

SECOND CHANCES AND SWEET SURPRISES by Victoria Ifeyinwa Okakwu

Igbanam saw her. He knew that one day they would run into each other for sure, but he just didn't think it would be this soon. It was too soon.

Felicia saw him before he saw her.

She hadn't wanted to attend this wedding; she didn't know either the bride or groom and had always been of the opinion that crashing a wedding was tacky. But here she was, being tacky as hell in this drop-dead yellow mini Adire silk slip dress with a thin ruffled cold-shoulder sleeve. She'd been saving it for Tinu's birthday, and it was a far cry from the wedding's magenta and silver color theme. It helped that it was certainly not wedding-appropriate; that's why she had chosen it. She wasn't looking to attract serious suitors today; she wanted tons of attention, though. So far, she had counted eight interested men in her spec range. It was about to be an interesting evening, until she spotted him across the room, looking so good in that gray suit.

Her best friend, Aya, was the bride's makeup artist, and she had pleaded with and begged Felicia to come along to get out of her funk. While she protested at first, she finally gave in to enjoy the free food, good wine, and maybe some company that would take her mind off of him. But he was here. Ugh, not again.

"Hey."

Felicia opened her WhatsApp, and he had sent her a message? "Hey"? Okay then.

"Hi."

Igbanam chuckled. She was pretty predictable. He hadn't known her that long, but he knew she hated one-liners. He just couldn't help himself, and he really wanted to at least say something. She was in the same room with him again.

"You look beautiful," he started to type when Gold came and planted herself on his lap. She was the chief bridesmaid, and he was the best man, so they were acquainted a bit, but not enough for her to be sitting on his lap, although she had been touchy with him since the day before at the traditional wedding. He hadn't minded it at the traditional wedding because she was a useful distraction, but today was different. Felz was here, and this would piss her off even more.

And he did not want that. God, he missed her so much. So, so much.

He got up so Gold could have the chair while he looked for another for himself, and instinctively glanced in Felicia's direction, but she wasn't there.

God, not again.

He knew she probably had seen the thing between him and Gold and would probably be upset, and he needed to find her.

Felicia sat in her car, phone in hand, staring at his message: "hey." He knew sending that would annoy her, and he did it anyway. Just like he knew leaving her the way he did would, and he did it anyway. How could someone she had only known for five days have such an effect on her like this?

They had met a month ago in Ghana. Their mutual friend Olisa had lost his twin brother Okita a year ago and was having a hard time with the healing process. A couple of them had come together to take a trip to Ghana for a week with Olisa, to unwind, rest, relax, reconnect, and flood him with as much love as possible.

She hadn't noticed him until the second day. While everybody arrived on Sunday evening, Igbanam was the last to arrive on Monday.

They were a group of 26, staying at a private resort in Accra with a private beach, a stunning view, huge en-suite rooms with Nordic rustic decor, and an overall great ambiance. The plan was to have a lot of activities together as a group to remind Olisa that despite the fact that Okita was dead, he still had people he could count on and lean on.

Sunday evening was for resting as they had just gotten in, but Monday was very different. It started with a breakfast buffet, followed by a volleyball game among them during the day and an interesting group activity that had to be played in pairs in the evening.

Igbanam was supposed to be her partner after drawing cards, and since he hadn't arrived yet and she was solo, she got to play judge in their game of "who makes the best cocktail." Each pair had to make a signature cocktail, and she would taste all twelve of them and choose a winning cocktail.

Felicia was tasting the Moricano cocktail from team 12 when Igbanam arrived. She was already quite tipsy from the pretty strong drinks, and her voice was softer than usual, giggling in between commenting on the cocktails when she finally chose team 3's Owlie cocktail. The group sampled each other's cocktails afterward when he walked over and introduced himself. He noticed she was tipsy, and after a light conversation, mentioning she was hungry, he offered to get pizza as a token for her filling in for him. She agreed, only if he agreed not to criticize her choice of pineapple as a topping on her pizza. Almost instinctively, he squealed, as he loved pineapples on his pizza as well. It was pretty much smooth sailing after that. It was so easy to talk to him. So easy.

"You're still here," Felicia looked up. He was there, by the car door.

"Oh, yes, I just wanted to get a hand fan from my friend's car." She wasn't going to let him know how annoyed she was.

Igbanam had been watching her for about two minutes, hesitating before approaching her. He had scoured the hall looking for her and was relieved when he spotted her in the parking lot outside the hall. She looked deep in thought, worried, annoyed, and sad, all at once.

"Can I hug you?" He asked. "Please," he said immediately after.

"Yes, sure."

Felicia got out of the car and started to give him a side hug when he enveloped her with a warm hug. He was a 6'4 man, and she was a 5'6 woman, and he always gave the best hugs. The hug felt too familiar. He felt it, remembered it.

Their last contact together, he had hugged her just like this, promising to make her Attieke the next day for breakfast instead of having their almost usual combinations of fries, baked beans, toast, eggs, and oolong tea at the breakfast buffet, but he had instead left without saying a word. Ghosted her. God, he had really messed things up.

Igbanam had made up his mind at the last minute to join the group for the Ghana getaway trip. Olisa was his close cousin, and he wanted to be there for him in any way possible, but he hated group-related activities. He was very introverted for the most part, so it was always a challenge to mix up in a group without appearing to be a snob. He knew he looked like a snob, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

He was very lucky to be paired with Felicia on the first day he arrived because that meant he had one person to talk to mostly, even if they were in a group, and it was like having his own person, which reduced his anxiety about having to talk to every single person. It helped that she wanted to spend time with him as well, doing everything and nothing.

"Uhm, I think they're looking for you," Igbanam broke away from the hug and looked behind him; Gold was walking towards them.

"Right, I'm the best man, so I'm needed for a lot, but the afterparty starts soon, and I'd be free then. Will you still be here? Can you wait? We need to talk. Please."

Felicia nodded in agreement while he smiled and proceeded to walk toward Gold and back to the hall. Something inside her was giddy. Something else was angry. Angry at him for hugging her like things were still the same. Angry at herself for feeling giddy because of him. Wasn't he just cozying up with the same girl that he just went back in with?

During the course of the getaway, she had spent 70% of her time with him, and vice versa. Igbanam was like her in male form; she was introverted as well. They both were good at games and were super-competitive. They both liked pineapple on their pizza topping, they both liked jazz and old-school music with some nostalgia, they both liked TV shows over movies, and they both had a small circle of friends. In fact, the group had started calling them a couple before

they realized they had feelings there because, for the most part, they spent their days truly getting to know each other, not really doing anything romantic per se.

For her, she liked having someone in a group that was like her go-to person. She was a late riser in the morning and would come down late for the breakfast buffet, but Igbanam made it a habit to pick out things she liked on a plate before they got finished so she could still have a yummy breakfast. He was her best friend in the sea of strangers, and she liked that. She thought he liked that too. Till he left, without a word.

"Madam, why are you in the car? We said today was for mingling and distractions. I just finished touching up the bride's makeup for the second time. Have you eaten yet? I'm hungry now, and the Ofada inside is calling my name."

"He's here."

"Who?" Aya asked.

"HIM."

"HERE? Did he see you? Oh my God, I need to see the man that's turned my friend morose for weeks now."

"Ugh, Aya, he did, he even came out here to give me a hug. He wants to talk after, and I don't know what to do."

Aya hugged her friend tight. "Don't worry, I will tell you what to do. First, let's go inside and get something to eat while we talk about this please before I faint."

They made it in just in time to hear the end of Igbanam's best man speech, and Felicia signaled to Aya that he was the one on stage. After settling at a different table because someone else had taken her previous seat, they beckoned to the servers for some food, with Aya requesting Ofada and Felicia settling for the fried rice and jollof rice combo with coleslaw and Asun.

Felicia was surprised she had an appetite despite how she was feeling on the inside. The girls both ate, had sips of wine in between, while casually moving their bodies to the beat of the music as the DJ played songs from time to time.

After their meal, Aya scooted her seat closer to Felicia's. "Babe, what do you really want to do?" she asked Felicia.

Felicia poured herself some more wine; this was going to be her third glass. "I don't know. I mean, I missed him, and seeing him made me happier than I have been for a while, but I'm still angry."

"I understand," Aya said. "It's how he went from 100 to zero and now he's back again. I don't think you should make it easy for him."

"What do you mean?" Felicia probed.

Aya giggled. "Well, thank God you wore this dress today; it's like the Holy Spirit knew it was for today because I've already seen eyes on you and this table. I wanted you to come along with me today to have a good time and be distracted from all of this, and that's still the plan, whether the root cause of the problem is here or not."

Felicia high-fived her best friend. Together, they came up with a plan. Felicia was going to make Igbanam feel miserable, the same way he had made her feel for the past month. She felt like a silly teenager hatching pranks for payback at her big age of 28, but she liked it. Maybe, just maybe, this plan would give her enough satisfaction to forget the entire thing even happened.

They were still talking about the plan in detail when one of the bridesmaids came to get Aya to touch up the bride's makeup for the afterparty. The wedding reception was ending, and she needed to glam up the bride for her afterparty look, and Felicia understood.

While her friend was making her way out, Igbanam was making his way toward her, fries, suya, and a bottle of champagne in tow. He knew how much she loved her fries. He sat beside her, dropped the items on the table, and began to speak.

"I'm sorry, Felz. I really am. I should not have left the way I did. I really wanted to make Attieke for you the next day. I wanted to make you try it with fries instead of plantain, but something happened that night that got me confused. When I dropped you off at your room after we'd all gotten back to the resort from the bar, you were quite tipsy but wanted to watch some TikTok videos, which we did till we slept off. When I woke up, it was early morning, and I was in your room and tried to pull away; you pulled me back, saying 'don't leave Eric, I love you,' and I froze."

Felicia started to speak. Igbanam paused. "Please let me get all of it out of my chest. Felicia, I liked what we had in Ghana. It wasn't romantic yet, but it was building up to that. I woke up every day there looking forward to the day because you were there. We were supposed to be there for Olisa, yet I was selfishly enjoying being there for you, and you, me. I did not realize the extent to which I cared till you said that. I never asked if you were single and just assumed you were because we were spending time together all the time. Hearing you mention your boyfriend's name and saying you loved him was a rude awakening. I literally laid there still for minutes before gathering myself enough to leave your room, straight to mine, packed my bags, and left Accra."

Felicia started to speak again, and instead tears rolled down her eyes. She was sobbing. He pulled her closer, hugged her tight. Sigh. Him and his hugs. God, she was embarrassed. So this was why he had left? She had been hurting, but he had been hurting as well.

"I'm sorry too," she finally managed to croak. Releasing herself from their hug, she held his hands and looked him in the eyes, "Eric was my boyfriend for four years, but he committed suicide over two years ago, and I still miss him sometimes. I haven't been close to any man since him, or even stayed in the same bed with any man. You being there felt familiar."

Igbanam felt ashamed, angry at himself. Why hadn't he just spoken to her about it like an adult? She was still hurting from a recent situation, and he had carelessly walked in and out of her life.

"Felz, I am so sorry. I didn't know," he said softly.

She chuckled and gave him a gentle punch on his upper arm. "I knew we were alike, but this alike? We could have both talked things out. Imagine if we hadn't run into each other today."

"I missed you so much. When you left and ghosted me like that, I couldn't believe it. I was so sure you were a sweet, sweet man. I'm glad I was right. I am sorry," she added.

It was Igbanam's turn to chuckle. "You know what, why don't we try this all over again?"