CHAPTER

Seven

IT SEEMED HOURS but it was probably only one until Timothy said, "Do not be alarm now, young bahss. I am goin' to jump into d'wattah an' kick dis raff to d'shore. Widout dat, we'll pass d'islan', by-'n'-by."

In a moment, I heard a splash on one side of the raft and then Timothy's feet began drumming the water. I guess he was not afraid of sharks this close in. Soon, he yelled, "Boddam, young bahss, boddam." His feet had touched sand. In another few

minutes, the raft lurched and I knew it had grounded.

I listened for sounds from shore, hoping there would be a cheerful "hello," but there were none. Just the wash of the low surf around the raft.

Timothy said, "'Ere, young bahss, on my shoulders an' I'll fetch you to d'lan'." He helped me to his back.

I said, "Don't forget Stew Cat."

He laughed back heartily. "One at a time, young bahss."

With me on his back, he splashed ashore, and judging from the time it took, the raft wasn't very far out. Then he lifted me down again.

"Lan'," he shouted.

The warm sand did feel good on my feet, and now I was almost glad that we wouldn't have to spend another night on the hard, wet boards of the raft.

He said, "Touch it, young bahss. Feel d'lan', 'tis outrageous good."

I reached down. The grains of sand felt very fine, almost like powder.

Timothy said, "'Tis a beautiful cay, dis cay. Nevah hab I seen dis cay." Then he led me to sit under a clump of bushes. He said, "You res' easy while I pull d'raff more out of d'wattah. We mus' not lose it."

I sat there in the shade, running sand through

my fingers, wondering where, among all those many islands in the Caribbean, we were.

Timothy shouted up from the water, "Many feesh 'ere. *Langosta*, too, I b'knowin'. We ros' dem."

Langosta, I knew, was the native lobster, the one without claws. I heard Timothy splashing around down by the surf and knew he was pulling the raft up as far as he could get it.

A moment later, puffing hard, he flopped down beside me. He said, "Cotch me breath, den I will tour d'islan', an' select a place for d'camp. . . ."

He put Stew Cat into my lap.

"Camp?" I asked, stroking big Stew.

Timothy replied, "We mebbe 'ere two, tree days. So we be libin' comfortable."

He could tell I was discouraged because we had come to the island and there were no people on it. He said confidently, "We be rescue, true. Before d'night, I build a great fire pile o' brush an' wood. So d'nex' aircraft dat fly ovah, we set it off."

"Where are we, Timothy? Near Panama?"

He answered slowly, "I cannot be sure, young bahss. Not veree sure."

"But you said you knew about the banks and the cays that are near the banks." I wondered if he knew anything, really, or if he was just a stupid old black man.

Timothy said, "Lissen, I know dat many banks an' cays are roun' fifteen north an' eighty long. Dere is Roncador an' Serranno; Quito Sueño an' Serranilla an' Rosalind; den dere is Beacon an' North Cay. Off to d'wes', somewhere, is Providencia an' San Andrés . . ." He paused a moment and then said, "Far 'way, up dere, I tink, is d'Caymens, an' den Jamaica."

"But you are not sure of this island?"

Timothy answered gravely, "True, I am not sure."

"Do the schooners usually come close by here?" I asked.

Again very gravely, Timothy said, "D'mahn who feeshes follows d'feesh. Sartainly, d'feesh be 'ere. I be seein' wid my own self eyes."

I kept feeling that Timothy was holding something back from me. It was the tone of his voice. I'd heard my father talk that way a few times. Once, when he didn't want to tell me my grandfather was about to die; another time was when a car ran over my dog in Virginia.

Of course, both times happened when I was younger. Now, my father was always honest with me, I thought, because he said that in the end that was better. I wished Timothy would be honest with me.

Instead he got up to take a walk around the cay, saying he'd be back in a few minutes. Then Stew Cat wandered away. I called to him but he seemed to be exploring too. Realizing that I was alone on the beach I became frightened.

I knew how helpless I was without Timothy. First I began calling for Stew Cat but when he didn't

return I began shouting for Timothy. There was no answer. I wondered if he'd fallen down and was hurt. I began to crawl along the beach and ran head on into a clump of low hanging brush.

I sat down again, batting at gnats that were buzzing around my face. Something brushed against my arm, and I yelled out in terror. But I heard a meow and knew it was only Stew Cat. I reached for him and held him tight until I heard brush crackling and sang out, "Timothy?"

"Yes, young bahss," he called back from quite a distance.

When he was closer, I said harshly, "Never leave me again. Don't you ever leave me again!"

He laughed. "Dere is nothin' to fear 'ere. I walked roun' d'whole islan', an' dere is nothin' but sea grape, sand, a few lil' lizzard, an' dose palm tree . . ."

I repeated, "Never leave me alone, Timothy."

"All right, young bahss, I promise," he said.

He must have been looking all around, for he said, "No wattah 'ere, but 'tis no problem. We still 'ave wattah in d'kag, an' we will trap more on d'firs' rain."

Still believing he wasn't telling me everything, I said, "You were gone a long time."

He answered uneasily, "Thirty minutes at mos'. D'islan' is 'bout one mile long, an' a half wide, shaped like d'melon. I foun' a place to make our camp, up near d'palm. 'Twill be a good place for a lookout. D'rise is 'bout forty feet from d'sea."

I nodded, then said, "I'm hungry, Timothy."

We were both hungry. He went back to the raft, took out the keg of water and the tin of biscuits and chocolate.

While we were eating, I said, "You are worried about something, Timothy. Please tell me the truth. I'm old enough to know."

Timothy waited a long time before answering, probably trying to choose the right words. Finally, he said, "Young bahss, dere is, in dis part of d'sea, a few lil' cays like dis one, surround on bot' sides by hombug banks. Dey are cut off from d'res' o' d'sea by dese banks. . . ."

I tried to make a mental picture of that. Several small islands tucked up inside great banks of coral that made navigation dangerous was what I finally decided on.

"You think we are on one of those cays?"

"Mebbe, young bahss, mebbe."

Fear coming back to me—I knew he'd made a mistake in bringing us ashore—I said, "Then no ships will pass even close to us. Not even schooners! We're trapped here!" We might live here forever, I thought.

Again he did not answer directly. I was beginning to learn that he had a way of being honest while still being dishonest. He said, "D'place I am tinking of is call Debil's Mout'. 'Tis a U-shaped ting, wit dese sharp coral banks on either side, runnin' maybe forty, fifty mile. . . ."

He let that sink in. It sounded bad. But then he said, "I do hope, young bahss, dat I am outrageous mistaken."

"If we are in the Devil's Mouth, how can we be rescued?" I asked angrily. It was his fault we were there.

"D'fire pile! When aircraft fly above, dey will see d'smoke an' fire!"

"But they might just think it is a native fisherman. No one else would come here!"

I could picture him nodding, thinking about that. Finally, he said, "True, but we cannot fret 'bout it, can we? We'll make camp, an' see what 'appens."

He poured me a half cup of water, saying happily, "Since we 'ave made lan', we can celebrate."

I drank it slowly and thoughtfully.

CHAPTER

Eight

DURING THE AFTERNOON, Timothy was busy and we did not talk much. He was making a hut of dried palm fronds. I sat near him under a palm. Now that we were on shore, I again began to think about what had happened to my mother. Somehow, I felt she was safe. I was also sure that a search had been started for us, not fully understanding that a war was on and that all the ships and aircraft were needed to fight the U-boats. I even thought about

Henrik van Boven and what a story I would have to tell when I saw him again.

I tried not to think about my eyes, sitting there under the palm, listening to Timothy hum as he made the camp. I trusted him that my sight would return within a few days. I also trusted him that an aircraft would spot our fire pile.

In late afternoon, he said proudly, "Look, our hut!"

I had to remind him again, stupid old man, that I couldn't see, so he took my hands and ran them over the fronds. It was a hut, he said, about eight feet wide and six feet deep, with supports made of wood he'd picked off the beach. The supports were tied together with strong vines that covered the north end of the island.

The roof, which sloped back, he said, was about six feet off the ground. I could easily stand up in it, but Timothy couldn't. Not quite.

Timothy said, "Tomorrow, we be gettin' mats to sleep on, weave our own, but tonight we mus' sleep on d'sand. 'Tis soft."

I knew he was very proud of the hut. It had taken him only a few hours to build it.

"Now," he said, "I mus' go downg to d'reef an' fetch langosta. We'll ros' it, to be true."

I became frightened again the minute he said it. I didn't want to be left alone, and I was afraid something might happen to him. "Take me with you, Timothy," I pleaded.

"Not on d'reef," he answered firmly. "I 'ave not been dere before. If 'tis safe, tomorrow I will take you." With that, he went down the hill without saying another word.

My mother was right, I thought. They had their place and we had ours. He did not really like me, or he would have taken me along. He was different.

It seemed as though he were gone for a very long time. Once, I thought I heard an aircraft, but it was probably just my imagination. I began yelling for Timothy to come back, but I guess he couldn't hear because of water noise on the reef.

The palm fronds above me rattled in the breeze, and there were other noises from the underbrush. I knew Stew Cat was around somewhere, but it didn't sound like him.

I wondered if Timothy had checked for snakes. There were also scorpions on most Caribbean islands, and they were deadly. I wondered if there were any on our cay.

During those first few days on the island, the times I spent alone were terrible. It was, of course, being unable to see that made all the sounds so frightening. I guess if you are born blind, it is not so bad. You grow up knowing each sound and what it means.

Suddenly, the tears came out. I knew it was not a manly thing to do, something my father would have frowned on, but I couldn't stop. Then from nowhere came Stew Cat. He rubbed along my arms

and up against my cheek, purring hard. I held him close.

Soon, Timothy came up the hill, shouting, "Young bahss, tree nice langosta."

I refused to speak to him because he had left me for such a long time.

He stood over me and said, "'Ere, touch dem, dey are still alive." He was almost crowing over his lobster.

I turned away. Sooner or later, Timothy would have to understand that he could not ignore me one minute and then treat me as a friend the next.

He said softly, "Young bahss, be an outrageous mahn if you like, but 'ere I'm all you got."

I didn't answer.

He roasted the langosta over the fire, and later we crawled into the hut to spend our first night on the silent island.

Timothy seemed very tired and groaned a lot. Before we went to sleep, I asked him, "Tell me the truth, Timothy, how old are you?"

He sighed deeply, "More dan seventy. Eben more dan seventy. . . ."

He was very old. Old enough to die there.

In the morning, Timothy began making the fire pile down on the beach. He had a plan. We'd always keep a small fire smoldering up by the hut, and if an airplane came near, he'd take a piece of burning wood from our small fire to ignite the big one. That

way, he said, we could save the few matches that we had.

It didn't take him long to stack driftwood over dried palm fronds. Then he said, "Now, young bahss, we mus' say somethin' on d'san'."

Sometimes it was difficult to understand Timothy. The soft and beautiful West Indian accent and way of speaking weren't always clear.

"Say something on the sand?" I asked.

"So dey be knowin' we are downg 'ere," he explained patiently.

"Who?"

"D'mahn in d'sky, of course."

"Oh." Now I understood.

I guess Timothy was standing there looking at me, waiting for me to say something or do something. I heard him say, "Well, young bahss."

"What do we do now?" I asked.

His voice now impatient, he said, "Say somethin' wid d'rock, wid many rock; eeevery rock be sayin' somethin'. . . ."

I frowned at him. "I don't think I can help you, Timothy. I can't see any rocks."

Timothy groaned. "I can see d'rock, young bahss. But what do we say?"

I laughed at him, enjoying it now. "We say 'help.'"

He grunted satisfaction.

For the next twenty or thirty minutes, I could hear Timothy dropping rocks against each other,

singing softly to himself in calypso. It was a song about "fungee an' feesh." I'd had "fungi" in Willemstad down in the blacks' market at Ruyterkade. It was just plain old corn meal. But most food has different names in the islands.

Soon, he came to stand over me. "Now, young bahss," he said. He seemed to be waiting.

"Yes?"

There was a silence until Timothy broke it with anguish. "Wid d'rock, say 'help.'"

I looked up in his direction and suddenly understood that Timothy could not spell. He was just too stubborn, or too proud, to admit it.

I nodded and began feeling around the sand for a stick.

He asked, "What you reachin' for?"

"A stick to make lines with."

He placed one in my hands, and I carefully lettered H-E-L-P on the sand while he stood above me, watching. He kept murmuring, "Ah-huh, ah-huh," as if making sure I was spelling it correctly.

When I had finished, Timothy said approvingly, "I tell you, young bahss, dat do say help." Then he happily arranged the rocks on the sand, following my lines.

I felt good. I knew how to do something that Timothy couldn't do. *He couldn't spell.* I felt superior to Timothy that day, but I let him play his little game, pretending not to know that he really couldn't spell.