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Government Offices, Marylebone

31st December 1945

‘Do you know this man?’

Edith Graham looked back at the implacable black eyes staring into hers, then down at the photograph. A Greek *kouros* in a cricket sweater. A young man caught in the full beauty of his youth, or so she’d thought when she fell in love with him that very afternoon. She remembered the photo being taken. 1932. The Parks in Oxford. He was standing at the edge of the pitch, hands in pockets, face in profile, fair hair waving back from a high forehead. Shadows showed beneath his brows and defined his high cheekbones. He was frowning slightly, his mouth a straight line.

‘Why yes, I do know him. That’s Kurt von Stavenow.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Oh, yes. Quite certain.’

‘And your *relationship*?’

‘We – we were lovers for a while . . .’

The woman made a note with her green marbled Schaeffer. Edith left it at that. She wasn’t about to confide in this austere stranger with her cold, appraising eyes.

‘For how long?’ she asked with the air of someone who knew anyway.

‘Not long. A year, if that,’ Edith replied. He’d been her first love, only real love, come to that. Strange to think their time together had been so short. It took a far greater space in her recollected life.

The woman made another note, put down her pen and looked back at Edith, head on one side. She was strikingly good-looking, black hair swept back from a porcelain-pale face, large, dark eyes, slanted and slightly hooded. She wore red lipstick, the sort of shade that Edith’s sister, Louisa, favoured; other than that, very little makeup. The set of her mouth suggested that she rarely smiled. Her dark-grey costume was cut with the severity of a well-tailored uniform. Any suggestion of mannishness was offset by the ivory silk blouse, the Peter Pan collar pinned with a small pearl brooch. Edith admired the subtlety. *I’m a woman in a man’s world*, the outfit said, *in a position of some seniority*. The woman put a hand to her throat, an unconscious defence against Edith’s scrutiny.

‘I say,’ Edith broke the silence. ‘What is this all about?’

‘You’re here to answer questions not ask them.’

Edith shifted in her seat. This was beginning to feel less like an interview, more like an interrogation. She had no idea why she was here, or even where ‘here’ was.

She’d been brought from Control Commission, Germany Headquarters in Kensington, pulled out of the final briefing without explanation, and delivered without a word by a young man in a double-breasted suit and a Guards tie. He’d just pointed to a porticoed entrance.

‘First floor. Corridor on the left.’

They were government offices of some type, although the proportions were all wrong for offices: the corridor too wide, the ceilings too high. The room they were in might once have been a grand sitting room. A small gas fire stood dwarfed in a wide fireplace, any heat swallowed by the yawning, cavernous chimney, and the muffled clatter of a typewriter filtered through thin partitioning plywood. No nameplate for the offices, no numbers on the doors. Something to do with cousin Leo. Edith

would put money on it. They were second cousins, really, several times removed, but had grown up together, their mothers close. Leo was always vague about his work in the government but everyone knew it was hush-hush.

Edith sat facing a large, plain desk, clear apart from a single pad, fountain pen beside it and two manila files. The woman behind it opened the second folder and Edith caught a glimpse of her own passport photograph.

'You are due to leave for Germany soon to take up a position with the Control Commission, Education Branch,' the woman read from her file. 'That is correct?'

She spoke in German now. Edith replied in the same language. The interview was taking a different tack.

'Before that you were working in a girls' grammar school, teaching Modern Languages?'

Edith agreed again.

'For how long?'

Edith answered her questions, going through her education: her degree in German from Bedford College, London. Time spent in Germany, dates and places. Finally returning to her application to join Control Commission, Germany.

'Why?' the woman asked.

'Why what?'

'Why did you apply? It's a simple question, Miss Graham.'

'Those are often the hardest to answer,' she said. Her smile was not returned. 'I spent the war at home. This is a chance for me to do something. Make a contribution.'

Even to her own ears, her words sounded trite, banal. How could this woman with her important job, involved in goodness knows what, possibly understand the tedium of life as Senior Mistress in a provincial girls' grammar, with responsibility for Languages, Ancient and Modern, and the lower school? And when she wasn't doing that, she was looking after her mother while everyone else, it seemed, was off somewhere *doing* something. Dangerous, maybe, even deadly, but exciting, even so.

Looking back, that time, wartime, seemed melded into one

big mass, like the congealed blobs of metal and glass one found after a raid, impossible to see where one thing begins and another ends. So it was with the succession of days. Even raids had a tedious sameness. The dismal wail of the siren, getting Mother up and down to the shelter, listening for the drone of the bombers with that nerve-shredding mix of dread and boredom that came from not knowing when they would come, how long it would last, when it would be over. Then an hour or two of fitful sleep before the exhausting journey across town to work, on foot or by bicycle, with the plaster and brick dust hanging in the air, depositing a fine film everywhere, rendering pointless Mother's constant dusting and cleaning. Some nights, she would get Mother settled in the shelter and then return to bed, not caring if she was blown to smithereens, in some ways wishing for it. The only relief had been rare escapes to London and Leo.

'And how did you find out about the Control Commission?'

'A colleague. Frank Hitchin.'

'Who is he?'

'My opposite number in the Languages Department at the boys' grammar school.'

'They're looking for teachers,' Frank had told her, 'German speakers, to go there after it's all over, help sort out the mess it's bound to be in. I'm going to give it a go. They'll probably be taking women, too. Spinsters, you know. No ties and nothing to keep 'em. Fancy free.' He'd winked. 'Why don't you apply?'

Fancy free? If only he knew.

She'd pedalled home that evening, parked her bike in the garage with Mother waiting for the click of the garden gate. Tea on the table. Then cocoa and the six o'clock news on the radio. More V2 bombs in London but the Allies were crossing the Rhine; the Russians had reached the Oder. Surely the war was nearly over? 'Then we can get back to normal' her mother had announced with some satisfaction as she turned a row in her knitting. By that she meant, *how things were before*. To Edith, the prospect of peace felt like a closing trap. The Control Commission offered an escape. For a spinster teacher in her

thirties, such opportunities did not come often. She was as well-qualified as Frank Hitchin and she'd spent time in Germany before the war, which was more than he had.

She'd said nothing to the family. They'd only try to stop her.

She'd had a reply almost by return, forms to fill, an interview. Nobody at home had the least idea. She didn't tell them until it was too late and she'd given in her notice.

'And what will your job entail?' her interrogator enquired. 'Teaching?'

'The teaching will be done by the Germans,' Edith replied, referring back to that day's briefing. 'We are there as administrators. Inspectors. Our job will be to set up schools where there are none, get them up and running. Vet staff. Get the children in.'

'I see.' The woman glanced back at the file. 'And a high position. Senior Officer, equivalent to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.' She sat back, fingertips together, assessing. Then she smiled. 'You speak German very well,' she said in English. 'Very fluent with a good accent.'

Edith nodded in acceptance of the compliment. She had a good ear for languages and accents. Something in this woman's speech said she was not British. There had been a lecturer at college who could have been her brother.

'I could say the same thing. I've been trying to place your accent. Romanian perhaps?'

A lucky guess. The woman coloured slightly. There was a pause. Then she gave a slight nod, as though she had decided something.

'I would like you to read this and sign.' She took a form from the top-right desk drawer and pushed it towards Edith.

'What is it?'" Edith asked, taking it from her.

'It's the Official Secrets Act.'

Edith glanced down the page of regulations. 'What is this all about?' she asked again.

The woman allowed herself a thin smile. 'We can go no further until you have signed.' She offered her pen. 'Here. And again

here, if you would. And your name, clearly printed. Thank you.’ She took the document and slipped it into a file. ‘I am Vera Atkins.’ The name meant nothing to Edith although it was clearly meant to command recognition and respect. ‘From now on, all proceedings are covered by the Act and cannot be repeated, now or at any time in the future. You understand? Perhaps you need more time to consider . . .’

Edith shook her head, impatient to know what was going on.

‘Now, back to Kurt von Stavenow. Or should I call him *Graf* von Stavenow. A man of many titles, it seems.’ Miss Atkins pushed his file across the desk towards Edith. ‘Do you recognize him here?’

Edith wanted to think that she didn’t recognize him, didn’t want to recognize him. His extreme good looks were heightened to a sinister glamour by the black SS uniform: the silver epaulettes, the lightning rune on the right collar, and the four silver pips on the left to show his rank. But of course she did. His blond hair looked darker and was dressed differently, combed to the side and cut shorter. His face had filled out, but still retained a certain boyishness; those high cheekbones, that cleft in the wide, square chin. He was not looking straight at the camera but off to the right, a look of resolute aloofness, his deep-set eyes pale under dark sweeping brows.

‘Did you know that he was a high-ranking member of the SS?’ the woman asked with a crimson slash of a smile.

‘No, of course not.’

Edith felt her cheeks grow hot. She was close to losing her temper with the testing, teasing nature of the interview but it wasn’t that which was bringing the blood to her face. Her grip on the photograph tightened, denting the corners. She’d known him. Known him well. They had been lovers. Whatever had happened between them, she’d thought him fundamentally good. She’d often wondered what he might be doing but she could never have imagined this. The glossy paper creased further under her fingers. An officer in the SS? The opposite, if anything. She’d worried he’d get mixed up in something. End up in a

concentration camp. She would *never* have thought *this* of him. Never have dreamt it. How could he? How could this be? Her stare intensified as though the image might speak to her. She glanced away and back again. Perhaps it was a mistake. Perhaps it wasn't him. But that was even more foolish. She felt some of her certainty about the world and her place in it shift. It was him all right.

'When was the last time you were in contact with Sturmbannführer Kurt von Stavenhow?'

'I didn't know him as Sturmbannführer von Stavenhow.'

The woman sighed in obvious frustration, but Edith felt she needed to make the point.

'Very well, when did you last see *Kurt* von Stavenhow?'

Edith thought for a moment. 'It would have been 1938.'

'You don't seem too sure.'

'It was 1938. In the summer.'

'Not since then?'

'Of course not!' Edith snapped. 'We've been at war!'

Perhaps he hadn't done anything terrible, part of her mind continued to reason as she answered questions. Perhaps he *had* been involved in some form of resistance, a plot against Hitler. Perhaps that was the reason for this current interest. Yet there was something in those slanting black eyes, a slight twisting of the lip that spoke of a deep contempt, even hatred, for anyone who had even been associated with this man, who might ever have called him a friend. Such loathing was not aroused by innocence. What had he done?

'Ah, here you are!'

The connecting door to the next office opened and there was Leo, coming through in a bustling hurry. Edith had the feeling that he had been there all the time.

'Sorry I'm late! Meeting ran on and on. How are you two getting along? Like a house on fire, I shouldn't doubt.'

He rubbed his hands together, choosing to ignore the frigid atmosphere, or failing to notice it.

'I think we've finished.' Vera capped her pen.

‘Everything satisfactory? Edith pass with flying colours?’

‘Perfectly.’ She stood up. ‘And yes.’

‘In that case, thank you, Vera,’ Leo at his most avuncular. ‘Now, don’t let us keep you. I’m sure you have plenty to do, gathering your bits and pieces and so on.’

Vera looked around the empty room. ‘I’ve already done so. As you can see.’

‘Hmm, yes, well . . .’ Leo rubbed his hands again. ‘Don’t let us keep you, as I say . . .’

Vera held Leo’s eyes in her level black stare before slowly fitting her pen into her briefcase. It was unclear who was dismissing whom.

‘Oh, and leave those files on the desk, would you?’ Leo added.

‘I had every intention of doing so,’ Vera said as she put on her coat, ‘since they no longer have anything to do with me.’ Quite unexpectedly, she turned as she moved to the door and proffered her hand to Edith. ‘*Auf wiedersehen*, Miss Graham.’ Her handshake was firm and strong. ‘You have a formidable task in front of you with the Control Commission. A great responsibility.’ Her grip became more emphatic. ‘May I wish you good luck.’

‘You mustn’t mind our Miss Atkins,’ Leo said as the door closed behind her. ‘She’s got a good eye, old Vera. Good instincts.’ He collected the files from the desk. ‘Particularly good with the girls. None better. If you pass the Vera test, you’re on your way.’

‘On my way to where?’ Edith asked as she followed Leo out into the corridor. She caught his arm, slightly disoriented, still shocked by what she’d heard about Kurt. ‘What am I doing here, Leo? What’s this all about?’

‘When you said you were off to Germany, I had an idea, that’s all. It’s a frightful mess over there. Chaos doesn’t begin to describe it. Our zone is full to bursting, God knows how many from God knows where – the unfortunate residents of the bombed-out cities, demobbed soldiers, ex-slave workers, refugees from all regions east who’ve fled from Uncle Joe’s forces and

who can blame them for that?' He frowned. 'Among them are some bad hats, some very bad hats, taking advantage of all the chaos and confusion. Hiding in plain sight. Nothing suits them better. Our job, or part of it, is to wrinkle them out. Simple as that. We need all the help we can get, quite frankly.' He looked at her, blue eyes magnified by his glasses. 'Since you're going there, I thought you might do us a little favour.'

'Is Kurt one of these bad hats?'

'Most emphatically, I'm afraid.'

'But what has he *done*?' She held onto his arm, wanting, needing an answer. How could this possibly be? The Kurt she knew transformed into Sturmbannführer von Stavenhow?

Leo glanced round. 'Not here. I'll explain later.'

Edith looked down the deserted corridor, the parquet dulled and scored, marked with cigarette burns. The tall windows filmed with grime, still criss-crossed with peeling tape.

'What is this place, Leo?'

'It's a place that's never existed officially and is about to cease to be entirely.' He nodded to a pile of boxes stacked by the door.

'Secret, you mean? Hush-hush?'

He nodded.

'What am I doing here? What do you want *me* to do, exactly?' Edith asked, a sudden, cold realization dawning. 'Be some kind of spy?'

'I wouldn't go as far as that. Not in the accepted sense.'

'The Official Secrets Act?'

'Oh,' Leo waved a dismissive hand. 'Everyone signs that. People get the wrong end of the stick about intelligence work. Most of it's done by perfectly unexceptional types: businessmen, travel agents, teachers, clerks, typists, shop assistants, anybody really. Ordinary men – and women. It's mostly a matter of keeping eyes and ears open, passing on information. Women are excellent at it. Superior intuition.'

Edith frowned. 'How do you know I'd be suited?'

'Oh, you'd be perfect.' He looked at his watch. 'Better get the old skates on. You'll find the driver waiting.' He kissed her on

the cheek. 'I'll pick you up from Dori's at eightish. Wear something nice. I've booked a table at The Savoy.'

Edith sat in the back of the car. The driver seemed to know where he was going without her instruction. What was this about? She'd done favours for Leo before. Attended meetings at university, dropped off a parcel or two, collected ditto. Sat on a certain park bench until a man walked by with a dog. Another park, another town. Wait by the floral clock. Same man. Different dog. What did Leo want? The Official Secrets Act suggested something serious. In Edith's experience, the swankier the place, the bigger the favour and it didn't get swankier than The Savoy on New Year's Eve.