

WINTER'S BULLET

W I L L I A M O S B O R N E

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JANUARY 11, 1945

It was just before dawn when General Müller, head of the Gestapo, arrived at the Adlerhorst.

The Führer had based himself at this medieval German castle to direct his daring offensive against the Americans and British in the forests of the Ardennes. But news from the front was bleak: The German army had ground to a halt, and the enemy was counterattacking with overwhelming force.

After six years, the unthinkable was happening: The Third Reich was losing the war.

General Müller stared out at the darkness beyond the car window, his mind racing. At least they still had Operation Black Sun, he thought. It was both their last hope and the best hope of victory. And he was here to report on its progress to Hitler himself. Everything was ready, he told himself: the

secret airbase near Amsterdam; the friends in South America; the sea trial; the weapon itself . . .

After a series of checkpoints, his Mercedes pulled to a halt in the castle's large courtyard. A series of blast-proof concrete bunkers had been built beyond it, cleverly disguised to look like small cottages. Müller climbed out and stretched.

A sense of defeat seemed to hang in the foggy air. There was a muted silence to the staff officers who passed him, saluting perfunctorily. The atmosphere wasn't helped by the still-smoldering remains of the village church and several cottages that had been hit by Allied bombs a few days earlier. The Führer had been assured it was coincidental—his whereabouts were a closely guarded secret since the assassination attempt last July—but nevertheless, it added to the sense of a tightening net.

Müller reached Haus 2. A uniformed valet opened the door and took his winter coat and hat, then escorted him to an ante-chamber outside Hitler's situation room. The place had been decorated to resemble an Alpine lodge; it was very cozy, Müller thought, *sehr gemütlich*.

Reichsleiter Bormann was standing in front of a fire warming his legs. He didn't move his squat, paunchy body to greet Müller, just fixed him with his black eyes.

"So, Müller, what is your report on Operation Black Sun?" he said. "The Führer is anxious to hear it."

"Everything is proceeding to plan and on schedule." Müller pulled off his gloves slowly, finger by finger.

“And the bomb?”

“It will be shipped to the Amsterdam airbase in time.”

Bormann merely nodded.

The two men waited in silence for the Führer to conclude the morning briefing of the Ardennes offensive. When the last of the tense-faced generals had departed, Müller and Bormann stepped inside and the doors slammed shut behind them.

They snapped salutes to the Führer, who waved them away.

“I’d like some good news for a change, Müller,” he said. “My generals continue to thwart all my best endeavors.” Though he looked thin and his hair was lank, there was still, Müller thought, a sense of burning energy.

“Of course—” he began before Bormann the sycophant interrupted him.

“General Müller reports that all aspects of Operation Black Sun are in place.”

Müller watched as Hitler nodded, mulling it over.

“This bomb . . .”

“Here, *mein Führer* . . .” Bormann quickly laid out a map in front of Hitler, who studied it carefully with a large magnifying glass.

“New York?”

“*Ja, mein Führer*. Observe . . .” Bormann jabbed his middle finger at a series of concentric rings. “Central Park. The first two rings spell total annihilation. Everything reduced to dust.”

The Führer stared at the two rings, the second one extending well beyond the island of Manhattan. “So this atom-splitting weapon will work,” he said eventually. “Incredible.”

“Indeed, *mein Führer*,” said Bormann. “With this weapon you can win the war in one stroke. The genius of German technology will be the Fatherland’s salvation.”

The Führer threw down the magnifying glass and stabbed an accusing finger at the two men. “Didn’t I tell you,” he said, “didn’t I tell the German nation to keep the faith, that we would triumph over whatever the Americans and Bolsheviks threw at us?”

His voice grew louder and stronger as he spoke. Müller noticed a fleck of spit form in the corner of his mouth. There was silence for a moment. Hitler closed his eyes briefly, then opened them.

“If the sea trial of the weapon is successful then we move immediately—in three days. Müller, you will fetch my baggage.”

Müller frowned, not understanding. “Your baggage, *mein Führer*?”

“Frau Braun, she is staying at the Berghof. Bring the sister too—she will want some company in Argentina, no doubt.”

“Ja, *mein Führer*.”

“And my special gift that I promised our Argentinian friend? The stone?”

“The stone—” Bormann began, but this time Müller interrupted him.

“Everything will be in order by the time we leave, *mein Führer*.”

Hitler frowned. “See that it is. I gave my word to the señorita.”

Müller saluted and the Führer planted his hands on his hips, his eyes bright.

“Take heart, gentlemen, the real war is just about to start! This weapon—this wonder weapon—will rain death on any city we choose: first New York, then Moscow, and finally Churchill’s London. We will bomb them all back into the Stone Age!”