

K. A. BANKS

YOUR WORST ENEMY IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK.

A SHORT STORY

KINGSLEY ADRIAN BANKS

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iv

I know, sometimes we find enemies in the unlikeliest of places.

Fidelia's feet were planted in the carpet of the headmistress's office, unmoving, as if cemented in place, or so she thought. Her eyes had misted with tears; her her car keys dangled from the middle finger of her left hand, long forgotten. Her mind was dazed and thoroughly confused; she was at a loss about what to do at that moment. Where had it all gone wrong? she wondered to herself for what felt like the hundredth time that afternoon.

Her only daughter, Bianca, was missing. And not only was the girl the only female child she had, the girl was the only child that God had blessed her with during the duration of her marriage to her husband of fourteen years. Her only child.

# Missing? Missing? How is that possible?

She had rushed down from her plush offices on the nineteenth floor of the Soma Building at the Island; she had nothing on her appointments calendar, a rare fit. As head of litigation, SummerSmith & Partners, she'd led three other lawyers in arguing the Motion for dismissal of the suit before Justice H. O. Akabogu, and thankfully, the respondent's lead Counsel—Chief Bode Akinosun, S.A.N.—had appeared himself for the battle, with a team of well-dressed minions, each with their writing pads as they scribbled every word uttered in the proceedings furiously. After that Motion, she'd had nothing really urgent to get back to the office to do, so she'd sent the two lawyers she appeared in the matter with back to the

office while she headed for her daughter's school. And now, *this*. It had been quite some time since the last time she and her daughter had the day with each other to gossip, and so she had chosen this day to make it up to the girl.

Now, the girl was nowhere to be found now. Nobody knew her whereabouts. No one would or could agree to have seen her since the school time had long elapsed and the girl was supposed to be waiting for her driver to come and pick her up so she could go home and get ready for the private tutorial session she had every Friday evening to brush up on her English and Mathematics.

'Madam, we are still trying the very best we can to look for Bianca,' a voice said, jarring Fidelia back to the present, back to her surroundings.

Fidelia turned around to look at the headmistress, a fair-skinned woman with a crown of neat Afro curls atop her head. The woman looked flustered and agitated, the long nails of her left fingers digging into the soft flesh of her right palm. Her plum-coloured suit sat loosely on her frame; she seemed to have aged a few years since this drama began. As well she should, Fidelia thought; something like had *never* happened here. She'd checked it out herself—it was one of the reasons she had chosen this school. Security. And look where that had landed her.

Fidelia nodded, at a loss of words too. She understood that the woman was finding it extremely difficult to process this new information. Fidelia knew that this school had *never* witnessed something like this since its twenty-three years of spotless, unblemished existence.

The fan suspended over the ceiling whirred angrily overhead, dispensing the chill of the air conditioner—which the headmistress had

turned off immediately they began the drama about Chidiogo's disappearance—around the room. The TV that was suspended on the wall was showing a Nollywood on Africa Magic Epic; Ini Edo was the screen gesticulating at Jim Iyke, though her words were inaudible—the volume was muted. A phone on the desk vibrated; it was ignored.

'I think it is time for us to call my husband and tell him that our daughter is missing from school and there is still no sign of her,' Fidelia said wearily, struggling to keep the fear and terror she was feeling at that moment out of her voice and her face. She had to maintain her calm. She was a seasoned lawyer; her control and mastery over her emotions was her pride and glory. It however, threatened to collapse to pieces.

'I will do that for you.'

Fidelia nodded, grateful to the other woman for being the one to break the news to her husband. She knew that the school kept a very comprehensive database of all the parents and guardians of the pupils of the school, so it would be easy for her to be able to reach Nick. And Fidelia felt with a sinking feeling of dread that she had failed her husband again. She had failed him first by not getting pregnant early enough, and then she had failed him secondly by not being able to get pregnant again even though it was eleven years since the birth of her daughter. She knew that there was pressure coming at Nick from all sides for him to get married to another woman but he had kept to her. His family wanted him to marry another woman or at least to impregnate one so he could have other children, but so far he had kept them at bay. For that, she was grateful.

Oh my God! My daughter!

The real enormity of what had happened to her struck her. She let

out a wail of sheer anguish, her eyes glued to her watch as her mind churned at the number of hours her daughter had vanished from the school. She was crying now, and she was almost unaware of hands steadying her, of voices coming together and setting up verbal queries as to what had transpired. She was in pain, and she could feel it in her bones that something bad had happened and something worse was about to happen to her only child. She could literally feel the chill of that feeling of boreboding pervading her senses, infusing itself through her till it felt as if she was in an icy wilderness without any clothing.

'It will be all right,' Mrs. Ikemba was saying, sounding soothing, like a mother.'We will find her.'

Fidelia shook her head. Her head felt light, she felt the room spinning around her and she struggled to contain herself. 'No, it won't be all right,' she wailed, and then her sobs came harder. She doubled over, her fingers clutching at her breasts as all her maternal instincts rushed out to her daughter, wherever the girl might be at this moment in time. 'My daughter is in trouble.'

'Don't be so negative, Mama Bianca,' another woman chided her. 'Let us all pray that the girl is safe and will be found soon.'

But Fidelia was shaking her head, and then she burst out laughing. It was a near maniacal laughter that jarred the people around her, most of them mothers like she was who had dropped in to pick up their kids and take them home. But then they had stopped what they were doing to be a part of the pain of the woman. They were from rich stock, all of them. Most of them were housewives or had their own expensive shops around the Island, or worked from home for international companies headquartered in London while they themselves added to the bottomline

from their homes in Lagos. The different smells of their expensive perfumes clashed and became a battle for supremacy. The keys to Lexus jeeps, Toyota SUVs, and sleek Hondas with V6 engines dangled from chosen fingers of their well-manicured fingers while the less busy fingers worked at flicking errant locks of expensive hair off their made-up faces.

To Fidelia it was absurd for her to be thinking of her daughter being when she knew that the girl was seriously in trouble. What had happened to her only child transcended child's play—the girl was in serious danger.

She knew it deep within her bones. She could feel it.

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It took two hours for her husband to arrive—he had been tied up in a business meeting and couldn't be reached—and when the news was relayed to him, he took his wife in his arms and started issuing orders into his phone. Call the police; reach out to the parents of all the other children that were in her class and those who were her friends to know if she had said something to any of them about where she was headed to before she had disappeared; get copies of her pictures so they could be circulated around the neighborhood with great speed; notify the neighborhood vigilante group so they could also help with the search for Bianca. And so on and so forth.

At that moment, Fidelia felt happy that she had Nick with her. The way he towered above all, seemingly above even this horrible situation they had found themselves in, gave her a deep sense of reassurance. *Something good is going to happen.* 

Fidelia had very stunning pictures of her daughter on her iPhone;

she had them emailed to the school's mail address and, within moments, they had copies already being circulated around. But even before that she knew that it was not necessary; the School had already began the work of looking for the little girl.

Nick was by her side, holding her hand and talking speedily into his phone, dispensing information about their child to the powers that be. He had taken control, just like he always did in moments of trouble.

Fidelia felt very grateful that she had him there with her; she had never known what to do except to sit down and wail about the disappearance of her only child when she should have been taking steps to have her daughter found. She was ordinarily someone that was always in charge, but when it came to matters that were emotionally involved, she always became no more than an emotional wreck.

'We've done the very best we can do at the moment,' Nick said to her as he sat down beside her and held her. 'I believe that we will find her very soon.'

Fidelia looked up at him with eyes that were filled with despair. 'What if you're wrong?' she asked in a very strangled voice, as if she was terrified of speaking what she felt. 'What if something bad has happened to her?'

'Have some faith,' Nick chided her, like the other woman had done several minutes ago. 'Maybe she's gone off somewhere on her own and had fallen asleep. She could be sleeping around here somewhere.'

Even though she really wanted to believe the words her darling husband was saying to her, she felt it deep within her that she was walking on egg shells and it could crack wide open at any time. And what if what

her husband was saying was true—that their daughter had gone off somewhere and had fallen asleep and forgotten that she had to get home and do her homework?

But then, it felt most unlikely, she reasoned. Bianca was never the kind of girl to wander off on her own when she had express instructions to the contrary about what she was expected to do. Bianca had always been a very quiet girl, always content to play with her dolls and read her books—advanced books that girls of her own age would never understand—and she would never go off on her own provided you'd given her a very tangible reason as to why she shouldn't wander off. Bianca knew better. She had been raised better.

Fidelia then decided to give up on her tears and her pessimism and hope for the very best. But when it turned to seven P.M and the girl was still nowhere to be found, real panic set into her. The other women were all gone, though they had all promised to call her and check in with her; they all attended the school Parents-Teachers meetings and were acquainted with each other; some, she had done legal work for. They had her number and she had theirs. The deepening natural lights of Lagos infused a sense of urgency into the other women, that they needed to go and get their family ready for supper. So, they were all gone. The headmistress and Bianca's class teacher remained.

Fidelia kept pacing the office. The white fluorescent bulbs hanging overhead were threatening to drive her crazy with their glare, but she welcomed it. She needed that craziness to be able to think. Phone calls had come in from the office—as a partner at her law firm she had her own personal assistant—and she had ordered that her assistant should take all her calls, reschedule the non-urgent appointmets slated for the following

day, and pass off the other engagements to other partners or senior associates.

I have to go home. I have to go there and see if she has turned up.

Going home while her husband went off on a search with some men to find the girl was a very difficult thing to do, but she knew that she had to go home or else she would go crazy. Besides that, she felt that she would only be in the way of the men that were trying to find her daughter for her. For now, she could be nothing to them other than a liability. She picked her bag, walked out of the headmistress's office, then slid into her car for the journey home. At least, with the mad chaos on Lagos roads, she could take her mind off the sheer horror of her only daughter's situation.

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At home, she refused any meal; she just removed her office suit, pulled her hair into a bun, donned on one of her old T-shirts and a pair of short shorts, then she sat down in a settee in her living room and stared blankly at the TV. Her phone was on the table, and her eyes kept straying from the TV to the phone—she willed it to ring with some good news.

When her iPhone rang, she flew at the table and grabbed it up to answer it, thinking that perhaps it was her husband calling with news of her daughter. But it turned out to be her younger sister, Ifedinma, who also lived in Ikoyi with her husband, calling to get the real details of what had happened.

'Nick called me. He thought that perhaps she had come to see me. What happened? Where is she? Have you found her?'

'She just disappeared from the face of the earth and nobody seems

to have any inkling about where she is currently,' she wailed through her sniffs. 'She just vanished, and there was nothing they could do about telling me where she could have gone to. Where can she be? And you know that this is Lagos and there are thieves and kidnappers—'

'Take it easy, dear,' Ifedinma interrupted calmly, her voice strong over the phone waves. She had the knack of being always calm and serene in very stressful situations, never breaking up into pieces. 'It could be kidnappers.'

'Oh, God forbid!' Fidelia wailed into the phone. 'What do they think I have that they will ever want from me? I am not rich.'

You are richer than you think you are,' Ifedinma said calmly. If it is kidnappers that want some kind of ransom, then at least we'll know where to start from and what to do. But there is also the possibility that . . .' her voice trailed off into uncertainty.

'I know what you're trying to tell me. Maybe she's in the hands of some ritual killers who intend to use her for something evil.'

And as soon as these words were out of her mouth, Fidelia hung up, the implications of what she had said sinking into her mind. She knew that there was no way she could not consider that possibility; that her only child had fallen into the hands of some ritual murderers. She had seen it a lot in the news lately, of men kidnapping and killing young boys and girls and then selling their body parts for money rituals. There was even the story of the man at Ikorodu who had grabbed the son of his neighbor and had then hacked her to pieces with a machete. As he was on his way out of the apartment building with the decapitated body in a suitcase, the yard dog had gotten to him, biting and hacking at the suitcase with scary ferocity.

That was when the alarm had been sounded and then the people in the street had assembled, seeking to know what was in the bag that had nearly driven the dog mad. And that was the end for the young man; he was currently at the Kirikiri prison awaiting his death sentence.

And what if my only daughter has met the same fate? Fidelia wondered. She stood up and paced the living room. Art decor on her walls; large, life-sized images of her husband, herself and her daughter all caught her attention and only sharpened the pain of her sorrow. The smell of lavendary pervaded the large, uncluttered space—Nick loved expensive but minimalist furnishings, and she must admit that the minimal decor gave the living room a roomy, spacious feel. A pair of rosary beads lay on a small stool; she retrieved the rosary beads and began to pray the decades of the holy rosary, her tears flowing down her cheeks as she implored on the Holy Mother for help. She knew what she needed to pray by heart, so there was no need for her to go searching for her prayer book.

By the time she was done, she felt some peace within her, and it was as if there was a voice speaking within her, telling her that all would be well soon. She just had to try and believe it within her that the things she thought were hopeless weren't so hopeless like she had thought.

Nick returned late that night, and his eyes were red-rimmed, his expression glassy.

'I am sorry, honey, we couldn't find our daughter,' he told her.'No one knows when she left the school. The parents of every single pupil in her class were called—no one seems to know how or when she left the school. There are also no cameras that could have captured her departure.'

Fidelia said nothing, she did nothing; she just sat there in the living

room, the lights on, the TV turned on to Arise TV. She was staring out into space, in shock because she had lost the only thing that mattered more to her than her own life. She wished there had been the opportunity for her to have been there with her daughter, so that if it was murderers that had gotten to her, then she could have negotiated with them to trade her life for her daughter's. But she had been too busy in court and from there on the phone as she'd headed for Bianca's school, speaking her British English and attending to foreign clients, earning money for her firm, and her daughter had been in danger. Bianca had been in danger and she had been oblivious to it.

She sat there throughout the night, her pain like a physical weight she had to bear, her mind flogging her with guilt. But she was objective enough to know that there was nothing she could do at the moment: there were search parties still combing through the streets of Victoria Island, looking for Bianca; the police had already been notified; she had already emailed AIT and NTA the details of her daughter while Nick had phoned them and they had agreed to give their daughter's disappearance top priority over every other news they had for the night and early the following morning. She had done all she could do at the moment, so all she had to do was pray.

And pray she did, hard and fast and really furious. She prayed like she had never prayed before, asking God to save her baby, that the girl was all she had. She asked Him to forget that she existed and just save her daughter for her, that she would do *anything* to ensure that He spared her daughter's life.

When she was done with the lengthy prayer, she staggered into her bathroom and brushed her teeth, took a cold shower, did her makeup, and

then she got dressed in a long flowing gown that swept the floor. She did it all mechanically, like someone in a state of near catatonia, and then she stepped into the living room. She hadn't gotten a wink of sleep the previous night, and her head pounded with a headache that threatened to uproot the grey matter in her brain.

Nick was seated on a settee, his head in his hands. He looked haggard and frightened, and he frowned when he saw that she was dressed up and ready to go out of the house.

'Honey, what are you doing?' he asked, his eyes searching her face. A deep frown creased his brows; his eyes were rimmed red—she knew that he was fatigued. He had retired to their bedroom for the night but obviously, he hadnt't gotten any sleep as well.

'I am going to the salon and then I'll go to the prayer meeting at the church that I had told you about last week,' she replied, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. After her prayers, she felt calm, peaceful. 'I had been meaning to go though I never really told you about it.'

But honey, our daughter is missing!' Nick exclaimed. 'The neighbors are all aware of that and they are all looking for her. What will they think if you just looked like a fashion plate, ready to go out while we should be looking for her?'

She smiled, and the calm she had suddenly felt remained on her. It was as if there was nothing wrong to upset the balance of her life at the moment, as if her sorrow had been relegated to the background and other matters had taken priority. I had promised myself two weeks ago that I must attend this crusade, so I must go there. Even though our daughter is missing, there's nothing I can do to find her for the moment, so I might as

well go to the church.'

Without another word, she turned and left the mansion, her long strides taking her to the car canopy under which parked three cars. The black Lexus ES350 had been washed to a shine, its tyres dark against the silvery rims. *I will go with this one*. She called for the car keys, then she used the remote control and sprung the car locks open, then eased into the driver's seat. Her phone vibrated in her purse. She fumbled for it as she slammed the door shut, turned the key in the ignition and the car engines purred to life. The call was a telephone line; it was from the office.

She didn't have the time to start responding to myriad calls and granting requests from the office right now. She dragged the red disconnect button into place. Her assistant had an inkling that all wasn't well with her; she should field all her calls and divert all her responsibilities for the day to either the sub-head of the litigation department or to another partner or senior associate.

Fidelia turned the AC knob on and set the settings to High. She needed the chill to numb her senses. She was aware of the worried look on her husband's face as she drove out of the vast, opulent grounds of the mansion, but she felt that this was something she had to do for herself. She had to go and praise the Lord, for it was there in the bible; that you shall praise the Lord in any situation you find yourself in. Besides, she felt a pull towards a church right now. She couldn't find her daughter; she could at least drive her knees to the ground in supplication to a Higher power.

Thanks to traffic from the long queue of cars bound for the Lagos Mainland areas from the Island, it took her forty minutes to arrive at Life Adoration Prayer Ministries at Bode Thomas Street, Surulere. The car park on the church grounds was overfilled with cars, but luckily, she found a

spot and eased her own car into it. Some people milled around; a few children chased themselves around the large lot, though they kept their cries and their play to the barest minimum because of the ongoing prayers inside the large cathedral.

Fidelia knotted a scarf around her hair, grabbed her purse from the seat beside her, then she locked the car doors and headed inside.

The church's interior waas bursting with worshippers. Its domed roof soared three stories high, and from it hung very long poles on which were suspended fans that whirred speedily, dispensing cool air. The walls were etched with murals of the Virgin Mother and other super-sized images of biblical figures and saints. Large votive candles burned from the altar on a raised dais at the far end of the large building; some priests were flanked around the altar, dressed in their ceremonial priestly garb. The smell of incense permeated the atmosphere.

Fidelia found a spot and eased into it, then joined in the activities. She joined in the praise and worship songs, and soon, she was so enraptured by the songs that she temporarily forgot about the things that had gone awry in her life.

Before long, the prayers had begun, and even though Father Ikechukwu, the priest leading the Mass—a new visiting priest that had come to Lagos from Anambra State—had given them the prayer point to focus on, she overlooked it and instead continued to sing to God, tears flowing from her eyes, cascading down her cheeks. She was oblivious to everything else that was happening around her. To her senses it was as if the throng of bodies all around her had fallen into a deep, silenced chasm, such that it seemed as if she was all alone now, with the body of song to keep her company. Suddenly, Reverend Father Ikechukwu's voice rang out

clearly like bells, amplified around the large hall by his microphone.

"There is a woman here that her child is missing,' the Reverend said.

The singing stopped. The prayers ceased. Eyes flew open, turning to him. Fidelia stopped her singing and her eyes joined the others in focusing on the man. The vast prayer room was now as still and quiet like a graveyard, all ears primed to hear the words of the Reverend, for it was obvious to all there that something was going down. Her eyes were focused on the podium too, and the tall man looked ethereal to her, like some being from some higher plane of existence. She was listening to him intently, her heart thumping loudly in her chest.

'I want that woman to step up here today, for the Lord has heard your cries and He will make an example of you,' the man boomed. 'For further clarification, that woman here is a lawyer, so come out now!'

The silence was deafening. Somewhere close to Fidelia a phone vibrated, but its owner swiftly turned it off. Her heart pounded in her chest. There was no way the man could have known about her because she had told no one she was coming here today; it had been a spur-of-the-moment decision. Even Nick didn't know where she was.

In the still, deathly silence, Fidelia clutched her purse and gingerly stepped up to the man on legs that had turned rubbery all of a sudden. She had been seated at the back of the church, so her progress was slow, the slowness heightened by the thousand pair of eyes that strained to see who was stepping up to the altar, to see who the Reverend was talking about. She had had her experience in making public appearances and public speaking; from moderating intellectual discussions to serving as Emcee at

important events, and she had carried herself with admirable poise and confidence befitting of her high-flying status in Lagos Society. Now, she was sure she was sneaking up to the altar like a mouse badly beaten by the rain. Her legs felt gelatinous with fatigue and fear.

Immediately she stepped up the three steps to the podium, an altar boy passed her a microphone as all watched, and then she was looking at this man, this new Father she'd never seen before. She did not even know what to think of him, but she could feel the coolness of his gaze on her, feel the serenity that oozed off of him. He was *tall*, she could see tha now, and he had coal-dark skin that stood out against the sparkling white of his priestly robes.

'I am a lawyer, and yes, my daughter is missing,' Fidelia said into the mic.

There were gasps and shakes of heads, and some of the women had even clutched their breasts in commiseration with the tortured woman there on the stage.

'She disappeared from the school without a trace and up till now, the girl is yet to be found by anybody and nobody seems to know her whereabouts,' the Father continued, and this time, in the silence that ensued, if a pin had dropped, then that pin would have sounded loud as a bomb and the assemblage would have wished it to oblivion with their hearts.

Yes,' Fidelia said, her eyes glued to the man. There was something about him that was profoundly comforting to her, and he seemed to be giving her a sense of peace. She seemed to forget that she was in the midst of over a thousand other worshippers; it was as if the persons there had fallen off into some great chasm, and there was only she and the Father

now. They had both taken center stage now; her earlier nervousness had fallen away.

I tell you that your girl did not *just* go missing,' the Father said, and then he shook his head and laughed. I want to tell you that the Lord will make an example of you, my child. If I may be so brazen to ask, where is your husband? Is he here?'

'He was at home when I was on my way here to the crusade.'

'And you know that your husband has been trying the best he can to find the little girl for you because that is the only child you have for him,' the Father told her. He smiled at her, his small smile an invitation to her answer.

She nodded.

'Let me tell you that your husband knows where your daughter is.'

Loud gasps errupted from the crowd, and someone in the Prayer Warriors' pew even burst into prayers, speaking in tongues. When the din had subsided, the Father continued.

'My daughter, you will find your little girl tonight. The Lord will lead you to her. I will not tell you exactly what has happened, or what is going to happen tonight, but the point is that it *will* happen tonight, and you shall be there to witness it with your two eyes. I will pray for you, and then, later on, some of my people will go with you to where you will find your daughter.'

Fidelia was swaying on her feet, and her tears were flowing anew with renewed strength. She felt her body going slack, and she struggled to gain control over herself, but it was proving to be too difficult a task for her.

What was it the Reverend Father had said—that her husband, her darling Nick, *knew* what had happened to her daughter? To their daughter? How could that be possible?

In a daze, she reached her free hand into her purse, serching for her iPhone, her mind already calling up the key for his number which was on her speed-dial, but the voice of Reverend Ikechukwu halted her fingers.

You shall *not* call that man and let him know that the Lord has revealed his secrets. There is nothing hidden under the sun. Everything will be revealed to you in due course.'

Fidelia was dazed and shocked, her fingers hovering indecisively over her waist, for her phone was tucked securely into an inner lining in her purse. She still wanted to defy the man and call Nick, but somehow, something told her resolutely that her fingers were no longer under her control, that if she tried to call him, she couldn't . . . that she would not even be able to lift her phone. *Something*— a gentle but persistent pressure on her fingers—was stopping her from reaching for that phone.

'You *cannot* call him,' the Reverend said, his gaze fixed on her. She could feel this man in her mind, searching and probing. 'I know you want to call him, but you cannot do that. I beg you: do *not* call that man.'

At that moment, the strength she'd had failed her. Fidelia broke into tears, her long nails raking at her scarf and when it fell to the tiled floor, through her hair, her anguish evident on her face. Some people—women—were even crying silent tears in the audience. Some were singing praises, and others were praying, thanking God for His miracles.

'There is a doctor here that just moved to Lekki from Abuja,' the Reverend continued. 'His wife is a nurse and she's now assisting him in his

new clinic here in Lagos. They are right here in this church. I want them to come out now.'

Within moments, a handsome couple was on the stage with the Reverend and Fidelia.

You two, along with two people from the congregation, and two members of the Prayer Warriors, shall be at the CMS bus stop at 11 P.M. tonight. There you shall see what the Lord will do. For the rest of the congregation, you shall all go home, sleep, eat, and do whatever it is you want to do. Return here by 11 P.M. or 12 A.M. if you can and you shall see for yourselves the handwork of the Lord.'

Fidelia was in a daze. Her legs felt weak; it was as if her body's internal batteries had run down and she could now barely hold herself up. Reverend Ikechukwu directed some members of his team to take Fidelia to the Fathers' Quarters where she would stay until the appointed time for her to leave. But before she was taken away he spoke to her again, his words for her ears and hers alone.

You worry about your husband; that he does not know where you are or what you are doing. He is not worried, my child. He has a lot of things on his mind. You are the least of his worries. Right now the search for your daughter is still underway, but it is something you should not concern yourself with anymore.'

All Fidelia could do was nod, then the team led her away, to the one-storey building where the presiding priests resided. She was guided into a conference room and she collapsed on a chair, her mind far away, her senses numbed by the horrors of what she was experiencing. Hours passed and she sat there, immobile like some statue cast in bronze, refusing both

food and the drink that was offered her by the Fathers' steward. Food and drink were far from her mind right now.

The time seemed to flyand she marked the passage of time by the changing scenes and people flashing through the screen on the TV they had turned on for her. Suddenly, the steward appeared and informed her that she was needed outside the house. She flashed a glance at her Cartier Tank watch; it was 8 P.M. She grabbed her car keys and purse and followed the man, out of the house. The house was positioned at the back of the huge cathedral, though close enough to where she had parked her car.

'They are all ready to go,' the man said, at which she nodded.

Floodlights were positioned strategically on the buildings and they shone down to the grounds, illuminating everywhere with artificial brightness. There were fewer cars around now; most of the people were long gone.

The Doctor and his wife were already waiting for her, and there was also another man and a woman there with them. A silver-colored Toyota Highlander SUV was parked beside Fidelia's car, its engine idling, the headlights turned on. Fidelia, the doctor and his wife got into her car, with Fidelia at the wheel—she rejected the entreaty of the young doctor that he take over the wheel—and then she waited for the other car to take the lead. She reversed her car and eased in behind it, heading for CMS, the bus stop at the Lagos Island where the Reverend had told her to go.

'It is going to be alright,' the woman with said from her position at the back.

Fidelia nodded. 'I hope so. I honestly hope so.'

As she eased into the Island-bound traffic, Fidelia fiddled with the car stereo—a flash drive inserted into a port provided her with music entertainment, countless hours of it—and settled for Sinach. The singer's 'You Are Awesome In This Place' filled the car's chilled interior as Fidelia picked up speed, her fingers gripping the steering wheel tightly.

Cars filled up the roads; Lagosians were on their way home. Thankfully, they were at Mainland, heading into the Island—which meant that they were moving against the traffic—so it was easier and faster for her to make progress.

\*

It took her an hour to make it to CMS. The Toyota Highlander had already arrived ahead of her and its occupants waited beside the car. Fidelia found a spot and parked the car and they all piled out of it. The air was cold, the wind blowing in from the marine nearby, lifting Fidelia's long gown. She shivered and hugged herself, her teeth clenched shut, her long hair blowing all around her face. The stench of human waste rose from the waters of the Lagos Marina, strong and revolting; it stung her nose.

'Can I give you a sweater?' the nurse asked, concerned. 'You look like you're about to fall to the ground.'

Fidelia smiled at the woman and shook her head, and her companions all shrugged. She said nothing, her eyes wandering around the vast street, seeking out— what? What exactly was she looking for here? She remembered what the Reverend had told her before she had driven off.

The road was lighted up by lights, both from the steel towers nearby, still bustling with human activities as those within those air-conditioned buildings cuhrned out their work for important clients;

streetlights and car headlights, as workers raced for their faraway homes at Ikeja, Ojodu Berger, Orile, Mile 2 and the other farflung areas of the sprawling Lagos Metro in their cars and in overflowing Danfo buses.

'Trust in the Lord,' he had told her in a whisper meant only for her. 'He will lead you to Bianca.'

And she had stared at him in shock, for she knew with high clarity and certainty that she had not told this man the name of her daughter. She stood there leaning against her car while the others glanced into the screen of her iPhone, memorizing the face of the pretty primary school pupil that was smiling up at them from the bright screen of the phone.

Almost an hour passed with nothing happening, and then Fidelia began to feel a long wand of despair sweeping through her. A voice in her head was screaming at her that she would never see her only child again, while another one, smaller and soothing, told her not to worry, that everything would be all right.

'It's getting late,' the doctor said, and his voice sounded shaky, for the air was getting chillier by the minute and they were not suitably dressed to brave the elements.

'Be patient!' Ademola, one of their companions, admonished the man in a calm, yet, firm voice.

Then Fidelia sensed something, her instincts screaming at her to move away from the cars, away from the group. She had always had very good instincts, and she had often trusted in the little voice at the back of her mind to ferry her away from many dangers. If her mind was telling her to get away, then she had to do it.

She turned away, her legs carrying her away from the car. They had parked at the CMS bus stop exactly, and she turned down the pedestrian walkway that led towards the Balogun market, with the expressway spread out in the other direction for cars that were heading to Victoria Island and Ikoyi and those that were coming in to the Island and the Mainland.

Wait; don't leave!' the doctor said.

But Fidelia was moving as if she was hurrying away from the scene of a crime, her legs in swift but silent motion away from them. She could hear them talking excitedly behind her, could hear the thump of their feet hurrying after her, but she didn't stop or had an inkling as to where she was headed to. She also heard the *Agberos* talking in their deep voices; she smelled the marijuana coming from the lighted wraps they clutched with their teeth. She headed down the stairs, and then she was in the main street where the sellers usually displayed their wares along the way to Balogun Market.

### What? What? What? What now?

The thoughts were coming at her in a rush, filling her mind. Tears had clouded her vision, and she swiped at them angrily, her hair falling into her face. Then she seemed to sense something; there was a change in the atmosphere, a subtle shift in the psychic balance of the place. It was something many people would never have noticed, but Fidelia had always had an extraordinary sense of awareness that made her *aware* of things that other people took for granted.

She looked around, her eyes seeking through the semi-darkness. And that was when she saw her; she saw her daughter coming towards her, though the girl had not seen her and probably would not see her because

she had her attention focused on the ice cream cone she was licking merrily. The girl was wearing a loose red gown that hung down to the ground, and, beside her, walking slowly and holding her hand, was *Nick*. He looked preoccupied, not attentive to the girl beside him, as if his mind was furiously preoccupied with some very important decision that needed urgent attention. His lips were compressed in a grim line, and he looked totally different from the man Fidelia knew and loved.

Fidelia was now crying, her palms covering her mouth. The other persons with her had come up behind her, and they all stood, watching the man and the girl that were wearing the exact same shade of blood-red gowns, the material hanging down to the ground.

'Bianca!' Fidelia called.

Bianca stopped and looked, and then her eyes widened with recognition as she saw her mother. 'Mother!' she called, and then she let go of her father and rushed to her mother. She hugged Fidelia, her face pressed into the perfumed folds of her mother's gown. 'Daddy told me you had gone away, that we are going somewhere too.'

Fidelia turned wide eyes of shock to her husband, and there he stood, stupefied, as if petrified by some invisible force. His mouth hung open, the look of a beached whale without water for its oxygen. It was as if he had never expected to see his wife here. Not here. . . never here.

### 'Fidelia . . .'

Fidelia stood there frozen with shock, unaware that her daughter was talking excitedly. The girl was saying that her daddy had told her to come out early after class and go and wait for him at the bus stop, that there was somewhere special they had to go, just the two of them.

Fidelia was no fool; she knew exactly where *they* were going. Her husband was going to kill her only daughter; their only child.

Through some distant plane, or perhaps as if she was listening to and hearing the voices through a tunnel, a babble of voices arose, thick and incoherent. She was dimly aware that her husband was talking, and that her companions were also all talking. Then she heard the sniffles that were coming from her husband, but she was lost, as she folded up like a deflated balloon and crumpled to the ground in a faint.

When she came to, she was aware of voices talking, of someone gently applying pressure on her forehead. She knew that she was in a car, and that the car was in swift motion, purring silently along the roads. The smell of the air freshener hinted her that she was in her own car and someone else was driving the machine, the car zapping speedily through the night.

'Bianca...' That lone word escaped through her lips.

Her only child; her only daughter, missing, and yet her husband—her darling, kind-hearted husband—had known where she was all along. *He* was the person responsible for her disappearance.

\*

When they arrived at the church, the nurse assisted Fidelia down from the car. Through the periphery of her vision she saw the doctor and her other companions, together with Nick and Bianca, all together. As they headed into the church, she began to cry again, with the wife of the doctor holding her and talking soothingly to her. She could not even see her husband, but she was aware now of her daughter holding her by the side and looking bewildered at what was going on.

They entered, and to Fidelia's shock, the church was full to bursting point, with the entire pews occupied. There were many people standing, some squeezed into tight corners, all eyes turned to the doors of the huge church. When they entered, screams arose, and the people were all getting to their feet, clapping and screaming. A song broke out from the choir section and everyone joined in, their collective voices emitting a powerful sound that seemed to shake the very walls.

Fidelia noticed her husband walking behind her, looking stunned and docile, as if something had sapped all his energy and left him empty and without life.

It was only later that she would learn that from the moment the Prayer Warriors had surrounded him, he had suddenly gone slack. He had been unable to utter a single syllable or to do anything, while they had led him like some zombie into the SUV. Throughout the drive to the church, he had sat there in the car with them like someone in a trance, unable to say anything.

When the people started to scream, Fidelia held her daughter tighter to her side, her eyes lifting to the huge mounted clock that hung suspended above the altar. It was almost 1 A.M. These people had all assembled here tonight because of her.

'Here they come,' the Reverend Ikechukwu said through his microphone, and the people screamed harder. 'I told you that God has His plans, that this little girl here will return and you will witness it. I told you all.'

Fidelia and all those with her had all gotten to the altar, and she looked at the Father and the man smiled at her. She felt some knowledge

infuse into her: this man had known from the very moment she had seen her daughter there with her father, right before she swooned into a dead faint. That was why the man had insisted that the nurse and her doctor husband accompany them on their bizarre errand.

'Welcome, my daughter,' he told her in an undertone, and then he smiled and held out his hand to Bianca.

At the very moment the girl's fingers connected with his, Nick was jarred back into the present. The look of torpor fled from his face so fast, there was no expression left to cover up the ensuing utter blankness that suffused his face. He looked around, seeking his bearings, and then he caught sight of the crowd, along with the Reverend. His eyes fell on Fidelia. His countenance changed, moving from the point of bewilderment, to sheer, clear comprehension of the soup he was in, to utter and total terror at the prospect of having to face his wife and the entire assemblage down.

'No!' he shrieked, shrinking back from the Reverend. His face seemed bloated, his eyes bulging from his face, sweat trickling down his forehead. His movements were at once jerky and uncoordinated.

Yes, my son; it is over for you,' Reverend Ikechukwu said, speaking loudly into the mic for the sake of the congregation. 'Tell us—the people of God—what you wanted to do. Do not try to lie to us, for they all already know the story, and the angels of heaven are waiting for you to lie or make a wrong move so they can strike you down.'

Bested at his own game, shamed and terrified, Nick broke into tears. Loud, heart-wrenching sobs rose from him, and he even covered his face with the back of his left hand so the people there wouldn't look at his face and see the disgrace he was facing. A microphone was thrust into his

hand.

'I command you to tell us everything!' the Reverend ordered, his voice like a crack of thunder through a dark night.'My son, talk. You have no other choice.'

'I was a poor young man, trying to be the best I could be,' the broken man began through his sobs, though he was able to maintain coherence. The assemblage held total silence, all ears straining to hear him.

'My friends were all richer than I was, and I wanted to be like them; to drive the flashy cars they drove and eat the best foods and have sex with the most beautiful women around. That was why I told my friend Stephen to help me become rich. I had wanted to be like him, so that was how I joined their club. It all started with a simple discussion, but Stephen refused to help me. I begged and begged him, until he finally accepted to help me. He introduced me to his club and said I had to join. I joined. I never knew that I would use my own father for rituals. You see, Stephen never told me; perhaps that was why he refused to help me for several months, because he didn't want me involved. Then I had to kill my own father—I killed him and used him for rituals.'

Fidelia felt an icy chill descend into the pit of her stomach. So, all the money she had been spending over the years was blood money, gotten because her husband's 'club' had used her father-in-law—a man she'd never met—for rituals so he could become one of the happening men in the town. Goose bumps erupted all over her skin.

They had told me that they would take him, but I had said no,' Nick continued, his voice teary. Then they had told me that the very moment I had stepped into their sanctuary, there was no going back. The

choice had been stripped from me and should I refuse to use my father, then they would still get to him and also kill me afterwards. You see, they are a very powerful occult group.'

Cries and shouts of incredulity rose from the crowd, but the Reverend raised his hand for silence and the din subsided. The powerful white lights shone down on the congregation.

I became rich overnight,' Nick continued. 'After that fateful night, I received a call from home, with my kid brother telling me that our father had died, that he had been bleeding heavily through his mouth. I had killed my father without meaning to do so. That very night, as I lay on my bed crying, there appeared before me a huge coffin that was open, and there was money in it, money that was so big and in so many different currencies, more money than I had ever seen in my whole life before. I am a rich man, but it came at a great price. I got to visit different countries. I got many connections. I slept with beautiful women and paraded around in different clubs.

Then I met Fidelia. She was different from the other expensive women I dated. I genuinely fell in love with her and we got married. Then she got pregnant; she had her first miscarriage.

Even I thought that there was nothing to it except the issue of her genetics, but our Dibia appeared to me the evening of my wife's miscarriage while I was in my home office and told me that he had been responsible for it, that the goddess we worshipped was in need of my offerings. He told me that I would have to be making offerings to them every year. I would go, sleep with the runs-girls from LASU and UNILAG, and then pay them huge amounts of money. What they never knew was that I had sacrificed their first two children to the goddess; they would have two miscarriages

whenever they got pregnant.'

The assemblage was now screaming, some of them calling on the blood of Jesus, some shaking their heads. Some young women were even crying and holding on to each other as they listened to the horror story that was unfolding before them. Some people fanned themselves with their printed bulletins. Some people kept snapping their fingers. The Reverend was nodding, displaying no emotion, his face calm and serene.

'I was rich, but I had no peace,' Nick continued; he was now crying. 'Then the goddess became more demanding, asking for more sacrifices. I had to go to my fellow brothers for help, but they each had their own stories. Tobenna had sacrificed his first son, his mother, his first wife and her children—all to the goddess. Each of my brothers had something to give, and if you refuse to give, then the goddess would take it by force and then tax you double for it. If you don't obey, you die, along with the entire members of your family. Then your wealth will revert back to the goddess.'

'Ewoooooo!' a woman screeched. Fidelia noticed this woman, a plump, middle-aged woman whose arms were a quivering mass of flesh that vibrated and shook with each movement she made.

The goddess asked for my wife. I sent several accidents her way when she was out driving or travelling, but they all failed to get her. Once, when she was heading down to Onitsha to see her parents, she went by commercial transport. I fired off our *mkponani*—our spiritual bomb—to the car. There was a severe head-on collision between her bus and a trailer along the Delta-Benin road. Everybody in the two cars died but my wife survived without a scratch on her body. She came back to Lagos looking as if she had visited a health spa, looking better than when she had left for her home.

'The goddess was very happy for the blood that had been spilled from the accident, but she was furious that the ultimate sacrifice to her had returned unharmed. She had to have Fidelia, there was no two ways about it. But then, everything I tried to do to her either went to someone else or bounced off her as if it was nothing. Once, I had a meeting with the Brotherhood about her, about how to tackle her, and, to say the truth, we were all scared of her. Our best shots at her meant nothing to her, and she was never even aware of what was going on spiritually around her.'

'And that is the awesome power of the Almighty God we serve,' the Reverend broke in, eliciting bouts of applause from the congregation. 'She serves the Living God and not anything else.'

We had to leave her alone, for she was proving to be too strong for us,' Nick said, and this time, he gave his wife a terrified glance, as if she was his nemesis come to life. I had to continue with the blood sacrifices, and each time, I waited for the goddess to tell me to try again on my wife. It never happened. When Fidelia gave birth to our daughter, the goddess appeared to me personally. In my entire life I have never seen such a being before. There I was, on my bed, while she appeared to me in a flash of dazzling light, looking so unbelievably beautiful, more than anything else I had ever seen before. Her hair hung down to her feet which were encased in gold sandals, a black cloud about and behind her. I wanted her more than I ever wanted another woman. She congratulated me on the birth of my daughter, and then she had sex with me. It was better than anything I had ever had before, and then she spoke to me for some time and then vanished from my room.

When I told the Brotherhood what had happened, they began to respect me more because the goddess almost *never* appears to any of her

followers. Our Dibia told me that even he had never seen her physically, that I must be really special to her. My spiritual powers grew to unbelievable proportions, and I could do anything; I could turn into any animal I wanted to be; I could see anything that was happening anywhere and with anybody at any point in time; I could cause thunderstorms and send down the rain from the skies; I could kill by merely wishing you dead... I was loaded with power.

I initiated many people into the Brotherhood, young men that were in need of money and power. It was so easy. It was easy to get these men to become part of us, or at least to be seduced by us. Nigeria is a poverty-striken country and everyone wants to make it at all costs. We lavished money on these men; we showed them a taste of what it would mean to be super rich. They just had to join. And now, the goddess asked for the blood of my daughter. I never thought it would happen; I had thought that since they had tried to get my wife and had failed to do so, that they would forget about my wife and her own, meaning, our daughter.

I begged her to allow me bring her the blood of as many people as she wanted, but she told me plainly—she appeared before me once again—that she would settle for nothing less than Bianca. And if I fail to do her bidding, then there would be dire consequences. I have seen what she has done to some members of the Brotherhood that had defied her wishes; they were destroyed totally.

'So, I had to tow the line. I wept for days, but I knew that there was no other option.'

"There is *always* an option,' Reverend Ikechukwu said, his voice ringing out clearly like bells, and the people began to scream and to clap for him, calling out praises and singing hymns. Then he raised his hand again,

and a big hush descended on the crowd once again.

Fidelia felt drained of all strength. She wanted nothing more than to sit down somewhere, to rest her head somewhere and be done with it all. But she remained standing.

'I have always been very close to my daughter,' Nick continued, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he remembered the past times. It was as if he was talking to himself now, remembering the past in the wall of memories and reeling them off to his own self, not to an audience. It was very easy for me to tell her what I wanted and to get her away from her school. Tonight was the night we had planned to kill her, and everything I had told my wife about making efforts to find Bianca was all a hoax. I knew where the girl was all along. She was to die tonight at the stroke of midnight; we were to bury her alive, all to the glory of Karoshiuka, our goddess. My daughter was to have been the ultimate sacrifice I had to give for the wealth I had received, and then I would have to start impregnating other women. Once they gave birth to my children, they would become blood sacrifices on their first birthday. I have already lined up four young women that would sire children for me, and they would have done it because of the money I was willing to be giving to them and their families.

Because of their need for money; to get away from poverty, they have already agreed to become the mothers of my children, thinking that I will end up marrying them. Nigerian women love money more than they love their own lives, so even if I want hundred women to be giving me the children from my seed, I would have gotten them without blinking twice. It was all worked out already. If my wife had been getting pregnant, then I would have had to be using her pregnancies to further my wealth.

'What happened as I was going with the girl to the venue, I can never tell. All of a sudden, I saw my wife, and she looked as if there were other persons dressed in white with her; that she was not alone. And then I can't remember all what happened again, except that I suddenly had my eyes wiped and here I was, with all these people looking at me. I knew then that the game was up. A voice told me that it was over.'

'The Lord arrested you,' the Reverend said.

Fidelia turned around and stumbled from the church, heading for the Fathers' Quarters, her tears blinding her. She was dimly aware of people touching her and clapping her shoulders, many of them telling her that she was strong, others calling out words of encouragement to her. It was all over now, she thought. Her daughter was with her now, safe and sound, without injuries; she had not even lost her life.

### But at what cost? At what price?

And, how had she been living with a blood murderer and had absolutely no idea of it? How could her husband have been so evil? How could she have been living with a terrible monster all these years and have no inkling about it? Not even a whisper. Not even a thought.

She thought of all the money she had been spending, of how she had access to everything she needed that money could buy— all she ever had to do was to tell her husband what she wanted, and it was hers. He loved to spoil her rotten. Yeah, she made her own money and was an 'independent woman', but still, Nick loved spoiling her with money and staggeringly expensive jewellery. He loved changing her cars for her even when she complained that she didn't need the latest and most beautiful car. Oh, she had thought that the man loved her. How stupid could she have

been? How clueless?

And it had all come at *that* price: ritual deaths so the money could be flowing and their status could be maintained.

Oh God.

Fidelia could never forget what had happened to her daughter, neither could she get it off her mind that her husband was a ritualist, one of those men that engaged in blood money rituals, and that he had tried over the years to kill her without success. You live with a man that has been trying to kill you. You live with your own worst enemy. Way to go, Fidelia. Way to go.

For now, she had to be on her own. She had to get away from Nick, she had to think long and hard about her life. She also had to get her daughter away from him. He had tried to kill Bianca, and had he not been discovered, Bianca would have been dead by now. She now knew her husband's deepest, deadliest secret, and she understood what happened to people who became privy to information they were never meant to know.

#### THE END

# **Author's Note**

We all seem to hear stories about men that do 'blood money'. Everyone knows at least of that one man everyone is wary of in the street or in the village. When we come across such men of immense wealth and economic power, are we tempted to ask if the stories about them are true? And, in the case of us creative writers, the whirring stories about these men make our imagination run wild with churning thoughts; to put at least one of these stories down for our readers' consumption.

In my own case I heard a story from my younger sister sometime in 2015. I had just returned from Abakaliki and she'd regaled me with this chilling tale of a man who had been looking for his daughter, whereas he was the one that had hidden her away from his wife; she was his sacrifice. She'd picked up the story from a crusade, and she had mentioned names. I have a fantastic memory and recall events in shocking, minute details, so this story *Rituals* was born. *Rituals* is my retelling of that story my sister had told me; I penned it down immediately after she told me that story, and now, I present it to you, dear reader. Make of it what you will, but note that the names and places mentioned within—except for one or two real-life locations—are all fictional.

I thank you all for reading-my work will be incomplete without you.

Thank you for your kindness and support.

Please take the little time to head over to this story's Goodreads page here for a review and a rating. It will be appreciated.

And always, I would love to hear from you. Reach me on <a href="mailto:adrianbanks2008@gmail.com">adrianbanks2008@gmail.com</a> or follow my blog on <a href="mailto:adrianbanksbooks.wordpress.com">adrianbanksbooks.wordpress.com</a>

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# **PROLOGUE**

There are times when, upon the occurrence of a certain event, time itself will seem to stand still; it would seem to be suspended above the specter of space. That is the feeling I have in the pit of my stomach at that moment when I watched the life leave the body of a man, when the life seemed to seep from him. It was a big moment and I thought: Oh my God, Phoenix what have you done?

And there was the guy himself, standing still and erect, and he looked beautiful; in the flash of the night lights the guy was a stunning beauty, and the Angel of death itself. In the stillness of the night Phoenix seemed to be the very embodiment of the things that was scary about the night. He was a murderer, one without a soul, and he had killed someone who loved him dearly. It was a man who had loved him enough to think to die for him. But the society would not have understood that kind of love, that love which existed between two men, one that may be pure and yet misunderstood in every way.

Phoenix, you are a murderer. I know what you did, and I think I will tell on you. But from the look on that stunning face which had been calculating enough to take the life of another person, there seemed to be nothing that the guy could not handle, no scandal he could not take and then turn to his own advantage and popularity, the love of the screens, the siren that drew all in and left nothing of you when he was done with you.

It takes a special kind of person to think to take the life of another

person, and Phoenix was that kind of special person. He had the guts and the special kind of mercilessness to do it, and there was that look in his face, that cold dead look of triumph in his face that showed that the guy knew what he was doing. And what if he was caught? What would happen?

'He was trying to forcefully have sex with me, and that was the reason why I had to defend myself,' he would probably say to the screens as the throng of the masses that loved him and yet hated him would weave a massive demonstration in his favor.

But I know what you did, Phoenix, and though you may hide behind the mask of your beauty and your good show of yourself to the world, I know you, I know what you did.

Available at all your favorite retailers.

# **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kingsley Adrian Banks is a Nigerian-born novelist. *Behind Closed Doors* is his first novel. It is followed by the books in the *Women of Eternity* Saga: *Entangled, Forbidden Woman* and *Sirens*. He has also written standalone titles, hundreds of short stories and long novellas, and an urban fantasy novel.

To get exclusive access to his full body of fictional work and learn of his new releases, follow his Amazon Central Author Page <a href="here">here</a> or subscribe to his blog <a href="here">here</a>

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