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A NEW BEGINNING

Sometimes all you have left is the future

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One

Gestapo Offices

La Cahagnes – Normandy

July 1944

With the pair of pliers gripped in his right hand the Gestapo officer approached the man seated in the chair strategically placed in the centre of the room. As he drew nearer a smile tugged at the corner of his thin mouth. It seemed he might not need the pliers after all, as judging by the dark stain between the man's legs it seemed the wretched fellow had already lost control of his bladder.

Positioning himself in front of the chair the officer stared down at the face of his prisoner. His pale blue eyes fixed on the man's pupils. Even though the room was quite chilly droplets of perspiration had formed on the man's forehead. Another indication of the feeling of terror the man was experiencing.

Placing his index finger under his chin the Gestapo officer tilted back the man's head, bending forward as he did so until their faces were just inches apart.

'So, let us make things easy for each other, shall we?' Although infected by a slight Germanic accent Otto Brohl's French was flawless.

Instinctively, the man's head jerked up and down rapidly, his teeth clamped shut to stop them from chattering.

'Excellent! said Brohl, pulling himself upright. 'I congratulate you on the wisdom of your decision. Now, my colleague Herr Fengler,' glancing towards the tall, stockily-built man standing beside the door, a black fedora perched on his bulbous head 'will provide you with a pad and pencil and all you have to do is write down everything we need to know. Do you understand?'

'And then… and then you will let me go?' The man stammered.

'Of course, I am a man of my word. Isn't that true Fengler?'

Fengler gave a sort of grunt. His thuggish features failing to disguise his disappointment at the prisoner's speedy capitulation. He always enjoyed watching his superior at work. More used to inflicting pain with his huge fists himself, he was fascinated by the surgical precision with which he used simple everyday tools to loosen the most reluctant tongue.

Robbed of his moment of pleasure, Fengler walked across to the chair, and with his nicotine-stained fingers, he unbuckled the straps securing the man's arms. Removing a small notebook and pencil from his jacket pocket, he pushed them into the man's trembling hand. Watching disinterestedly as the Frenchman began writing down the first of the names.

With the act of betrayal completed the prisoner handed the pad back to Fengler, watching nervously as he in turn deposited the notepad into the outstretched hand of Otto Brohl.

'Just these five?' Brohl asked, scanning the page, a hint of disappointment in his voice.

'There were others Monsieur but I was never told their names.'

'I see. You're quite sure now only I would hate to think that you were not keeping your side of the bargain.'

'Quite sure Monsieur.' His gaze instinctively drawn towards the pliers gripped in Brohl's hand.

'You, you have my word.'

Brohl didn't answer right away. Silence was another tool in his armoury. Applied at the right time, he found it had much the same effect as pointing a loaded pistol at a person's head.

Very well, we will save them for another time. For now, we will deal with the ones we have.'

Turning his back on the prisoner, Brohl slowly walked across to where a table had been pushed up against the end wall. Running his eyes over the array of implements, he returned the pliers to their allotted place amongst what he liked to call the tools of his trade. If you put things back where you found them you will always know where they are when you need them again was one of his late father's aphorisms. Sadly, in Brohl's line of work, this wasn't always possible, certainly not where the fingernails and amputated fingers of the people he interrogated were concerned. But then these were things his father probably wasn't referring to anyway.

'On your feet.' said Fengler, his voice as menacing as his appearance.

Having replaced the pliers where he had found them alongside the secateurs, and perfectly in line with the claw-hammer and the dozen-or-so six-inch-nails, Otto Brohl turned his attention to the poor wretch who an hour earlier had entered the room filled with such youthful bravado.

What was he, sixteen? seventeen? It seemed that the Maquis was having to scrape the barrel for their members these days.

Casting an eye over the list of names, the smile returned to Brohl's pallid face. When these five had been rounded up, it seemed they were going to have to scrape a little harder.

'Take him out through the rear entrance,' Brohl snapped, eager to get this judas out of his sight.

'But what if I am seen? What if someone recognises me?'

'Don't worry I have a scapegoat in mind,' Brohl replied, staring into the teenager's face, 'after all I wouldn't want you coming to any harm.'

If the young man was reassured by what the man had said, it didn't show on his face. The fear was still there, evident in his eyes, and the involuntary trembling of his bottom lip.

Dismissing the grovelling creature with a movement of his head, Brohl watched as Fengler dragged the informant towards the door.

When the two men had gone, crossing to the window Brohl pulled back the heavy brocade curtains, flooding the interior with natural light. The room was not at all like those he was used to working in. They were usually more austere. Dungeon-like in many ways, with their stone floors and bare brick walls, which if they were painted at all, it was usually in a drab grey colour. Those fortunate enough to have an outside wall would sometimes have a narrow aperture set into the brickwork just below ceiling level. But in the main, most of them were windowless.

This room had previously been the kitchen. A place where the family would gather each morning to enjoy a typical breakfast of warm croissants and coffee. Surplus to requirements, Brohl had ordered three of the four chairs

which had once stood around the table to be removed together with the cast iron range, and cupboards, including those fixed to the wall. The tell-tale patches left behind in the lilac paintwork revealing the room's original décor.

The sink, its glazed porcelain bowl crazed with age remained, a neatly folded towel and a block of carbolic soap placed on its well-scrubbed draining board. Attached to the cold-water tap by a wire clip was a coiled length of hosepipe, another of Herr Brohl's playthings. Hanging from the ceiling on a length of chain was a rustic light fitting in the shape of a cross. A solitary bulb covered by a faded lampshade attached to each of the four horizontal arms. Strips of patterned lino covered the tiled floor, worn away in places by the constant to-ing and fro-ing of people's feet.

Rescued from his reverie by Fengler's reappearance, Brohl turned his attention to the matter at hand.

'Take Metzinger with you and bring in the woman,' said Brohl, handing the notebook to Fengler.

With a nod of the head, Fengler turned away.

'Keep her here overnight and then release her in the morning.'

Responding with a slight shrug of his powerful shoulders, Fengler made his way towards the door. Sensing the man's disappointment, just as he was about to open it, Brohl tossed his henchman a bone.

'Perhaps before you let her go you might wish to inflict a little punishment?' His words bringing a smile to Fengler's face. Not something you see very often.

'Although don't be too rough.' said Brohl, waggling his index finger in the man's direction. Well aware that on occasions Fengler could be a little over-enthusiastic in

complying with his instructions, particularly where women were concerned.