

More than Conquerors!

*From Struggles to Forgiveness
From Forgiveness to Blessings*

By
Claudine McDaniel

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:37-39 (NKJV)

DEDICATION

To my mother, my children and to everyone who knows that God exists and who doesn't rely on his/her own understanding and strength.

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A percentage of the revenue from this book will be used to help people in developing counties.

ISBN-13: 978-1977989925

ISBN-10: 1977989926

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Acknowledgements

My first acknowledgment is to God for bringing the right people into my life to make it possible for me to write this book.

Special thanks to my two lovely daughters, Grace and Edouarda Viagbo, for their unfailing support throughout the writing process.

Thanks to Funa Nhonda who called me a "writer," a word that inspired me and kept me at it so that today I really am a "writer," having published my first book. I am also grateful to Funa for working with me on the project.

A very big "Thank You" to Bob Waters for reading my book.

Thanks also to Claire Raskob for taking time to edit my book and to give me so many helpful suggestions.

I also appreciate the support of Victoria Mitchell who read the book and provided very useful feedback.

And thanks to Richard Smith who helped during the publishing process.

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Introduction

I was born on July 7th in Lomé, the capital of Togo, and given the name Adjovi Doudou Ayigah. Togo is a small country, but don't let that mislead you. Togo is often described as the land of small miracles because of its lush terrain and diverse peoples. There are 37 tribal ethnic groups; the largest and most influential of which are Ewe, Mina, and Kabye. French is the official language. My mother's people are from Benin and, my father is from a royal family in Togo. Unfortunately, at times, ethnicity is an issue within my country. Arranged marriages still prevail, however, my parents both opposed the idea of an arranged marriage. They both wanted to find love on their own terms. As a result, they found each other.

I am the first child of my mother, Marie, a seamstress and the fourth child of my father, Joseph, an accountant. My parents were hard working and lovingly devoted to each other.

I spent the first two years of my life with my parents in a small one-bedroom apartment in

Lomé. Lomé is close to the Atlantic Ocean, and it is near the biggest open-air international market in the country.

When I was three, we moved into a two-bedroom apartment. When I was ten, we moved again to Agoe, Togo. Agoe is a small, sparsely populated village that is surrounded by beautiful vegetation.

The people of Agoe warmly welcomed us. They shared their food and were helpful in many other ways. While I was growing up there, we would freely enter our neighbors' homes to play, and pleasantly, there were also times when we shared meals. Their homes were our homes, and our home was theirs. Our community was such that all the parents knew each other and we all lived harmoniously. Parents worked together to teach us children the essential values of love, honesty, and integrity. Any parent could discipline any child; it was as if we had many mothers and fathers in the community. My twelve years growing up in Agoe were years of both happiness and sadness. I have many wonderful memories of those days, some of which I will share within the pages of this book.

My parents attended "*Christianist Celest*" church where my first years of faith started. When I was 13, I began attending bible studies at my school. We met Wednesday and Friday afternoons. On Sunday, I went to a church called "*Christ est la Reponse*" (Christ is the answer in

English) along with my fellow classmates from the bible study. During this time, I became "grounded in Jesus." They taught me how to live a Godly life, how to exercise my faith, how to pray, and more. Later, I joined a group of prayer warriors. We prayed for our problems, we prayed for each other's needs, we prayed for our future, we prayed about everything. In time, I became a worship leader. My experience with this group gave me a strong foundation, and I learned biblical principles that have helped me in every season of my life, whether good or bad.

At the age of 22, I was hired at *Banque Togolaise du Commerce et de industrie* as a teller, and a short time later promoted to head teller. The following year, I moved in with my mother and siblings to a house in an isolated town about ten miles from my father's home. A few months after that, I was married and moved in together with my husband in the city.

My next move was a consequential one. Three years later I decided to move to the United States. I was 28, the mother of two little girls, and disillusioned with life, love, and marriage when I took a leap of faith and migrated here with only 13 dollars.

To say the least, when I arrived in the United States, I was in a total cultural shock. Everything was different— a different language, different dress styles, diverse cuisine, and at times it seemed like there was nothing familiar

to hold on to.

I faced many cultural differences in the United States, but the most challenging was the language barrier. In Togo, I spoke three and a half languages: Ewe, Mina, French, and a little bit of Fon, none of which was of any use to me in America. As a result, I could not do even the simplest things like shopping, getting to know people, and having meaningful conversations. I felt like a baby learning to speak for the first time.

Faced with the reality of a language barrier, I decided to go to school to learn English. Once I started attending school, I did not stop until I had graduated from the University of Maryland with a Bachelor's degree.

Several months after arriving in the United States, my Togolese marriage was annulled. So, technically that union never happened. Then, in two years, I met and married a very caring and good man. He, my two beautiful daughters, and the Lord have been my support in everything I have done since we have become a family.

Today, I continue to live by the Christian principles I learned growing up in Togo. I live for, and trust in Jesus. He has guided me steadfastly through many struggles, including the greatest struggle of all, learning to forgive.

For the last several years, I have had a desire to help women with similar stories like

myself – women who are willing to work hard in order to make a difference for themselves and their children. I look at my own experience –how I was able to overcome challenges in the United States, and I how I am now able to live a better life than I might ever have known in Togo. But I keep thinking about the thousands of women who have not had my opportunities –the single women and mothers who have nowhere to go, no jobs, and no way to take care of themselves and their children.

As I considered their plights and my own, I thought that perhaps I might write about my life experiences as a way of encouraging others to dream big and to put forth the effort to live the kind of lives they want to live.

The following pages contain the story of my experiences, my background, my family, and my culture. I hope that through it all, my gratitude shines forth and that from my simple words, others will take courage and nurture the vision of attaining the things they desire. The message of this book is to never give up on your dreams; believe and keep on believing, and do the best you can every day. If you keep pressing forward one day at a time, sooner or later you will reach your goals. You can rise above any difficulties or obstacles that are trying to keep you from reaching your goals and your destiny.

I'd like to add a personal note. English is not my first, second, or even my third language,

and I recognize that I speak with an accent and need to improve. I still think and dream in my native languages while trying to express myself in English. This affects the way I select my words and express my thoughts across, but I don't want that to keep me from telling you of my adventures in life in the pages of this book, and writing it for you in English. Enjoy it!

Chapter One

My Family Background and an Arranged Marriage

When I was growing up, my mother used to do my hair on Sunday evenings to get me ready for school the next day. We had fun singing and talking every time she was doing my hair in our living room. That was the time she would tell me stories about my grandfather, my father, my culture, and many other stories. She repeatedly told me the story about my family background to the point where I knew it by heart. Now I'm not only sharing my family background with my two daughters, but I'm also sharing it with you.

My grandfather, Komlan, was a king; but growing up, he loved to make and repair wooden objects. At the age of 16, he opened his own carpentry shop. He also loved to hunt. People

loved him because he was talented, creative, confident, and he was focused. They also loved him because he valued integrity and honesty.

He got married and became the king at the age of 21. At 22, he and his wife Esse had my father, Joseph.

My father also became a carpenter and worked in my grandfather's shop. Even though he worked as a carpenter, his desire was to become an accountant. To fulfill this dream, he began taking accounting classes. In time, my father completed the requisite classes and graduated. He was delighted and began to pursue his dream by finding work in his new profession. The accounting job he found allowed him to continue working with his father on a part-time basis.

Traditional systems of social organization are significant in the daily lives of the people in Togo. After my father graduated, my grandfather followed the traditional dictates and found a spouse for my father to marry. It was an arranged marriage. Both families planned and agreed to the union of their son and their daughter without thinking about what their children may have really wanted.

When my father asked his father why he could not choose his own wife, my grandfather replied, "You know that I love you and you know how important it is for your mother and I to maintain our tradition and customs. You are the

next generation, and we want to make sure you carry on the tradition. In fact, you will be the next king; and as the next king your mother and I want to make sure you have the right queen, one who will help you sustain the kingdom."

My grandfather went on, "It's crucial to me that we continue the good reputation of the family. The way people see us is very important, and I want everyone to have an excellent opinion of the family and the kingdom. Soon, it will be your turn to build on our family's foundation and reputation."

He also pointed out that my father should keep the family's prosperity growing and said to my father, "Your bride is talented and knowledgeable about the kingdom. She can reign alongside the throne with you." He continued, "Believe me son, she is lovely, tall, slim and is close to your age. She has an expressive smile and the curves that any handsome man like you would desire to have. She is the perfect match for you, son. Trust me. *Elle est belle*. She is beautiful."

He also said, "I want the best for you, but don't forget, 'father knows best.'" I do not share my grandfather's worldview, but I understand part of his intentions. I do not know any parent that does not want the best for their child. So, I can say that my grandfather was a good person with the right intentions carried out in the wrong way, rather than a villain who was hated

by his son.

Cultural cohesion was quite important to my grandfather. Since Cecile, my grandfather's choice of a wife for my father, was basically from the same ethnic people as my father she was aware of all the cultural norms and how day-to-day aspects of life were addressed. "Nothing will be a surprise for Cecile," my grandfather emphasized. Cecile had the same background as my father. She grew up eating the same food, following the same fundamental beliefs and attending the same ceremonial events.

In my culture, the wedding has two phases. The first phase is a ceremony that allows them to become engaged. It takes place early in the morning on a date agreed upon by both families. The groom-to-be and a few members of his family travel to the prospective bride's parents' home and ask for her hand in marriage. They bring liquor, soft drinks, and a few other items. My father, his parents, and a few members of the family did so just as the tradition required. After this initial process with its very joyful festivities and the formal agreements have been made, the couple becomes betrothed, and the wedding date is set.

During the second phase, the parents, uncles, and aunts speak. The bride's family communicates to the groom's family about how important and precious their daughter is to them and their firm desire that she is taken good care

of. My father's family was a very large family. It included my grandfather, fifteen uncles, ten aunts, and a few other members of the extended family. Each one of them spoke. Whenever my mother told me this story, I interrupted her at this point and said, "What? I cannot believe each one of my father's relatives spoke that day. I could imagine each one of them going on and on about the same subject and never ending their thoughts. It must have been very boring." My mother replied, "I see your point. You are now a teenager and things like that sound boring to you. But, I know you would like the food and the dancing part. That's the part that interests teenagers the most."

After the dowry was paid, the young bride Cecile was allowed to come out of her hiding place and meet her husband-to-be. Her bridal dress was ornately adorned in the Togolese traditional style with a very beautiful cream-colored lace and an elegant short oval trail that followed her.

When the guests saw the stunning bride on her processional walk, they clapped, screamed, and danced for joy as the drums, shakers, and rattlers played. After the bride's appearance, my grandfather made an announcement and presented the bride to the crowd followed by a brief speech.

A few other people from both sides of the family gave brief speeches, which the wedding

guests enthusiastically applauded. The wedding ceremony ended with a big reception. Everyone ate and drank as much as they could. As the wedding day ended, the couple, Joseph and Cecile, headed to their home to embark on the "happily everlasting."

After the wedding, it was now time for my father and his bride to become acquainted with each other since they really did not meet before the marriage, and since the arrangement was made by third parties. The process of being together, loving, and learning about each other's interests and desires was rather daunting. Now both the bride and the groom needed to try to find out how to talk to each other, and how to nourish each other's needs. More importantly, they needed to work in harmony for the sake of the kingdom and somehow fulfill my grandfather's dream for the kingdom.

A few days after their wedding, my father discovered that there were some attributes to his wife that were overlooked during the nuptials. He was discouraged because Cecile was illiterate. Illiteracy had been declining since Togo's independence in 1960. However, having it so close to home was disconcerting. He also discovered she was ill-tempered and easily angered. Apparently, my father did not like the kind of wife that was chosen for him because his desire was to have an educated wife. My father told Cecile about his concerns, especially her

illiteracy.

He wanted his wife to be educated so she could help him better serve the people in the kingdom as well as the community. He wanted his wife to be educated so she could be a source of inspiration to other women of the community. Also, my father wanted his wife to be educated so she could help promote health and hygiene in the community. He wanted his wife to be in a position to educate other women so that they could live a better life.

Joseph and Cecile talked about how to resolve this issue and the decision was made to hire a private teacher who would teach her all she needed to know as queen. However, it soon became evident that she was more interested in cultivating the earth for farming and being a regular household wife. The concentration required for studying began to gradually wane. Over time, her lack of interest in education progressively took hold. The teacher she hired stopped coming because other commitments arose and it negatively impacted his time to teach.

To resolve her seemingly ongoing anger problem, my father forged a deeper emotional bond by attentively being close to her. My father cooked with her, took her shopping, and even made special getaway trips with her. Also, my father had committed to being very patient with her, hoping that she would change and become

the happy wife he had always wanted. Sure enough, his wish came to be a reality for a while.

Initially, Cecile tried to satisfy his wishes in earnest. She knew that, culturally, it was very important for the wife to respect her man, so she tried her very best to do so. Basically, she respected his choices and acknowledged his decisions. For example, she glowingly praised him every time he came back from hunting for the household needs, but what about the times when the husband came home empty handed?

She still found a way to praise him and encourage him by saying that he would be able to make a better shot next time. Hunting was one of my father's hobbies.

A few months into their marriage, my father did not feel as respected as before. Now, when he came home without being successful, Cecile would belittle and continually say very disrespectful, unkind words to him. There was no fun in hunting anymore. Cecile's complaining took the enjoyment out of what Joseph liked to do for fun.

When she stopped pursuing her education and decided to solely concentrate on being a housewife, Joseph was very discouraged and became distant. He slowly stopped treating her like a queen. He stopped appreciating her. Words that were once said with ease about her beauty and importance gave way to disappointment and silence.

Cecile noticed the change in my father Joseph. She was concerned and complained to my grandfather who tried to the best of his ability to solve the problem. The problem remained unsolved, and the situation began spinning out of control. Joseph would not listen to his father. He blamed him for his unhappiness. He expressed his regret about getting married to someone he did not really love, someone he wouldn't have wanted to marry in the first place.

My grandfather in turn got very angry and told my father he had to make that marriage work for the sake of their kingdom. He harangued vigorously and told my father that if he opposed him or did not comply with his wishes, my father would not become the next king. In other words, he would take the kingdom away from him. Stubbornly, my father resisted and did not obey his father. He went out to find a love of his own.

Before I tell you what comes next, let me describe the kingdom. It was composed of numerous compounds of extended families within the community or the city of Bê-Amoutieve (the city most affected by political activities). My grandfather's compound was the largest. It extended on acres of land. It was walled and composed of a group of isolated rooms, one-bedrooms and two-bedrooms. There were also small buildings of two levels. Each one

of them was opened into the courtyard. It solely belongs to the king's family and his hundreds of close relatives (brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and their children). They all lived there. A long time ago, the compound was first built of clay, but as the years passed, it was slowly and progressively transformed and modified into cement. Eventually, my grandfather passed away and the throne was transferred to someone else since my father had renounced the throne.

Every time mother got to this part of the story I asked her, "So, my father renounced all the fame, all the power, all the land, all the riches, and more, to look for love? Love must be a very good, valuable, and powerful thing." "Yes, love is a strange thing my daughter," said my mother. Then I eagerly asked, "Can you please tell me the rest of the story?" She replied, "Yes, but when you turn fourteen."

Up until I was thirteen, my mother had stopped here. At fourteen, she told me the rest of the story on different occasions. The next chapter will tell you what happened next.

Chapter Two

My Father's Search for Love

My father left the kingdom and started searching. He was looking for true love...for someone he would love with all his heart and the person who would also love him the same. He looked for someone who would respect him, someone who would lift him up, and someone who would consistently value his knowledge, opinions, decisions, and wishes. He was looking for someone who would love him and accept him for who he was. He was looking for someone honest, someone he could open up to.

Soon my father met a young lady who was a businesswoman and an apprentice seamstress who also sold all kinds of goods at the main intersection of the capital of Togo, Lomé. She worked at her sewing job during the day and sold her goods. This woman, Marie, was to become my mother.

My father quickly fell in love with Marie. Every evening, he would go to Marie's business

place and help her sell the fruits, vegetables, cookies, etc. At the end of the day, my father would help my mother put everything away and give her a ride home.

My mother was originally from Bohicon, one of the big cities in Benin. Benin is a country which borders on the east of Togo. She lived in the palace because her uncle was the king. She initially spoke two languages: Fon and French. She later learned the third language, Ewe, in her new country, Togo.

My dear friend, let me briefly tell you why she moved to Togo. At about 14 years-old, my mother was appointed to marry to an older man. She rejected the whole idea and decided to run away. Since her parents supported her decision, they did not want to be left behind to suffer the consequences. Therefore, they decided to flee with their daughter Marie. They ran away together and ended up in Togo Kpalime, a village located about a hundred kilometers from Lomé. Kpalime is a beautiful village filled with mountains, waterfalls, and a lot of lands. Marie's parents settled there and cultivated all kinds of produce. Her parents were farmers, but they made sure Marie was educated. Upon graduation from middle school, she decided to become a seamstress and traveled to the capital to follow her dreams.

Marie was, and still is, very beautiful. She has a deep, rich, flawless brown skin with warm

undertones. Her brown eyes shine in a way any sunset will envy. Her long black hair falls on her shoulders and blows in the wind. She is slender and walks like a model. She dresses well and makes sure her colors coordinate. Marie is a very attractive woman, and she knows how to be a lady. She takes care of her skin by making sure that she washes and moisturizes it two times a day. Her nails are well groomed and at the right length.

She also makes sure that her hair is well kept and looks very healthy. She never lets her hair dry out or go unwashed. She is a minimalist in terms of wearing makeup. She only wears eyeliner and lipstick. She is an exquisitely beautiful lady. She values integrity and respects herself. She is also strong, confident, and wise. She speaks softly and lovingly, and she gets along well with others. Marie possesses all the qualities of beauty. She was beautiful then and after so many years, she is still beautiful.

Six months after meeting each other, my father told his family about my mother. His family became furious and firmly opposed the friendship and union of my father and mother. The reason behind their opposition was that my mother was from another country and another ethnic group. She spoke another language, and they did not really know about their traditions. She could not be the next queen.

The love Joseph, my father, had for Marie,

my mother, caused him to abdicate any claims to the throne. He left the kingdom and decided to follow his heart. In order to be able to secure a living, my father found an accounting job in a beer manufacturing company called *Brasserie du Benin*. He was paid adequately. A few months later, my father asked for my mother's hand in marriage. He could not, of course, take my mother to his parents because they did not approve of his new choice. For that reason, my father and my mother got married by the justice of the peace in court.

After the marriage, my father converted to Christianity and started going to church with my mother. My mother was the one who talked to my father about the church, and sure enough, my father liked it; and from that point on, they never missed a Sunday.

Oh! I almost forgot to tell you this. Speaking about religion, in my mother's extended royal family, they worshipped idols and had to do many sacrifices. My mother and her parent were against those practices, which had created some sort of resentment between the king and my mother's parents. When they moved to the new country, they did not have to worry about worshipping idols anymore.

I personally love and respect the fact that my father ran away from the arranged marriage tradition. My mother Marie also fled her country to avoid being forced into a marriage. It

seemed like my father and my mother were perfect for each other; they had similar backgrounds, they shared similar values, and they were both good-looking and hard-working.

Chapter Three

Marie and Joseph's Union, Cecile's Persecutions

After my father and mother were married, they rented a very simple bedroom where they lived a peaceful life. In the mornings, my father took my mother to her job. He came back to pick her up later in the afternoon, so they could both go to their business place where my mother sold her goods to the people during the rush hours.

My mother soon became pregnant and it was the happiest moment of my father's life. He treated my mother like a queen. He met almost all her needs with love and passion. My mother was very happy, as happy as she could be. She repeatedly told herself she had found the man of her dreams.

My mother had nothing to worry about until one day, a woman visited her at the place where she sold her goods. That Wednesday evening, my father went to church. He had only been gone for about 30 minutes when the woman

showed up, pregnant, and with two young children, a four-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl.

In a harsh, condescending voice, she said to my mother, "Your so-called husband already has a wife, two children and as you can see, the third one is on the way. Soon, we will have three children altogether. I just wanted to let you know." Marie was in such shock that her only response to the terrible news was to just stare at the woman. She did not say a word until the woman left. The whole scene was a total surprise to her. She never saw it coming and had a very hard time believing what she had seen and heard.

My mother quickly packed her goods and hurried home. She cried, and cried, and cried. She could not understand what was happening to her. She cried more and more. She packed her belongings and decided to leave, but for some reason, she thought about waiting for my father to come home so she could ask him about the other wife. My father finally arrived after my mother waited through for an hour which felt like forever. My sweet mother calmly asked my father, "Do you have a wife and children? A couple of hours ago, a pregnant woman and her two children showed up at my business place. She claimed to be your wife and that her kids were yours. Is that true?" My father was stunned. He could not believe what he was

hearing from my mother, but he could not deny the fact that he already had two children from the other woman and was waiting for the third one to be born. He said, "I am sorry, honey. I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid to lose you. I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

My mother was very disappointed in him for hiding such a thing and lying to her. My mother expressed her frustration and said, "If you can live a double life, who knows what else you are capable of doing? You made me fall in love with you while you knew you had a wife and children. What kind of man are you? What you have done is very cruel. You are a liar, and you chose to hurt me. You purposely hurt me. Now look at me – I'm pregnant." My mother could not understand why her husband lied to her.

My father asked for forgiveness. He let Marie know that he loved her, and she was the only one he would always love. He explained to Marie that he was married to the woman traditionally because that was what his parents wanted. His parents chose the woman and arranged for the traditional marriage. After the wedding, he realized that his wife was not educated to help him succeed.

Besides, she had a short temper and got angry over the smallest things. He continued and said that was not the life he wanted. The life he wanted was to be with Marie. He begged her

for forgiveness and also asked her not to leave him. He reminded Marie about the fact that he told her about his previous marriage before their wedding. What he didn't tell her was that he was still seeing Cecile and that he had children with her. He feared he might lose her. Consequently, he kept it a secret. At that particular moment, Marie wished she could hear more about Cecile's side of the story, but there was no way to do so. Marie could not help but wonder what her future would be like with Joseph. She realized that she had a major problem. She was with a husband whose relatives were totally against her. She was with a husband who had another wife somewhere else. She might not be respected because people around her could think she purposely stole someone else's husband. She was discouraged, devastated, and troubled. The happily-ever-after, sweet life she had dreamed of living with her husband suddenly became a nightmare. Marie became worried and unhappy with her life; however, she did not quit working hard for her and her baby's future.

A few months later, my mother gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, me. My father was very happy and gave me the name "Doudou," which means "Sweet Heart." He also gave me the name "Mondenou," which means, "You are my hope." I was named Claudine when I later got baptized. My father loved both his wife Marie, and his daughter; therefore, he did everything in his

power to provide for them and to protect them.

I, Doudou, was about three months old when my mother Marie completed her sewing classes and graduated. Soon after, she moved to another location. At her new location, she opened her own sewing class a short distance from our one-bedroom apartment, which she managed as a shop where she would sew and sell stylish clothes. The sewing class was located in a commercial area of the city. My Mother went to work every day with her little girl, and soon she was discovered by many.

Marie had customers from all over the city. Through word of mouth, many of her customers told others to buy from her. In the window of six months, my mother had more than a thousand customers and more than twenty students working for her.

This time, Joseph was not able to take her to work because his work place was in the opposite direction. Every morning, Monday through Friday, he was unable to take them. But he made sure to wake up early on Saturdays to fix his family a lovely breakfast before he dropped them off at the shop.

In no time, my mother could see a better and promising future. She felt confident about herself and started saving for both her and her daughter's future. Even though she now had enough money to buy herself a motorcycle or a car that she could drive to work, she did not do

that. Instead, she carried me on her back, had her two bags on each shoulder, and walked to work every morning. She chose to continuously live that way in order to save her money. Since she did not really know what the future held for her and her little girl, saving money was her priority.

I was a year and a half when the other "wife," Cecile, angrily showed up at my mother's shop and made another scene. At her arrival, she stood at the entrance of the shop and started screaming and crying. She said to my mother, "Marie, why do you have to take my husband away from me? Aren't there enough men for you to choose from? Why my husband? Why Joseph?" She shouted and yelled so loud that almost everyone in that populated area could hear her.

Her behavior caught the attention of many, and in no time, there was a crowd of people gathered in front of the shop. At that point, she turned to the people and said, "Marie is a very dangerous woman. She is a witch. Everyone around her should be very careful and cautious. Marie has taken my husband, and I don't even see him anymore. Marie is a gold digger. She used my husband's money to buy everything you see in this store. She even pays the rent with my husband's money." Cecile screamed and said many more disparaging things that caused people to hate my mother. She screamed, cried, and screamed and cried

again. She also jumped and even rolled on the ground asking my mother to give her husband back. "That is crazy!" I thought to myself, as my mother was telling me the story almost thirteen years later. I also thought that Cecile was indeed ill-tempered just like my father had said.

The motive behind Cecile's actions was to embarrass my mother and to ruin her reputation in the community. In my culture, people get particularly annoyed and irritated when they hear someone has taken someone else's husband.

Also, they get very anxious and quite apprehensive when they hear that someone is a witch. Those two phrases Cecile used were enough to destroy my mother and her business. Worse, Cecile was from the royal family, so the majority of the people believed her.

My mother felt embarrassed even though she knew from the bottom of her heart that she did nothing wrong. Facing the most humiliating situation in her entire life, my mother felt upset, worried, picked on, and she wanted to hide. The whole situation made my mother ill. She cried and cried and cried some more. To her, the whole world was turning upside down.

After that incident, my mother lost almost all her customers, and even some of her apprentices stopped coming to work. No matter how hard she tried to regain her clients' trust, she was unsuccessful. Only a few people believed her and stuck with her. Others were very hard to

win back. My mother got very worried and worked even harder to win them back by reducing the price to the products and even visiting some of the customers. But, none of that worked.

The business never picked back up and little by little, my mother used up all the money she had saved; consequently, she ended up not being able to pay her rent. Besides all that drama, she also faced another very unusual situation. Her husband returned to the other woman Cecile.

A few months after the incident, my father started coming home late from work, and his excuse to my mother was that he was very busy at work. Soon after that, he started coming home past midnight on the weekends. When my mother asked why he was coming home that late, Joseph simply told my mother, "I just hang out with a few friends after work." Slowly and slowly, little by little, a short time after that, my father started spending some nights out. He no longer took Marie and her child to work on Saturdays. He no longer cooked breakfast for his wife and his daughter on the weekends. Worried, my mother said to my father "I feel things are different between us." My father replied, "What do you mean?" My mother said, "We don't spend much time together anymore. The precious and quality time we used to spend seems to be fading away." After those words, my father finally told

Marie, "I want to reconsider Cecile as my wife again. Cecile is my first wife, and I had neglected her. I'm now thinking about getting back together with her...she is also my wife. I would like you also to stay my wife. I will do all that is in my power to make both of you very happy."

My mother had a very hard time understanding my father. She could not believe what was coming out of his mouth. She told him in a very disappointed voice, "Remember, you told me that I was the only one you love and that woman Cecile was your parents' choice; you don't love her. Remember you didn't want to spend your life with her? What has changed?" Joseph replied again, "I will do my best to make you very happy."

Again, my mother was very surprised about the words coming out of my father's mouth. With a puzzled look on her face, she said, "This is unheard of. Are you out of your mind? A few months ago, Cecile came to my store to make a scene. I was humiliated. In fact, my business is currently down because of her. Now you are back with her...not only that, but you also want me, Marie, to join the group." Marie looked very angry and shouted as loudly as she possibly could, "No, no and no! I'm not doing what you are asking me. You betrayed me." She continued in her deep and sad voice, "You cannot be married to her and to me. I did not sign up for a polygamy, so leave me out of it."

She quickly left the room, angry and confused, and she did not understand why her whole world was turning upside down. She decided to leave her husband and start a new life. However, there was one thing holding her back. She was pregnant with her second child (a boy). My mother wondered how she was going to live with two children in the situation she was in. She still had the desire to live very far away from her husband and to also live as far away as possible from her husband Joseph's extended family's home because she really wanted to have a fresh start with her business as well as her personal life.

When I was three, we moved to another location where my mother rented a two-bedroom apartment and used one room for her sewing class and clothes store. The store was situated at an intersection in the neighborhood. It was a very nice location, but this time the store was a little smaller than the one she had before. At this new location, the business did not quite pick up until after my mother had her second baby.

With two children, she struggled to pay the rent, buy food and raise her kids. Her husband who now had two families rarely came to visit.

My mother wanted to divorce him so badly, but the only thing stopping her this time was her "dignity." Another thing she valued was "loyalty," She had promised herself to have the same father for all her kids. Also, she believed

that marriage was for the better and for the worst. Marie had tried with all her strength to cope with their uncomfortable life and concentrated on raising her two children, Doudou and Omega.

Since my mother did not want to divorce, some of her friends had suggested a few things she could do to keep her husband Joseph to herself.

You will find that out in the following chapter.

Chapter Four

Abla's Suggestions and Marie's Advice

One day, my mother found out something very important during the visit of an old friend, Abla. Out of habit, every time one of her friends was visiting, my mother cooked for her. Hmmm! It is better to say, they cooked together, talked a lot, and ate so much. While Abla and my mother were cooking and chatting about the time they were in school together, their graduation and their boyfriends, my mother's friend Abla suddenly froze. She was staring at the spaghetti sauce they were cooking. "What is wrong? Is the sauce burning?" my mother asked. "If the sauce is burning, what don't you stir it up, you weirdo?" My mother said smiling. Abla replied softly, "It's not the spaghetti sauce. There is something I have to tell you." After those words, she stopped talking again. My mother said in a very compassionate voice thinking Abla got herself into some kind of problem and was afraid to tell her. "Are you in trouble?" Abla replied.

"No, it is not about me. It is about you, Marie."

Abla asked my mother if she was still married to Joseph. When my mother said yes, Abla looked right and left to make sure no one else was listening. Of course, there was no one else. She got closer to my mother and said. "I'm going to tell you something very important. Please, don't tell anyone I said this. Can you keep a secret?" My mother replied, "Yes." Then Abla started talking. "I heard that Cecile's father is one of the most powerful men in their village. He has spiritual 'Shaman' (*Bokono* to use the Togolese term) powers. He uses his power in so many ways, and he can also use that same power to control people. Anyone who has problem seeks for his help. He helps people solve their marital, financial, and all kinds of issues. He is well-known for solving problems using his spiritual powers."

My mother wondered why Abla was telling her all this, but right before she actually asked, Abla had already said to my mother that the reason behind her saying these things was that she heard something that was very upsetting. My mother listened to what Abla had said, and her eyes became very wide. "I'm listening," she said. "Do you know the reason why your husband is not as excited to see you? The reason why he has become distant? The reason why he went back to Cecile? It's because Cecile's father is a *bokonon*, that is, a 'shaman' in Togolese, and

he helped her spiritually. I have a very hard time believing those powers, but it seems to be working." Abla said to my mother, "I think your husband Joseph is with Cecile because of the help from her father."

Abla asked my mother if she wanted to do something about the situation or sit and watch, as her life turned miserable. The only response she gave Abla was, "If Joseph is truly my husband, he will certainly come back to me. I will not seek for help in places I don't want to." Abla gave the example of a young lady named Afiwa. Afiwa and Cecile are cousins – she was the niece of Cecile's father. Afiwa was married to a very wealthy man of her village named Fofu through an arranged marriage.

However, in this case, Afiwa was the third wife. Fofu was madly in love with her and did everything in his power to make her very comfortable and happy. Somehow, somewhere along the way, Fofu had stopped treating her right. In fact, he neglected her for three years. Now, he had built her a very nice and brand-new house with a store where she sold all types of goods, groceries, beauty supplies, bag clotting, and much more.

Abla continued talking about Afiwa and told Marie that Afiwa's home was in the center of the nearest city in the village. It was painted beige, and it had six bedrooms, six full bathrooms, and one half-bath. The living room

was the biggest room in the house. It was decorated with expensive flowers, and other royal ornaments befitting the status of a king. The lights in the room looked as if they were made from crystals. In the center of the living room was a dazzling chandelier. The sofas, the dining room table, and even her bed were all imported from France. Abla bragged some more about the gorgeous tile floors and the glass windows and doors.

After talking about Afiwa's house, Abla paused for a while, shook her head slightly, and started talking about the store. She looked even more excited while she was talking about the vast shop that was opened to the busy streets in that area. One could find anything he or she might need in that store. On one side, she sold an assortment of groceries. The other side was designated for beauty supplies, and the back of the store was for bags, clothing, and shoes. She had customers coming from all over the village and the nearest cities to shop there. Another thing that enhanced her popularity was the restaurant she had opened right beside the shop. She hired professional cooks who made the most delicious dishes including fufu and rice with every kind of soup one can think of. They made goat meat soup, beef soup, fresh soup, smoked fish soup, vegetable soup and other African soups. Inside the restaurant, there was a refreshment bar where people refreshed

themselves. Thursday and Friday evenings were happy hours. The place was always packed with people of all class levels – middle class and affluent people. Soon, she was well known in the whole region, and people came from other parts of the area to shop and eat at her restaurant.

Afiwa's husband bought her a very nice and brand new 1981 Toyota Corolla. It was a metallic silver. She was one of the few women who drove a car at that time. More specifically, she was the only one who drove a brand-new car. She was very happy and proud. She became well known throughout the area. Other women looked up to her and wanted to be like her.

Abla said to Marie that Afiwa, who was once loved by her husband, was at some point abandoned. Her husband did not even want to see her. He used to kiss her every morning, told her that he loved her, and listen to her concerns, trying to the best of his ability to console her. He used to spend time with her in so many ways. For example, they could just have a little conversation, laughing, and making jokes. The husband used to take her shopping, and to restaurants on the weekends. He even volunteered to do the house chores every Saturday.

They were living a perfect life until, for some reason, the husband started pulling away. He gradually stopped doing all those fun things with Afiwa. Afiwa became confused, sad, and

discouraged. She became lonely. The husband did not love her as much anymore. He saw her as an enemy and had no problem treating her like one. He shouted at her, called her names, and even beat her. Afiwa had tried her best to satisfy her husband, but nothing she did was good enough. The husband always found every opportunity to constantly criticize her, talking down to her, and even insulting her. At that point, she did not have any choice but to go see her uncle who possessed some spiritual powers that could do something about her situation.

Abla continued, "After consulting her uncle, Afiwa learned that one of her husband Fofu's wives was the one causing the trouble between them because she was jealous and wanted all the attention to herself. Now that Afiwa did something about her case, she is happy, her husband is making her very happy."

To make sure she understood well what Abla was saying, Marie asked, "Do you mean, Afiwa was at first in the best harmony with her husband, but then one of her co-wives used some kind of power, which caused her husband Fofu to mistreat her? However, after she consulted a shaman, the husband started loving her again, so much to the point that he built her a house, bought her a car and financed her business?" Abla replied, "Yes."

She said to my mother, "I know a very powerful shaman who can help you get your

husband back." My mother laughed and told Abla that she did not believe in those kinds of powers. She told Abla that if she wanted, she would have done it a long time ago.

My mother explained to Abla, "I'm from one of the most powerful regions in Benin called Bohicon. There are very powerful witches, enchanters, sorcerers, magicians in Bohicon who do amazing things. They can put spells on people, they can read people's minds from a very far away distance, they can cut themselves in half with sharp knives and still live, they can eat a bowl of blazes, they can even disappear and appear. There are all kinds of things people do that can blow your mind away. But none of those practices interest me because my parents have told me that most of those people end up very badly. They said that people they knew who practiced idolatries and witchcraft ended up very miserably." Abla asked, "Do you mean they ended up wretchedly unhappy or even sick?" My mother replied, "Yes, most of the people who used powers of darkness to perform those 'miracles' end up alone, ridiculed, and unwell. Some of them became mentally ill, and others died unexpectedly.

Abla's eyes grew big, and she shouted, "Oh no!" My mother, thinking Abla was reacting to what she had told her, so she said, "Yes. It is the truth." But, no, no, no, Abla was reacting that way because she saw that the sauce they were

cooking was burning. My mother had her back turned to the stove while she was talking to Abla, so she did not see it. They were lucky – some of the sauce was still good for them to eat their spaghetti.

At the dining table, Marie told Abla the story about a young lady named Kaka who wanted to be married to a wealthy and handsome man. She searched and searched and finally found a man that she liked. However, the man did not like her. So, for her to attract the man, she went and saw a bad witch. The witch asked her to bring money, a goat, chickens and other items that she needed to use to perform the miracle for the rich man to notice her, get together with her, take her out, and eventually marry her.

My mother said with a serious face, "The spell worked. Kaka found her way to the annual party that the young man named Koffi and his family organized for friends to attend. At the party, Koffi somehow noticed Kaka and approached her. They talked for a long time and made an appointment to meet again. After a period of time, Koffi and Kaka started seeing each other regularly. In three months, they got married. In the meanwhile, Kaka kept consulting her bad witch, she received instructions from her frequently, and she followed every instruction perfectly. In return, she got exactly what she wanted in three

months," my mother said.

My mother told Abla that after the marriage, Kaka needed to regularly update her husband's love. For that reason, she visited the bad witch regularly. She was asked to bring money, animals and some other items for sacrifice. She was even asked to bring her husband's underwear, t-shirt, and shoes. With those items that Kaka provided, the witch could demonstrate her power. Every time the husband wore one of those items, he loved Kaka even more and did everything she wanted. Kaka became very rich and was basically the one ruling everything in the home and in the marriage. Kaka was not satisfied. She now wanted her husband to love her even more than the way he was loving her now. So, she went to her bad witch again. This time, in exchange for her money, the witch gave her a powder to add to the husband's food or drink.

Once at home, Kaka cooked a very nice meal and added the powder to her husband's portion. Somehow, she accidentally ate the husband's food and became crazy. She finally confessed all the things she had done to win Koffi's love. Kaka remained mentally ill – she talked to herself a lot, feared a lot, and had no desire to live in a house. The street became her home not because she was homeless but because of her illness. Kaka did not even mind walking naked in the streets. She was very dirty and did

not mind eating from trash cans. Kaka eventually got very sick and died.

My mother now turned to Abba and told her, "People will always reap what they sew. Kaka reaped what she had sown. She forced a man to love her by consulting a witch. The power worked for a while, and she was happy for a while. Now, where is she? She is dead and buried. I will never do something like that to win my man's love. If Joseph does not come back to me, I will just assume Joseph is not mine."

Abba's mouth was hanging wide open in shock by the story my mother had just told her. My mother said to her, "Abba, close your mouth before a fly finds its way into it." She immediately realized she did need to close her mouth, and she quickly did just that.

My mother continued, "Another lesson to learn from this is that if we ask the Lord to bless us, He does it to the fullest. He does it to the point where we are satisfied. That satisfaction comes from His Spirit and makes us feel complete. But when people ask from the devil, they keep asking for more and more because they are never satisfied...It is like there is a big hole in them that cannot be filled."

Marie then told another story about a business lady named Mama who wanted to have more clients and become very rich and successful. To fulfill her dream, she went to a witch and asked for her to meet her needs. The

witch asked her to get pregnant and at three months of pregnancy, she will need to abort the baby and bring it to him. Mama did exactly as she was told. In three months Mama's business started booming. She had a lot of customers and was known as an important businesswoman. She built the house she wanted, bought the car of her dreams, and possessed all types of expensive clothing, bags, shoes, and jewelry. She had everything she had ever wanted; however, she was unable to conceive. Why? Because she was naïve and gave her fertility away in order to get rich. The witch asked for something more expensive in exchange for something inexpensive. Having a baby was more valuable than having wealth she was looking for.

Until this day, Mama has not conceived. She was very rich for about ten years, but later her business began to fail. Mama went back to see the witch, but this time he was asking for something more. She never told anyone what the witch asked for the second time she saw him. Whatever it was that she was told to bring this time, Mama refused to do it. Consequently, the business failed. In addition to that, she faced other problems that caused her to lose her house, her car, and other valuable possessions. She eventually found herself very poor. Poorer than she was before she went to see the witch to get rich.

Marie continued and told her friend Abla

that the witch required more from Mama than what he gave her. She required her fetus that would become her child soon. She gave away her baby to become rich. A baby was more important than wealth. The witch knew that. That was the reason why he asked her to give it to him in exchange for something cheap and temporary. In addition to losing her baby, she was now unable to conceive. She was smart not to obey whatever the witch asked her to do the second time. If she had, the witch would have asked for more and more until something worse would have happened to her.

Marie said to Abla, "Witches, charlatans, and other powers of darkness require more from you than what they claim to give you. That is why I would not be jealous of Afiwa, who is loved by her husband, thanks to her uncle, the shaman, nor would I be jealous of Cecile who now has my husband because of the help from her father. I prefer to try my best working hard to raise my children and take care of myself. I believe the Lord will bless me that way."

Even though Abla was stunned by all the advice my mother gave her, she was still surprised to hear Marie say that she was unwilling to do something to bring her lover, Joseph, back to her. She was also amazed when she heard her saying that she was willing to work hard to feed her kids, pay for the kid's school fees, clothe them, and more. The two

friends, Marie and Abla, chit-chatted a little more and cleaned up the dishes before Abla left.

From that day on, Marie focused on working hard just as she had said she would. She advertised her business to the local community and offered some discounts to any customer who had her sew their clothes.

People liked the offer and came to her. She was able to sew ten to twelve Togolese clothing a week. To make extra money, my mother tried to negotiate a deal with a few wholesalers of the traditional costumes and seasonal attire commonly worn in almost all African countries.

To keep up with the quantity required every week, my mother hired a few seamstresses to help her. After a while, she was doing well, and the business was also doing well. With those two opportunities; sewing for the clients from her community, as well as sewing for the wholesale, my mother was able to support her children.

In the meanwhile, Marie's husband came once in a while to visit her. He sometimes stayed for a day or two before he left again. My mother did not want a relationship with Joseph because of the other woman, Cecile. She did not want to share her husband with another woman. She wanted to file for divorce, but at the same time, she cared so much about her children and wanted their father to be nearby. She was hopeful that they would somehow, sometime,

have a better relationship. Another reason why she did not file for divorce was that she eventually had a third and fourth child, and she was worried Joseph could have taken the children away from her. And if her husband and her in-law kept the children, they would not be taken care of. Because of that, my mother made a sacrificial choice to stay, take care of, and love us, the children. I'm so grateful to be her daughter.

Joseph at his end did very little to fulfill the role of a father. He loved his children but lacked the ability to demonstrate to them (us) that they came first or that they were his priority. He very seldom spent time with them.

There was no such thing as spending quality time with us, his children. With that being said, we did not really have opportunities to talk, ask questions, or be listened to. It was very hard and difficult; however, he did manage to make one Christmas memorable for us.

Chapter Five

A Christmas with my Father

In 1990, Joseph my father came to Marie my mother's apartment and stayed there for three days before Christmas. He bought a Christmas tree and decorated it while my mother was at work sewing costumes for her customers for the holidays. When she came home the night of December 23rd, she was very surprised to see a very beautiful and decorated Christmas tree. There were also some sweet Christmas songs playing in the background. The whole family was very happy. We, the children, were delighted to see our parents happy, and surely, they were also very happy to see us smiling, laughing, singing, and dancing to the songs.

The next day, Joseph surprised my mother with a meal from a restaurant. He knew my mother was very busy at work and that she was going to come home late and hungry. To make

her happy, Joseph ordered a very delicious from one of the best restaurants in town, which he went and picked up right before she got home. The food was served hot. The big broiled chicken, the baked one-foot salmon, the fried potatoes, the salad, and the cookies were something my mother and her children had never ordered before. We had always cooked meals at home, but she had never ordered food from a restaurant for a Christmas dinner before. That was an exceptional treat, and we all enjoyed it very much.

The special day continued until the day after Christmas. On Christmas day, we woke up and saw presents under the Christmas tree. The girls had a very tall and beautiful toy doll each. The boys had very big toy cars. That was one of the best days of our lives. It was a special and memorable day, not just because of the presents we received from Santa (Papa Noel in French), but because we spent quality time with our parents. They were also very happy to see us, their children, being happy and joyful. Later that day, my mother Marie and Joseph cooked a Christmas meal, and we all sat and ate together as a family. I don't remember having another Christmas like that with both my parents and my siblings until this day, or until my father passed away. I know my father loved me, but circumstances did not allow him to spend time with me. In spite of that, I loved my "Papa," and

I regret that I didn't get there in time to see him before he died. My father passed away when I was pregnant with my first child, and to this day, I wonder what it was he wanted to tell me before he died.

Soon after Christmas and the New Year, my mother faced another financial crisis. Her business started to decline. No one asked her to sew clothes anymore. Remember the wholesalers who had her make large quantities of African clothing? They also, for some reason, had stopped their orders. My mother could not understand what was going on. People who had known her had said that her sudden fall was weird, strange, and bizarre.

Also, my mother did not understand why Joseph, who was very happy and had celebrated a very remarkable Christmas with her and the kids, had suddenly become so distant. He disappeared for weeks and was nowhere to be found. The kids had missed their dad and wanted to spend some more time with him, but they could not because their father had not come. For a while, everything was so confusing for my mother.

It was not long before my mother had learned from Abla, whose sister worked at the palace as Cecile's maid, that her problem had come to existence because of Cecile. She was furious because Joseph had chosen to spend time with my mother on Christmas instead of being

with her that day. For revenge, Cecile visited her witch father who helped her destroy my mother by attacking her business.

Also, Cecile had ordered her witch father to cause Joseph to leave my mother and to hate her. The spell seemed to work for a while, but it was not long before my mother was back on her feet. Her business was restored and Joseph, who was supposed to abandon and hate my mother, was loving her. He had built Marie a beautiful house in an isolated city named Agoe and had my mother move in with her children Claudine, Omega, Aaron, and Gloria. Gloria was two years old when we moved into the new house that was still under construction... My sister Esther was born after we moved there.