

**The First Two Pages of “The Jollof Rice and Crayfish Mystery”  
by Stella Oni**

From *Festive Mayhem 2: Seven Holiday Culinary Cozy Mysteries*,  
edited and published by Marla Bradeen

An Essay by Stella Oni

The idea for my main character, Elizabeth Ojo, the Nigerian British housekeeper in The Mews Guest House, a plush hotel in Knightsbridge, came in early 2020 in the thick of the pandemic. I had just finished editing my gritty, dark debut police procedural, *Deadly Sacrifice*, and I jumped at the chance of contributing to a Christmas cozy mystery anthology by some members of Crime Writers of Color and edited by Marla Bradeen.

I yearned to write something light, fresh, and different. And that was a character inspired by Alexander McCall Smith’s Ma Ramotswe of *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*. It was liberating to bring Elizabeth to life in “The Stranger in the House” in the first *Festive Mayhem*, which came out in October 2020 and was well received.

Elizabeth has a unique sense of her world, shaped by her past. She also has the ability to get people to trust or confide in her. She had served in one capacity or the other as a poor housemaid back in Nigeria, a cleaner in the City of London, and now a housekeeper in an upscale guest house. Her journey was not smooth, but her various interactions with the wealthy people in the Mews was intriguing.

This year, I gladly agreed to contribute another Elizabeth Ojo short story to *Festive Mayhem 2*. That is how “The Jollof Rice and Crayfish Mystery” came to life. *Festive Mayhem 2*’s combination of culinary and holiday mystery gave me the vehicle to explore Elizabeth’s strong sense of culture, her ability to cook her delicious jollof rice dish, and her tenacity when it came to clearing her name and solving mysteries. It also helped that I contributed a jollof rice recipe to the bonus recipes in the anthology.

The story was at Christmas, and the beginning set the tone. Elizabeth and her staff at The Mews had gone to great lengths to ensure that the stay of their guests, a flamboyantly wealthy polygamous Nigerian family, was smooth. But it also hinted at the trouble to come with Elizabeth’s sense of foreboding. I wrote this beginning a few times and decided that flashbacks might work better in the story as I had to go between the present and the immediate past.

When Chief Arowolo and two of his wives swept into The Mews on a wintry December day, Elizabeth had felt a sense of impending doom. But preparation for these important guests had been straightforward for the house management. After all, they had just seen off Arab oil magnate Ibrahim Ibn Saud and his household. Therefore, a chief of Lagos, albeit one who owned nearly half of the prime land in that busy metropolitan city in Nigeria, would not be an issue. Was it not like owning half of New York or London, she wondered and shivered.

I also needed the reader to get a sense of this opulent guest house and its affluent location. The first teaser got them curious about the world—the mysterious billionaire owner, the house management with lead character Elizabeth—and hopefully wanting to know what happens next.

Elizabeth took pride in being the head housekeeper of the Mews, a luxury guest house made up of a series of interconnected buildings on a small street in Knightsbridge and owned by billionaire Nigerian businessman Alhaji Maalouf. Their existence was an open secret amongst the international jet set, who could hideaway for a few days and shop out of hours in Harrods. Usually, the wealthy Nigerians did not come to the Mews till the summer as they hated the British winter.

The story continues with Elizabeth moving into the heart of the mystery.

She cooked the jollof rice for the chief's birthday celebration, but something dreadful and mysterious happened. The chief collapsed on the day of his celebration, and the only food he had eaten was Elizabeth's rice. He was allergic to crayfish, but even though it was done by many cooks, Elizabeth never added crayfish to her jollof rice. Therefore, she had to clear her name and get to the bottom of the issue. Who tried to kill the Chief amongst his family and guests?

Now Elizabeth sat reflecting on the past few days as her premonition had come true. Chief Arowolo was in the hospital from a severe allergic reaction that nearly killed him. They blamed Crayfish in Elizabeth's jollof rice. She never added Crayfish, but no one would listen. They had ruled it as an accident, but Elizabeth would not let that go. She worried that if it was not her, who added the Crayfish to the Chief's rice? Who was trying to kill him?

I am expanding Elizabeth's world in the manuscript and look forward to offering the first in The London House Mystery Series soon. In the meantime, enjoy the taster that is "The Jollof Rice and Crayfish Mystery" and other stories in *Festive Mayhem 2*.

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British Nigerian, Stella Oni is the author of the debut crime fiction novel *Deadly Sacrifice*, a police procedural published by Jacaranda Books. *Deadly Sacrifice* was shortlisted for the SI Leeds Literary Prize in 2016 and was an Audible Crime & Thriller pick of the month. It is a fast-paced thriller, set in London and Nigeria and about human trafficking and ritualistic killing.

Stella has a degree in Linguistics and African Languages from the University of Benin and a MSc in Information Systems and Technology from City University, London. She works as a Business Intelligence Analyst. She is working on the first of the London House Mystery series, a new traditional mystery series set in London, Knightsbridge, and is also currently writing the second in her police procedural series.