



BLITZKRIEG

B R I A N F A L K N E R

He glances behind just once, to see the track of the torpedo just metres away from the ship. Then suddenly the cold wind of the Atlantic is gone, replaced by a huge hot balloon of air that lifts him off the deck, his hair and clothes on fire, and hurls him over the side and into the mouth of the beast itself, the cold, blue, bottomless darkness of the ocean.

KATIPO JOE



BLITZKRIEG

BRIAN FALKNER

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Most of the characters in this story are fictional, but others are real historical figures. Most of the events are based around real historical events of World War Two, such as the bombing of the Café de Paris. Thomas Argyle Robertson is real, as is his operation to turn German agents into double agents, called Operation Doublecross.

For a full discussion of the fact vs fiction elements of this story, go to www.brianfalkner.com/katipo.

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For Cliff and Val,
Todd and Tiffani, Grace, Wil and Ava.
And, of course, Leigh.
Wonderful people. Great friends.

Thanks to Lynn Wild for her knowledge
and attention to detail.

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KATIPO

(Māori, meaning night-stinger)

A New Zealand spider,
related to the Australian redback and
the North American black widow.

The katipo is New Zealand's
only native venomous spider.



BOOK ONE

BERLIN



I heard a documentary about me on the wireless,
after the war. They described me as a hero.
I felt more than a little ashamed. I was no hero.
Far from it. I was a villain. One of the worst.
I was just lucky that my side won.

—*From the memoirs of Joseph (Katipo) St George*



PROLOGUE

SS HAMPTON CLAIRE

North Atlantic Ocean, 22nd February 1941

THE OCEAN REACHES once more for the boy, sweeping over the starboard railing and raking his face with needle-claws of the most bitter cold.

Instinctively the boy turns aft and flings up one of his gloves to shield his face. It does little good, and even the fur-lined hood of his oilskin coat can do little to protect him from the ocean's bitter breath.

He keeps his face aft for longer than he should, knowing that the sea will attack again the moment he turns back. Another gust of wind and frozen sea-spray talons rattle and batter him, before he risks another glance forward. Around him the North Atlantic growls and gnashes in eruptions of white-frothed blue.

The early-morning watch is the most hated by all the crew; it is the time when the water is the darkest and angriest, the cold the most chilling, and the wind the most piercing. But it is also the time the U-boats love best. They



can creep up on the convoy, silhouetting the ships against the glow of the dawn while they attack out of the western gloom.

Already the convoy has lost two ships. One, a cargo ship carrying iron ore, went to the bottom in just a few seconds, the spine torn out of her by what the Germans call their 'eels' – their sleek, deadly torpedoes.

The other was a Canadian troopship. That sank more slowly, giving most of the troops time to escape, to get picked up by other ships in the convoy or by the escorting destroyers. Even so, over a hundred men were not recovered from the belly of the beast.

The SS *Hampton Claire* carries food – a hold full of corned beef and salted pork – desperately needed rations for Britain. Food isn't Joe's concern however. Nor are the starving children of London. He has his own reasons for being on board the vessel. Secret reasons.

The boy's name is Joseph St George, although that is too elaborate a name for a colonial boy and everybody just calls him Joe.

JOE HAD STOWED AWAY in New York, sneaking onto the ship at night and hiding in a maintenance cupboard until they were well at sea. Only then did he reveal himself to the crew and, after a chewing out by the captain, was given duties to earn his passage.

He probably would have been locked in a cabin for the duration of the voyage if he hadn't lied and claimed that



he had only stowed away so he could join the British army to fight against the Germans. Even then he might still have been locked up below decks if it wasn't for the threat of German submarines. Over three hundred ships have already been sunk since the start of the war. All eyes are needed on deck.

He forces himself to face forward again, into the chilling blast of the wind. His face is already red and raw from the ocean's claws, and each flurry is rubbing salt into a wound.

He scans the dark blue troughs of the ocean, straining his eyes through the gloom and the spray for the slightest sign of anything that doesn't belong. The roiling sea is good cover for U-boats, he knows that, but it also makes them raise their periscopes higher to see over the wave crests, which makes them easier to spot if you spy one in a trough.

He hates the morning watch. But he has little choice. As a stowaway, he has no rights on board the vessel at all. The crew could throw him over the side if they wanted, and nobody would know. So they give him the dirtiest and the worst jobs, and Joe takes them without complaint.

Wait ... there! What is that? He fixes his eyes on one spot, trying to give himself bearings from one of the other vessels of the convoy. A few hundred metres from the stern of one of the ships, and only a kilometre or so away, he thinks he has seen a grey tubular shape. That would put it inside the convoy. They do that sometimes, sneaking in through the protective screen of destroyers and attacking a convoy from within.



Another flurry of ice and a buffeting blow from the wind forces him to look aft once again, then, when he forces his eyes back to the same spot, there is no sign of the periscope. If it was there at all.

He scans the ocean desperately. What has he seen? A periscope ... or a trick of the mind? The ship lurches into a trough and he crouches down as he had been taught, lowering his centre of gravity, and clenching his hands on the railing at the same time.

The ship heaves up out of the trough, leaving Joe's stomach behind. Not that there is much to leave. He emptied the contents of his stomach over the side in the first few moments on watch, and now the dried spatter of vomit on his 'Mae West' inflatable lifejacket is the only reminder of last night's dinner.

From the starboard railing he can see only six other ships, the rest of the 30-ship convoy are spread to aft, or port-side, or just lost in the gritty North Atlantic gloom. Like the SS *Hampton Claire*, they heave and wallow through the jagged hills of the sea; great, lumbering cattle of the ocean, easy prey for the sleek grey wolves of Admiral Doenitz's U-boat fleet.

He has a feeling of unease now. A sense that around the convoy, the flock, the wolves are circling, gathering, waiting for the feast. Only the shepherding destroyers give them pause, and the protection they offer is limited.

Another glimpse of something that does not belong in the icy water ... something too perfect, too straight to be



part of the turmoil of the ocean waters. Just a quick flash, but it is enough.

There is a wolf among the sheep.

Joe cracks his hands off the railing where they have already frozen tight, and runs for the alarm bell. The rope is iced over, but he grabs it with two hands and hurls the clanger against the side of the bell. The breath of the beast roars over the side of the ship as he does so, swallowing the sound and whirling it away out into the darkness of the early morning sky.

Two, three times Joe works the bell, but each time the wind and the sky eat the sound. He drops the rope and runs for the metal staircase that leads to the bridge, staggering on the bucking deck. One step ... two steps ... three ...

The staircase, little more than a ladder, seems to be trying to throw him off at every step.

The young bosun meets him at the top, grasping the back of Joe's oilskin to steady him. Wilfred is standing unaided, not even holding onto the railing, somehow sturdy and solid on the pitching deck. Behind him the door to the bridge calls out to Joe, offering shelter, respite from the cold and the storm. But there are more important things now than shelter.

"Where?" Wilfred shouts into the hood of Joe's oilskin. There can be only one reason Joe has made the climb to the bridge.

Joe aims a hand and Wilfred follows his fingers, gazing out across the water with eyes that surely can pierce the



ocean and see the evil grey shapes of the U-boats lurking beneath.

Wilfred shakes his head. "Are you sure?"

Joe stares back out at the water for a moment, before shaking his own head. "No, but I thought ..."

"I'm coming down with you," Wilfred shouts, and makes some kind of hand signal to the officers inside the darkened bridge.

Going down the staircase is worse than going up. The iced metal grill of each stair provides no grip for Joe's boots. Twice the metal edges cut into his shins as he struggles to keep from slipping.

He is glad Wilfred is there. Although not much older than Joe, the bosun is the kind of solid, dependable man you are glad to be standing next to in a spot of bother.

Wilfred braces himself with a knee against the railing and raises his binoculars.

They both see it at the same time – a dull pinpoint of light, as a momentary ray of early morning sunshine, sneaking through the heavy cloud, reflects off something in the middle of nothing. There is *something* in the valley of waves out there, and that *something* can only be one thing.

Wilfred swears violently, but is already running for the staircase and his words just whip out into the sky.

What Joe sees next chills him more than the sea spray or wind could ever do. A growing streak of white phosphorescence reaching out across the ocean towards the *Hampton Claire*. He has seen that streak once before, when



the troopship went down. It is the track of a German eel.

A white flare goes up from the bridge, the signal for 'U-boat sighted'. A siren sounds from one of the destroyers, brought to Joe in short snatches by the gusting wind.

He watches the long finger reach out towards him, closer now. Will the captain do nothing? The ship lurches into a huge wave, and when it comes up it is on a different bearing. The captain *is* doing something, Joe realises; he is spinning the ship around in an emergency turn. But a great lumbering beast like a cargo ship takes a long time to turn and the torpedo is approaching quickly. Far too quickly.

The ship leans as it turns, lowering Joe towards the darkness of the water, and still he can see the track of the torpedo, heading for him. *Right for him!* he realises, with a stifled cry. The eel is arrowing in right where he is standing. He turns to run but his gloves have frozen to the handrail and it takes a moment of twisting to crack them free. Then run he does, as best as he can down the sharply sloping deck; the slightest slip would be enough to hurl him against the guardrail, the only thing between him and the ocean.

Joe runs, a stumbling drunken lurch forwards, away from where he knows the torpedo will strike. The wind slices at him with razor-sharp claws, but he scarcely notices.

He glances behind just once, to see the track of the torpedo just metres away from the ship. Then suddenly the cold wind of the Atlantic is gone, replaced by a huge hot balloon of air that lifts him off the deck, his hair and clothes



on fire, and hurls him over the side and into the mouth of the beast itself, the cold, blue, bottomless darkness of the ocean.

The boy never even hears the explosion.

The Gestapo came for my father on Kristallnacht – the Night of Broken Glass – the 9th of November, 1938. It was a bloody awful night. All across Germany, gangs of Nazi thugs roamed through Jewish neighbourhoods, smashing and looting shops and synagogues, bashing anyone they found.

A lot of people died that night.

We weren't Jewish, and my parents were diplomats, so I thought we would be safe, immune from the Nazi disease.

But we weren't, and even now I can remember everything vividly, like looking at a photograph.

There were three of them, dressed in those dreadful black uniforms. More of them standing outside. I was twelve years old, standing in the hallway of our house, desperately clinging to the nightgown of my mother, and they looked like devils to me.

I remember crying – huge sobs that seemed like they would burst through the walls of my chest – shouting at my mother to stop them. She did nothing, and I know now that there was nothing she could have done. In Berlin, in 1938, there was nothing anyone could have done for my father.

—From the memoirs of Joseph (Katipo) St George

