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The Cay

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CHAPTER ONE

LIKE silent, hungry sharks, that swim in the darkness of the sea, the German submarines arrived in the middle of the night.

I was asleep on the second floor of our narrow, gabled green house in Willemstad, on the island of Curaçao, the largest of the Dutch islands just off the coast of Venezuela. I remember that on that moonless night in February 1942 they attacked the big Lago oil refinery on Aruba, the sister island west of us. Then they blew up six of our small lake tankers, the tubby ones that still bring crude oil from Lake Maracaibo to the refinery, Curaçaosche Petroleum Maatschappij, to be made into petrol, paraffin, and diesel oil. One German sub was even sighted off Willemstad at dawn.

So when I woke up there was much excitement in the city, which looks like a part of old Holland, except that all the houses are painted in soft colours, pinks and greens and blues, and there are no dykes.

It was very hard to finish my breakfast because I wanted to go to Punda, the business district, the oldest part of town, and then to Fort Amsterdam where I could look out to sea. If there was an enemy U-boat out there, I wanted to see it and join the people in shaking a fist at it.

I was not frightened, just terribly excited. War was something I'd heard a lot about, but had never seen. The whole world was at war, and now it had come to us in the warm, blue Caribbean.

The first thing that my mother said was, 'Phillip, the enemy has finally attacked the island, and there will be no school today. But you must stay near home. Do you understand?'

I nodded, but I couldn't imagine that a shell from an enemy submarine would pick me out from all the buildings, or hit me if I was standing on the famous pontoon bridge or among the ships way back in the Schottegat or along St Anna Bay.

So later in the morning, when she was busy making sure that all our blackout curtains were

in place, and filling extra pots with fresh water, and checking our food supply, I stole away down to the old fort with Henrik van Boven, my Dutch friend who was also eleven.

I had played there many times with Henrik and other boys when we were a few years younger, imagining we were defending Willemstad against pirates or even the British. They once stormed the island, I knew, long ago. Or sometimes we'd pretend we were the Dutch going out on raids against Spanish galleons. That had happened too. It was all so real that sometimes we could see the tall masted ships coming over the horizon.

Of course, they were only the tattered-sailed native schooners from Venezuela, Aruba, or Bonaire coming in with bananas, oranges, papayas, melons, and vegetables. But to us, they were always pirates, and we'd shout to the noisy black men aboard them. They'd laugh back and go, 'Pow, pow, pow!'

The fort looks as though it came out of a storybook, with gun ports along the high wall that faces the sea. For years, it guarded Willemstad. But this one morning, it did not look like a storybook fort at all. There were real soldiers with rifles and we saw machine guns. Men with binoculars had

them trained towards the whitecaps, and everyone was tense. They chased us away, telling us to go home.

Instead, we went down to the Koningin Emma Brug, the famous Queen Emma pontoon bridge, which spans the channel that leads to the huge harbour, the Schottegat. The bridge is built on floats so that it can swing open as ships pass in or out, and it connects Punda with Otrabanda, which means 'other side', the other part of the city.

The view from there wasn't as good as from the fort, but curious people were there, too, just looking. Strangely, no ships were moving in the channel. The *veerboots*, the ferry boats that shuttled cars and people back and forth when the bridge was swung open, were tied up and empty. Even the native schooners were quiet against the docks inside the channel. And the black men were not laughing and shouting the way they usually did.

Henrik said, 'My father told me there is nothing left of Aruba. They hit Sint Nicolaas, you know.'

'Every lake tanker was sunk,' I said.

I didn't know if that were true or not, but Henrik had an irritating way of sounding official

since his father was connected with the government.

His face was round and he was chubby. His hair was straw-coloured and his cheeks were always red. Henrik was very serious about everything he said or did. He looked towards Fort Amsterdam.

He said, 'I bet they put big guns up there now.'

That was a safe bet.

And I said, 'It won't be long until the Navy is here.'

Henrik looked at me. 'Our Navy?' He meant the Netherlands Navy.

'No,' I said. 'Ours.' Meaning the American Navy, of course. His little Navy was scattered all over after the Germans took Holland.

Henrik said quietly, 'Our Navy will come too,' and I didn't want to argue with him. Everyone felt bad that Holland had been conquered by the Nazis.

Then an army officer climbed out of a truck and told us all to leave the Queen Emma bridge. He was very stern. He growled, 'Don't you know they could shoot a torpedo up here and kill you all?'

I looked out towards the sea again. It was blue and peaceful, and a good breeze churned it up, making lines of white-caps. White clouds drifted slowly over it. But I couldn't see the usual parade of ships coming towards the harbour; the stubby ones or the massive ones with flags of many nations that steamed slowly up the bay to the Schottegat to load petrol and oil.

The sea was empty; there was not even a sail on it. We suddenly became frightened and ran home to the Scharloo section where we lived.

I guess my face was pale when I went into the house because my mother, who was in the kitchen, asked immediately, 'Where have you been?'

'Punda,' I admitted. 'I went with Henrik.'

My mother got very upset. She grabbed my shoulder and shook it. 'I told you not to go there, Phillip,' she said angrily. 'We are at war! Don't you understand?'

'We just wanted to see the submarines,' I said.

My mother closed her eyes and pulled me up against her thin body. She was like that. One minute, shaking me; the next, holding me.

The radio was on, and a voice said that fifty-six men had died on the lake tankers that were blown up and that the governor of the Netherlands'

West Indies had appealed to Washington for help. There was no use in asking Amsterdam. I listened to the sorrowful sound of his voice until my mother's hand switched it to off.

Finally she said, 'You'll be safe if you do what we tell you to do. Don't leave the garden again today.'

She seemed very nervous. But then she was often nervous. My mother was always afraid I'd fall off the sea wall, or tumble out of a tree, or cut myself with a pocketknife. Henrik's mother wasn't that way. She laughed a lot and said, 'Boys, boys, boys.'

Late in the afternoon, my father, whose name was also Phillip – Phillip Enright – returned home from the refinery where he was working on the programme to increase production of aviation fuel. He'd been up since two o'clock, my mother said, and please don't ask him too many questions.

They had phoned him that morning to say that the Germans might attempt to shell the refinery and the oil storage tanks, and that he must report to help fight the fires. I had never seen him so tired, and I didn't ask as many questions as I wanted to.

Until the past year, my father and I had done a lot of things together. Fishing or sailing our small boat, or taking long hikes around Krup Bay or Seroe Male, or just going out into the *koenoekoe*, the countryside, together. He knew a lot about trees and fish and birds. But now he always seemed busy. Even on a Sunday, he'd shake his head and say, 'I'm sorry, guy, I have to work.'

After he had had his pint of cold Dutch ale (he had one every night in the living room after he came home), I asked, 'Will they shoot at us tonight?'

He looked at me gravely and answered, 'I don't know, Phillip. They might. I want you and your mother to sleep down here tonight, not on the first floor. I don't think you're in any danger, but it's better to sleep down here.'

'How many of them are out there?' I thought they might be like schools of fish. Dozens, maybe. I wanted to be able to tell Henrik exactly what my father knew about the submarines.

He shook his head. 'No one knows, Phillip. But there must be three of them around the islands. The attacks were in three different places.'

'They came all the way from Germany?'

He nodded. 'Or from bases in France,' he said, loading his pipe.

'Why can't we go out and fight them?' I asked.

My father laughed sadly and tapped his long forefinger on my chest. 'You'd like that, would you? But we have nothing to fight them with, son. We can't go out in motorboats and attack them with rifles.'

My mother came in from the kitchen to say, 'Stop asking so many silly questions, Phillip. I told you not to do that.'

Father looked at her strangely. He had always answered my questions. 'He has a right to know. He's involved here, Grace.'

My mother looked back at him. 'Yes, unfortunately,' she said.

My mother, I knew, had not wanted to come to Curaçao in late 1939, but my father had argued that he was needed for the war effort even though the United States was not at war then. Royal Dutch Shell had borrowed him from his American company because he was an expert in refineries and petrol production. But the moment she saw it, my mother decided she didn't like Curaçao and she often complained about the smell of

petrol and oil whenever the trade winds died down.

It was very different in Virginia where my father had been in charge of building a new refinery on the banks of the Elizabeth River. We'd lived in a small white house on an acre of land with many trees. My mother often talked about the house and the trees; about the change of seasons and the friends she had there. She said it was nice and safe in Virginia.

My father would answer quietly, 'There's no place nice and safe right now.'

I remembered the summers with lightning bugs and honeysuckle smells; the cold winters when the fields would all be brown and would crackle under my feet. I didn't remember too much else. I was only seven when we'd moved to the Caribbean.

I guess my mother was homesick for Virginia, where no one talked Dutch, and there was no smell of petrol or oil, and there weren't as many black people around.

Now, there was a cold silence between my mother and my father. Lately, it had been happening more and more often. She went back into the kitchen.

I said to him, 'Why can't they use aircraft and bomb the submarines?'

He was staring towards the kitchen and didn't hear me. I repeated it.

He sighed. 'Oh yes. Same answer, Phillip. There are no fighting aircraft down here. To tell you the truth, we don't have any weapons.'