

# **Gladio**

**We Can Neither Confirm Nor Deny...**

**Steve Chambers**



**Zymurgy Publishing**

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Zymurgy  
Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne UK

Copyright © 2013 Steve Chambers

The moral right of Steve Chambers to be identified as the  
author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means,  
electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording  
or any information storage and retrieval system without  
permission in writing from the publisher.

A CIP catalogue reference for this book is available from the  
British Library.

ISBN 978-1-9035063-8-7

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses,  
organisations, places and events are either the product of the  
author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance  
to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely  
coincidental.

Cover artwork Paul Goldsmith  
Back cover concept We Are Shift  
Front Cover layout Simon Hubbard  
Front cover font New Press Eroded courtesy Galdino Otten  
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,  
Croydon, CRO 4YY

## Author Details

Steve Chambers was born and brought up in Nottingham. He read mathematics at Imperial College, London and now lives in the north-east of England where he writes and teaches scriptwriting. An established dramatist, he has written extensively for all the dramatic media. For TV, he has written episodes of 'Casualty' and 'Byker Grove' and his feature film 'Hold Back the Night', starring Sheila Hancock, opened Critics Week at Cannes '99. He has adapted 'Waterland', 'The Grapes of Wrath' and 'Robinson Crusoe' for BBC Radio 4's classic serial and he co-writes the long-running Radio 4 comedy 'Highlites'. 'GLADIO: We Can Neither Confirm Nor Deny' is his first novel.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the following for their help, support and general encouragement.

I'd like to thank Malcolm Wright who was there at the start, Northern Arts for giving me the opportunity to write the first draft and New Writing North for their generosity, advice and feedback.

Thanks are due to all those who read and responded to the manuscript drafts, in particular, Ross Irvine for his important strategic suggestions and Mike Mould for his detailed notes.

I'd like to thank Sean Hamil for a wonderful research trip to Northern Ireland, Dickie Hodgkiss for the introductions and financial research in Amsterdam and Kate Adie for giving up her time to talk to me.

Finally, I'm indebted to my publisher, Martin Ellis, for his hard work, persistence and determination.

## PREFACE

‘Gladio’ is Latin for ‘by the sword’; the sword in question being the murderous, two-edged, stabbing short sword that carved out the Roman Empire.

‘Gladio’ is also the code-name of a shadowy CIA operation set up in western Europe in the 1950s and 60s to wage a guerrilla war in case of a communist takeover. Secret, self-contained cells were recruited, trained, funded and armed. The personnel were a mixed bag; criminals, pardoned fascists, assorted weirdos and other anti-communists, but in the fevered atmosphere of 1950s anti-communism, their background was disregarded. The Gladio network provided a convenient ‘deniable’ network for covert operations against left-wing governments and organisations. Missions Gladio operatives trained for included espionage, bombings and assassinations. The CIA suspended their operations in 1969 but the Gladio structure survived. The Bologna station bombing is now believed to be the work of an Italian Gladio unit. British and American governments have always denied that Gladio cells were set up in Britain... but rumours persist.

*Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss*

W. H. Auden



# **PART ONE**

Italy 2004





## ONE

Overcrowded, hot, wildly expensive, the towns of the French Riviera flaunt a stylish confidence. Yet just a few miles to the east, where the mountainous coast sweeps from France into Italy, the Italian towns of the Riviera suggest a distinctly faded glory. Despite the statuesque palms and purple bougainvillea in their grounds, the grand hotels close to the railway and the sea have an air of neglect about them. Even in the heat of summer, few arrive by train now and fewer still linger here. The autostrada runs high above the coastal towns, swooping over impossible bridges, diving into long fast tunnels so that summer visitors, driving their air-conditioned cockpits back from Tuscany, can only glimpse the beauty of the 'Riviera dei Fiori' as they hurtle towards the French border. For those who look north, away from the sea, the landscape flashing by is enigmatic: valleys, hills and distant snow-capped mountains, the hinterland of a forgotten paradise before the next tunnel obliterates it.

The steep green hills behind San Remo are part of this mystery. A warren of tiny roads and unrecorded tracks with impossible gradients, terrifying bends and missing crash barriers leading to farms and smallholdings which cling to the hillsides; jewels of fertility among the relentless brambles. A good place to get away from it all; that's why John chose to settle here.

When he bought his rustico, his ancient olive-gatherer's cottage, it had no water, no electricity, no road access and the loo was an old olive pot stuck in the ground. On the hillside below the 'one-up, one-down' with the faded statuette of the Madonna between the small windows, were five crumbling, scorpion-infested terraces and sixty-five olive trees in dire need of attention. The two redeeming features of John's mountain

retreat were the views and the fact that it was so far off the beaten track. He'd sold up, come to Italy to get away from everything. Where once he'd wanted to make a difference, now it was invisibility he craved. In six months, he'd connected a water pipe, cleared the terraces, made a rough terrazza, repaired some of the walls, built an outdoor shower and made his bedroom comfortable. The physical labour suited him, made him feel useful, fit, optimistic even. That's when he'd started running. Every evening he loped through the olive groves, listening to the crickets and smelling the woods. Afterwards he felt liberated and energised but then again, maybe he was just satisfying the need to stifle the unquiet echoes of his past.

After an initial hostility, his ageing neighbour Guiseppe became friendly. Communication was rudimentary, a mixture of John's self-taught Italian and operatic gestures, but when Guiseppe realised John was serious about living in the hills, the barrel-shaped Italian with the bandy legs showed him how to repair the terrace walls and prune the olive trees. Guiseppe lived in San Remo and journeyed up to his olives on his ancient Vespa two or three times a week. Apart from him, John met the occasional local on the road but strangers were a rarity. That's why the car made such an impression.

It was parked behind John's ancient Land Rover in the recess afforded by the hairpin bend near the bottom of the path down to the road. Tinted windows, Milan plates, a silver Mercedes; he wondered what it was doing there. Then again, he wasn't the first to discover the area's potential. He had a brief nightmarish image of the hillsides covered in expensive villas then forgot about it - John was preoccupied with his water supply. He'd installed an eleven hundred litre tank on the terrace above the house but the water had been off for days now and the tank was finally empty. Reluctantly, he'd followed the plastic pipe a hundred and fifty metres back up the overgrown terraces, hacking his way through thickets to see if it was damaged, but it was fine. The brambles tore his clothes, drawing blood, and by the time he got to the water meter he was in a foul mood. Someone had taken it upon himself to turn his bloody water off. Why? He turned the

tap back on and listened to the water hissing down the pipe. He took the long way back, down the dirt track made by the water company, which is when he saw the car.

Two days later, the Merc was back. At dusk, John was walking along the road looking for the tail light cover, which had fallen off his Land Rover. When he first spotted the silver car, he wasn't really bothered. After all, if some property company was looking for land to build on, why wouldn't it come back? The idea of future development was depressing but nothing more. But after he had fixed the tail light back on, he noticed the Mercedes' tyres; they were new and fat, the complex tread packed with dirty sand. That was when he remembered. He stood up and looked round as calmly as he could but his pulse quickened. He walked slowly to the bottom of the water company track and looked up. He couldn't think why he hadn't seen them when he walked down - running up the hill in the sand, twin tracks made by fat, new tyres with a complex tread.

He walked the hundred and fifty metres back up to the house trying to rationalise the problem without success. Maybe the tap had been turned off by accident? Maybe he was mistaken about the car, maybe another vehicle had driven up there? Why would anyone turn off his water? Why come back and park behind his vehicle? He struggled to recall exactly who knew he was here. It didn't help. He was certain the car was here for him. It was time; they'd found him. They'd turned the water off to draw him out. He considered throwing everything in the Land Rover and driving off into the night but he'd made a commitment to his new home. He wasn't about to run away.

As the light went, he removed a loose stone from the terrace wall and took out a plastic lunch box hidden within. He removed the lid, unwrapped some oilcloth, checked the fading passport and the dog-eared bundle of cash before inserting the magazine into the small automatic. He replaced the box, lit the hurricane lamp, turned it down and sat in his sun-lounger listening to the crickets. Sitting in the lounge at night was a great way to watch the stars. Away from the city, the Milky Way was amazing, a sequinned scarf thrown carelessly across the sky, only tonight he

wasn't stargazing. For once, he didn't open a bottle and listen to a Dylan cassette. Instead, he sat silently in the darkness, wishing he had a bigger gun and a dog.

He came awake with a start, grasping the automatic in his lap. He listened; a cracking of twigs and a rustling coming up from the road. Footsteps, definitely. He slipped the safety catch off, trying to suppress his own breathing so he could listen better. The footsteps came on, nearer and nearer, then abruptly halted. John listened but the night was suddenly still as if the whole hillside were listening with him. He considered shouting out or going to investigate but some instinct made him stay put. If they wanted him, they could bloody well come and find him. He didn't sleep again and by dawn, he was cold and exhausted. As the sun rose above the hills, he dismantled the gun and put it back in the wall. Then he had a cold shower.

As he combed his hair afterwards, he decided to confront whoever it was, find out what they wanted. He started walking down to the road. He felt like shit – his right knee clicked walking down the steep, uneven terraces, causing him to waddle rather than stride. He was hungry and he really fancied soaking in a hot bath. Then he stopped in his tracks.

The car was gone.

He had been so pumped up for a confrontation that he felt let down. He looked up and down the road, checking for the car, then felt idiotic. He hadn't heard it go. So what? He fell asleep didn't he? What about the footsteps? Must have been wild boar again. He'd lost a night's sleep for nothing. Besides, why would anyone be interested in him? At fifty-one, the ex-soldier, ex-journalist, ex-teacher, ex everything was well past his sell-by date. And after going without a night's sleep, didn't he know it.

He decided to treat himself and drive down to San Romolo for breakfast. It was a lovely morning and he sat outside Silvano's bar enjoying the view as he waited for his croissant and cappuccino.

Silvano appeared looking perturbed. 'Signor John? There is a phone-call for you... una donna?'

John looked up, puzzled. 'For me?'

'Sì.'

## TWO

‘John, is that you?’

The voice, for so long only heard in his dreams, came out of the past, exploding into his present, memories colliding with feelings, which stampeded through him. Alarm and fear competed with wonder, excitement, arousal. ‘*Jesus.*’

‘It’s me, Jess.’ That voice again, that gentle lilt. He thought he’d forgotten but it was the same interesting, textured, husky voice.

‘*Christ, Christ, fucking Christ!*’

He’d been all right. He’d found himself, accepted his fate, who he was going to be. His horizon had shrunk, his dreams had died; he’d had his adventures. He would never be a great journalist, never write his major work, never ride off into the sunset but it was OK. He had understood something important, come to enjoy his quiet routine. He didn’t want any surprises.

‘Am I speaking to John Bradley?’

John took a deep breath. ‘Yes, it’s me.’

‘For heaven’s sake, why didn’t you answer?’

‘What do you want, Jess?’

‘To see you of course. What d’you think?’ He said nothing. ‘John?’

‘I don’t know, it’s been so long.’ It was her turn to pause. When she spoke again, her voice was quieter and more urgent.

‘I have to see you.’

‘Where are you?’ He half-hoped she was in America or China. Somewhere far away.

‘San Remo. Can I see you? It’s important. Please?’

In his head, the thoughts hammered over and over. ‘*Just say*

*fucking no. Just do it and it'll be over! Say No! That's all you have to do! Say No!*

'Please,' she repeated, elongating the word slightly so that it became sensual, suggestive.

'All right.'

'I'll be an hour.'

He hung up and ordered a large brandy. He was angry with himself for agreeing to see her, but what could he do? He couldn't stop her. She could come up and find him. What was he afraid of? But he knew the answer.

Silvano placed the brandy in front of John and shrugged apologetically. 'The English woman call two times yesterday, and once last week.'

'What did you say?'

'That you were not here.'

'Thanks.' Silvano nodded. 'Irish.' Silvano looked confused. 'The woman,' John explained, 'she's not English.' Silvano shrugged and headed back inside.

She ran straight to John, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek. Again he was flooded with sensation and emotion. Tastes, images, memories competed with the present and he was suddenly self-conscious about himself. If he'd known, he'd have made more of an effort. She stood back, looked him up and down and nodded.

'Not bad,' she said with a smile. 'Not bad at all, John.'

He'd recognised her immediately. The same slim figure with that slightly angular way she had of holding her head. She was still stunning but close up, he could see the age in her. Lines around the eyes and mouth had furrowed and sharpened. If anything, she was even thinner than she had been. Her hair was greyer and cut short but it suited her. She looked tanned and fit and her eyes were still that brilliant blue. She wore an off-white, loose-fitting linen jacket with a matching knee-length skirt. She looked at him, then slapped his midriff gently, 'Look at you.'

'Bit more of me than there used to be,' he grinned sheepishly.

She shook her head. 'Yes, it suits you,' She looked round at the tiny village. 'Is this where you live? It's lovely.'

'This is the nearest village; I've got a place in the hills.'

'Can I see it, John?' she asked eagerly. 'Oh please, I'd love to?' her head bobbed slightly in that familiar way but it wasn't the same. Her accent was lighter than he remembered.

'How did you find me?'

'You pay taxes, John. Trust you not to have a mobile.'

'You speak Italian?'

She shook her head. 'French.'

'What do you want?'

'I was in the area. I heard you'd ended up somewhere near here. I just wanted to see you.' She seemed genuinely pleased to see him but he didn't believe it.

'Let's have a drink. We should celebrate, shouldn't we?' she said, heading into the bar. She returned with two beers and put them on a table. As she picked up her glass, the skin on the back of her hand wrinkled and folded slightly, reminding him of his mother's hands.

'Cheers.'

'Cheers.' He sipped his beer and stared at the view. In the valley bottom he could just make out the spire of Isolabona church. The people down there would be going about their lives, shopping, chatting, the butcher's shop full to the door but no one in a hurry. He didn't speak. She watched him.

'How are you, John?' He glanced at her then looked back down the valley. 'You've changed.'

'People do, after twenty years.' She nodded but her quiet assurance nettled him. 'And you, Jess, have you changed?'

'Of course I have.'

'So tell me about your family,' he said coldly. 'I'd like to hear about your husband. What does he do? How many kids have you got?'

Her eyes hooded and the lines round her mouth became sad. 'Don't be a bastard, please?' She was suddenly vulnerable. He was pleased it mattered, pleased he could wound her, surprised at how pleased he was. And then, knowing he had the

power, he felt a pang of guilt. Christ, his insides were churning again.

‘So what, now?’

‘We go to your place. I’d like to go to bed with you.’

For a moment, he wasn’t sure she’d said it but his cock stirred unexpectedly. He wasn’t in control of anything. ‘Well er... look... the thing is, Jess...’

She began to laugh. ‘If you could see yourself, you’re blushing.’

He got annoyed. ‘That’s beside the point.’

‘You’re not going to turn me down, are you? Is there someone else?’

‘No. I just don’t think it’s a good idea.’

‘Why shouldn’t we do it, we used to all the time?’

‘We were different people.’

‘We were younger. You think we’re too old?’

‘We don’t know each other anymore. And that’s not why you came here.’

‘You’re right. It’s a bad idea.’

He stared at her. ‘Why say it then, to test me out? A joke?’

‘Don’t be angry.’

‘What did you expect for Christ’s sake?’

‘I needed to find out if you were still interested.’

‘By making a fool of me?’

‘Can we go to your place? I have to talk to you, in private.’

He shook his head and stood up. ‘No, Jess, I don’t want to talk about anything. That stuff’s over, finished. I have a new life here.’

Now she stood up, eyes blazing. ‘For Christ’s sake, John, you’re not going to say no. If you’d meant it, you’d have done it when I phoned!’

Her unrestrained passion unleashed some of the Ulster dialect of her youth. Her energy surprised him. ‘Take me up to your place. Hear me out. If you say no, I’ll go. I promise.’

‘Then you’re gone.’