

CHAPTER 2

Hattie held her hand in front of her face. She couldn't see a thing. Nightfall in Africa offered no twilight transition from brilliant sunshine to pitch black, especially on moonless nights such as this. Light disappeared as if blown out like a candle flame. Hattie couldn't find a comfortable position on the bare, wooden platform that served for a bed. The baby snuggled next to her with Freddie between little Paul and Grace. Hattie sighed deeply and reviewed the day's events from the moment she had stepped onto Mozambican soil. A faint, but distinct scent of flowers reminded her of the juice the women had sipped at the bakery while the men dealt with customs officials.

Brother Agnew, the only Free Methodist missionary in the region had asked Mr. Richards, who served under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, to meet the newly arrived missionaries and help guide them through Portuguese immigration and customs. Brother Agnew asked Mr. Richards to accompany the women and children for some refreshment while he stayed with Brothers Bennett and Lincoln. The port officers examined every package and trunk in a meticulous process that took hours.

Their escort was the tall man with dark hair Hattie had spotted on the beach, who had led the women and children to a small bakery nearby for refreshments. Hattie slid her tongue over her teeth. While the chilled juice slaked thirst, the liquid drew her mouth like alum.

Mr. Richards sat on a wooden bench with the children while the ladies took over the other two benches in the shade of the trees.

“Mr. Richards, what kind of juice is this?” she asked.

He glanced at her expression and threw back his head in hearty laugh. “I’m not making fun of you Mrs. Bennett, but the look on your face suggests that this is not the most appealing drink you’ve ever had.”

Hattie smiled and shook her head. “Perhaps I’ll get used to it.”

“This is fresh cashew juice available only once a year during the harvest of cashew nuts. People waste nothing as they gather in the fruit and nuts. The nut hangs below the fleshy, pear-shaped fruit which they squeeze for the juice. It’s said to be very nourishing and healthy. The nuts have to be roasted to remove the poisonous outer shell before they can be opened and eaten— raw or toasted.”

In Hattie’s opinion, no amount of sugar could relieve the peculiar tartness. She breathed in deeply and tried to identify the scent. A heavy, sweet perfume wafted over them with each breeze. “Mr. Richards, I smell something quite pleasant, but it’s not this juice.”

“Mrs. Bennett, it’s the frangipani blossoms over there.” He pointed across the sandy street. The tree looked strange because its trunk was smooth with a few huge shiny leaves around the clusters of flowers. The dark, green leaves were like shiny magnolia leaves in America, but much larger. “Frangipani blossom year round with creamy, white flowers that open in clusters like bouquets. I hope you like their perfume because you’ll find them everywhere you go. Sometimes the flowers are pink rather than white, but the scent is always very heavy,” Mr. Richards said.

Once their baggage was released the natives loaded everything onto a waiting launch to take the newcomers to the other side of the bay. Before boarding the flat-bottomed boat to accompany them to his mission station thirty-five miles to the southwest, Brother Agnew spoke with Mr. Richards who would remain in Inhambane.

Seated on a wooden plank, Hattie squinted at the far shore and followed the green line of foliage beyond a narrow strip of beach. To the south, she couldn’t see the end of the bay, but to the north it looked like a large cove. She gazed over her shoulder beyond the land at the edge of town. Where the ocean’s wave met the calmer waters, white caps and turbulence marked the bay’s wide entrance.

The boat was huge and very comfortable like the broadhorn river vessels used in America. Hattie noted that the main difference between this craft and the ones at home were the two oars on each side. The natives rowed toward the entrance of the Mutamba River near the foot of Inhambane Bay. With the help of the incoming tide, the craft crossed the water very quickly and entered the estuary late in the afternoon. Several miles up river, during the last moments of daylight, the rowers dropped anchor and hastily off-loaded everyone and everything.

Brother Agnew spoke fluent Tonga, the local language, and supervised the process. As he coordinated the distribution of people and goods, he arranged accommodations for them to spend the night. The Lincolns and Sister Heffner walked the short distance from the river to their hut. The Bennett family and Sister Allen's hut at the edge of the tropical forest, on the opposite side of the village, required a long walk. Brother Agnew insisted that the women be carried. Fortunately, the trip was brief; Hattie was carried to their sleeping quarters in a hammock with the baby in her arms enveloped in total darkness. She felt reassured by the men's voices calling back and forth about various matters to be resolved before turning in for the evening.

When the carriers set one end of the poles on the ground, Hattie knew they had arrived. She emerged with Paul sound asleep in her arms.

With only a sliver of moon to cast light, the group gazed around the clearing. The forest loomed ahead to their right, but directly in front of them was a single hut. Its opening yawned within arm's reach and challenged them to enter the pitch-black interior. Grace gingerly felt her way. "I can't see a thing. We need some light before anyone else comes inside."

The native men poured oil into a half coconut shell and added a rag for the wick. Brother Agnew's face glowed in the wavering light as he walked into the hut with the shell in his hand. The Bennetts followed. What a disappointment to find only one piece of furniture! The square, wooden platform boasted a carved headboard to identify it as a bed.

Hattie knew she should feel grateful as she rested on the native-made, mahogany bed with Grace and the children while the

men slept in their clothes on the floor. Worn out with the journey, it was her last thought before roosters woke them at dawn.

Brother Agnew left immediately to fetch the Lincolns so that the group could discuss plans for the final stage of their journey. Hattie rested inside with the baby while John, Freddie and Sister Allen wandered around. When she heard Edith's voice, she joined the others outside.

Brother Agnew had built a small fire to brew tea. He used coconut shells as cups and poured some of the black brew for everyone. He passed a sack of sugar for each one to sweeten the steamy liquid to his or her taste and offered palm fronds for spoons.

"I think it would be best if you stayed at Nyanjele Mission Station with me until you have adjusted to the climate and have a sense of the countryside." Brother Agnew said in a halting manner. While the African language rolled off his tongue, he groped for each English word.

Brother Lincoln nodded.

"We need time together to plan for the expansion of Free Methodist activities here. Brother Ebey designated funds for us to open another mission station," John said, already intent on fulfillment of the Mission Board's mandate.

Brother Agnew stroked his sparse beard. "First, we need to get you settled at Nyanjele, then we'll consider the possibilities for another Free Methodist mission station."

He looked over the group and then talked to the lead porter in a language none of the others understood. Brother Agnew scratched his head when he heard the porter's response. "Most foreigners to Africa travel by hammock rather than walking, since we slow the normal pace of the Africans. We don't have the stamina to trot in this heat while carrying parcels. Unfortunately, I have only two hammocks which are probably best used to carry the women. This means that we will have to divide the group and travel in stages."

Brother Lincoln's sandy eyebrows arched in surprise. "You are saying that we can't travel together?"

"You can walk the distance if we travel at a slower pace. But, it would be better for the women if they were carried."

Brother Lincoln rubbed his chin. "Perhaps my family and Sister Heffner could lead the way. That would give the Bennetts and Sister Allen more time to rest."

"It seems like six of one and a half dozen of the other to me. None of us will rest well until we're all settled," John said. Waiting for the carriers to return with the hammocks would give him ample opportunity to examine the tropical trees and shrubs in the vicinity.

Looking at the Lincolns and Sister Hefner, Brother Agnew said, "As soon as you're ready, the natives will take you to Malahisi."

Brother Lincoln interrupted, "But I thought your mission station was Nyanjele?"

Brother Agnew shook his head. "I tend to forget that you know nothing of the area. Malahisi is the French Trading Station about halfway to Nyanjele. I'll take the Lincolns and Sister Heffner there and send the natives back with the hammocks for Sister Bennett and Sister Allen."

Grace Allen voiced the concern in Hattie's mind. "But how will we manage? We don't speak the language here."

Brother Agnew's eyes opened wide as he sputtered. "You're perfectly safe here, Sister Allen. There's a booth with a little counter near the village. You can buy food and something to drink. Although you don't speak Tonga, I know the people here and they will keep an eye on you. If any problem develops they will send a runner to me. The carriers should return for you around midday."

After the others left, John took Freddie with him to explore. Hattie and Grace unpacked the small parcel of food they had saved from their meals on the steamship.

Grace shook the dust from her skirts as she stood up. "I'll find the shop Brother Agnew mentioned. Nohow is this fruit and cheese enough for one person, let alone four of us."

Hattie chuckled at Grace's use of American slang. What was normal at home sounded peculiar in Africa. "That's a great idea, but how will you pay for the food?" Hattie remained seated on the ground resting her back against the hut's exterior. She didn't mind waiting alone, a quiet time for her to rest and nurse Paul.

"Maybe I can barter with some trinkets. If not, I have a few South African coins."