at the identification cards. The woman's name was Bimpe Kolade, and the man's name, if she doubted it before, was Oluwole J. Towobola. The address on Olu Ade's ID card read:

*22 Wemimo Street, Somolu, Lagos*

Number 22? Where had she seen that before? Oh yes, one of the pictures Seun had sent her; the one where he was in front of a gate.

"Sir, is this your current address?" Bewaji asked him after making the copies.

"Ah, no ... Actually, that was where I lived when I got my ID card. My current address is different. What do you need it for?" he said in a worried tone.

"In case we have to contact you, sir. Please provide your current address and phone number," Bewaji said. He did. It was the same address she had sort-of visited on Monday. She also made Bimpe, whom she had determined to be Olu's girlfriend, provide her contact information as well. Olu then paid for the flight in dollars. Yes, in dollars because the travel agency accepted that form of payment.

She told them they would have to come back to pick up the ticket. As they turned to leave, Olu Ade suddenly turned around and said:

"Your face looks familiar. Have I met you somewhere before?"

Bewaji, who had been dreading that question the whole time, replied:

"I get that a lot, sir. I think I have a very common face."

He smiled and walked away. Whether or not he believed her explanation was uncertain. After they left, Bewaji literally danced for joy. She couldn't believe what had just happened. Now, she *really* needed to speak with Seun.

"I need to go and burn this *ankara* blouse. I can never wear it again!" Bewaji said as thought about the near-disaster that would have transpired if Olu had recognized her. It was not wise to tempt fate a third time.

\* \* \*

The following day, Saturday was Arinola's white wedding ceremony. Bewaji had had to explain why she did not show up for the traditional wedding. But she knew Arin would not forgive her if she missed the church wedding.

Bewaji got up very early and arrived in church early. The ceremony went through without any hiccups. Arin was finally married to her sweetheart, Bosun. The reception was at an event hall not too far from the church.

As the couple danced into the hall, Bewaji along with the other guests who had been sitting down rose to their feet and cheered. The other *ore iyawo* dressed in various styles of the same *aso-ebi* were scattered all over the hall. Bewaji had forgotten to turn her phones back on after turning them off in church. It was not until the MC announced the couple's first dance that she realized that her phones were still off. She quickly turned them on, and as she did so, she saw that Seun had sent her several text messages. He had mistakenly dropped his phone in water and had to get a replacement handset. That was why she had not heard from him in almost a week.

She excused herself from the table where she sat and went outside to "flash" Seun. He called her back and she told him she had some news for him regarding the investigation. So, he put Connie on a three-way conference call, and the other two listened patiently as Bewaji relayed the details of Olu Ade's identity and who he was. When she got to the part where she found out that Olu Ade was not a primary school teacher, but was a house boy, there was dead silence on the phone. Bewaji continued and finally told them about Olu Ade's girlfriend, Bimpe.

"So, you see, he's been taking your money and using it to finance his own romance," Bewaji said quietly, addressing Connie. She could hear the woman sigh painfully and was afraid she

was going to start crying on the phone. But Connie remained calm. At least now, as Bewaji reasoned, Connie knew the truth. What she did with that "truth" was totally up to her.

Both Seun and Connie thanked her. Then Connie left, leaving Bewaji to gist with Seun.

"Do you think Connie will still keep *seeing* Olu Ade?" Bewaji asked.

"You mean, Olu Towobola, or should I say, Justice. Ah, I don't think so. I mean, would you date a house boy?"

"God forbid. Maybe ignorance is bliss."

"I disagree. Only Connie was ignorant. Olu was not. He was fully aware that he was lying to her, and that's why she needed to know the truth."

"That's true."

"Anyway, I think you handled this well. I will definitely hire you for all my future investigations," Seun said, chuckling.

"Oh, no problem. I can assure you it will cost you a lot more than \$ 300," Bewaji said, rolling her eyes. They both laughed.

By the time Bewaji returned to the hall, the *aso-ebi* ladies were taking pictures with the newly-married couple. As Bewaji planted herself into the picture, she could not help wondering at the mystery of life, for while one couple's story was just starting, *another* couple's story was about to end.

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### **[About the Author](#)**

Sharon Abimbola Salu was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria where she lived until she relocated to the United States of America. Her stories are mostly set in Nigeria, and she writes the kind of stories she would like to read. A professed lover of spicy foods, she loves experimenting with new recipes, to the dismay of non-spicy food lovers. Apart from writing, photography is her other hobby.

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