

Not Your Day To Die

Chapter one

MAURITIUS BOUND

"Your attention please. This is the last call for passengers for British Airways flight number BA065 to Mauritius via Dubai and Seychelles. Passengers are kindly requested to board immediately".

This message came several times through the intercom, as I dashed through the waiting lounge, among a mass of people of all sizes, shapes and colours making it to the check-in desk in time. Sometimes I had to dodge the trolley that suddenly swerved in my way or I had to brake sharply, figuratively speaking of course, to avoid face-to-face crash with a fat woman who had made a U-turn in front of me without warning.

"You almost missed your flight, Mr....?" said the charming hostess pausing to check and get my name correctly and opening my passport.

"Mr. Denning," I pointed out.

"Oh, yes. Mr. Chris Denning. You must be the famous writer," the beautiful young woman said, radiating such a magnetising smile.

She instantly reminded me of the sensuous Joan Collins of the seventies. How I wished I had met that young lady at a different place, a different time, under different circumstances.

"I've read one of your books. The Mystics," she continued, displaying her more hidden charms, this time with the sweetness in her voice. She would have been quite something in intimacy, in complete privacy.

"Did you like the book?"

"Yes, indeed. You are a superb writer."

"Novelist," I stressed.

"It's all the same. Good-bye Mr. Denning. Have a good flight and a nice holiday," she said, bidding me a farewell with the same bewitching smile that kept me thinking of her, for a long time during the flight.

I got a seat in the rear of the Boeing 747, in the area reserved for smokers.

"Smoking is bad, that's what they say when they put a thing like 'smoking is injurious to health' on cigarette packets. Why don't they just simply ban the sale of the damn thing?" I always asked myself.

"But they won't, for it would leave big holes in the Chancellor's coffers," came the answer.

The take-off was smooth. I lit a cigarette as soon as the "No Smoking" sign went off. I closed my eyes and thought of all the difficulties I had in preparing for this trip, financially. I was only too aware of the dire situation I was leaving my family in, back in Wimbledon.

"Novelist. That's a grand title. It conjures a playboy style of living, a penthouse or mansion as residence, and driving a Porsche, a Lamborghini, or some other fancy car around!" I meditated.

"It hasn't been like that for me. I could have made it to the top, hadn't my last two books been complete flops. They weren't really that bad. They did get some good press reviews in the literary columns. It must be the recession. Too long a recession. People don't have money to spare, not on books, I guess."

"Would you like something to drink, sir," I hear a male voice say.

I opened my eyes. It was a steward. "Yes. I'll have a beer."

Lately, my taste for refinement, following a streak of bad luck and financial hardship, had diminished. I became quite happy with a beer, while previously it would have been, unmistakably, a gin and tonic.

I found that, during the time I had my eyes closed, a man of retiring age had moved in the seat next to the aisle, leaving an unoccupied seat between us. This man was going to be someone, I was never going to forget.

The man had ordered a neat scotch. He was travelling alone, just like I was. He was smartly dressed and still had his navy-blue corduroy jacket on. The temperature inside was fine compared to the December wintry snow around Gatwick Airport when we took off. The man appeared to be feeling cold.

"Hello. I'm Chris Denning. How far are you going?" I said, turning to him.

"All the way. I'm on my last journey," he replied, seeming friendly and pleasant.

Yet I could detect a kind of melancholy about him.

By the looks and manners, he gave me the impression of a thorough-bred British. I could not make out what he meant by "last journey". Probably, he was an ex-patriate, already settled in Mauritius, returning there from his European visit.

"Have you been in Mauritius for long?" I inquired, full of presumption.

"Good heaven, no! I was on the island some twenty years ago. What about you,

Mr. Denning? Is this your first visit to Mauritius?"

"I'm afraid yes. Can't afford the luxury of travelling much."

"Going to Mauritius for business or pleasure?"

I wished he had not me that question. That was a subject I did not want particularly brought up. But since the question was put, an answer was inevitable, out of sheer politeness.

"You may call it business."

"What business are you in Mr. Denning?"

I began to feel nervous. I did not want to talk about my failure. I took out a Benson and Hedges and offered one to my neighbour.

"Would you like a cigarette, Mr...?"

"Call me Allan. No, thank you. I don't smoke. Used to. I gave it up a few years ago. But drinks! They are the things I live by. Can't really do without them."

Sure enough, he called the steward for his fourth scotch, always taking them neat. I could not help thinking that, at that rate, he would soon be knocked out.

"You didn't tell me what business you are in, Chris. May I call you 'Chris'?"

"I write books. Not much of a business, is it?" I said hesitatingly.

"What kind of books do you write?"

"Novels, thrillers and that sort. But I haven't had much luck recently. Inspirations seem to have deserted me. I'm off to the tropics, in search of fresh materials."

"That's very interesting. I've always wanted to write. But a thing like that does not come naturally to me. I've been more a man of action, less of words. Eventually after long, sustained effort, I've managed something in the form of a book," Allan said humbly.

"Anything new is difficult at first," I remarked, with a view to be encouraging.

"Oh, ho! Don't think that I'm trying to turn into a writer. It's too late now," he let out, bursting into laughter.

"My friend, I'll make you a surprise," Allan continued and got up from his seat to reach the luggage rack overhead.

"Leave it for later," I pleaded.

"No, I've something to show you," he insisted.

Allan took some time to get out a small holdall and, barely able to stand upright, he opened the bag. He took out a neatly rolled bundle of white sheets, secured by an elastic band.

"Chris, my friend," he said, his speech spotless, despite being definitely drunk.

"Chris, you're a writer. I'm not. You are looking for fresh materials. I've got this. You take this. It won't be of any use to me. But it can be of use to you. See if you can use it," Allan went on, handing me the white bundle.

"What is this?" I asked politely, trying not to offend this amiable man.

"It's my book, for whatever it's worth. It's my first and last book. It's the book of an unsung hero, of the one Friday of my life, that scarred my mind and heart forever."

So saying, Allan collapsed on his seat with a thump. Two air hostesses rushed to him.

"Is he alright?" one of them asked.

"He's O.K. Just too drunk. He's about to pass out," I pointed out.

I helped the young ladies to ease Allan in a comfortable, reclining position onto his seat. Very soon he was snoring away. He slept through the remaining flight, the stops at Dubai and Seychelles, inclusive. There appeared to be something mysterious about this man, something wishing to be let out.

My new travel companion having retired to slumberland, I found myself alone for the rest of the journey, with ample time to put my thoughts together. Thoughts of Linda and baby Jane back home, thoughts of what if I don't find suitable materials for my next story intermingled with the thoughts of the sensuous young woman at Gatwick.

I only got out in transit at Dubai and strolled in the duty free shops, being over cautious with my expenses. Allan was still fast asleep when the Boeing landed at the Seychelles. There was another six-hours jump to Plaisance Airport.

I was anxious to get on with my job of starting with my new book. My publishers had given me little to come up with something interesting. If I failed to do so it would mean the severance of our contract, the end of my career.

When the plane took off again, I was at the peak of anxiety and boredom. I let out a big yawn, stretching my arms and legs. As I did so, my right hand fell on to the bundle of papers lying on the middle seat. I unrolled

it to find many, many A4 size sheets, written on only one side, in a handwriting which should be classed nothing else but "artistic", with chapters, headings, sheet numbers and all.

To kill the time, with Allan snoring ceaselessly on my right, I began to read. Quickly engrossed, I took account of Arjen, the unsung hero, on that fateful Friday.

Chapter 2

A FRIDAY AT DAWN

Arjen opened his eyes. In his waking daze he could hear their family rooster crowing as it had done for as long as he could remember at this time of the night. It pained him, a skinny young lad who had only the previous week turned twelve, to have to get up so early in the morning. Very conscientious, the poor boy was, of where lay his youthful and innocent duties. He was aware of the tasks, awaiting for him in the day, rain or shine. There was no getting away from them. He was well determined that nothing could stop him from moving ahead in life. That showed that he had reached reasonable maturity well before his age.

He stood up on the wrinkled rag-torn blanket, serving him as both mattress and cover during those cold winter months. The nights of the past few weeks, colder than usual for that month of August, had made sleeping difficult, since heat insulation in the two-roomed, corrugated ironsheet house was non-existent.

The crowing of the old black cock continued intermittently, giving the impression of being tired of so doing, but nevertheless, trying to make sure that its young master was well and truly awake.

It all started on a similar cold, wintry morning, following a stormy night, with a strong wind and heavy rain, thunder and lightning, which are common in anti-cyclonic weather over the Mascarenes and especially, the island of Mauritius. It was almost four years to the day.

As it had become a do-or-die obligation since his father's premature disability had rendered him invalid for work two years earlier, Arjen was out on his way to look for fodder for the goats before sunrise. He was not far from home, on the long and winding lane bearing deep marks of cart wheels of decades of their use transporting sugarcanes to the nearby sugar factory which were drawn by brahmans.

Delighted by the sight of a nice bunch of acacia leaves, on which thrived his tiny goats in the middle of a large wild berry bush, the boy, barely eight years of age then, approached the thorny plant carefully. While parting the thin, twiggy branches of the berry tree and utterly avoiding the needle-sharp thorns, (one prick of which could easily make a grown-up dizzy), the little fodder-seeker heard a faint chirping noise. At first he did not mind the noise, thinking that it was probably a small red canary, a species of bird very common around his native village, Goodlands, four miles off the Northern coast.

Soon he realised how mistaken he was. Bending down and poking his head through the prune leaves, he gasped when he saw a beautiful black chick, about two month old, huddled against some dry leaves in a hole below a fair-sized rock. He was delighted and perplexed too to see the newly-found feathery creature in such a place, at such a time. He scrambled on all fours to reach out and drag the creature out of its hiding place.

By then little Arjen had lost count of time. Engrossed in thoughts, his mind was working as to what to do next.

"No school today?" asked a familiar voice from a distance and, without turning his head, the boy recognised Grand-dad Rubein on one of his daily morning trips to those untended fields, to pasture his ox during intercrop season.

The pair of bare feet, too young to carry its own body, hurried home, laden with a huge bundle of grass on its head and a safely and softly held tiny life in its right palm.

"Go and put back that chick where you found it," shouted Sheila angrily; Arjen's mother, a strikingly beautiful and shapely woman in her late twenties, on her way to work at St. Antoine sugar estate.

"Don't you know that this kind of chick brings bad luck?" continued the young mother loudly.

"People, performing ritual ceremonies, make offerings to don't-know-who-or-what use these young black cocks, letting them free in the wild and hoping that they take away with them forever all the worshipper's evil and bad luck." Seeing the sobbing eyes flooded with tears, Sheila felt for her precious but unfortunate son.

"Alright my son, you can keep it. We have plenty of bad luck already. We cannot be worse off if we have some more," conceded the sympathetic mother.

Jen, as his mother called him, smiled and inwardly named his new friend "Chance" which means luck in Creole. That was four years, almost, since. Chnace had grown into an old bird, but its feathers still had a lustre of silky black. Had it not been for the devoted care of his young benefactor, he would have disappeared into a prized chicken curry for anyone in the neighbourhood long ago!

On many occasions offers were made to Mrs. Dave for the animal. Once, she had decided to sell it. It was New Year. Things were really bad at home and she needed money to buy some clothes for the children, especially for baby Leila, who had not had a decent dress for over a year.

"We shall sell the cock," she said very gently to Jen as he was about to go to sleep in his corner of the floor, replenished over the years by repeated layers of mixture of soil, cow dung and water.

The meal of that evening was terribly disappointing and meagre, consisting of boiled manioc from the next-door garden and green tomato and chilli chutney. The pang of hunger was clearly visible in the eyes of her growing young man of the house. She was moved by the sight, and realised quickly the sheer heartbreak Arjen would have been going through at the thought of losing the only thing in the world that he might call his own.

"My dear son, we shan't do it. I know how much you love Chance. And of course, without him, none of us would get up on time in the morning."

Her tactful retraction, from the initial decision, wiped out the pain from the boy's face. Chance stayed with the Daves, safe and sound.

Just to show how right Sheila's decision had been, the old rooster kept on announcing the dawn of the day every twenty-four hours, just as he did that particular Friday morning. The time was about five o'clock; still more than an hour to go before the first rays of the sun would appear behind the group of mango trees by the narrow asphalt road, full of potholes caused by the recent, torrential downfalls that had lasted for days.

Arjen moved across the room, taking due care not to walk over his father who was soundly asleep. There slept a very poor and bitter man. When Arjen was two, his father was a very envied man, envied by his peers and envied by the young woman of the village. Standing five feet and ten inches tall, always clean shaven and spruced, he gave the impression of a movie star of James Bond calibre. But since some times earlier, a series of bad luck seemed to have taken hold of him.

When Nathan Dave and Sheila faced each other for the first time, at a distant cousin's wedding reception, in Factory Road, Goodlands, they felt an instant, magnetic effect. There was no holding back their infatuation, and consequently, they were joined in Holy Matrimony a few months later. Instead of marital bliss, it appeared that Fate reserved a streak of ill-luck for the newly-wedded couple.

Within months, Mr. Dave lost his socially uplifting job as an overseer on a sugar estate near Mahebourg, a South-Eastern ancient port-town. Together with the well remunerated job, he also lost the fully furnished staff-bungalow and all the perks that went with it.

Far from exasperating them the Daves kept up appearance till Arjen was born. The birth of their son called a short truce with Fate, giving enough time to Nathan to leave the south of the island and move to the north

near Goodlands, where he got a job with a much smaller pay, in a small sugar estate. This time there was no furnished house to go with it, neither were there any perks. After the lapse of degrading unemployment, the new change in their life was greeted with ample satisfaction. They resumed their living at the previously accustomed rate.

The newly found happiness was but short-lived. The worst was still in store. One bright sunny morning when the world outside was in full gaiety, their world crumbled. Nathan, all happy and ready to leave for work, felt a sudden sharp pain on the left side of his chest. He fell down on the doorstep. He had an acute stroke. Since that day, he had become an invalid, suffering from right hemiplegia, his right limbs almost useless. Had he had suicidal tendencies, he would have done away with his burdened life long ago.

Nathan slept most of the time, in a bid to shorten his waking hours. He did not even know what time Arjen had woken up that morning and what his son was about to do. Signs were that another fateful day was dawning for the Dave family.

Before the boy had time to feel his way out of the pitch-dark room, he heard a shrieking crowing right in his ears. His father woke up, gasping.

"What's that?" he burst.

He repeated his question in a loud mumble, joining in cacophony with the devilish crowing, while trying to sit up hurriedly, something which proved very difficult, as he could not make use of either of his right limbs.

"It's nothing, Pa. Just our cock that's going berserk this morning," Jen reassured his visibly shaken father.

Chance had quietly slipped down from his perch, on the top of the guava tree, growing close to the iron sheetings that bordered the humble hut.

It had crept through the two-foot-square opening acting as a window, overlooking the Manns, on the other side of the road. Standing on the old dining table, (the only family heirloom remaining of the magnificent furniture that once adorned Arjen's grandfather's bungalow) the cock gave a second burst of its defying throat, that echoed back in the tiny tin-house.

"Oh God!" exclaimed Mrs. Dave from the other room.

"This is indeed a bad omen. I have been having strange dreams, a kind of premonition, for some time now. This cock, singing in the night, in the middle of our house, is killing me with worry," she continued.

Arjen tried to reassure his mother.

"Forget it, Mother," he said, "on the contrary, all this can be a good omen, signalling us the end of our miseries. Have faith, Mummy. In answer to all your devoted praying, the Good Lord cannot but have pity on us. To tell you the truth, I, too, have been sensing things in the air. But unlike you, I feel a drastic change is about to happen to our lives. This time for the better."

The young man's intervention had the intended result.

"You are right, Jen," rejoined Sheila, "faith is the only thing left to us. That's something we cannot lose."

The quietness and calmness that were there when Arjen woke up that morning and that were instantly shattered by Chance's very unusual behaviour, returned in the poor household. Mother had lit the paraffin lamp, a small glass bottle with a screw metal top, and a thin strip from an old cotton shirt, as a wick, placed on the edge of the table. The flickering light was casting a semi-circular dark patch on the dried-mud floor and, in its subdued lightning, it disclosed the rooster under the table, pecking at the straight line of black ants, moving a dead housefly in a concerted effort towards their hole three feet away.

The time was half past five in the morning. It was still night outside and all four members of the Dave family were up. Nathan was sitting propped up against a small heap of old gunny sacks. He was puffing quite nervously at a hand rolled fag, which his wife had lit for him. He was having difficulty in reaching the

used sardine-tin, his make-do ashtray left a bit further away on his left, purposely to avoid any accidental dropping of cinders, or lit cigarette on the fire-prone materials, on which he was lying. It was a wise precautionary measure on behalf of his family.

Arjen, outside the house by then, gave a big yawn, while stretching his arms from above his head bringing them slowly down, bending backward, to his sides.

"Come on, clean your teeth, son," the young mother said, handing the youth a tin can of tepid water which she just took out from a small pot on a fire-wood stove, outside in the open. The boy took a small piece of charcoal in his mouth, crunched into bits with his teeth and into a fine gritty paste, just right to use his forefinger to rub around his teeth with it. He took a mouthful of water from the can, gargled lengthily, and as if making faces to the darkness outside, he was rolling the water in his mouth. His cheeks, pouching from right to left and right again, in time to spew the water in a straight jet spray, hitting a roving stray cat that had just appeared a metre away in the dark.

The feline intruder backstepped in spontaneous retreat, leaping over the makeshift goat barn and disappearing without knowing what hit him. The billy goat bolted in its harem, too crowded for the eight concubines, who let out several long loud bleats.

These goats were the reason why Arjen had to get up so early each morning. Animals as they were, they were obviously unable to realise the daunting task it would be for a tender twelve year-old to walk miles and miles, day in, day out, fetching them their fresh grass.

Within a few minutes, four or five pinches of dry tea leaves, a commodity very cheaply available on the island as it was locally produced, were dropped in the pot of boiling water. Tea was ready. Sheila served her son an enamel mug full of that neat fuming hot brew, liberally sugared. Sugar, just like tea, was equally cheap as compared to milk which was a luxury that only the well-off could afford, even though it was rumoured that tons of powdered milk were donated by friendly countries like Australia and New Zealand.

Arjen sat on the flat rock, a foot high, which had been there since he was a toddler. Munching a roll of pancake, the easiest thing to cook for a breakfast when one is poor, by pouring a gooey mixture of flour, sugar and water on a hot pan, Arjen thought of the day ahead of him. Joy emanated from his face as visibility improved around them.

Chance, a black beauty of a cock, was busy with a piece of pancake cackling happily at his master's feet. In the dawning daylight, its scarlet crown lying sideways on his head and the long plumes on the tail arching downwards, the big bird looked majestic.

"I am going mow, Mum," said Jen to his mother, who was changing the dress of little Leila, after having given her the one wash of the day.

The daughter, four years old, looked petite indeed for her age. Her birth was met with real mixed feeling since it resulted from a rare intimate moment Sheila had had with her husband.

"Be very careful, Jen," implored the Mother. "Every day I fear for you, knowing that you have to go deep in the sugar cane fields for a sack of grass. The sugar canes are very tall and dense at this time of the year."

"Don't you worry for me, dear Mother," answered Arjen. "Who would gain anything by doing harm to a poor boy like me? Anyhow, even if I am only a boy, I feel strong and clever as a man."

The woman filled with motherly love and recognised some truth in what her son had just said.

"This is something that I am really proud of my son, knowing that I have a, albeit young, but strong pair of shoulders to lean on."

The boy ran to his mother, cuddled her tightly round the waist and standing on his toes, he kissed her on both cheeks.

"I love you very much Mummy. And Daddy and Leila too. I am going to work hard, very hard, and one day we will be very rich, you'll see," the boy said, as tears flooded his eyes.

Nathan was following their conversation from inside the house. His heart ached as he watched Arjen's frail body, through the opened wooden door, in the twilight, getting ready to go on his routine morning job.

A flood of old cherished dreams rushed into the poverty-stricken father's mind. They came vividly in front of him the day when his baby son, his very first child had been born. All the wishful thinking he had engaged in about his son growing into the happiest child, the exciting adolescent, and the flamboyant young man, a successful academic career, culminating in a liberal profession such as a doctor or lawyer. But coming back to reality, Nathan's heart sank.

"Jen! Jen! Come over here. I want to speak to you," Nathan called from inside. The lad approached his father obediently, stood and looked over him.

"Come on, sit down on the floor, by my side. I know how unhappy you are, having to look after your invalid father. But son, I am sure that some day you will reap the benefit of all the kindness you've shown to your miserable father. Maybe I shan't be here to see it. But as sure as every cloud has its silver lining, I'm convinced your life will have its share of sunshine on day. May God bless you my son and the sooner."

Arjen did not say a word to his Father, for he could not think of anything that could have soothed his father's bitterness. He stood up, leaving his Father in all his melancholy.

"See you later, alligator," said Arjen finally, a phrase he had picked up from his Father, who in his youth was a great fan of Buddy Holly of Rock-n-roll fame.

Nathan gave a forced smile and waved off his son.

The early morning riser stepped out of the house which resembled more like a shed, and into the small yard, where the rooster was moving about quietly. Sheila was busy preparing something, a kind of potato fricasse and boiled rice, the common diet for the day for the family. Arjen picked the sickle, with partly broken handle, very pointed at the tip, and half its teeth missing from above the goats' shelter and a gunny sack from inside, and walked to the road, a few steps away, in the direction of the Mann's.

Visibility was good then. Leila ran behind her brother to meet him, almost tripping over a pebble lying on her way.

"Jen! Take me with you! You never take me with you!" the little girl said, pulling her brother by his loose shirt.

"I'll take you every day next year when you are grown up. I promise you. This morning I am going to get you some crabs, as it is low tide right now. I know you like crab soup. There are some nice crabs at Bassin Bel. Mother will be delighted to have some for tomorrow."

When Arjen was ten metres on his way, a sound of music came from Uncle Mann's house. On rising, Mr. Mann had the habit of switching on his radio, the only one in that neighbourhood. Mr. Mann was a keen short-wave radio listener and he used to tune in to the BBC every morning.

Just after the signature tune, a voice announced, "This is London; the news read by Reginald Moore. According to an uninformed report, the Royal Prince is not well and has to stay indoors for some time. The Royal Prince is in Australia as part of his schooling..."

Chapter 3

BASSIN BEL

A big ball of fire was poking out of the sea, spreading its warmth across the horizon, as Arjen neared a small bay of Bassin Bel. The long golden rays darting from the sun were reflecting colours on the crystal water, making starring twinkling patches on the calm lagoon. The silhouette of two fishermen in their boat, large round hats on their heads, busy putting up their sail, gave the only sign of life there. Except for the flock of white seagulls that flew swiftly overhead, making piercing cries, and disappeared on Amber Island, a dense forest growing out of the sea.

The whole scene was enchantingly beautiful that any budding artist would dream to put it to canvas. Arjen approached the beach from the North, having done a long and tiring walk along narrow dark paths through the sugar cane fields. He had reached the first clearings before getting a wide stretch covered with tall filao trees, over forty feet high, their long evergreen spindle-like leaves swaying and whistling in the breeze.

The pitch of the whistling noise varied according to the strength of the wind. Under the filao trees grew a kind of soft, cushion-like, pale green grass where sea-goers were keen to lie down and rest. That was exactly what the boy wanted to do. He laid his gunny sack on the grass between two thick roots above the ground of an old tree, possibly the oldest, growing for more than a hundred years, and sat down in the snug place, as if on a armchair. He had been sleeping there for some time. Arjen was a good looking boy. A crop of black, thin and slightly greasy hair was just long enough to cover his ears. He had a handsome face, with matching nose and chin. He had silky, light, brown skin.

Arjen was wearing an old khaki short-sleeved shirt, and shorts, torn with little holes here and there. His clothes had been mended on several occasions. The lean right shoulder blade could be seen through a large split in the top of the shirt. The cloth round his trouser's pockets was frilling, and a small hole near his groin revealed that the boy did not have underpants. There were several scars on his right leg; a big one just below his right knee, caused by an abscess a few years earlier. The state of his soles greyish and rough, indicated that the young man had never worn shoes.

Arjen felt a cold wet thing touch his toes. Initially he thought that it was drop of rain. But when his right leg was touched by something furry, he sprang to his feet. He beheld a huge dog, a kind he had never seen before, a Doberman, sniffing everything in front of him.

The lone boy was almost frightened out of his wits. He was shivering but kept himself close to the old filao tree, expecting a savage attack by the dog, at any moment. He was trying to work out what he would do just in case the attack came.

To his amazement, the Doberman continued sniffing around and gradually moved away, without a growl, bark or whimper, amongst the trees to the other side of the clearing.

"Where could this animal come from? Anyhow, I shouldn't worry anymore now. It's gone," Arjen thought to himself.

The sun was shining brightly in the blue sky, over the small island forest, a mile from there. Arjen left the tree where he had his nap, and took the direction of the muddy bay full of crabs for picking. He followed a very narrow path, wide enough for one person only, to walk at a time.

Ten minutes later, he arrived at the lime kiln at the Northern end of Bassin Bel. From there a full view of Amber Island could be appreciated. Arjen walked carefully round the old abandoned lime kiln, built on solid black rocks, which was now above the sea level at low tide. His bare feet hurt a bit as he walked on the masses of broken bits of corals and shells, before he reached the stone steps leading to the top of the kiln.

Sitting down on the ledge on the top of the kiln, Mr. Dave junior lifted his right ankle and rested it on his left knee. He felt with his fingers for a minute piece of shell that had got stuck in his hard skin of his sole. He managed to clip it between his long nails, using his forefinger and thumb, and pulled out the unwanted bit.

Looking at the position of the sun in the sky, he guessed the time pretty accurately. It must have been seven o'clock. He had plenty of time and was not to hurry. He continued sitting and admired the sceneries.

From the lofty place, above the lime kiln, Arjen surveyed the horizon. On his right was Bassin Bel half full as the tide was at its lowest. The water of the small bay was shallow at that time; at most it was chest-deep in the middle and pools of water formed on the dry seabed. Between the muddy strip and the green grassy bank, thousands of black boulders of all sizes were scattered around the ten or so hectares-wide bay.

Those boulders formed the natural habitat for the Mauritian crabs. The young lad thought that he would have to go to catch some crabs soon; the tide should be rising and Bassin Bel would be full within the next hours. With that thought, Arjen turned his glance to his left. The lagoon was glistening like a sheet of glass.

Arjen was mesmerised and went into a voluntary trance, sitting and looking over the lagoon; it was like looking into a crystal ball. Suddenly, some fifty metres from where he was, he noticed a large spray of water, a thin transparent cloud, jetting upward from the sea. It was a shoal of mullet fries darting out of the water and diving back on their run to deeper waters.

His hypnotic state did not last long! For soon his attention was drawn to something shining like a mirror, over the top of the trees, behind Amber Island. Minutes later, he found a large vessel, the type he could not make out at first, which appeared on the horizon, coming from behind the small island. From the little knowledge Arjen had, he knew that that was not a ship but rather smaller. In fact the vessel was a cruiser, never seen or heard of in this part of Mauritius before.

It was time to get moving. The boy walked down the broken steps from the top of the lime kiln, taking care the stones do not move from his weight. Just then he noticed another unusual thing. A crumpled newspaper, with the word "MIRROR" in big red letters, was thrown at the bottom of the kiln.

Out of curiosity, he picked up the paper and carefully opened it. He knew that it was not part of a local newspaper. Unlike 'le Mauricien' or 'Advance', that one was in English. Arjen was quite right in his deduction. The paper was a front page of the British daily, the "THE DAILY MIRROR". It was a few weeks old.

Arjen's tiny mind was intrigued by then. He thought to himself.

"First there was a Doberman, then the vessel and now this newspaper. There is something strange about all this! It looks as if some foreign people are present in this area. Ah well! For all I know, they can just be some tourists. I remember, last March, there was some talk of rich people from overseas coming to visit us as tourists."

As he reached the dried-up shore of Bassin Bel and stepped in, from one muddy pond to another, the sight of crabs hastening to hide under the rocks in the rippling waters, the boy's thoughts vanished. Within a few minutes, Arjen managed to catch a kilo of crabs. He was very pleased with his easy catch. Leila would be thoroughly spoilt by those delicious crustaceans.

His gunny sack holding the morning catch, dripping along the way, and his sickle resting on his left shoulder, gripped to the khaki shirt by its teeth. Arjen moved slowly to the undergrowth among the filao trees. He began to feel a bit hungry. So he searched the berry bushes for any odd fruits to eat. In the end, he had a pocketful of semi-ripe fruits, of which his mother had warned him not to eat too many, because he would surely get constipated.

Having nothing else to eat, Arjen devoured the wild berries one at a time, not heeding, really, his mother's advice. He made his way towards the clearings, before hitting the sugar cane fields at the border of St. Antoine sugar estate. From a distance, he saw a large greyish white animal grazing in the clearing. He did not have much trouble recognising Granddad Rubein's old ox, by the look of its long thick and pointed horns. It was unthinkable to find old Rubein, still on round to graze his animal, especially so far out of his way. The old man could not be seen.

"Granddad! Granddad Rubein!," called out Arjen, loudly, surprised to see the bovine animal alone. There was no answer. He called out again, this time with all his might. "Granddad! Can you hear me? It's me! Jen!"

He paused for a feedback. Still silence. Arjen was worried for the old man; the oldest' whom he had known since his childhood. Granddad Rubein was in his early eighties. He stopped being a cartman a long time ago, but in order to keep himself active, he has kept the habit of taking the ox to the fields to graze every morning, without fail.

Even though he had donated the animal to his youngest son, he was faithful to his daily chores.

In spite of all his calling out, there was still no sign of the old Rubein. The sun was fairly high in the clear blue sky. The heat promised to be a scourger, even for a midwinter morning. Arjen decided to look for the old man whom he had for so long called and known as "Granddad". He searched throughout the bushes in the area. He was about to give up and seek help from the village to find the old man. Just then he saw old Rubein, flat on his back, under the very same old filao tree where he, himself, dozed off earlier that morning.

Instantly, Arjen feared the worst for the weak, old man, thinking of an encounter with the prowling monster of a dog, the Doberman. He ran to the body and knelt down by it, calling the old man to get up. Old Rubein was breathing faintly. He had probably fainted for some time. Arjen shook the thin, frail body lying still a corpse, by the shoulders.

Granddad came back to life gradually. He made a couple of groans, then opened his eyes slowly. He fixed his glance on the boy and muttered, "Oh, it's you, Jen."

The youth gave a sympathetic and warm smile to the old man, showing that he was really pleased to see the latter all right.

"Are you O.K. Granddad?" he inquired with concern.

"I'm fine. I have been feeling dizzy all this morning. Last thing I remember, when I arrived at this place, is my head turning round and me falling before I had time to sit down. I don't know how long I have been lying here. Have you seen our ox?"

"Yes, it's over there, behind those bushes. Don't you worry. Come on, I'll help you to sit up," continued Arjen holding and pulling up the affectionate Rubein.

After having sat up for some five minutes, the old man asked again, "What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock, I think. It is so hot, you'll think that it's noon, but it's still morning."

"Jen, I have something to ask you. Have you noticed anything strange around here this morning?"

The boy did not reply.

"Jen, you have to be careful. I've seen something unusual this morning. I've even heard shots being fired. I know they were real gun shots. I've not heard shots like these since my army days in North Africa during the war. First I saw a young man, a white boy, very exhausted, running like mad through the waste land near Melville. Later on, there were three big dogs roaming and sniffing their way in the direction of the boy had disappeared. And much later, I saw some men moving across the fields, looking and searching for something or someone in the bushes. In fact it was these men and dogs that frightened our ox, which ran so far this way to Bassin Bel."

Granddad Rubein cut short his narrative.

"But these have nothing to do with us. You just be careful, my child. My animal must be full up by now. We must be off. I have a long way to walk back in this heat and sun. I must return home before I start feeling dizzy again. You, too, don't stay long around here."

Arjen was happy to see the old man and his ox moving slowly along the grassy path. In a few minutes, they would reach the sugar cane fields and in an hour, through the lonely lanes, they would be home.

Arjen had misgivings about all that Granddad Rubein had told him. He put it all in a corner of his mind. He decided that it was finally time to get the fodder for his goats and get back home before twelve, just as he had promised Leila.

The intense heat and the shouting had made him sweat and his throat dry. He new of the spring a kilometre towards Madame Azor. He thought of going there for a drink and a splash in the fresh cool water and to make his way to the nearby sugar cane fields where acacia was plentiful.

He hurried in that direction. In a moment, he could see the spring, for the ground where he was, was slightly higher, overlooking the marshy spring. He came to a spot where the water was clean with black and brown pebbles at the bottom.

He put his right foot with precaution into the water, holding firmly at some reeds, that grew wild on the spring bank, to prevent him from slipping and falling in the water. As he was cupping both hands to bring water to his mouth, he heard several long growls behind him. He looked back.

There was the mystifying, terrifying Doberman. This time he was not alone. He was one of a band of three, let loose, heaven knew why, in the remote coastal region. The dogs were growling and snarling. Arjen was petrified.

Chapter 4

STRANGERS AROUND

The young lad stood still in the water, wondering what the ferocious looking dogs would be up to next. The dogs did not seem to be aiming for Arjen. They were sniffing at everything on their path. Apparently, they were hard on the scent of some man or beast.

The tallest of them, a bitch, darker than the others, rolled on her back and wriggled her whole body as if to scratch a sudden itchy spot. Then, she got up on her feet, turned her big head to her rear and attempted to bite gently the layer of skin and hair above her tail. The familiar one, the one that Arjen saw first in the morning, was pulling at he sack, with the crabs inside, which he had left on the edge of the spring.

Bending over and dipping both arms in the calf-deep water, Arjen picked a couple of pebbles. He flung one of them with all his force and scored a bull's-eye, hitting the dog in the middle of the neck. The dog let out a loud painful cry and scampered over the reeds and vanished. The other two dogs followed suit.

The unwelcome dogs gone, the boy sipped some water with satisfaction. While he was coming out of the water, he was gripped by a strong sense of curiosity once again. He was too puzzled by the presence of these dogs. He decided there and then to find out what the unfriendly canine beasts were up to. His curiosity was such that he thought to himself that he could forget about his goats for now.

Arjen's young mind was bubbling with preoccupations about what he had, only the day before, heard from his school mate, Shaun. They were sitting and talking cosily under a century-old tamarind tree, spreading its clustered branches, full of pea-sized leaves and casting a wide shadow around its trunk, in the mid-afternoon sun. Shaun had mentioned about something he had overheard his father, a watchman at St. Antoine sugar estate, telling his mother that there were rumours about some strangers having been found lurking in the fields. Nobody seemed to know who they were and where they had come from.

It was a beautiful time to play detective, a tempting idea for young Dave, who could recount his adventure to his friends, on Monday morning, when school would resume. For a change, he could be the focal point in the class, especially if he could solve the mysteries of those intruders, just like Sherlock Holmes did in the Hound of the Baskervilles, a film of that name he had seen at the village picture-hall recently.

Arjen already had the lead, the dogs. All he had to do was to find them and follow them in their moves! The young lad sincerely wished to find out something for himself. He knew he would, he felt quite confident. The last time he saw the Dobermans, they were leaping over the reeds by the springside. They were not to be seen now. Arjen hastened to get on their trail.

Holding his sickle in his right hand and his morning catch in his wet sack, he made across the thick blades of reeds where the animals had vanished. The sun, in its splendour, was high in the spotless, azure-blue sky, spreading its rays as a mixture of golden and silvery alloy across the silent green tropical landscape, stretching right up to the Moka mountain range, with Pieter Both standing majestically in the Western horizon. It promised to be hot that day.

Arjen did not want to spend too much time in tracking down the animals. He tried to move south fast but with not much success, as finding suitable paths through the thickets, was not easy. After all the difficulties, he managed to reach a lone mango tree, pruned off of its branches and leaves for firewood.

As he was about to sit down on a flat and smooth rock in the scanty shade of the abused tree, a sudden sharp whistling noise, a few steps in front of him, startled him. A brace of wild fowls flew off from their hiding place under the growth, making loud flapping sounds with their beating wings and simultaneously giving out deafening, squeaking, throatful cries in their flight.

The boy's accelerated heartbeat normalised between seconds. He sat down to rest from the morning heat, from the blazing sun, and most of all, from all those exhausting movements of the morning. He paused under the tree for some minutes, chewing, one by one, at the fruits he had picked up at Bassin Bel. While he was there under the tree, he heard barking of the dogs coming from a distance.

There was no doubt in his mind that the barking was coming from the dogs, he was trying to locate. Arjen rushed to climb the partly hacked tree. From his position on the tree, he could make out roughly the direction and distance the sounds were coming from. It was some five hundred yards on his left, in the direction of the well, one of the several in this region, where lay the memorial tombstone of a little girl mysteriously murdered and the slaughtered body dumped in the well, many decades ago.

Mrs. Dave has advised and even warned her son on many an occasion never to go anywhere near the well, locally known as the well-of-death. The vicinity of the well-of-death was a no-go area for all the kids of the neighbouring villages of Madame Azor, Melville and Goodlands. Arjen was fully aware of this. But the grip of curiosity had taken such a tight hold that there were no restraining him. He made his way straight towards the spot at a hurried pace, through the grassy paths.

Even though it was clear day-time, our boy seemed to be under some unknown uncanny spell to have erred so in his mind and decision, to try to unravel the enigmatic phenomenon that some grown-ups would neither wish nor dare.

Within a few minutes, he had reached the place he had spotted from the look-out post on the tree. He could not see the well, but the tombstone, marking the unique grave, was there, its top black and mouldy above the indigenous shrubs. The tranquil, soft whizzing sound in the air was once again disrupted by the repeated sound of growls, right behind the young 'Sherlock'.

The youth turned round instantly. There facing him, was the now rather familiar Doberman, eyeing him as a prey, head down, fore legs out-stretched, and gaze fixed. Saliva was dripping from the dog's blood-stained mouth and the growling continued, displaying the blood curdling jaws of finely pointed sharp teeth. The boy stood still, unmoved.

Arjen knew that this dog was the leader of the pack. The others should be around. He held the handle of his sickle tightly for he sensed an attack imminent. In a flash, the brute pounced on Arjen. The brave boy stood firm on his feet and kept his balance as the dog landed his front claws on the small shoulders, piercing his shirt and skin. In a fraction of a second, before he had the time to feel the pain from the claws and before the dog had the chance of ripping his face, Arjen stretched out his arm and gave a terrific blow with his sickle, digging the instrument deep in the dog's neck, letting out a spurt of blood. The animal yelped and ran wildly past the tombstone, to the cane fields on the other side.

Soon the excruciating pain from the savage claws, from the wounds, (luckily not so bad) was beginning to be felt. But Arjen was quite resistant to these kinds of bodily pains, often inflicted throughout his time in the fields, in the form of thorn splinters, or wasp, or bee stings. He passed his hands beneath the collar and rubbed gently over the wounds, to soothe away the pain.

There was something manly about the boy. Instead of trying to run away from the eerie place, even in full daylight, Arjen was adamant in his mind to pursue those animals, whatever the cost. He had just missed being killed by the ferocious dog. Nevertheless, he was determined to go all the way, to find what has brought those dogs in this area, what were really looking for and who were the persons behind them.

The youth stood there a few minutes to recuperate his strength, all along keeping on the look-out, should any of the dogs reappear. After a short while, he picked up his sack, his sickle clutched tightly in his right hand, and moved on the trail of the wounded dog.

It was some time now since Arjen had left home and he had not had a proper rest. Even so there was not any true sign of fatigue on his. Maybe this was the result of his unfailing determination. He walked on carefully over the tall thick grass, below which he could feel the ground soft and uneven. This was due to the fact that, in that part of the fields, the soil was sandy.

Unknowingly, he stepped on something unstable, and stumbled headlong over the grass. Whatever he tripped over, he did not think that it was either wood or stone. As he got up, he tried to check what it was. To his utter amazement, he found two feet, whitish in colour, wearing a pair of beautiful tennis shoes.

Arjen, slowly and gently, moved the grass over the motionless body, lying face up. He did not have any difficulty in guessing the unknown young man's age, whom he thought to be older than himself.

The boy bore signs of multiple wounds, in the face, arms, and legs. Young Dave was sure that the stranger was not dead. He saw the short-sleeved, navy blue T-shirt, bearing a pretty flower badge, over the right chest, moving and the movement was only more noticeable, when Arjen laid his palm on there.