



*For Such a Time*

KATE BRESLIN



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*For John, my beloved*

*When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai,  
he sent back this answer . . . "And who knows but  
that you have come to your royal position for such  
a time as this?"*

Esther 4:12–14

# 1

*Esther also was taken to the king's palace. . . .*

Esther 2:8

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 1944

The stench was unmistakable. Seeping through the walls of the two-story chalet, turning pungent from the warmth of an oil furnace, the insidious odor drifted upstairs to where Stella lay asleep on a window seat. It filled her nostrils and roused her with a jerk; she struggled upright, shielding her eyes against the bright light penetrating the glass.

Dawn. The burning had begun.

Beyond the chilled pane lay the Ceaseless White. Stella gazed out at the endless mantle of snow punctuated by clusters of bare-limbed trees, a handful of farmhouses, and St. Jakob's onion-shaped cupola in the distance. To the west, the nebulous sky grew dark as the stacks of Dachau's *Krematorium* belched gritty smoke against a colorless sun, permeating the air with a sickening-sweet odor.

She imagined the tiny charred flakes, soaring high, borne off to God Forsaken . . .

Despair struck like an angry fist; she grabbed at the sill, feeling

dizzy and out of breath as she pressed her bruised forehead against the cold glass. How was it that she still felt anything?

The nausea soon passed, and she turned from the window—away from death—to stare at the austere whitewashed walls that hemmed her in. Not the train, not the Block at Dachau where she'd been held for months, but a room. Her makeshift prison for untold days.

Why was she here . . . and why had *she* been singled out? The repetitive questions preyed on her anxiety as she began the day's ritual of scouring her surroundings for clues.

Uncle Morty once said that a person's possessions spoke much about them. Stella believed their lack often revealed more. This room, for instance, like her dignity, was stripped bare except for a low-slung cot and a nightstand disguised as a battered fruit crate. Nothing else—least of all any frivolous female comforts that might capture her interest. No vanity with ruffled seat, no perfume bottles, lipstick cassettes, or cosmetics to clutter its top. Even the windowpane had felt brittle against her skin, bereft of any delicate lace curtains. With the war in full swing, no silk stockings hung idly over the back of a chair (had there been one) or tumbled from an open dresser drawer (had there been one). Not even a shard of mirrored glass hung on the stark walls. She'd simply been locked away upstairs in an empty room, the fabled Rapunzel in her tower. Except for the hair . . .

Hardly a princess, Stella thought bitterly, smoothing blistered fingertips over the new growth at her scalp. She surveyed her spindly extremities—barely discernible arms and legs that protruded from the capped sleeves and knee-length hem of her blue cotton dress. She looked more like the room: an empty husk, lifeless, genderless. Temporary . . .

The faint purr of a car's engine drew her attention back to the window. A black Mercedes approached the chalet, cutting a path through the snow that concealed the road. The disjointed white cross of the *Hakenkreuz* emblazoned its door.

*Jew Killers*. Stella froze as the Nazi staff car pulled up beside the house. Fragments of memory collided with her mounting apprehension. The gritty-faced *Kapo*—a Jew trusted by the Nazis to guard their Block of prisoners at Dachau—had stuffed her into the blue dress. The feel of warm wool against her skin as she was wrapped in a blanket and carried. The dark trunk of a car . . .

The driver wore the black uniform of the *Schutzstaffel* and exited first before rushing around to open the passenger door. The man who emerged next stood tall and broad-shouldered in a heavy greatcoat. His presence evoked every aspect of authority. Dominance. Even the cane he gripped in his right hand failed to diminish his aura of power.

He looked up at her window. Stella's heart pounded. Did some intuitive force reveal to him her hiding place, or had he already known? She pulled back from the sill, then quickly changed her mind, meeting his stare.

His face was a canvas of strength—rock-hard features fortified with asperity, amplified by the grim line at his mouth and the tautness of his squared jaw. Features much accustomed to pain. More in giving it than receiving it, she decided.

Beneath his black officer's cap with its skull-and-bones death's-head insignia, eyes of an indiscernible color watched her a long moment. Without looking away, he raised his free hand and snapped his fingers, bringing his driver to heel like a trained beast. He passed his cane to the underling without comment and then strode to the front door.

The bell sounded below, and every nerve in Stella's body screamed. She heard the frantic voice of the housekeeper—her jailer—greet the Nazi.

Pressing chapped palms against her thighs, she was vaguely aware of the dampness of sweat seeping through the thin cotton dress. Her pulse hammered in her throat as the first wooden step leading upstairs groaned beneath his weight. She'd heard

about medical experiments performed on prisoners. Was he a doctor? Was that why she'd been brought here?

A key turned in the lock. Stella's body bucked in reaction, launching her to her feet. She became aware of a winded sound, a shallow, rapid rushing of air—and realized it was her own breath.

“Gut, you're awake.”

The stout, ruddy-cheeked *Hausfrau* stood on the threshold. Not the Jew Killer.

Stella's knees nearly buckled.

“You have an important visitor. Follow me downstairs.”

Stella didn't immediately grasp the command. Fear rooted her to a spot by the window, a sapling anchored to earth. She could only blink at the sour-faced woman standing at the door.

“Are you deaf, *Jude*? I said come with me!”

The sharp words freed Stella's invisible fetters and she shuffled forward, swallowing the bubble of terror in her throat. *In deference lay my survival, in deference lay my survival . . .*

“Your kind brings nothing but trouble,” the housekeeper hissed before turning to leave.

Stella ground her teeth to keep silent. She wasn't surprised at the woman's hostility. Even the word *Jew* had become dangerous to utter. Deadly.

Following the *Hausfrau* downstairs, Stella felt panic escalate with each step. She fought it the only way she knew how: by lulling herself into a languid state that had so often shielded her sanity. She became oblivious to the gold-gilt lithographs framed along the stairwell and the moan of warped wood beneath her bare feet. Dust particles swirling in a shaft of winter sunlight from an upstairs window went unnoticed.

When pain from a protruding nail on the step finally jarred her benumbed state, Stella blinked and stared down at the blood oozing from her torn flesh. Her chest tightened with flashes of memory. *Bloody hands . . . gunshot . . .*



“Move!”

Like an ill-wakened sleeper, she raised her head to glare at the housekeeper. What was the point in deference? She was already dead inside. Did it matter what they did with her body?

Fear and disgust flashed across the other woman’s face before she hastily resumed her descent. Stella followed, determined to buoy her defiance with each step—

Until she came face-to-face with *him*.

Terror sank its claws in deep. As the housekeeper fled to the safety of the kitchen, Stella clung to her last shred of newfound courage and focused on the man before her. He swiftly removed his hat, the brim pitching flecks of snow against her cheek.

From the window above, she’d imagined him much older. Stella was surprised to see that, up close, he was nearer in age to her own twenty-three years. His thick russet hair, shot through with gold, lay close-cropped against his head, while eyes—a vibrant shade of green—studied her with open curiosity. “Good morning, *Fräulein*.”

Startled by his deep voice, Stella teetered backward on the step. He caught her bony wrist to steady her. When she tried to wrench free, the gloved fingers held firm. His dark brows rose in challenge. “I trust you’re feeling better?”

The ice from his brim numbed her cheek. Stella fought for calm as she glanced from his arrogant face to the imposing grip on her wrist. She could smell him—new leather and pine, the dampness of snow.

“I can assure you that you’re quite safe here.”

Safe? Her free hand fisted at her side. How often had that word been used, that promise given and broken at Dachau?

The snowflakes melted against her skin. Stella raised her fist to wipe at the wetness; his hand was faster, and she flinched at the contact of soft leather against her cheek. Would he beat her now for being weak, mistaking the water for tears? Or maybe criticize her first?

But the Jew Killer did nothing, said nothing. Even his touch felt surprisingly gentle. She watched his gaze drop to the hand still in his grasp. In that he took care as well, as one by one he uncurled her clenched fingers. Turning her hand over, he assessed the bruises on her knuckles and joints.

Stella's fear battled against his oddly comforting touch. The heat she could feel through his leather glove made him seem almost . . . human.

The raw fury in his eyes shattered the illusion. "You have my word," he said mildly. "While you are here, no one can harm you."

Clicking his heels together, he offered a curt nod. "Allow me to introduce myself. Colonel Aric von Schmidt, *SS Kommandant* to the transit camp at Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia."

When she made no response, he added, "Lucky for you, on my way to Munich I stopped at Dachau to see my cousin Frau Gertz. I also chose to visit the camp while I was here and oversee the first transfer of laborers into my command."

An effort to smile died on his lips. "You see, I'm relatively new to my post, so I can hardly afford mistakes. Nor am I a man who tolerates them. When my sergeant informed me that one body from the train's manifest was unaccounted for, I decided to track it down myself. Care to guess who it was?"

Stella shook her head, too afraid to speak.

"No? Well, here you are—proof of my good deed. And if you're wondering why I didn't put you on that train, it was due to an inconsistency on your papers. They state you are Aryan, *Fräulein Muller*. So you will explain to me now why they have been stamped JUDE."

Stella lowered her head to hide her resentment. The false identification papers Uncle Morty had purchased for her in secret from Berlin had done nothing to save her. She'd spent the past several months living in quarters unfit for livestock. She'd worked outside in the cold, wearing thin rags and wooden clogs several sizes too big. Not even stockings to protect her feet

from chafing or frostbite. And hunger—the Nazis had tried to starve them all.

“Answer me!” he snapped at her, all pretense at politeness gone.

Stella’s head shot up as she choked on her fear. “*Gestapo* . . . at the checkpoint . . .”

“*Gestapo* did this? Why?”

His eyes narrowed on her. Stella’s panic exploded. “He wanted to . . . tried to . . . I wouldn’t let him . . .” She struggled against his grasp. “Please . . . not my fault . . . !”

“Enough!” His grip was like iron. “I told you that you are safe here. Why do you think I brought you to my cousin’s house?”

Stella quit her struggle. The fact that he’d gone to such lengths to save her came on the heels of realizing he wasn’t a doctor. Instead of feeling relief, a cold shiver crept up her spine. What did he want? She tried to recall further details from that night, but could remember nothing prior to her awakening days before on the cot upstairs.

It seemed her life had changed in the span of an instant, and this man, this Jew Killer, took credit for the act. Yet Stella had no recollection of him. Nor did she feel gratitude. “I don’t understand. Why did you bring me here?”

High on the foyer wall, a Black Forest clock ticked the seconds. Stella held her breath, every nerve attuned to the man’s response.

This time his smile reached its destination. Dazzling white, its unexpected warmth surprised and unsettled her. Only his somber green eyes dampened the effect. “Do I need a reason, *Fräulein*?” A pause. “Very well, I wanted an explanation and you’ve given it—more or less. I know the *Gestapo*’s breed of men, so I can fill in the blanks.” He eyed her a long moment. “Trust me when I tell you that you are not the first to fall victim to their pranks.”

Stella’s throat tightened with anger. Her experience at the hands of the *Gestapo* had hardly been a mere joke. She swallowed her ire and said, “And now . . . what will you do with me, *Herr Kommandant*?”

“Fatten you up like a Christmas *Gänsebraten*, for a start.” He glanced at her spare limbs. “Soon you’ll return to the pretty dove I imagine you once were.”

Stella looked away. Was he toying with her? Morty once told her that her beauty would save her—a “changeling,” he’d called his young niece, Stella’s blond hair and blue eyes a rarity among their people.

Her uncle had been wrong. Beauty was dangerous, a liability for someone desperate to remain obscure in a crowd, inconspicuous to the eyes of soldiers.

She turned to him, this time her bitterness unchecked. “Christmas goose or fatted calf, both meet the same end, do they not, Herr Kommandant?”

The muscle at his jaw clenched. Too late, Stella realized her foolish outburst. Horrified and amazed at her own audacity, she braced against the expected Consequence. Surely he would beat her, or worse—

“Frau Gertz!”

The force of his bellow nearly knocked Stella back. He continued to hold her in his grip until his cousin appeared cautiously from the kitchen.

“Get her a coat. We’re leaving.”

Frau Gertz bobbed her head like some peasant to a feudal lord before she rushed toward the closet. Stella could only watch, frozen in place. The colonel promised she would be safe . . . *here*. And now they were leaving.

The Hausfrau returned with a coat disguised as a frayed white shawl.

“Have you any shoes, Fräulein?”

He sounded impatient. Stella gaped at her bloodied feet, her mind seized by more forgotten memories. Someone at Dachau had taken her shoes, her clothes . . .

*She knelt naked in the snow, her soul seared with humiliation, her body numbed by cold. Faces streaked with dirt and*

*pity surrounded her as though she were some freak in a carnival. Soon guards dragged her away. Her flesh burned with pain, then fear. Fear for the little hands shoving a bundle in her direction. A blouse . . . little hands in danger . . . crying hands . . . struggle with the guards . . . the crack of a rifle . . .*

Images ripped through Stella like shards of glass. She hunched forward, dizzy with pain, her eyes shut against the brutal past.

“I will not ask you again!”

The colonel’s frighteningly cold voice sounded a thousand kilometers away. She clawed her way up through the terrifying haze and struggled to recall his question. *Shoes . . .*

“Gone,” Stella managed to say before her knees buckled. She collapsed toward the floor just as he caught her and hauled her against him. She made a puny attempt to push away, but his strength clearly outmatched hers. Exhausted, she slumped against him, only vaguely aware of the shawl being placed across her shoulders.

She cried out in protest as he lifted her into his arms. That seemed to fuel his anger. “You fed her while I was away, didn’t you?”

“Oh, she ate.” Frau Gertz’s blunt fingers bunched in the folds of her white apron. “She ate food enough for three people! Then she threw it up on my floor. Now she refuses anything but broth.”

The Hausfrau shot an accusing look at Stella, as if demanding corroboration. Stella’s face heated. She’d been so hungry. Afterward, she’d sworn that no one, especially this nasty woman, would ever again witness her humiliation. So far, the broth seemed safe enough.

“What about clothing, cousin?” The colonel’s tone held an edge. “I had assumed that for the week I left her in your care, my money would more than compensate you for your trouble.”

“But you said to use discretion,” the Hausfrau whined. “How could I go to town and buy new clothes without the tradesmen asking questions? She is so much smaller than me—”

“I’m done with excuses! Now give her *your* coat, and shoes for her feet. *Schnell!*”

His bark sent her running back to the closet. She returned with a voluminous black wool coat and a pair of dirty pink house slippers. “My other shoes are still at the cobbler’s. . . .”

Her voice trailed off. The colonel was staring at the boots on her feet. The Hausfrau looked alarmed. Stella felt a spurt of vindication. “Please, cousin.”

Before she could utter another plea, he swore and snatched up the clothing. He wheeled around and departed with Stella, leaving a startled Frau Gertz in his wake.

Outside, his driver held the car door open. Once the colonel deposited Stella against the seat, he offered her the coat and slippers. She took them before scooting to the far end of the car. His hulk-like frame followed her inside.

The engine of the Mercedes roared to life while heat blasted from vents in the car’s dashboard. Stella bit back a blissful sigh as she hugged the borrowed coat to her chest. Casting a surreptitious glance at the colonel, she found herself caught in his steady, impenetrable gaze.

A brief moment passed before the line at his mouth thinned and his features hardened, as though he’d reached some distasteful conclusion. Alarms began going off in Stella’s head as he reached a gloved hand deep inside his coat . . .

A gun! He was going to shoot her! She grabbed the door’s handle and pulled. Locked! A scream lodged in her throat as she shut her eyes, pressing her body hard into the leather seat—  
“Put this on.”

Her eyes flew open. She swallowed her cry when she saw he held not a pistol but a woman’s red hairpiece. He offered it to her. “As you’ve discovered, papers mean little at this stage of the war. We don’t want you looking too conspicuous.”

With unsteady hands, she fitted the wig so that the strands fell about her shoulders.

“You’ll get across the Czech border safely enough,” he said when she finished. “But the color doesn’t suit you, Fräulein.”

Ignoring the petty insult, Stella turned toward the window and struggled to regain her composure.

Outside, emerald fir and barren poplars rushed past the car as it sped along the winding ribbon of road into Germany's lower wine country. The war hadn't yet touched this pristine countryside; instead of burned-out buildings and cratered fields, she saw only arbors, barren of fruit, cast against a backdrop of snowy white. In summer their latticed bowers would again be laden with plump grapes, peacefully unaware of the suffering only a few kilometers away.

*Freiheit*. Freedom. Stella gazed out at the forested hills and felt a stab of yearning like physical pain. She embraced it, ridding herself of fear as fury from the past several months replaced it. Fury at the old God for abandoning her. Fury at this new one, the uniformed monster beside her who now controlled her life.

Silence stretched with the miles, and though she burned with questions, Stella was grateful for the respite. She had no use for small talk with this Nazi, and having to answer more of his questions could only become a dangerous undertaking.

At Regensburg, a town near the western bank of the Danube River, the colonel ordered a halt at a local *Gasthaus*. He dispatched his driver, Sergeant Grossman, to go inside and procure three lunches. He then turned his attention to her.

"Your papers state you are from Innsbruck. I too am Austrian, from the little town of Thaur, not far from there." His penetrating eyes looked at odds with his smile. "I once knew a man by the name of Muller: Tag Muller. He and his family lived in the town of Innsbruck, where I ventured often as a boy. Are you any relation? I'm sure I would not have forgotten you."

Stella shook her head, glancing at the bruised hands in her lap. Mentally she cursed her false papers. In all of Europe to conjure a birthplace, Morty happened to choose this man's backyard and the name of a family friend!

"Well?"

She moistened her dry lips. “Muller is a common name.”

“True. Is your family still there?”

Again she shook her head, refusing to look at him. Stella desperately hoped he would mistake her silence for grief and stop asking questions. Her ploy failed.

“Speak!” He grabbed her chin and turned her face until their eyes locked. “I trust, since you have the ability to make rash remarks, that you can also make intelligent conversation.”

Trembling beneath his touch, Stella did not look away. “My parents died when I was five.” That much was true, anyway. “I had no other family, so I was taken in and raised by their closest friends.” A spurt of defiance made her add, “They were Jews.”

Expecting a violent reaction, Stella was surprised when his grip on her eased. In fact, he looked only mildly curious. “Your papers also state you have performed clerical work. Did you attend school at Innsbruck?”

“Yes.” It was another lie, though Stella *had* received instruction, but not in any school—not past the age of thirteen when Nuremberg law forbade Jews to receive an education. Instead, Mrs. Bernstein, a retired schoolteacher living upstairs from their old apartment in Mannheim, had tutored her in the basics of bookkeeping and clerical skills.

“How well can you type?”

Stella straightened in her seat. Did he have need of her abilities? “Very well, Herr Kommandant,” she said. “I also know shorthand and general accounting.” She tried to repress her optimism, painfully aware of the Nazis’ verbal traps.

He seemed genuinely pleased. “I’d hoped as much, Stella.”

The sound of her name on his lips disturbed her, as though linking them together in some intimate way. Stella wanted nothing personal between them. She’d much rather hate him.

Sergeant Grossman returned with their packages of food. As he began passing them through the open car window, Stella noticed his left wrist bore no hand; the steel hook in its place



both frightened and moved her as she watched him struggle with his burden.

The colonel offered her a boxed lunch. Stella vehemently shook her head.

“You will eat,” he growled. “Not only did your bones cut into me while I carried you, but you weigh less than a pair of my boots. And if you starve yourself, well . . .” He shot her a calculated look. “We won’t be able to plan out your future, will we?”

*An artful strategist.* She took the box, hating that he’d correctly guessed that her curiosity at his statement would outweigh any risk of nausea. She concentrated on taking small bites of the cheese sandwich and apple slices packed inside while her attention strayed back toward the miles they had crossed.

“Relax.” The colonel read her thoughts. “Dachau is only a speck in the distance.”

She paused with a dried apple slice halfway to her lips. *What of those who still suffered?* There was no hope for them. Unlike her, they wouldn’t be rescued.

But was she safe? Stella stared at the man beside her, this Jew Killer who had taken possession of her. With or without false papers, her life might only stretch as far as the next hour. What did he really want with her? Why had he taken her from Dachau?

Would he ever let her go free?

Her throat ached at the unbearable uncertainty. *Lord, please let me know my fate.*

Silence. Had she expected otherwise? “What is my future, Herr Kommandant?” she managed to whisper.

“That depends on you, Fräulein.” His smile was enigmatic. “Can you act as well as you type?”