



### Chapter 12

Smith had no difficulty getting the two of them past his own outposts, although it took longer than was good for his nerves. They had cleared the Chancellery and were in the Voss-strasse before they heard any sound of pursuit. Smith pulled Rani into the shadow of a building and waited. About three hundred metres ahead, half a dozen men turned the corner of the Chancellery, fanned across the street and came towards them, walking quickly. 'That'll be Hoener's bloodhounds', he said. He was at a loss. 'I doubt that we can shake them, and we certainly can't fight them, even with Gustav's cannon.' Rani said nothing, but touched his arm and set off in the other direction, keeping to the shadows. For want of a better idea, he followed.

She led them towards the Potsdamer Platz. 'Is this a good idea?', Smith asked. 'Strauss told me that the Russians were quite near here this morning.'

'That should slow the bloodhounds down, shouldn't it?'

'True', conceded Smith, and resolved to leave this part of the enterprise to someone who knew what she was doing. Through the black and rubble-strewn streets they hurried. They passed a manned barricade without even a challenge, but within a minute there was a shout behind them, and as they passed the Potsdamer station they could hear feet running. Rani quickly turned into Prinz Albrecht Strasse. About halfway down the block she halted outside an abandoned building. 'Wait.' For a few seconds Smith stood, totally nonplussed. Only when she saw their pursuers turn the corner did she ostentatiously begin to pull Smith up the steps. Surely she did not want them to be cornered here?

The building was in total darkness, but Rani unerringly found her way to the main staircase. They ran along the first floor landing past a row of large double doors until Rani found those she was looking for and pushed them open. The room had once been an opulent office, with a large desk and chair facing the door. They were still there but behind them there was no longer window or wall. A bomb had neatly excised them, exposing the contents like the inside of a doll's house. Beyond the edge were the unseen depths of an internal courtyard. Rani closed the doors and sat at the desk, fingers resting on its sill. 'Stand behind me.' Smith obeyed. He heard steps on the stairs and then splintering noises as door after door along the landing was forced. Standing behind Rani gave him the absurd



sensation of being in a Victorian wedding pose waiting for the photographers. The door flew open and they burst in, aiming their machine pistols at the tableau outlined before them.

Smith was not sure what happened next. He remembered fumbling unsuccessfully with Gustav's pistol but then the room seemed to explode and keep exploding. The faces in front of him were briefly and flickeringly illuminated, as if a strobe light had been turned on them, before vanishing. He was deafened by the din and choked by acrid smoke. The desk reared back, pushing Rani into him and both of them nearly into the chasm behind. The cacophony lasted for a few seconds, and ended as suddenly as it had started. The silence that followed was broken only by the sound of running feet receding down the marble staircase in the foyer. Smith walked across to the shattered doors in a daze. Five bodies were strewn between them. None had less than three bullet holes in it. Hoener's very best friend, the driver, had been cut almost in two. Of Hoener himself there was no sign. Smith went to back to the desk. The two veneer panels facing the door were splintered, each revealing a wicked black hole behind. He opened a side panel. The MG42 inside greeted him with a whiff of hot polish. Smith got his head working again by doing a calculation. 'Eleven hundred rounds per minute, so these chew through a fifty round belt in about three seconds.' He turned to Rani. 'It seemed a lot longer. What is this place?'

'It's Walther's office. He liked playing spymaster. There are microphones everywhere, and cameras; even a chemical laboratory for invisible ink and treated paper. The buttons for the guns are next to the buzzer for the secretary.'

'He wouldn't have wanted to get that wrong.'

She laughed. 'Come. The one that got away will be back with more. We need to make the best of the darkness.'

They left the Reich Security building cautiously, but the disturbance in the office had gone unremarked amid the almost continuous small arms fire from nearby streets. They retraced their steps as far as the Potsdamer Station. Two tanks were now outside it and Rani took to the back streets leading to the Landwehr Canal. 'My cousin said that if he could provide anything he'd leave it under the bridge.'

'What? A boat? And he wasn't sure?'

Rani shrugged. 'No, and we can't be sure of him. He's a dedicated National Socialist.'



‘But he’s a gypsy!’

Rani shook her head. ‘You English. Everything always so cut and dried. He is an armaments craftsman. His skills have been gold since rearmament began and Krupps value him accordingly. He also remembers being out of work for years in the Depression. Of course he’s a National Socialist, and so are millions of other German workers. They don’t want to get rid of Hitler. They just want the war to finish.’

Smith made Rani stay back while he reconnoitered the bridge. There was a barricade at the far end but no sign of life. He led her down to the canal and under the span. There were piles of rubbish but no boat, and nothing else either. Five minutes of fruitless searching exhausted Smith’s patience. He angrily kicked at a pile of rubble and stubbed his toe. The rubble gave off a fine resonant note. ‘What’s this, then’, said Rani as Smith hopped away, rubbing his foot. She pushed aside some dirt to reveal a jerrycan. She tried to pull it out but it was held by something. ‘How about lending a hand, if you’ve finished dancing about?’ They found that the jerrycan was tied to a plank and the plank to another jerrycan. Full excavation revealed a wooden transport pallet, about a metre and a half square, with an empty jerrycan expertly lashed under each corner. Wedged underneath were two crudely fashioned paddles. Smith recanted. ‘My apologies and compliments to your cousin. This is first class make-do. There must be lots of spare petrol tins now that there’s nothing to put in them.’ He found a badly torn tarpaulin and some short lengths of frayed rope among the rubbish, and without further ado they carried their finds to the water’s edge. Smith went back up the bank for a last look behind them. He thought he saw a shadow move but the half moon was flitting in and out of cloud and he couldn’t be sure. He looked again when he felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle, but still there was nothing.

‘There’s more rubbish than water in this canal, but least HMS Jerrybuilt won’t look out of place. This flows into the Spree, and from there into the Havel, doesn’t it?’ Rani agreed that it did, but they found that ‘flow’ was a gross exaggeration. Even with both of them poling and/or paddling they could not maintain walking pace. The raft was hard to keep on an even keel and with their weight added the freeboard was negligible. After three hours Smith was beginning to wonder whether they might not be better off walking along the bank. He was quickly dissuaded. Almost abreast of them, a voice hailed across the canal in Russian and was answered from



the other side. He and Rani stopped paddling and lay prone, side by side, with the tarpaulin over them. Water slopped through the open frame of the pallet, soaking them. It took fifteen minutes for the so-called current to carry them beyond the danger point but shortly thereafter they came out onto the broader waters of the Spree. 'This is more like it', Smith said, as the stronger current took them, 'but it'll be light shortly. We'll lie up till dark in the gardens of Schloss Charlottenburg.'

They made their raft again look as much like a pile of rubbish as possible. Smith led Rani through the shrubbery. 'Close your eyes', he said. They went on a few more paces and Smith stopped. 'You can look now.' Rani opened her eyes to one of the most beautiful and melancholy sights she had ever seen. Patches of moonlight hurried across the ground, climbed marble walls and vanished into the night. The building was in ruins, but enough still stood to bear witness to its grandeur. 'This is the Belvedere, built for Queen Charlotte Sophia. It'll be something to tell our own Sophie.' They crept around the ruins until satisfied that they had the place to themselves, then settled down to rest in a room that had fragments of roof still above it. They were cold and they were hungry, but sleep was a greater need and that they could satisfy. At dusk Smith woke refreshed and almost cheerful but Rani looked strained and was unusually subdued. Smith was about to ask her whether she had dreamed, but thought better of it. She would tell him if he needed to know. It was a demon that only she could wrestle with. Smith again marvelled at the grip that fatalism could have on such a strong mind. He knew that it was possible to will oneself to death: Australian aborigines would do it if tribal magicians pointed the bone at them; American Indians did something similar. It almost seemed that the stronger the will, the more potent a weapon it was against itself, once turned. The dusk barrage from the Russian guns intensified and its sustained thunder could be heard in every direction. The only people he could see were half a dozen civilians, probably a family group, hurrying west along the other side of the river. Rani saw them too. 'I thought that there would be a lot more refugees on the move.' 'So did I', said Smith, 'but in these uniforms we couldn't mingle anyway. I reckon the word has gone around that the city's surrounded. Everyone who can has gone to ground, hoping that the storm will pass over. And speaking of plans, what's ours?' 'If we can get as far as the Wannsee I think I can find help.' 'That's probably about fifteen kilometres as the river winds. With luck we might do it in a night.'



The broad stream of the Spree carried them on at a good speed, but there was far less rubbish on its waters than there was in the canal, and the raft was a good deal more obvious, even at night. Smith had been worrying about how to deal with the problem when the raft brought up with a gentle bump. At the same time a putrid smell assailed their nostrils. 'It's a horse,' he announced, 'or was.' Large pieces of flesh had been carved from its rump but it was still larger than life. The gasses of decomposition had improved its buoyancy so far as to make it positively jaunty as it bobbed along. 'Push it away', Rani pleaded, holding her nose. 'Sorry, my sweet, but you never can tell when it might come in handy', said Smith, securing the raft to a leg, 'but I'll pay out the tow as far as I can.'

The little convoy reached the Havel without incident and swung south, but Smith suspected that the three great bridges near its junction with the Spree, dominating Berlin's communications to the west, would be strongly and alertly manned, whoever might be holding them. It was almost disconcerting to find them devoid of life, straddling the river like primeval monsters that had come there to die. Two kilometres further on the Pichelsdorf Bridge loomed, the last river crossing before the Wannsee. There were fires at both ends. Again Smith and Rani lay with the tarpaulin over them. As they passed beneath the span there was a shout from the bridge, then another. A rifle spat into the water a few metres away. Then there was the stutter of an automatic weapon. The horse disintegrated, showering the raft with rotting entrails. Ribald laughter came from the bridge, quickly silenced by an order given in a violently angry, almost hysterical, voice. The automatic opened up again but the raft was now beyond its effective range. Smith took his hand from Rani's mouth.

'That was disgusting', she said.

'Better the horse than us.'

She smelt her hair. 'I'm not so sure. If they were suspicious of *us*, why did they shoot at the horse?'

'The camouflage bods say that if you can't hide something, next best is to put it near something bigger. Can't say I believed it much, till now. God, I'm hungry. Will they be able to feed us, where we're going, do you think?'