

SECRET AGENT "X"

THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES

CORNERSTONE BOOK PUBLISHERS



SECRET AGENT X: VOLUME THREE
An Airship 27 Production

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AN ALL NEW
SECRET AGENT "X" ANTHOLOGY
Volume Three

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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.

Chapter Two

A mortician's duties are burdensome and dark, and are never made easier when the man he must bury is loved so dearly, and taken so unexpectedly. The family of the man lying before him, sealed in an economical pine box, had been devastated by the vicious loss that had been visited upon them. He had comforted the weeping widow, had tried to assure her with gentle words and scripture that her beloved husband was now in a better place. The man's sons were too young to understand that daddy was not coming home. The ceremony had been solemn, bleak, and they had fidgeted, giving curious looks to the grieving adults that surrounded them. The memorial service had drawn to a suffocating close, and soon the funeral procession to the hole dug in the graveyard outside would commence.

After performing his duties as undertaker and master of ceremonies here at Westbrook Memorial Home, he was finally alone with the corpse. He sighed, and reached into his coat pocket for a small prybar, no more than six inches long. Opening a nailed-shut casket containing the grisly remains of what once was a man is never a silent operation. The nails yielded with a low moan, slowly at first, then all at once in an outpouring of noise that he did his best to contain. He looked to the doorway, saw no one was coming, and went back to work. He reached into another jacket pocket for a special container. Good. It was still there. He had felt it move when the traumatized widow had been weeping into his chest.



"The nails yielded with a low moan, slowly at first, then all at once in an outpouring of noise that he did his best to contain."

He placed the lid of the pine box to the side, next to a beautiful display of flowers sent by the dead man's mother-in-law, and was confronted with the blackened sight of Ben Thatcher.

Murders happen every day in New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, just like the rest of New England, just like the rest of America. Gangsters machinegun each other down in restaurants. Pimps strangle unproductive members of their street harems. Mothers smother their babes in desperation or drunkenness. The mid-1930's dark economic situation had been hard on the entirety of the populace, and the result was often the shedding of innocent blood.

What didn't occur too often, however, was the unusual, the bloodthirsty, the brutally grotesque. Two coastal rescuemen found at their remote station on Long Island sound, mercilessly drilled with gunfire and left to burn, had somehow prodded even the jaded Gotham public into paying attention. Newspapers from Manhattan flooded the seaside towns along the quiet coastline with raucous reporters, each trying to scoop their competitors.

The fervor for the story had lasted more than the usual couple of days, when it was usually banished to the back pages by another atrocity. Something about the story, filtered through his ever-working subconscious mind, also refused to settle into the muddled background of normal, everyday life. That last rumination made him smirk despite his somber undertaker's disguise: "normal, everyday life." As if there was such a thing for him, the man known as Secret Agent X.

This case resonated something in him, something that clawed and whispered in the back of his brain. Spree or thrill killers were often sloppy. They were usually deviant youth, seeking to offset their hollow, privileged upbringings by debasing themselves in the blood of others. This crime was unlike something along those lines.

The two men, Thatcher and Morgan, had both been killed by gunfire, but there were no casings found. Residents of a small hamlet of Charleston, some six miles away, reported being awakened by a cavalcade of shots, describing it, "as if an army of them crawling tractor-tanks had landed on Green Hill beach, by God," as one aging resident had told the papers. Assuming the killers had used conventional weapons, the Charlestonians shouldn't have heard a thing, considering the sizeable distances involved. Another piece of the puzzle that didn't fit.

Charles Morgan's corpse had yielded few clues from the examination Agent X performed this morning after a similar memorial service. The

more-than-half dozen shots he took to the rear torso, punctuated by the twin wounds to the face, appeared to be pistol rounds. Pistol rounds definitely would not have been heard miles away. Something was wrong.

Opening the once-displaced container in his vest, Agent X took out a plug of special wax and placed it on the edge of Thatcher's now-open coffin. Lifting up one side of the body, Agent X evaluated the horrific exit wound. The man's right lung was completely gone, along with the surrounding ribs and musculature. Thatcher's body was spared from the punishing heat of the fire and trauma of the watch station's collapse, since he was killed in the doorway. The wound channel carved by the projectile was huge, far larger than any rifle strike Agent X had ever seen in his years of fighting crime. The only thing comparable was referenced from his years overseas, fighting the forces of Kaiser Bill. Because of its size, the exit wound was useless for the purposes of forensic detective work, short of the declaration that Thatcher had been hit with something on par with an elephant gun or a small cannon.

The entry wound on the front of his torso, however, was more promising, and not nearly as traumatic in scope or measure. Warming the special wax in his gloved hands, Agent X pressed the semi-solid solution against the wound. After a moment, the wax cooled and hardened, and he pulled the plug out gently. There, in his hand, was a positive impression of the cavity formed by whatever had snuffed out Benjamin Thatcher, created just after the projectile had hit him, but before it had yawed, tumbled, and turned his insides and rear torso to human hamburger.

He measured the smoothest, most cylindrical section of the plug with a tiny caliper, and came up with a measurement of just over 520 thousandths of an inch. Roughly thirteen millimeters: that had been a monstrous bullet. No wonder the exit wound had been so traumatic: in the world of man-portable weaponry, Thatcher had been hit with the equivalent of a freight train.

Agent X placed his forensic and precision items back into their varied hiding places on his person. Stripping off the gray mustache and wig he wore, he strode to the broom closet against a far wall in the small memorial hall. Inside, he retrieved a small briefcase and gently placed it on the lap of the seated, sleeping man who also occupied the closet. After another quick look to the door of the room, he opened the attaché, and placed the hair devices in their respective pouches. He donned a pair of thick, black-framed glasses containing clear lenses with no prescription. It was a simple, yet effective device that would enable him to slip out of the

building unnoticed.

Taking a small capsule in hand, he crushed it while holding it under the nose of the unconscious man. It snapped with a small puff, and an acrid, piercing smell filled the closet. The real undertaker stirred to groggy consciousness. The powerful chemical stimulus caused his own, quite real, gray mustache to twitch.

“Mr. Westbrook, time to wake up, sir. I hate to leave you in such a quandary, but my presence is required elsewhere. I do hope you understand.”

The mortician and funeral home director blinked and rubbed his eyes, not noticing the folded wad of hundred-dollar bills being pressed into his vest pocket. By the time he was able to focus his attentions and rise to his feet, the studious-looking man of average height and average build was gone from his funeral home, briefcase in hand. Westbrook emerged from the closet just as the widow Thatcher came back into the room, her eyes drawn immediately to the forced-open coffin. He slowly followed her gaze, and swore profanely as he lurched to grab for the coffin lid. A clamor arose as members of the bereaved family flowed back into the room, drawn by the crashing noise of Mrs. Thatcher fainting into a row of chairs as she fell to the floor.

Chapter Three

After an hour of nonchalant searching in an ever-widening pattern, Secret Agent X believed he had at last found the spot. The elevation, cover, and concealment were perfect. The only thing that puzzled him was the distance involved: over 1100 yards. Walking along the beach that stretched in front of the ruined rescue station, he had been stopped by a policeman who was assigned to the crime scene. His disguise was simple work clothes, a cosmetic dental bridge of stained teeth, and a workman's wool cap. The trappings were secondary, really, since he was hauling around a surveyor's tripod and sighting glass, or transit. His explanation that he was scouting a location for the new rescue station had easily passed muster with the beat cop, and his discreet search for the shooter's perch was now complete.

The location was in a thicket of low seaside grass, interspersed with patches of sand here and there. Like the rescue station, no empty cartridge casings were found. Thankfully, though, a weapon that was able to hit a man from over a half-mile away with enough force to turn him hollow was just as equally rough on the environment from which it was fired. Even days later, despite the constant wind coming in off the sound, Agent X could see the patterns of the weapon's muzzle blast in the driven sand and crushed vegetation. Small indentations a foot behind the blast patterns showed the gun had been mounted on a bipod. Each violent recoil forced those bipod feet to move incrementally, and come to a rest as the weapon had bucked and roared. Agent X counted ten distinct stops and starts in the

miniature trenches. Ten shots from 1100 yards and change; no wonder the folks in Charleston had heard the cannon's discharges.

Where had the remaining shots gone, if it took only one to dispatch Thatcher? Morgan's wounds were inflicted from a pistol, and close. Yet another piece of the puzzle.

The energy required to send a projectile measuring more than a half-inch in diameter this kind of distance was monstrous. Elephant guns and the like were large, but usually suited to shots of 100 yards or closer. Besides, their projectiles were usually solid brass, and would have been easily recovered at the crime scene. Here, he stood eleven football fields away from where a man had been torn to pieces with a single hit. This was military-grade weaponry, probably some form of anti-tank rifle. He mentally ticked off the short list of countries that possessed such powerful man-portable cannons. The list was short, and grim.

To confirm his suspicions, he knelt to the ground, clipping a small tuft of grass. The blasted and pulverized vegetation was impregnated with the residue of the gunpowder that had launched the projectile. Agent X placed the grass in a small tube of special solution. He replaced the cork top of the glass vessel, and shook it vigorously for ten seconds. The liquid reacted to the powder residue on the blades of grass, and turned a virulent purple.

A smirk signaled his annoyance at having been proved right, once again, especially when he didn't want to be. A dark blue would have meant British cordite. Light blue that turned to red after prolonged shaking would have meant American propellant. The powder was German, based on the mixture of nitrates and trace elements that resulted in the noxious violet color. It fit, now. Thatcher had been killed from afar by a powerful rifle and an accurate shooter, while Morgan had been finished off up close. That is where the remainder of the heavy rifle shots had gone: the shooter had been trying to flush Morgan from inside the rescue station, or keep his head down long enough for the pistol shooter to finish him off. The building's collapse had hidden the remainder of the heavy impacts.

The tactics were standard doctrine from the Wehrmacht field manual: establish a volume of powerful suppressive fire from a distance, while another element moves in close and finishes off the target.

Since the location was so close to water, insertion of the German force must have been from some passing ship, or even a U-boat, if the operation was important enough. The hows and whys of the rescue station slaughter now fell into place. Thatcher and Morgan had seen a group of individuals come ashore that they shouldn't have, individuals who were German,

armed, and ruthless. Now to find out why these Teutonic murderers were here, on American soil. He had a good idea where a group of German commandos could hide, and who would harbor them.

Agent X took down the tripod, and began the long walk back to the rescue station and the pair of cars parked there. The policeman folded up his paper and rolled down the window to his police car.

“Say, mac, how goes the surveyin’?”

Agent X pulled his mouth down at the corners, affecting the same peculiar Mainer’s drawl he had used earlier with the lawman, “Aw, you know, officer, anothis fine day at the office. I’m just about to wrap it up.”

“Another day at the office, that’s good. Damn shame what happened to these boys out here, eh?”

“It’s an ugly world, officer, full of bad people. Your department any closer to figurin’ it out?”

The policeman blanched, giving him an embarrassed shirk and grin. “We’re a tiny little seaside department. We’re not used to seeing this kind of action. Stuff like this happens in the big city, what with all those closed factories and folks out of work.”

“Well, officer, you know this stuff just happens, sometimes. I’ll be going, now. You have a good day.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Say, mac, one last thing: ain’t there usually some other guy with you when you go surveying, holding a pole and chain, or something?”

Agent X kept smiling at the officer, looking him in the eye as he casually placed the tripod and sight glass in the trunk of his black, non-descript car. A small, pistol-shaped tool was fastened to the inside of the trunk lid, out of sight. It quickly found its place in Agent X’s left hand, tucked in the small of his back.

“It’s a new technique, officer. That sight glass lets me take my measurements without an assistant carrying a surveyor’s pole, or a Gunter’s chain, as it’s called.”

“Hmm. What will they come up with next? The times we live in, huh?”

“Indeed. Well, goodbye.”

“So long.”

Agent X relaxed. The policeman appeared to be a decent man, and it would have been disappointing to use the device he pulled out of the trunk. He put the car in reverse, and looked in his rear view mirror. A harsh tap on his car’s window told him that things weren’t going to work out as neatly as he hoped. Agent X found himself staring down the barrel of the

policeman's service revolver.

The officer spoke calmly through the glass, "I called the chief while you were out there in the dunes, scoping out the place. The surveyors don't come until next Monday. Get out of the car."

"Very well, officer, you've got me. I'm a reporter for the Herald, just trying to get a scoop."

"I figured as much. I'm from up around Bangor. That fake accent of yours is horrible."

Agent X smiled. His drawling Mainer Yankee accent usually worked. He'd have to work on it in the future. He feigned tugging at the inside release of his car door, "Officer, the door handle of this car is broken. You're going to have to open it from the outside."

Shifting his revolver to one hand, the policeman reached for the car's exterior door latch. As he did so, Agent X jammed the electric stunner he held into the door. The current shot up the officer's arm, causing him to fire a round involuntarily into the air as his back arched and his neck muscles went taut. The man dropped backwards like a rock, his head thumping against the fender of his own police car.

Agent X swore quietly to himself, and got out of his own vehicle. He looked at the back of the patrolman's skull. It was going to rise up and be tender for a while, but it didn't look like a concussion, nor did it require stitches. Agent X propped the stunned policeman up against the side of his patrol vehicle, careful to bring the helpless man's legs out of the path of Agent X's tires.

"Easy, there, officer, you took a nasty fall. I must admire your initiative and vigilance, but I'm afraid I don't have time to go back to the station with you. Do have a nice day, now, won't you?"

Agent X placed the policeman's revolver back in its holster, got back into his car, and looked around to see if there was anything else he should notice before another surprise reared its head. His eye was drawn to an article in the policeman's paper folded on the dash of the car, one titled "Famed Weapons Inventor To Re-Open Gov't Armory." He retrieved the paper from the car, and sped back up the access road to the main highway.