

# GASLIGHT

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## GENESIS

*Let them come for him during Sunday service.*

*They should wait for him to walk to the altar. Let him check that the cameras are placed as he directed during rehearsals. Give him time to mumble some gibberish as prayers. Some in the congregation will swoon and the ushers will rush to break their falls. This is not the right moment.*

*A lot is at stake. Arresting Bishop Jeremiah Dawodu during his televised sermon is no joke. Timing and sequence are critical, so please follow the steps as we agreed.*

*Start with my disappearance. He would have told everyone I travelled to be by myself. Let the police know this is a lie to cover why calls to my mobile phone are going to voicemail. If they wave this away as insignificant, point them to the driver who never picked me up and my car still parked in the garage. They might claim I've not been missing long enough to suspect foul play. It's okay. Make sure they get to the house. Leave the rest to me.*

*At the Sunday service, let him urge the congregation to sit. Wait for him to welcome the viewers at home and ask everyone to turn their Bibles to the passage he's chosen to misread. The more confident he is that he's the centre of attention – The Anointed One – the better.*

*He will hide his outrage when they come. His bodyguards will come forward, ready to defend their man of God. The elders will protest. One or two will pull the police aside and*

*offer them something. Let this be. The point would have been made. The unholy hand of suspicion is upon their bishop.*

*If they take him away, I hope it's in handcuffs. This should humble him. He won't be able to wave with false calm, urging his church to pray for him. No raised fists, proclaiming the devil a liar. If you can't make this happen, no pressure. From this point, a lot will be out of your hands.*

*The coming weeks will be hard to get through but don't worry. I'll be with you every step of the way. Trust me. Everything is in place. It is time.*

*Let's get to work.*

# BOOK I

*Total pressure exerted is equal to the sum of the partial pressures in a mixture.*

Dalton's Law

*The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*

John 1:5 (NIV)

## BROTHERS AND SISTERS

I can't look away from the other side of the road. That'll be us later, stuck and trapped. I dread it already.

'You can at least fake some interest?' Kenny says, petulance mixed with irritation.

I turn from the static scene of cars heading towards Lagos. 'Do I look bored?'

Kenny side-eyes me, then hisses. 'We've been in this car for almost an hour and—'

'Eighty-two minutes to be exact. But I can't complain since you've used Folake to—'

'I didn't use anyone!'

I'm still miffed she went through my wife to ask my help. 'So, why didn't you come to me directly?'

'Because I don't like how you make me feel every time church comes up.'

I raise a sardonic brow. 'Like a whimsical escapist?'

'See?' She glowers. 'That's why I went to Folake first.'

'No, Kenny Girl.' She hates Dad's pet name for her, even more than I detest his 'Kenny Boy' for me. 'You went to Folake because you know murder makes it perfectly legit for me to say "I told you so."''

‘He didn’t murder his wife,’ Kenny whispers, nodding in the direction of her driver’s clean-shaved head.

I snort but lower my voice. ‘Everyone knows.’

‘Not from me.’

I suck in air – one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three – and exhale. ‘He’s practically the most famous murder suspect on earth right now.’

‘*Suspect* is the keyword here,’ Kenny snaps.

‘How you don’t find suspecting a pastor of murder disturbing, worries me deeply.’

‘It’s the devil at work. Why would Bishop kill his wife? There’s nothing to remotely suggest she’s dead. It’s a conspiracy.’ She kisses her teeth loudly. ‘So many haters out there.’

I blink. It’s hard to reconcile this accomplished career woman in her late thirties with language at my teenage daughter’s level. My younger sister’s religious fervour confounds me. How did we get here?

‘You don’t know the world, Philip,’ Kenny continues with pity reserved for the naïve. ‘It’s firmly under the devil’s control.’

‘And this world somehow has your pastor’s wife hidden away somewhere?’

‘Bee-shop.’ She corrects. My sarcasm ranks lower than my mislabelling.

‘Whatever. His wife’s missing, and even if he’s God’s personal assistant, the spouse is always the number-one suspect.’

‘That’s why we need your—’ Kenny’s phone rings. ‘We’re still in traffic, sir,’ she says with reverence into the handset. ‘It’s not that bad, but still slow.’

It is bad. The road I’ve nicknamed ‘Highway of Evangelical Churches of Nigeria’ is chaos. The snail-paced

traffic starts just before the ‘Goodbye to Lagos’ signage and graduates to near standstill as another billboard welcomes you to Ogun state.

‘We’re moving now,’ Kenny continues. ‘The road is clearing a bit. We should be there in about half an hour—’

I scoff, taking in my surrounding with resignation. Unless we are airlifted, her optimism is doomed. The megachurches lining both sides of the road are the only sign of order. A town planner would have an apoplexy at the jumbled mass of petrol stations, retail shops, informal markets and bus stops connecting one church estate to another. There’s no method to the madness that spills onto the road, narrowing a width created for three cars to two at the best of times.

‘Ah, he feels very honoured, o. It’s no bother at all.’

My double take is pointed. Kenny ignores me. I return my attention to the road. After megachurch estates, schools are next on the road’s claim to fame. From kindergartens through high schools with boarding options to university campuses; it’s all here. Tuition fees printed in large, colourful starbursts with facilities listed as endless bullet points on massive billboards. The schools’ intimidating entrance gates seem designed to reassure prospective students of protection from the bedlam on the road. I’m not sure they succeed.

Kenny ends the call. ‘The elders are waiting.’

‘They can spend the time praying for a miracle.’

‘Don’t.’

I keep my face on the road to hide my smirk.

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Two hours and twenty-three minutes later, in a plush boardroom more befitting of a Fortune 500 company than a church, nine men and four women stare at us like we just interrupted a heated discussion on plummeting stock prices. There's more tension here than in the Pentagon's situation room during the ambush of Osama bin Laden.

'Good afternoon, sir,' Kenny says as she walks around the wide and long conference table, curtsying. I try to guess the elders' rankings by how low she dips before each one. The greeting goes on until Kenny gets to the man closest to an empty leather chair at the head of the table. Early- to mid-fifties. He'd be good looking without the scowl. Dark-skinned, clean-shaven. The sprinkling of grey on his hair and the way he clasps his hands together gives him a stern headmaster aura. Kenny's knees touch the ground. The resident Deputy Jesus, I bet.

'Is this him?' His voice booms. A man used to addressing large crowds. 'The psychologist?'

'Yes, sir.' Kenny looks at me, and my heart warms at the affection beaming from her. 'This is my brother, Dr Philip Kehinde Taiwo. He's an investigative psychologist,' she announces.

I wave, as uncomfortable with the pride in her voice as the full rendition of my name and profession. Kenny moves to the woman next to Deputy Jesus. She makes to kneel, but the older woman stops her, pulling Kenny into an embrace.

'I was just telling them they shouldn't have bothered you,' the woman says, her eyes on me.

'Ah, auntie, not bother me, ke? How can I not be bothered when the devil is not resting?' Kenny looks at me as she puts her arms around the woman's shoulders. 'Phil, this is Bishop's mother-in-law, Mrs Kikelomo Bucknor.'

I try to hide my surprise. Having the mother of the possible victim here throws me. I'll have to proceed with more sensitivity than the unbridled candour I'd planned.

Mrs Bucknor gives me the once-over. I can't read her beyond her weary demeanour. Her face is bare of discernible make-up, and apart from the tiredness around her eyes, her light skin glows with health. She wears an ìró and bùbá that would have looked ostentatious if not for the simple knot of the matching gèlè on her head. No jewellery. No wedding band. Affluence oozes from her like it's the only adornment she needs.

'So, you're also a twin,' a female elder says, as though doubting Kenny's assertion.

'Yes, ma,' I respond stiffly. Hard to be gracious with thirteen pairs of eyes trained on you.

Mrs Bucknor turns to Kenny. 'Two sets of twins in one family. What a blessing!'

While I doubt my mum would agree, I find the way Mrs Bucknor spoke curious. Her tone was flat, without the wonder I've come to expect whenever my family tree comes up. Then again, the woman's son-in-law is being accused of murdering her daughter. Not quite a hurrah moment.

'Please have a seat,' Deputy Jesus orders me.

I comply and find myself opposite him.

'My name is Pastor Abayomi George. I'm the assistant general overseer of Grace Ministries.'

I was right. Second-in-command.

'Let me introduce the elders,' – He gestures at Mrs Bucknor – 'as Sister Kenny said, this is our First Lady's mother, Mrs Bucknor ...'

Decades of sibling coding goes into the look I give Kenny across the room: *You go to a church where the pastor's wife is called 'First Lady'?* She narrows her eyes in a reprimand that eerily reminds me of our mum. I turn back to Pastor George.

'Next to her is Pastor Richard Nwoko. He heads our finance ...'

To preserve my sanity, I decide to save remembering the names and titles for when – *if* – I take the case. I scan the room as the introductions drone on. None below middle age. The female elders have donned African print attires, reflecting good taste and skilled tailors. The men look dapper in three-piece suits and ties. How they are not uncomfortable is beyond me. Despite the cooling effect of the air-conditioning, the strain in the room makes me feel like unbuttoning my cotton shirt.

'Our leadership is made up of a lot more people, with several heads of departments across the globe. But due to the delicate nature of this assignment, we thought it prudent to keep things, er, discreet for now.' Pastor George looks around as if to confirm he has delivered his speech as agreed.

All, except Mrs Bucknor, nod. The rest look like kids in detention; defensive and ready to flee rather than go through what's to come.

To ease the tension, I put on my most genial smile and lie. 'I'm honoured to be here. How can I be of service?'

## FIRST LADY

‘Dr Taiwo, I’m sure you’re aware of our current situation,’ Pastor George begins. ‘Our general overseer was arrested yesterday on suspicion of involvement in his wife’s disappearance.’ He pauses, looks around as if to confirm his summation is accurate. The elders nod with varying depths of sighs.

‘This is a matter of great concern to us as the church leadership. As much as we’re concerned for our First Lady’s safety—’

Mrs Bucknor raises a hand. ‘I still think this is unnecessary.’ She turns to Kenny on her left. ‘She’ll be back any day now, and the police will be sorry.’

Before Kenny can speak, Pastor George touches Mrs Bucknor’s right shoulder gently. ‘We discussed this and you agreed.’

Mrs Bucknor doesn’t look at Pastor George but her eyes flit from Kenny to me. Is that a plea in her eyes? Or a challenge?

‘It just seems like a waste of time when we all know the truth.’ Mrs Bucknor leans closer to Kenny, as if to apologise for all the trouble of bringing me. Why do I sense she doesn’t want me here?

‘And the truth being...?’ I ask in Pastor George’s direction.

‘We all understand how the pressure of being the general overseer’s wife can take its toll,’ he says. ‘Our First Lady takes time off to be by herself several times a year. We’ve never worried. We just give her space.’

‘You mean it’s possible she’s away somewhere with no TV, no phone or internet, and no access to any media channel broadcasting her husband’s arrest?’

I tried not to sound sarcastic, but the way Pastor George’s scowl becomes even more intimidating proves I failed.

‘We know how this must sound to an outsider but First Lady is known for taking these retreats. Ask anyone.’ Pastor George looks around again. Bobbing heads urge him on. ‘We all assume she discusses her whereabouts with Bishop before leaving, but no one has ever questioned her decision to take these leaves of absence when it suits her.’ The knots on his brow smoothen as he speaks; his face becomes as neutral as his tone. I don’t think he likes their first lady.

‘You assumed she told her husband but she hadn’t? So, he doesn’t know where she went?’ I look around the room.

‘He doesn’t,’ Pastor Nwoko says, louder than necessary. The elders murmur their agreement. ‘The police swooped on our church, committed this blasphemous act, and we have no way of proving First Lady is somewhere recuperating, and will soon be home.’

‘So, the pastor admits he doesn’t know where his wife is?’ I ask again, my gaze settling on Pastor George.

‘Bishop,’ he corrects and continues smoothly, ‘and no, he doesn’t. He said she left home after he came here to the church office but that they did discuss her going away.’

‘The bishop was away from home for how many days?’

‘We had a special programme. Seven days of fasting and praying,’ Pastor Nwoko says, defensive, as if my enquiry came with judgement. ‘Bishop has been known to be in the cathedral for days on end, waiting on the Lord for a prophetic word—’

‘And you can all vouch that in the days leading to his arrest,’ I pause to look around the room, ‘the bishop never went home?’

Absolutely,’ Pastor Nwoko says loudly, above everyone’s affirmation.

‘Without doubt,’ Mrs Bucknor adds less robustly.

‘It’s true,’ Kenny says. ‘When work permitted, I also attended the programme. Bishop never left Graceland.’

‘Your first lady was absent during such an important programme?’ I ask the room. ‘And no one thought that was strange?’

The elders look at each other like actors figuring out who has the next cue.

Pastor Nwoko eventually shakes his head like the reluctant bearer of unpalatable news. ‘Our First Lady is young and quite impulsive.’

Mrs Bucknor throws him a look that could freeze boiling water.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says insincerely. ‘But, if we want Dr Taiwo to help us, we must say things as they are, not how we wish them to be.’ He turns to me. ‘Our First Lady is a lovely woman, but she’s recently become prone to youthful exuberance and unpredictable moodiness. We forgive this on account of her age.’

I steal a glance at Mrs Bucknor, but she’s arranged her face into a blank slate.

‘How old is the first lady?’ I ask.

‘She’ll be thirty in two months,’ one of the three female elders answers, eager to ease the awkwardness in the air. ‘I’m the one organising the women’s conference in honour of her birthday.’

Thirty is not young but I concede it might be for the ‘first lady’ of a megachurch. It’s hard to picture these elders kowtowing to a woman at least two decades younger than the average age in the room.

‘And the bishop?’ I can’t seem to drop the article before the man’s title, just as the elders can’t stop using his title as his first name. Their reverence is obvious, even in the way they now stare at me. Like they’ve never considered their leader had something as human as a birth date.

‘Fifty-two,’ Kenny says from across the room, her hand back on Mrs Bucknor’s shoulders, squeezing in support.

‘Is it his first marriage?’

‘Of course,’ Pastor Nwoko answers, his irritation evident. ‘He was focused on his ministry while waiting on the Lord for the right helpmeet.’

The man’s zeal is tedious. I write quickly to mask my impatience. ‘Children?’

No response. I look up from my notepad.

‘Bishop and his wife are still waiting on the Lord for the fruit of the womb,’ Pastor George answers sombrely.

‘And they’ve been married for what?’

‘Five years and a couple of months,’ Kenny answers gently since everyone’s focused on Mrs Bucknor’s impassive face.

I read from my notes. ‘So, the bishop’s wife goes missing—’

‘Her name is Sade. *Fo-la-sa-de*,’ Mrs Bucknor says sharply.

‘And she’s not missing—’ Pastor Nwoko throws in.

‘For lack of a better word,’ I say to the man, while giving Mrs Bucknor an apologetic look. I’d also hate it if my child’s existence was reduced to her marital status. To deflect from my shame, I focus on Pastor Nwoko. ‘We don’t know her whereabouts, which technically means she’s missing.’ I go back to reading off my notepad. ‘The first lady goes missing for three days, and her husband, who’s not been home for those days can’t say where she is. You all say this is normal, yet yesterday – making a total of five days since she was last seen – the police arrested the bishop on suspicion of murder?’

There’s silence, until Pastor Nwoko says with uncharacteristic solemnity, ‘That would be a credible summary of the current situation.’

‘What about kidnap?’ I broach tentatively. ‘Perhaps she’s—’

Pastor George shakes his head. ‘We explored the possibility. But no demand for ransom has been made as of now.’

‘So, why can’t you all, A, wait for your first lady to appear and all this will be cleared up, or B, send out a search party while trying to convince the police no foul play has occurred? Option B is especially easy with a good lawyer.’

Mrs Bucknor lets her guard down enough to give me a grateful look. ‘Is that not what I’ve been saying?’

I guessed right. She doesn’t want me here.

‘It’s not that simple, Dr Taiwo,’ Pastor Nwoko says. ‘Given the public nature of Bishop’s arrest, we need to show the congregation that due diligence is being done. We need answers. We need to know who reported First Lady as missing, or worse, killed. The police claim it was an anonymous tip-off.’ He hisses with a downward curve of his lips,



leaving no doubt as to his unchristianly impression of law enforcement and whoever tipped them off.

I frown. ‘You don’t think it’s an anonymous tip?’

‘No, we don’t,’ Kenny says with a reassuring smile at Mrs Bucknor. It’s strange she can’t sense the woman’s ambivalence about my presence. But then, my sister is like that. Loyal without reservation. Supportive without questioning.

‘Enemies are at work,’ Pastor Nwoko adds, but he’s looking around as if the culprit is in the room. ‘Those who will do anything to bring the man of God down. We want to know who they are and what they must have told the police. Our God will punish them.’

Murmurs of ‘amen’ and ‘in Jesus’ name’ ripple across the room. The irony of hiring someone to look for culprits to deliver to a forgiving God for punishment appears lost on them. I write in my notepad, more for dramatic impact while waiting for their loud piety to fizzle out.

When the room quietens, I glance at Mrs Bucknor. ‘I’m sorry, ma, but I’ve got to ask. What if the police are right?’

‘Phil!’ Kenny exclaims into the gasps around the table.

My eyes stay on Mrs Bucknor, and I keep my voice gentle. ‘For me to look into the matter, I’ve got to consider what the police know, and why they made the arrest. And if they believe the first lady is, er, well—’

‘Nothing has happened to my daughter.’ Mrs Bucknor’s gaze is unwavering, her tone clipped.

The elders agree with more amens and sprinklings of ‘the devil is a liar’. Their expressions dare me to contradict them.

I can’t back off. ‘The police must have something that points to foul play. If that’s the case—’

‘But who would want First Lady dead?’ Pastor Nwoko cuts in loudly. Mrs Bucknor flinches, and Kenny pulls her closer. There’s rebuke in the way the other elders stare at Pastor Nwoko, who looks now to Pastor George for support.

‘If we consider that possibility,’ Pastor George says, ‘then I’m afraid we have to ask who would want Bishop framed for such a crime.’

*If* he’s being framed. I don’t say this out loud, but the way Deputy Jesus is looking at me, I suspect he’s thinking the same thing.