



RITUALS

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YOUR WORST ENEMY IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK.

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

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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 foreboding 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 appointments 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 lavender 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 hadn'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 was bursting with worshippers. Its domed roof soared three stories high, and from it hung very long poles on which were suspended fans

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