Chapter 1

Early in the morning, three days before Christmas, 1956, we left our new home in Alabama aboard a train for New York City. There were five of us - my husband, Hulme; our two children, Lowell and Thelma; my brother, Cameron; and I, Alice Princess Siwundhla. After the New Year we would begin classes at Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama. But for our first Christmas in the United States we were to have a holiday in New York with our adopted American parents, Lowell and Josephine Edwards.

Our train clamored into New York City's huge Grand Central Station at 5:30 the next morning. As the walls of the building slowly rolled to a stop, I looked out the train window and saw that sweet face of Mother Edwards glowing brighter than the colored Christmas lights that decorated the station. I stepped down from the coach and ran into her outstretched arms.

Together we laughed and cried, and my son danced around her, squealing Gogo! Gogo! using the African word for Grandmother. It had been only a few weeks since I had last seen Mother Edwards, for she had helped us settle in our new home in Alabama. But to me, left in the middle of a strange land, those weeks had been confusing. I had longed for her familiar reassurance. Mother Edwards, a white woman, was the only mother I had known since my real mother died when I was six years old. While serving as a missionary teacher in Malawi, she had taken me, an African orphan, into her home and raised me as her own daughter. What wonderful relief I felt now to be with her again, and I looked forward to spending the next two weeks with her and Father Edwards.

The streets and buildings of New York City glittered with colored lights and tinsel. From the first, Hulme and I felt awed by this giant concrete city with its rushing people. All the way to the home of Father and Mother Edwards on Long Island we stretched our necks to look out the car windows. We passed those towering buildings that scrape the sky, huge brick apartment blocks, and dark, narrow streets with people hurrying in every direction. We drove along a highway busy with taxis and buses, and every few miles we would pass a crippled car abandoned along the side of the road. Mother Edwards explained that many of those cars had broken down and would be left on the road because they were not worth the expense of repairs. I could not imagine that an auto could be of so little value.

Later that evening we enjoyed dinner with the Edwardses and their two sons and families, who had also come for Christmas. Then we returned to the tinseled streets of New York. A few weeks before, while we had unsuspectingly waited for our surprise appearance on the "This Is Your Life" television program, we had seen the Christmas decorations of Los Angeles. Now that we were in New York City, Hulme and I had to agree that New York looked almost as pretty when the shining lights came on at night as had our precious "City of Angels." The lighted streets looked even brighter at night than they had in daylight. Accustomed to the darkness and silence of the African night in my homeland, Malawi, I was suddenly frightened by those paved streets lined with lights and glitter and flowing with noisy, honking traffic. I wondered how I would survive all that rush.

I asked question after question, faster than my amused American parents could possibly answer them.

"How do these people ever get to know each other?" I wondered. "Do they know where they're rushing to? Where do they get the money for so much coming and going? Don't any of the people stay at home? When do they sleep?" I clutched Hulme for safety, and he held his arm tightly around my shoulders, as if not to let any of the hurrying people steal me away.

What impressed me most was the biting December cold. My coat and clothes felt as light as ostrich feathers. Snow quilted the buildings, and huge machines that looked to me like scorpions walking backward scraped the snow-covered streets. In Malawi we had never seen snow, for there the temperatures seldom drop below forty degrees even in the winter months of May, June, July, and August. I could hardly bear the cold, but I noticed that the New Yorkers, bundled up like Eskimos in their heavy, hooded coats, appeared to be gay and happy. Some even told me that they enjoy a white Christmas!

We enjoyed that Christmas too - at least once we were back inside the warm, lovely home of Father and Mother Edwards. After supper on Christmas Eve, Mother Edwards built a fire in the fireplace, and we all gathered around the Christmas tree, a tall spruce that reached to the ceiling and sparkled with shiny glass balls and bubbling lights. It was far different from the little pines that Mother Edwards had decorated in Africa with strings of popcorn and paper stars. Father Edwards came out dressed like Santa Claus, and at the sight of his red velvet suit and long, white beard my twelve-month-old daughter, Thelma, began to scream with fright. But Lowell, who was almost five, sat on the floor

looking at Santa with shining eyes. I put sleepy little Thelma to bed, and Santa passed out presents to the rest of us. As we opened the bright, foil-wrapped boxes, we all made a great deal of noise, laughing and squealing in delight over our beautiful presents - a fine fountain pen and pencil set for Hulme, an electric train that raced along a curved track for Lowell (he had only just had his first train ride on the trip from Alabama to New York!), and an electric mixer for me. But when I opened a box from Mother Edwards containing a pink nylon petticoat trimmed in frilly lace, I began to weep. For it made me remember the first petticoat I had owned in Africa. It had been only plain, white cotton, but it had looked beautiful to me. I had made it myself at the request of Mother Edwards from material she had given me, thinking she wanted it for some other African girl. But when I had finished it, I found it wrapped up in a box for me.

A few days after Christmas, some friends of the Edwardses invited us to tell the story of our life in Africa at a junior college in North Albany. Since our appearance on national television we had already accepted several similar invitations. As we drove out of the city to meet our appointment in Albany, more snow began to fall. I worried about how we could travel in snow which kept piling up so fast on everything.

As we continued north, the state of New York became less and less appealing to me. Great drifts of snow blanketed both sides of the turnpike. The trees looked lifeless. I could see that heavy ice had cracked some of the gigantic branches.

"Are there any live green trees found in New York?" I asked Father Edwards in anguish. He laughed his big hearty laugh and nodded his head while continuing to drive at the speed of a cheetah. I nearly sank into my seat with embarrassment and felt a bit perturbed at him for laughing at my question.

He reached over Mother Edwards, who was sitting between us, and patted me gently on the shoulder. "Alice Princess," he began, "in about three months these same trees will have some of the most beautiful green leaves you ever saw." I made no comment, but took his answer with some grains of salt. I could hardly believe that those barren branches, laden with snow and ice, would ever wear a beautiful dress of green leaves. In my homeland I had never seen trees without leaves, except for dead ones.

I became curious again. "Could you tell me why people would want to live in this land which looks as desolate as the surface of the moon for a third of the year?"

Good, patient Father Edwards tried again to explain. "Many people miss this kind of weather when they move somewhere else, for they like the change of seasons."

"But I am homesick for Malawi!" I cried.

He looked at me sideways with a big, broad smile. "You will get used to it, my child. Don't worry, you will."

By this time I had concluded that I liked snow better in pictures! A warm bath felt very good that night before I faced the audience in the school auditorium.

Two days later we returned from upstate New York and found four more invitations waiting. They all came from Washington, D.C. - requests for Hulme, Camie, and me to speak at two colleges, a church, and a publishing house that specializes in mission stories. I could hardly wait for the day to arrive for us to go to the nation's capital. I wanted to see this historic city, but most of all I wanted to see the White House. I recalled from my history classes at Malamulo Mission in Africa that the first President to occupy the building was John Adams. Since he had a name so similar to the first man of creation, this President had always intrigued me. I never missed the question on any of my history tests when they asked, "Who was the first President of the U.S.A. to occupy the White House?" And because I knew I would not be able to see the home where Adam, the first man, had lived, I had always hoped to see the mansion first occupied by a President who had a name so similar to Adam. Then the day arrived, and I finally found myself standing in front of the White House. First we walked all around the outside; then we toured through it. The pictures in my history books seemed to have come alive. I remembered how my schoolteacher in Africa had been careful to explain that the White House was so named because it was painted white. Many of us Africans had thought it was called the White House because the President was a white man. The other place that specially interested us was the Lincoln Memorial. Even while we still lived in Africa, Hulme had earmarked this as a place he wanted to see.

Back in New York, we spent the remaining days of our vacation seeing other places of great interest. While we paused to watch the blend of flags flapping and flying majestically outside of the United

Nations building, a man passed by and glanced at us. Then he stopped and stared.

"Would you be the lady from Africa that I saw on television?" he asked.

"Well, yes. Probably so," I stammered. "But how could you remember?"

"Well, I was really impressed with your story," he answered. "I've never felt more touched by anything I've heard than by your story of love in action." He introduced himself and said that he was a guest of the United Nations and then went on his way. But what amazed me was that he recognized me from a program which he had seen a whole month before. Somehow, the recognition by people like this man, plus the many speaking invitations that reached us, made me comprehend somewhat just how realistic are the television programs to people accustomed to watching them. As for me, once I understood that the cowboys who fell dead on the screen really did not die, I had tended to dismiss almost everything else that appeared there as unreal. The workings of television not only confused me, but also mystified me. Even yet I cannot figure out, without losing my mind too much, how I can see in my sitting room live pictures of men walking on the moon and at the same time see and hear the President of the United States of America talking to them as if they were right there in front of me.

Finally the Christmas holidays ended and we sadly said goodbye to my precious American parents. I begged them to come see us soon, but they doubted that Father Edwards could get away from his work before summer. He was a script writer for a religious television program called Faith for Today. He also answered Bible questions for viewers by correspondence. They saw us off at La Guardia Airport, where we boarded a plane for Alabama.

When we deplaned at the Huntsville airport, my two children complained of hunger because no lunch had been served aboard our flight. We decided to eat at the airport snack bar. As soon as we sat down at the counter, Lowell picked up the glass of water at his place and drank thirstily. Immediately a stern-faced waitress appeared before us, holding some menus tightly against her chest. She stared silently at Lowell, drinking his water, and I wondered why she did not place the menus before us.

Finally she turned to Hulme and me and shook her head. "You know we cannot serve you here," she said.

"No?" I asked, dumbfounded. Then I remembered a warning that Mother Edwards had given me when we had first arrived in Alabama. She had told me that I would find some injustices in the South and that I might be treated unkindly because I was black. Other people had given us such warnings too. But not until this moment had I clearly understood them.

The waitress disappeared and reappeared a minute later with a young man dressed in a business suit, who I assumed to be the manager.

"The waitress has just told you that we cannot serve you here. You do not need any further explanation, because you know we do not serve colored' people," he said. He spoke slowly, precisely, and coldly, without any trace of apology.

I felt frightened. What would he do to us? Would we be arrested? What good would it do to try to explain that we had not known? I reached for Lowell's hand, and he began to cry as I led him away from the counter. I began to weep too, but silently. Hulme, carrying Thelma, followed us out of the snack bar. It pained me that my innocent little children had to experience this discrimination, which they understood even less than Hulme and I did. What could I say to Lowell to help him understand? He did not understand hate, nor did I want him to. I kept a hold on his hand as we walked across the parking lot toward our car. I found myself humming one of my favorite songs for some solace: "God understands your sorrow; He sees the falling tear, and whispers, 1 am with thee'; then falter not nor fear - " But even .while I hummed, sobs caught at my chest and I began shaking violently.

As Hulme silently helped us into the car, I was remembering the good food we had eaten at the Chileka Airport in Malawi; the meal we had eaten in the Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, airport; and how graciously we had been waited upon in airports in Nairobi, Rome, and London. In all those places we had been served, but in this Christian nation they made us go away hungry. "Yet in all those other places we had the same color skin as we have today," I thought.

"To think that in an African school I had to memorize the famous 'Give me liberty or give me death!' speech made by Patrick Henry, who was born in the South," I said to Hulme.

"Yes," Hulme agreed. "How could this be the same country that took the first lead in protesting the infringement of human rights?"

Somehow after we had wondered out loud for a while I felt better. I said to myself, "The sweet must go along with the bitter." In my short

stay in America I had already seen America at her best and at her worst. I had experienced her kindness and now her cruelty. I had seen her Christian and her heathen, her rich and her poor, her mansions and her ghettos, her black and her white. But I remembered, too, the large amount of kindness showered upon us by so many people, and I decided that the United States of America still held more love than hate.