

SECRET AGENT "X"

the **WRATH**
of the
VALKYRIE

by John Bear Ross

Chapter One

“So, Charley, when are you going to be making an honest woman out of that Ruth of yours?”

The question was a frequent one, asked at least once per dragging shift. Charley took his feet down from the table that filled the small coastal rescue station’s combination kitchen and main entrance room, and sighed. Folding his paper and setting his coffee to the side, he rubbed his bloodshot eyes and put his elbows on the table.

“Jesus, Benny, when are you going to stop repeating that damn question? Is she slipping you a sawbuck for every time you ask me?”

Benny Thatcher smiled, comforted by the fact he had managed to get a rise out of his watch partner. They had been stuck together on the midnight shift here for four months now. Neither complained too much about the work, since there wasn’t a lot of it to go around in these hard times. With the Depression on, and no end in sight, both were glad just not to be in the soup lines that were widely featured in the newsreels.

Unfortunately, their nightly duties put them in close proximity, and

familiarity had bred Benny's slight case of contempt for Charley and his lifestyle. Benny was a devout Catholic, and disapproved of Charley's cursing and living in sin with his long-term fiancée, Ruth Badermann. Benny hoped his long-filed transfer would go through soon to another coastal watch station, one in a higher traffic area, with more action, and higher pay.

"Relax, Charley, I'm just passing the time. We've still got four hours until Manny and Joe show up for shift change. Did you ever work out that bug with the wireless radio?"

"Nope, we can still only receive, not transmit. I've put in a repair notice to Regional two weeks ago, but you know the Captain's a lush. He won't process any request unless it's wrapped around a bottle of hooch."

Benny grimaced and smirked at the same time, hiding his expression behind the mug of coffee as he brought it up to his lips. He admired Charley's ability to cut to the heart of an issue, but found his methods rough, and what was the word? *Uncouth*. *Uncouth*: there was a twelve-dollar word if he ever heard one.

"So, we're still stuck with just the hand-cranked phone, huh?"

"You got it, mac."

"Well, it's better than nothing."

"So you say."

Benny took the remark as an excuse to step outside into the cool night air. The kerosene lamp kept the small watch station warm and lit, but tended to make the place stuffy. Benny stared out at the sea, at least what he could see of it reflected by the watch station's lights. It was a moonless night out here on the Long Island sound, and the low sound of crashing waves pulled his gaze towards the sea as much as the gray smudge of breaking surf did.

Something caught his eye, silhouetted against the flashing light of the Block Island lighthouse, a few miles across the water. For the briefest of instances, a square shape flickered in the darkness, dimly backlit by the distant, rotating strobe. He squinted, trying to focus on the shape even as it appeared to sink below the waves.

Stepping back into the doorway of the watch station, he called to Charley, "Hey, Charley, hand me those binoculars up on the shelf, would you?"

"Why, whattaya see out there? There's no moon. Is the lighthouse on fire?"

"No, wiseacre, I thought I saw a square sail or something sinking

between us and Block Island.”

“Square? Did it have hard edges like a sail, Benny, or rounded edges like a-”

“The binos, Charley, quick. I can barely see it, and it’s fading fast.”

Charley handed Benny the optics with a grim reluctance. He wasn’t in the mood to shove their rescue boat into the surf, especially at this time of night. Hopefully, it was nothing.

Benny kept looking out the door towards the water, reaching back for the offered binos.

“Holy smokes, Charley, I think it might be a-”

A drilling whine registered in Charley’s head, like a mosquito had flown down his ear canal. The sound crescendoed violently, and the back of Benjamin J. Thatcher’s chest exploded over Charley and the rest of the small room. A window on the far wall shattered at the same time, directly across from the doorway. Benny slumped against the door jam, sliding down it at a jagged and tortuous pace, and fell backwards into a pool of his own fluids.

Charley was rooted to the spot, shocked, the binocular case still held out at arm’s length. Shredded bits of bone, blood, and other parts of Benny covered him. By the time the stricken man finally hit the floor, Charley was snapped out of his stupor by a thunderous report that came through the doorway three or four seconds after the initial event.

“...Subma...rine...Charley...,” Thatcher’s last words rasped out as his pupils dilated. The sound seemed to come from his gaping chest wound as much as it did his blood-filled mouth.

“Oh, sweet Jesus, Benny, what the hell-”

Benny’s lips mouthed “submarine” one last time as he faded away. Charley dove for the floor, and began to slip and slog across the gore-soaked kitchen towards the wireless radio set in the next room. The station was built from brick and mortar to withstand pounding surf and driving winds that would come with seasonal Nor’easters. Those had been rifle shots. The lag between impact and the rifle’s report meant the shooter was some distance away. Charley had been a veteran of the Great War. He knew he would be safe from long-range rifle shots if he kept low, behind cover.

The seemingly-strong walls now began to explode. Every terrifying concussion of brick and dust would be followed later by thunderous gunshots in rapid succession. They happened at such a rapid pace that they began overlapping each other in a frenzied drumbeat of fury and thunder.

Charley screamed and covered his eyes and ears from the assault of stinging pieces of brick and splinters of wood from the kitchen table. After a tortured eternity of seconds, the fusillade stopped.

Charley crawled to the wireless set, his ears ringing. He never noticed the snaps and pops coming from the pool of kerosene spreading from the shattered lamp. He picked up the wireless radio's microphone, but remembered as he touched it that it was unable to transmit. He reached for the hand-crank telephone mounted on the wall nearby. A few fearful turns of the manually-powered phone produced a low growl, and a loud click as the party on the other end picked up.

"Long Island Office of Public Maritime Safety, Lieutenant Pudlowski speaking, how can I-"

"Pud! Pudlowski! It's Charley, Charley Morgan, out here at Green Hill Beach Station! Me and Benny need help! Benny's dead, but he said he saw a su-"

Half a dozen gunshots rang out again, but this time from within the station. Charley felt a slick stream of liquid heat pouring down the side of his face, and faintly heard Lt. Pudlowski's frantic "hello's" coming from the earpiece. The telephone dropped as his arm failed to respond to his mind's commands, useless from the new perforations in his shoulder, deltoid, tricep, and neck. The massive influx of pain forced him to turn around, to face this new attack, but his body fought him every excruciating degree of rotation. His eyes widened in shock at the fire slowly filling the kitchen. Looking through the blaze, the doorway was filled by a giant of a man, dressed from head to toe in black. Even his face was smeared black. Only a pair of piercing blue eyes, highlighted by the fire, gave any variation to his form.

Others dressed like him stood behind in the doorway, some facing into the room, others outward towards the building's surroundings. Some pointed their weapons at him, others watched their assigned sectors of overwatch. The large man raised his pistol, and surgically put a pair of rounds into Charley's face. The fire from the lamp became a roaring pyre as it found new fuel throughout the shattered kitchen. The hulking figure stooped to pick up his ejected shell casings.

Giving a signal with his hands, he and the small team pulled back, moving in a column up the dirt road that led from the coastal bluffs down to the remote rescue station.

Minutes passed. The small group of killers formed into an ambush pattern without a word as a rumbling canvas-backed truck came down the

road. They disappeared among the low dunes and scrub pines that dotted the beach. The truck squealed to a stop on worn brakes and turned off its headlights. A rotund figure dismounted from the truck, comically clad in some semblance of a military uniform. He was nervous, looking around the beach and back towards the main road with great hesitation, bathed in the orange glow of the burning station. He put a small brass whistle to his lips, and blew softly.

The team's leader appeared from nowhere, startling the truck driver. The pudgy man attempted to draw himself up, and threw his right arm up in an outthrust salute. The giant team leader clapped his massive hand down upon the driver's forearm, issuing a terse foreign profanity. The team loaded into the back of the truck, their number increasing by one as a sleek, similarly-outfitted figure joined them. The newest member moved swiftly, but was visibly burdened by the long case held in one hand. The case was slid into the back of the truck, and the marauders rumbled away into the night, the rescue station falling in on itself in a sudden gush of sparks and flame as its roof collapsed.