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 gasoline, kerosene, 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 colors, pinks and greens and blues, and there are no dikes.

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 toward 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

harbor, 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-colored and his cheeks were always red. Henrik was very serious about everything he said or did. He looked toward 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 toward the sea again. It was blue and peaceful, and a good breeze churned it up, making lines of whitecaps. White clouds drifted slowly over it. But I couldn't see the usual parade of ships coming toward the harbor; the stubby ones or the massive ones with flags of many nations that steamed slowly up the bay to the Schottegat to load gas 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 yard 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 program to increase production of aviation gas. 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 second 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 gasoline production. But the moment she saw it, my mother decided she didn't like Curaçao and she often complained about the smell of gas 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 gas 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 toward 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."

CHAPTER

Two

WE FINISHED DINNER just as it was getting dark, and my father went outside to look at our house. He wanted to see if the blackout curtains were working. While my mother and I stood by each window, he called out if he saw the slightest crack of light. By the governor's orders, not a light could shine anywhere on the whole island, he said. Then he went back to the refinery.

I crawled onto the couch downstairs about nine o'clock but I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about the

U-boats off our coast and those lake tankers with barefooted Chinese sailors on board. I guess I was waiting for the U-boats to send a shell toward Willemstad.

Then I began to wonder if the Germans would send soldiers too. About nine-thirty I sneaked out of bed, went to the tool house, and took a hatchet out. I put it under the couch. It was the only thing I could think of to use for fighting the Germans.

It must have been eleven o'clock when my father returned from the refinery to get all the flashlights we had in the house. They talked in low voices, but I could hear them.

Mother said, "It's too dangerous to stay here now."

My father answered, "Grace, you know I can't leave."

She said, "Well, then Phillip and I must go back. We'll go back to Norfolk and wait until the danger is over."

I sat up in bed, unable to believe what I was hearing. My father said, "There's more danger in the trip back, unless you go by air, than there is in staying here. If they do shell us, they won't hit Scharloo."

Mother said sharply, "You know I won't fly. I'd be frightened to death to fly."

"We'll talk about it later." My father sounded

miserable. Soon afterward he returned to the refinery again.

I thought about leaving the island, and it saddened me. I loved the old fort, and the schooners, the Ruyterkade market with the noisy chickens and squealing pigs, the black people shouting; I loved the koenoekoe with its giant cactus; the divi-divi trees, their odd branches all on the leeward side of the trunk; the beautiful sandy beach at Westpunt. And I'd miss Henrik van Boven.

I also knew that Henrik and his mother would think us cowardly if we left just because a few German submarines were off Curaçao. I was awake most of the night.

The next morning my father said that the Chinese crews on the lake tankers that shuttled crude oil across the sand bars at Maracaibo had refused to sail without naval escorts. He said the refinery would have to close down within a day, and that meant precious gas and oil could not go to England, or to General Montgomery in the African desert.

For seven days, not a ship moved by the Queen Emma bridge, and there was gloom over Willemstad. The people had been very proud that the little islands of Aruba and Curaçao were now among the most important islands in the world; that victory or defeat depended on them. They were angry with the Chinese crews, and on the third day, my

father said that mutiny charges had been placed against them.

"But," he said, "you must understand they are very frightened, and some of the people who are angry with them would not sail the little ships either."

He explained to me what it must feel like to ride the cargoes of crude oil, knowing that a torpedo or shell could turn the whole ship into flames any moment. Even though he wasn't a sailor, he volunteered to help man the lake tankers.

Soon, of course, we might also run out of fresh water. It rains very little in the Dutch West Indies unless there is a hurricane, and water from the few wells has a heavy salt content. The big tankers from the United States or England always carried fresh water to us in ballast, and then it was distilled again so that we could drink it. But now, all the big tankers were being held up in their ports until the submarines could be chased away.

Toward the end of the week, we began to run out of fresh vegetables because the schooner-men were also afraid. Now, my mother talked constantly about the submarines, the lack of water, and the shortage of food. It almost seemed that she was using the war as an excuse to leave Curaçao.

"The ships will be moving again soon," my father said confidently, and he was right.

I think it was February 21 that some of the Chinese sailors agreed to sail to Lake Maracaibo. But

on that same day a Norwegian tanker, headed for Willemstad, was torpedoed off Curaçao, and fear again swept over the old city. Without our ships, we were helpless.

Then a day or two later, my father took me into the Schottegat where they were completing the loading of the S.S. *Empire Tern*, a big British tanker. She had machine guns fore and aft, one of the few armed ships in the harbor.

Although the trade wind was blowing, the smell of gas and oil lay heavy over the Schottegat. Other empty tankers were there, high out of the water, awaiting orders to sail once they had cargoes. The men on them were leaning over the rail watching all the activity on the *Empire Tern*.

I looked on as the thick hoses that were attached to her quivered when the gasoline was pumped into her tanks. The fumes shimmered in the air, and one by one, they "topped" her tanks, loading them right to the brim and securing them for sea. No one said very much. With all that aviation gasoline around, it was dangerous.

Then in the afternoon, we went to Punda and stood near the pontoon bridge as she steamed slowly down St. Anna Bay. Many others had come to watch, too, even the governor, and we all cheered as she passed, setting out on her lonely voyage to England. There, she would help refuel the Royal Air Force.

The sailors on the *Empire Tern*, which was painted

a dull white but had rust streaks all over her, waved back at us and held up their fingers in a V-for-victory sign.

We watched until the pilot boat, having picked up the harbor pilot from the *Empire Tern*, began to race back to Willemstad. Just as we were ready to go, there was an explosion and we looked toward the sea. The *Empire Tern* had vanished in a wall of red flames, and black smoke was beginning to boil into the sky.

Someone screamed, "There it is." We looked off to one side of the flames, about a mile away, and saw a black shape in the water, very low. It was a German submarine, surfaced now to watch the ship die.

A tug and several small motorboats headed out toward the *Tern*, but it was useless. Some of the women cried at the sight of her, and I saw men, my father included, with tears in their eyes. It didn't seem possible that only a few hours before I had been standing on her deck. I was no longer excited about the war; I had begun to understand that it meant death and destruction.

That same night, my mother told my father, "I'm taking Phillip back to Norfolk." I knew she'd made up her mind.

He was tired and disheartened over what had happened to the *Empire Tern*. He did not say much. But I do remember him saying, "Grace, I think you are making a mistake. You are both quite safe here

in Scharloo." I wondered why he didn't simply order her to stay. But he wasn't that kind of a man.

The sunny days and dark, still nights passed slowly during March. The ships had begun to sail again, defying the submarines. Some were lost. Henrik and I often went down to Punda to watch them go out, hoping that they would be safe.

Neither my father nor my mother talked very much about us leaving. I thought that when two American destroyers arrived, along with the Dutch cruiser *Van Kingsbergen*, to protect the lake tankers, Mother would change her mind. But it only made her more nervous.

Then one day in early April, she said, "Your father has finally secured passage for us, so today will be your last day in school here, Phillip. We'll start packing tomorrow, and on Friday, we leave aboard a ship for Miami. Then we'll take the train to Norfolk."

Suddenly, I felt hollow inside. Then I became angry and accused her of being a coward. She told me to go off to school. I said I hated her.

All that day in school, I tried to think of what I could do. I thought about going somewhere and hiding until the ship had sailed, but on an island the size of Curaçao, there is no place to hide. Also, I knew it would cause my father trouble.

That night when he got home, I told him I wanted to stay with him. He smiled and put his

long, thin arm around my shoulder. He said, "No, Phillip, I think it is best that you go with your mother. At a time like this, I can't be at home very much."

His voice seemed sad, although he was trying to be cheerful. He told me how wonderful it would be to return to the United States; how many things I had missed while we were on the island. I couldn't think of one.

Then I talked to my mother about staying on in Willemstad, and she became very upset with both of us. She said that we didn't love her and began to cry.

My father finally ended it by saying, "Phillip, the decision is made. You'll leave Friday with your mother."

So I packed, with her help, and said good-by to Henrik van Boven and the other boys. I told them we'd be gone just a short time; that we were going to visit my grandparents, my mother's parents, in Norfolk. But I had the feeling that it might be a very long time before I saw Curaçao and my father again.

Early Friday morning, we boarded the S.S. *Hato* in St. Anna Channel. She was a small Dutch freighter with a high bow and stern, and a bridge house in the middle between two well decks. I had seen her often in St. Anna Bay. Usually, she ran between Willemstad, Aruba, and Panama. She

had a long stack and always puffed thick, black smoke.

In our cabin, which was on the starboard side and opened out to the boat deck, my father said, "Well, you can rest easy, Phillip. The Germans would never waste a torpedo on this old tub." Yet I saw him looking over the lifeboats. Then he inspected the fire hoses on the boat deck. I knew he was worried.

There were eight other passengers aboard, and they were all saying good-by to their relatives just as we were saying good-by to my father. In the tradition, people brought flowers and wine. It was almost like sailing in the days before the war, they told me.

Father was smiling and very gay but when the *Hato*'s whistle blasted out three times, meaning it was time to go, he said good-by to us between clenched teeth. I clung to him for a long time. Finally, he said, "Take good care of your mother."

I said I would.

We sailed down St. Anna Bay, and the Queen Emma bridge parted for us. Through watery eyes, I saw the fort and the old buildings of Punda and Otrabanda. Native schooners were beating in from the sea.

Then my mother pointed. I saw a tall man standing on the wall of Fort Amsterdam, waving at us. I knew it was my father. I'll never forget that tall, lonely figure standing on the sea wall.

The S.S. *Hato* took her first bite of open sea and began to pitch gently. We turned toward Panama, as we had to make a call there before proceeding to Miami. Down on the well decks, fore and aft, were four massive pumps that had to be delivered to Colón, the port at the Atlantic entrance to the Panama Canal.

I stayed out on deck for a long time, sitting by the lifeboat, looking back at Curaçao, feeling lonely and sad.

Finally my mother said, "Come inside now."