



Chapter 16

Smith was confused. Their captors were Russians, which was somewhat unexpected, but they were also few in number and there was something different about their uniforms. In place of the usual red and gold collar tabs of the Red Army, these men wore red and blue. They gave him no opportunity to think further about it. He and Rani were separated and Smith was dragged into a small windowless room. The chair and the table that were its only furniture were pushed into a corner. Smith was strip-searched. The officer scrutinised his documents carefully by the fitful light of a kerosene lamp. He also turned the *budionovka* over and over in his hands but made no attempt to interrogate his captive. Apparently satisfied, he left the room after barking an order to his men, who did their duty with relish.

Smith was conscious for most of the beating. He knew that it was important to stay on his feet while their enthusiasm was fresh, and took a lot of punishment around the head and upper body. He was felled by a heavy blow to the stomach that winded him, and when he tried to rise his legs were kicked from under him. The boots then came from all sides. He instinctively curled into a ball and a boot aimed at his groin caught him square on the side of the head. That put an end to his awareness of the fun, but not to his participation.

Consciousness returned reluctantly. Smith first heard the voices. There were two, one high and one low, and together they were making the soft music of Russian conversation. Smith tried to open his left eye, but it would not co-operate and the effort sent a spasm of pain down the side of his face. He must have groaned, because the conversation stopped and footsteps receded. He attempted to take inventory of his injuries, but found that it was easier to say where it did not hurt than where it did. The survey did establish, however, that he was naked and bound to a chair. He cautiously opened his right eye. Rani was tied and seated next to him. Her hair and clothing were disarranged but her face was unmarked. As soon as she saw Smith stir she began to speak, but not to him. The only other person in the room was a young Russian sentry by the door. Her voice was low and persuasive but halting, as if she were searching for words. In a short while the sentry leaned his rifle against the door and came to stand in front of her. Again she spoke, throwing her shoulders back, which slightly opened the front of her unbuttoned shirt. The soldier pulled wide



the shirt and paused in admiration. Rani's breasts were not large but they were firm and exquisitely formed, and their tip-tilted nipples were erect and dark. The soldier caressed them with his palms. Rani began breathing heavily and spoke more urgently. The soldier untied her from the chair and she stood before him, pulling shirt and tunic back to expose her flawless shoulders. Smith found that, hurt or not, he was getting an erection.

Rani lightly kissed the soldier and drew his hands to her breasts. As he worked her, kneading them hard, she stroked his hands and continued speaking. Smith by now was well aroused, but the longer it went on the less urgent the soldier became. He was still staring intently at Rani, but he was looking at her eyes rather than her breasts. He fumbled with his trouser buttons, but in slow motion. Finally his hands ceased moving, although one still held her breast. Rani put a hand to her neck and lifted the small clear stone that hung there on a fine chain. She held it between her eyes and the soldier's and spoke a few more words, still gentle, still seductive. His eyelids drooped, then closed, and his hands fell to his sides.

Rani untied Smith. 'Can you stand?' Smith thought he could. 'Is anything broken?'

'A couple of teeth. Maybe a rib or two cracked. It could be worse.' He watched, unsteadily, as she buttoned her shirt. 'Are you...hurt?' She looked at him levelly. 'Have I been raped, do you mean?' Her forthrightness embarrassed the Englishman, as usual. She did not wait for his reply. 'When I saw that there were only six of them, I gave them what they wanted. They would have taken it anyway.' The defiance in her voice was belied by the tears in her eyes. 'You had better get dressed.' Smith felt empty. He wanted to hold her, but couldn't. Somewhere in his head, far removed from his feelings, a voice was coolly observing that Rani was handling the situation much better than he. He struggled automatically into his clothes, his head throbbing with pain and grief. His papers were on the table, beneath the *budionovka*, with the Himmler pass unfolded. He found Gustav's pistol in the sentry's pocket. The only things missing were his money and his watch. 'Are you angry?', she asked. 'At the whole bloody, benighted, filthy world,' he replied. He drew the sentry's bayonet and held its point against the soldier's groin. 'Wake him up.' Rani gently took the weapon from his hand. The sadness in her eyes was profound. 'He's an ally, remember.' Smith felt emotion rising in his



throat in a choking wave. He threw his arms about her wordlessly and held her so close, so hard and so long that she had to ask to be allowed to breathe.

They made kindling out of the table and chair and piled it against the open door. Smith sprinkled most of the oil from the lamp on it. 'What about our ally here?' Rani led the sentry out of the room. 'He will wake when he is struck. His officer will certainly oblige.' They felt their way down the corridor to an outside door. The street beyond was empty but they crept around the corner of the building and waited. Even with the kerosene, it was a good ten minutes before the fire attracted attention. Soon four Russians appeared from the direction of the bridge and rushed inside.

'That's about the lot, you said. Let's go.' Smith tried to lead off towards the bridge, but found that he was still very unsteady. His left ankle was at least sprained. Furthermore, every muscle in his legs seemed to be screaming to be left alone. Rani supported him as far as the bridge, where he slumped against the parapet. 'This is hopeless. They'll catch us in nothing flat.'

Rani looked over the parapet. 'What about our boat?'

'No, it'll be a wreck. But hold on, they had lights down here. They may have a boat of their own. Have a look.' Rani ran down the steps and quickly called back up to him. 'It's only a little car.'

The lights had been headlights then, but... 'How could a car get down there? There's no road.'

'Don't ask me.'

Smith briefly debated with himself whether it was worth the effort, but then hobbled down to see for himself. This looked like the end of the line anyway. He was out of strength and out of ideas. It seemed that only his curiosity was intact and that, he was sorry to say, had more often got him into trouble than out of it.

Rani was standing beside a tiny, toylike, vehicle. Incongruously it was painted in camouflage tan. 'Good lord', said Smith, 'get in.' He pushed the ignition button and the engine chugged into life. 'Hang on!' He selected gear, and the little car jumped forward, down the bank. Rani suppressed a cry as water began to rise over the wheels. She gave in to the impulse when it reached the windscreen. Then with a funny lurch, the car pulled



its front wheels off the mud and floated free. Rani was dumbfounded.

'What is this?'

'This, *fraulein*, is a *schwimmwagen*, one of Dr. Porsche's variations on his People's Car. Hold the wheel and I'll lower the propeller.'

To her surprise, Rani found that once they were under way she could steer by simply turning the wheel. The way ahead suddenly seemed ridiculously easy; fatigue was making her light-headed. 'Well, this one of the people votes that we take this car of the people to...'

She was cut short by a sputter from the engine. Smith looked for the fuel gauge. He could not find one, but the turn of a valve restored the engine's slow beat.

'See how much there is in the second tank', he told her, 'that'll be the filler cap, in front of you, beyond the windscreen.'

Rani undid the cap and listened. 'I can hear it sloshing around, but it doesn't sound much.' Her levity was gone. They steered on in silence, neither willing to admit to the other what both knew; Fortune had been generous in letting them get them this far. To get to Neuengamme, as far again, was asking for a big overdraft. About two kilometres downstream, where the Havel was separated by the Elbe by no more than a wide sandbar, there was a ferry ramp. 'West or east?', Smith asked. 'Cross the river to the Americans, or find the road north on this side and pray for petrol.'

'That's a choice between surrender and hope, isn't it?'

Smith smiled wanly at her and turned the car up the bank, away from the river.

The ferry road headed directly inland. It crossed a railway line and a secondary road but Smith ignored both. He was intent on reaching Reichstrasse 107, an arrow-straight arterial that would have done the Romans proud. At the secondary road there was roadblock. It was unmanned and they drove through. 'That's orders and the Germans for you,' he told Rani. '*All crossroads will be barricaded*. And so they are, even if the barriers can just be driven around.' It had been getting light as they left the river, and the road took them straight towards the rising sun. It dazzled through the windscreen, so Smith lowered the glass and squinted into the light from under the peak of his cap. Suddenly there was something upright in the middle of the road ahead. Smith braked hard and the car slewed across the verge. Now he was no longer looking through the windscreen Smith could see what it was. The black uniform was awry



and there was a bandage around the head, but there was no mistaking the wearer. It was Hoener.