

Prologue

Leah, my granddaughter, rushed out of the room. I stayed behind, staring down at the photograph she had unearthed while hunting for school project materials. “*Tell the story of your family,*” the teachers had told her. To me, it felt less like education and more like state-sanctioned prying.

The photograph belonged to a dead era. It was a frozen slice of time when the faces in the frame still laughed, cried, joked, got drunk, and caused more trouble than I cared to remember.

Spike, Tomo, Dave, Kevin, Tony, and Pat—my mentor and my tormentor. Faces from a shadow history that would never be honoured. All of them gone now.

The picture should never have existed. It was taken on a whim, a careless spur-of-the-moment mistake. In our line of work, a camera was a liability. It violated our strictest protocol: no documentation, no names, no ghosts left behind. I had entrusted my life, and the lives of my family, to the men in that frame. Now, some lay in unmarked graves in unknown corners of the world, killed for reasons the world would never know.

And here it was, sitting on my desk, prompting a little girl to ask questions that should have been impossible to conceive.

The door swung open. Leah came bouncing back inside, her innocence cutting through the heavy dust of my memories.

“I have another question now, Grandpa. Can I ask you?”

“Come on then,” I said, forcing a smile. “Ask away.”

“Mummy said that you were a soldier and a policeman. I knew you were a policeman, but she said you were in the army. You must have lots of stories for my project! Could you tell me some?”

“I have plenty of stories, sweetheart. But I was never in the army. I was a Marine.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Absolutely not.” A ghost of an old smile touched my lips.

“We used to call the army ‘Percy Pongos’—I won’t tell you why. But the Royal Marines? We belong to the Navy.”

“Oh,” she whispered, her eyes wide. “So, you were a sailor?”

“No. We were the Navy’s personal soldiers. Commandos. Highly trained, very effective, and very quiet. Sadly, though, I can’t tell you, or Mummy, or anyone else the real stories.”

“But Grandpa, it’s family history! When you go to heaven, all that goes with you and we’ll never know. Mummy says when she was my age, you always carried a gun, but she never knew why. Please, please tell us.”

I looked at the absolute purity in her face. Every justification I had ever given myself for the violence I had committed came flooding back. Looking at her, I knew I would do it all over again to keep her that safe.

“Will you be a good girl and go ask Mummy to make me a green tea?” I asked, gently steering her away from the edge of the abyss.

She slid off my lap, threw her small arms around my neck in a tight hug, and skipped out.

As the door clicked shut, my mind drifted back years, to the day my own daughter had cornered me. *“I have no idea who you were, Dad,”* she had screamed, tears of frustration in her eyes. *“You’d come and go for months. At one stage, I thought I didn’t even have a dad. If you’re not going to tell us, then write a damn book or something! My children have a right to know who their grandfather is. I have a right to know.”*

I had left school at fifteen with no qualifications. I wasn’t a literary man; I was a blunt instrument. I had spent a lifetime despising former colleagues who wrote books, leaking secrets that weren’t theirs to sell just to garnish their own reputations. Most of them were a danger to themselves and everyone around them.

But my daughter’s words haunted me. And then there was the Boss, and the mess left behind in Cyprus. Before his demise, the Boss had spent thirty years trying to initiate a shadow support network called the Geminos Project. My non-existent employers wanted it built, but they wanted no paper trail connecting them to it.

I pulled out my mobile phone—the last piece of deniable hardware the organisation had ever issued me. I stared at the screen for a long moment, weighing the risks, before making my decision.

I routed the connection through a multi-layered VPN and dialled a number that didn’t officially exist.

The line clicked. No ring tone. Just a cold, synthetic voice.

“Confirm prefix and prime number.”

“Bravo, Five, Eight, Two,” I spoke clearly. I didn't give a name; names are currency, and I had used too many over the years. I used my final operational police call sign.

“This is Trojan Six One.”

“Begin message.”

“I agree to make one last attempt to set up the project.”

I cut the call.

Months bled into the calendar. Silence. I had reached a comfortable state of mutual relief and disappointment, assuming they had rejected the offer. Then, an encrypted text flashed across the black screen:

GO-AHEAD CONFIRMED WITH RESTRICTIONS. AWAIT CONFIRMATION OF G PLUS ONE CLOSURE BEFORE RELEASE. EXECUTE; GEMINOS OCCLUDE; GOOD LUCK.

Good luck. Bloody brilliant. Thirty years of planning, and all they could offer me was a cliché. They would be there, of course, pulling strings from the shadows, but I would be entirely on my own.

How do you build a deniable network without showing your hand? How do you tell stories to your grandchildren about events that never happened, executed by men who never existed?

The answer came back to my daughter's angry outburst: *Write a damn book.*

A book was the perfect camouflage. Hide the truth in plain sight, disguised as commercial fiction.

I drafted a heavily redacted, tightly controlled factual manuscript and sent it to a literary agent under a pseudonym. A few brief, tense emails later, a meeting was set. I boarded a flight to Gatwick and took the train down to his home near Victoria.

The agent was practically vibrating with excitement when I arrived, pacing his floor.

“This has massive potential,” he said, tapping the pages. “It's another *Bravo Two Zero*.”

I blinked, keeping my face a blank mask.

“Sorry. What's a *Bravo Two Zero*?”

“A highly successful book! By an ex-SAS man.”

He caught the subtle shifting of my jaw, the sudden coldness in my eyes. He paused.

“You're not too fond of the Regiment, then?”

“Too many poor decisions,” I said flatly. “Too many fuckups you've probably never heard of.”

The agent leaned forward, leaning into the tension, his eyes gleaming with pound signs.

"The operations in this manuscript... are there any others above these?"

"Probably fifty or so," I murmured.

He leaned in closer.

"Can you tell me about them?"

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"No."

"What *can* you tell me?"

"What's already in the manuscript."

The agent leaned back, his eyes narrowing.

"How far up the chain does it go? Who knows about these operations?"

"I have no idea who knows."

"Does the Queen know?" he pushed.

"I just said, I have no idea. Things are kept tight."

"How do you know you were working for the good guys, then?"

"You've read the manuscript," I said flatly.

He ignored the point, brushing it aside.

"There will be a great deal of redaction from both the MOD and the Police. You know that don't you? They'll strip this bare."

"I just need to publish the book," I replied, my voice steady. "I need to get a message out there."

"A message? What's the message?"

"I cannot tell you."

The agent looked exasperated. He rubbed his temples.

"So how will people out there know what the message is if you can't tell me?"

"When the right people see the term *Geminos*, they will understand. The book itself is the message. By reading it, they will know what to do."

"What is the *Geminos*?"

"At this point, I can't tell you."

A heavy silence fell over the room. I thought for sure he'd had enough, that he was about to show me the door. Instead, he leaned forward.

"Can you confirm your credentials?"

"Yes. Service records, police history—it's all available."

“Those can be manufactured,” the agent said, his voice dropping. “There are a lot of forged histories out there, and I’ve been caught out before. We once got as far as printing a memoir before we discovered the author was a fake. We had to crush the entire print run. I can’t risk that again.”

“My official service history places me in every single location mentioned in the book,” I told him.

“For the operations not explicitly detailed in the manuscript, my official postings were always the closest deployment. It will all hold up under scrutiny.”

The agent sighed, tapping the papers.

“Reading what you’ve outlined here, I believe the vetting process will kill most of your stories anyway. The redactions will leave you with Swiss cheese. You would need to come up with a completely different way of preventing that.”

“What are the alternatives?”

“Well... what about a different style of book entirely? A novel?”

I paused. Beyond the core objective of bringing the Geminos out of the cold, I had no idea what those silent men—my invisible employers—truly wanted. But I was certain they wouldn’t be keen on a whimsical book of fiction.

I declined his offer. The agent had finally run out of patience and brought the meeting to a close.

I flew home that evening, the dark sky outside the airplane window matching my mood. I felt despondent at my failure to find a path forward, but the rejection only made me more determined.

I spent the next few months turning the problem over in my mind. I talked around the edges of it with my wife. She was the only person alive who knew about my secondary life, even if she only possessed a fraction of the puzzle.

The more I chewed on the agent’s suggestion, the more the logic of it took hold. It didn’t need to be a factual autobiography to achieve the objective. A fictionalised, biographical trilogy could do the exact same job. I simply needed to ensure the title was explicit enough to catch the eyes of the operators still out there. They would recognise the word. They would examine the text. Hidden deep within the narrative, specific markers would point them directly back to our non-existent group.

And what should I call this phantom organisation? I smiled to myself. Keep it simple. Call them the Geminos. They know exactly who they were.

Over the next few months, I systematically altered the original manuscript. I could have desperately used G's counsel during those long nights, but that was no longer an option. I injected operational incidents I otherwise never would have shared, carefully masked behind altered names, shifted dates, and swapped locations. It was a delicate tightrope walk. But it just might work.

There was only one task remaining. I needed to use the secure mobile one last time before destroying it forever. Once the circuit was broken, the flow of information would become entirely one-way.

I initiated the connection, went through the strict encryption protocols, and waited for the line to clear.

"Yes," I said into the cold, synthetic voice on the other end.

"I know how to get the message out. On confirmation of G's closure, I will activate the project without further reference."

This third—and for me, final—attempt had to succeed.

The Geminos were lost souls, wandering in the dark ever since their primary handlers had passed away. This project would give them a beacon. It would give them somewhere to call home, ensuring they could still serve at a time when our country, and Europe, desperately needed them.

I have always been guided by a peculiar sort of intuition. Whenever a critical shift was looming, a quiet voice in my mind would nudge me forward. This time, the whisper told me to renew my long-lapsed subscription to the *Globe & Laurel*, the bi-monthly journal of the Royal Marines. I had let it slip years ago, though a long line of green binders still sat on my library shelves, holding decades of old issues.

I collected the first copy of my new subscription from my daughter's house. When I opened it, the text on the page hit me like a physical blow.

I read the obituary three times, my chest tight. I had come within weeks of missing the most crucial signal of my entire career.

The connection with G was officially closed. The final link was broken. The countdown had begun.

I sat in the quiet of the kitchen, letting the reality wash over me. I always knew this day would come, but seeing G's name in print was definitive. My former team members were already gone. Now, the link between me and the Great Society was dead too.

I looked toward the library, thinking of those green binders. How many shadow operators had been quietly stood down through the obituary pages of those official journals over the decades? How many names printed in those obituaries were members of the Great Society how many Geminos had been stood down? An organisation operating seamlessly within an organisation. Clever bastards.

I stood up, pulled the battery and the SIM card from the secure phone, and snapped the plastic modules in half. I dropped the shattered pieces of hardware into the microwave.

“Dad!” my daughter screamed, bursting into the kitchen. “What on earth are you doing? Have you gone senile? You can't put a phone in the microwave!”

She lunged past me as the machine began to violently pop, lethal blue sparks crackling against the glass door.

I didn't move. I just stared at the fireworks, a slow smile spreading across my face.

“For you, sister,” I murmured under my breath.

“What?” she shouted over the snapping electricity, hitting the cancel button. “What did you just say?”

I just smiled and walked away.

The Geminos was live. The fictionalised 'autobiography' would go out into the world, a digital ghost trap designed to bring the Geminos back from the dead to aid a nation in desperate need.

The fuse was lit. Now, I wait.