



### Chapter 17

A burst of automatic fire confirmed the fact. Smith gunned the car into the field beside the road. 'Where in the blazes did he come from?' 'The devil has wings', Rani said, as if that explained everything. Smith sometimes found her fatalism in the face of danger damned annoying. Why couldn't she flap like a normal woman, or like him? The range opened quickly and Hoener stopped firing. The field was flat and open. Smith steered diagonally across it. 'We'll cut the corner and get onto 107 beyond the intersection.' The words were hardly out of his mouth when their path was blocked by the remains of a farm cart. It lay forlorn, half submerged, a wreck in a sea of grass. As he swerved to avoid it, Smith noticed a gaping hole in the ground beneath where one of the wheels should have been. He braked so viciously that Rani almost went through the windscreen. 'What's the matter?'

'We're in the middle of a minefield, that's what.' He mentally kicked himself. The roads were barricaded to encourage armour to make just this sort of detour, and how stupid of him not to think that such an obvious route from the river would be mined. He looked for Hoener and saw that he was about a hundred and fifty metres away. He was almost level with them, but reluctant to leave the road. Smith took a deep breath, drew Gustav's Mauser and pulled back the crank to cock it. The action went forward with an unconvincing click. He pulled the magazine from the gun. It was empty. That was what Gustav, Safety First Gustav, had been trying to tell him - 'you'll need to load it.' He turned to Rani. 'I'm afraid this is where we part company, darling.' He was touched to see that there was still trust in her eyes; she wanted to believe that he would be equal to the occasion, one more time. 'I want you to get out over the rear, and run back to the road along one of the tyre tracks.'

'What about you?'

'I can hardly walk, much less run. I'll stay here.'

Trust was replaced by tears. 'I won't leave you, Smithy.'

Smith pushed the only button that he was sure would work. 'Someone has to find Sophie.'

She closed her eyes for a long moment, turned his cheek towards her and gently kissed his bruised face.

When Hoener saw Rani break from the cover of the car he started down the road to intercept her. Smith stiffly pulled himself up by the windscreen, lifted the Mauser high in the air, and bellowed across the



grass. 'That's right, you gutless wonder - helpless women and unarmed men - it's all that you're up to.' Hoener hesitated, but then went on towards Rani. Time to try the last card, thought Smith, despicable though it is. 'Do you think I didn't hear you running away from the Reich Security building? What did you say to your little friend when you pushed him through the door? "Don't worry, I'm right behind you, as usual." He isn't much use to you now, is he, arse blown away?'

There was a strangled scream of rage from Hoener, who began stumbling through the grass towards the car. He loosed off a burst from his automatic pistol, but it simply sprayed the air. Smith ducked behind the flimsy protection of the car door and tried to remember what Gustav had said. 'The automatic setting's only useful for mob intimidation; touch your trigger and the ammunition's gone, hitting nothing. It's reasonably accurate with single shots, but without stock attached you'd need to be an expert to hit a man at fifty metres.' Smith looked over the door; Hoener was a hundred metres away, fumbling to reload. Smith clumsily tried to reignite the SS man's anger. 'Still can't get your finger out, Hoener?' He could no longer see Rani. She must have reached the road. The Mauser began firing again, but they were single shots. One struck the car. Smith chanced another look. Hoener was no more than fifty metres from him by now, advancing steadily, gun held at arm's length in front of him. The next round just missed. 'Great. He'd have to be an expert, wouldn't he?', Smith muttered to himself. He held the pistol by its barrel. Last throw. How disappointed Gustav would have been to see his pride and joy reduced to such impotence. Smith waited till he was sure that Hoener must be almost on top of him. Now! But the car leaped violently into the air, throwing him back into the seat.

The smoke from the explosion slowly cleared. Smith struggled upright, looking for Hoener. He was stretched out on the ground, or at least most of him was. The mine, one of the nasty ball-bearing jobs that the Americans called Bouncing Betties, had taken off his left leg, well above the knee and none too tidily. What was left of it was metres away, as was Hoener's pistol. Even as Smith watched, the femoral artery began pushing gouts of blood skywards. Smith was glad to see that the man was still conscious. 'Hello, Hoener. I'd stick a thumb over that pretty quick if I were you. If you lose too much blood you'll pass out, and if you pass out you won't be able to hold the artery.'



Shock was already beginning to glaze the German's eyes, but there was still enough awareness to tinge his voice with panic. 'You must help me.' 'You're asking the wrong man. You might try God, but in your case I think he's been engaged elsewhere for some time. At least he's given you time to think things over, about half an hour I reckon. I wouldn't give you even that, myself, but I've no ammunition. Goodbye. May you rot in hell.' It was a good speech, Smith thought, if a trifle long-winded.

He started the car and began reversing very carefully along the tyre tracks. He frequently had to stop, go forward, and relign. It took quite a while. When he at length reached the road Rani stepped from behind a tree. She had her knife in hand. How had she held on to that in Havelberg? 'I was sure that it would be Hoener driving, but I couldn't go', she said lamely.

'And what did you think you were going to be able to do with that.' He meant it kindly, but it sounded patronising. Her eyes blazed. She whirled and threw in a single motion. There was a dull thud from the tree. The knife was half-buried in the trunk, heart height and slightly right of centre.

'Right', Smith said. 'Helpless women?', he thought. 'Sorry', he said. She tried to pull the knife out, but it would not move. 'I'm very tired', she said, matter-of-factly. The anger had drained from her as suddenly as it came, taking her strength with it. It was a day and a half since she had last allowed herself to sleep. She was not giving up; she was being worn down.

'Allow me', said Smith.

'Thank you.'

The car resumed its way along the road. Smith tried to keep Rani's mind engaged. 'How did Hoener get this far, let alone find us?', he mused.

'I told you, the devil has wings.'

The penny dropped. 'You meant the Arado. Could be.'

'It might still be near, waiting for him.'

'Only if the pilot wasn't scared off by that mine. It would have been heard for kilometres.'

The intersection came into sight. It was blocked, but a closer approach revealed that this barricade had wings. Smith slowed the car. The only person in sight was an overalled figure leaning against a wing, hands tucked under armpits. Smith was suspicious. This looked altogether too much like the western shoot-out in which a baddie tricks the sheriff into



drawing first, which is the signal for the others to cut him down. He firmly buttoned his holster and stopped the car at a respectful distance. The overalled figure shouldered itself from the wing and came towards them, unlit cigarette hanging from lower lip, which did nothing to dispel the illusion. Suddenly, the right hand sprang into view, holding a small, sinister object. 'Can you light me up? I'm afraid it's beyond me.' The hand was trembling like a jelly.

Smith worked the lighter for him. The Luftwaffe lieutenant inhaled deeply. 'I've been dying for that since dawn.' He held out his hands, both of which were shaking uncontrollably. 'Look at that. You wouldn't believe that I've got fifty Russian aircraft to my credit, would you? I've seen it happen before. The English are bright enough to spell their combat pilots; I've been at the front since day one. Then something happens and something just gives. End of story. I blame that madman I flew here. He hijacked me at Gatow, raving about a dead friend and an old lady who wouldn't talk. I suppose you're the people we saw in the boat yesterday. Rat cunning, he was. He climbed the hill behind Havelberg to watch whether you'd come past by river or road. Please tell me that the explosion I heard means the bastard's dead.'

'By now, I reckon', said Smith. 'What'll you do, in that state?'

'Can't fly, but I'll be fine as long as the wheels stay on the ground. And if I can't taxi as far as the Elbe, I'll walk. That's for me. Safety behind American wire.'

Through the fog of her weariness, Rani's horse-trading ancestry came to the fore. 'If you can still drive, this very fine car will take you across with dry feet. We'll swap it for your plane.'

'Sure, but you're getting no bargain. It badly needs maintenance, and look at the rudder.' It was hanging by its upper pivot. There were several bullet holes in the fin and elevator. 'I told your madman that we'd attract fighters like flies to dung, but he didn't care. It was damn hard getting her down in one piece.'

'We'll take it anyway', said Smith, his own spirits rising as he saw Rani's revival.

Smith stripped the plane of its radio ariel, forced the rudder back into position and used the wire to hold it to the broken pivot. The Luftwaffe pilot was sceptical. 'Rather you than me'.



'Thanks a lot', Smith said. There was very little play left in the rudder, and even minimal pressure on the pedals threatened to undo the lash-up.

'*Feldwebel* Grimm would not approve, but it will have to do.'

He lit another cigarette for the pilot, and reminded him that although the car might not fly, its wheels would be leaving the ground when he took to the river.

'Good point,' said the pilot. The three of them pushed the Arado around to face north along Reichstrasse 107 and got into their respective machines. The pilot waited until Smith had completed his run up, but did not wave as they took off.

'How's he doing?', Smith asked as they got airborne. Rani looked back.

'He's holding on to the steering wheel as if someone's trying to take it away from him, but the car is moving.'

In less time than it takes to tell, the intersection was deserted.