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BRUNO AND ALEX 1983

The bags were on the back seat of the car: three brown-paper carriers with string handles and writing on the side. Bruno had thrown his coat across the seat to hide them, but the movement of the car had shifted it and Alex could make out the letters ORE and AMO, black and bold, on the outside of the bag nearest to him. Alex liked words and fancied his skills as a linguist. He smiled to himself. *Hours*, he thought, and the Latin for *I love*; that's just what Bruno has in mind. Then, as the car drove on over cobbles and the coat slipped again to reveal VAT and RAG, it clicked. *Salvatore Ferragamo*.

'I didn't know you bought your shoes in Via Condotti,' he said, opening and snapping shut, then reopening his Zippo lighter, Bruno's most recent gift to him. He twirled the ratchet with his thumb, enjoying the sweet scent of the fuel, finally lighting a cigarette from the packet of Winston beside the gearstick.

Bruno, sweating in shirt-sleeves, was hunched over the wheel, distracted, fraught. 'Driving round Trastevere this time of night,' he said, 'is like threading strings of tripe through a fucking needle.'

'Or squeezing a Ferragamo customer through the gates of heaven,' said Alex, raising himself from the seat to slip the lighter back into his front jeans pocket, tilting his hips up at Bruno as if to remind the older man of what they'd be doing later.

'Ferragamo?' Bruno turned his head to look at Alex, puzzled. Then, with a grin of understanding, he said: 'You mean the bags? Don't be fooled by appearances. They're just what was to hand.' He stroked Alex's thigh. 'You needn't worry. I haven't been wasting my money on fancy footwear. I can't afford to.' He squeezed Alex's knee, pulled it towards him while Alex, teasing, resisted. 'I only waste money on you.'

'Quite right.' Alex wound down his window to throw the half-smoked cigarette into the gutter. 'Not that you are wasting it. I'm worth every lira.'

Bruno shifted down into second. 'Have you eaten?'

Alex shrugged. 'Have you?'

Bruno thought about this. 'I could eat again.'

'So could I.'

'Pizza?'

'Pizza?' echoed Alex. 'Why not?'

'I don't believe it,' said Bruno, swinging the car across the nose of a small green van, which swerved and stopped. 'A parking space outside the Obitorio. And they say there's no God. In Rome, of all places.' The van driver pressed his horn and shouted. Bruno strained across, his belly warm and heavy against the younger man's bare forearm, to shout back through Alex's open window. 'And you can

fuck off as well, you and your whore of a sister.' The van, to Alex's relief, drove off. Wiping his mouth, with an edge of glee in his voice, Bruno said, 'That's what I like, a bit of real dialogue before dinner. A bit of genuine communication with a representative of the skiving masses.' He tweaked Alex's earlobe between his fingers. 'And then, Alessandro *mio*, a bit more after dinner.'

It took almost twenty minutes before they could sit down, at one of the tables up against the wall. Bruno told the waiter to bring some bread and a litre of local white. And four *suppli*. And four *filetti di baccalà*. Alex had his elbows on the table, waiting for Bruno to tell him to shift them, feeling in the mood for a fight, nothing too serious, a touch of friction to remind them both that Alex had a mind and body, *and not just body*, of his own. He was still smarting from being called Alessandro, his real, despised name, although it might have been worse: Bruno might have said Sandro, as Alex's mother always did. His earlobe was warm, almost sore, from the pressure of Bruno's fingers, the edge of his broken, nicotine-yellowed nail.

Alex was wearing a T-shirt he'd bought that day, white, with Greek letters round the neck, but Bruno, the only person he knew who could read what they said, didn't seem to have noticed. Alex lit the final Winston from the packet he'd found in the car, scrunching the empty carton with his free hand, while Bruno picked up one of the paper napkins from the marble tabletop and took out a pen, an expensive real-nib job with a gold clip. Mont Blanc?

Maybe not, judged Alex, but not far off. Bruno scrawled a row of dashes in red-brown ink on the paper, divided into two groups by an oblique stroke.

'Come on,' he said. 'A famous person.'

'What?'

'A famous person. Big-time famous. An international name. Give me a letter. Any letter.'

'I don't understand you,' said Alex. 'Why can't we just talk? I mean, you don't have to amuse me. I can amuse myself. I'm not just a pretty face, you know.'

Bruno looked gloomy. 'You're right,' he said. He pushed out his lower lip until Alex could see the wet red-grey part inside and tilted his head towards his shoulder, a parody of self-reproof. 'I hate myself. I'm scared you might find me boring.' This made them both laugh, to Alex's surprise. Bruno capped and put away his pen and watched while Alex grew calm and silent.

With Bruno's eyes on him, he glanced around at the other tables, at the travertine-covered walls. 'You can see why it's called the mortuary, can't you?'

'They don't actually wash the place, you know that?' Bruno shuddered. 'They hose the drying blood off the walls.'

'And the tables. It's the marble, really, isn't it? That's really why they call it the mortuary. Perfect for the odd cadaver or two.'

As soon as the waiter had left the plates of *suppli* and salt cod, and the carafe of wine and basket of bread, Alex said: 'They're all ex-boxers, in case of trouble.'

'I thought that was that other pizzeria. Down the road.'

Alex looked over Bruno's shoulder towards the street with an unexpected sense of being out of place. He wished he hadn't agreed to see Bruno that evening, wondered what other kind of life he might be living instead of this, and with whom; his equal, perhaps. He nodded. 'Right.'

Using his rejected Hangman napkin, Bruno picked up a finger of cod. He bit into it, then gasped, spitting a scrap of batter on to his plate. 'Christ, this is hot,' he said, blowing out. 'I've just burned my fucking mouth.' He held out a clean square of paper to Alex. 'Try one.'

'In a minute,' said Alex. 'When they've cooled down a bit.'

'You're such a wise young man,' said Bruno. 'I'd trust you with anything, I really would.'

'Yes, right.'

'No, seriously, I mean it,' said Bruno, and he did sound serious, Alex decided, taking another piece of *baccalà* and blowing on it. He isn't a bad man, he thought. I could do worse. He's well connected, at least.

'What do you mean, anything?'

'In fact—' said Bruno.

'Yes?'

Bruno poured them both some wine. 'This stuff always reminds me of urine samples,' he said. 'Not that I see that many. It ought to be the other way round.'

'Yes?' repeated Alex, biting. Hot oil squirted from beneath the batter onto his tongue. He would never learn, he thought, from the mistakes of others. He would never

wait quite long enough. He wasn't made like that. This thought – that he might be doomed – gave him comfort. He felt like Jim Morrison, James Dean, pleased by the prospect of an early death. He swigged a mouthful of cooling, slightly apple-tasting wine, hangover guaranteed. Wise people laced it with lemonade.

Bruno sighed. 'Look, love,' he said, his voice lower now, as though they might be overheard, as though someone nearby might care what they were saying. Alex could barely catch the words. 'I need you to do me a favour. Well, I say me. It's not exactly for me. But I need a favour done.'

'Go on.'

'You wouldn't mind taking the car for a spin this evening, I don't suppose.'

It didn't sound like a question. Bruno was glancing round as though expecting to see someone he'd rather avoid. Alex wondered if he'd missed a link. 'No.'

'It's just that those bags . . .' Bruno said. 'You know, the ones on the back seat.'

'The fancy footwear.'

'That isn't.'

'So what is it?'

Bruno sighed again. He emptied his glass, grimaced, refilled it. 'It doesn't only look like piss,' he said. 'I don't know why I bother. But I do.' He drank a second time, more slowly, then took a new packet of cigarettes from his pocket and ripped it open. He flicked out a cigarette and held it with exaggerated care between his fingers, as

though it might snap. 'It's something I don't want in my flat right at this moment.' He put the cigarette down beside his bread and reached across, his hand on Alex's, a brief reassuring touch, pulling away before Alex could; before anyone saw. 'It's nothing to worry about, love. It's just that, well, it's delicate. Not even that. Potentially delicate.' He smiled. 'So I thought, knowing how much you like to drive my nice fast car, you might be willing to slip the stuff round to your place for a day or two.'

'So let me get this clear. You want me to drive your nice fast car to my flat and hide those potentially delicate bags? For a day or two. And it's nothing to worry about? It's just a favour?'

Bruno leaned back. 'Not *hide*,' he said, forcing a laugh. 'Hang on to them. Give them a home. It won't be for long.'

Alex thought about this for a moment. 'All right,' he said.

Alex lived down the Casilina, but he decided he'd take the long route. He was in no rush to return to Bruno, who'd begun to wear him down. It was not that he wasn't fond of the older man, in his way, or that he didn't appreciate the long-term view of a leg-up into journalism and the short-term regime of pizzas and presents; he'd be a fool not to play willing. Besides, this wasn't the first time Bruno had lent him the car with a wink, as though he might not want it back, not at once anyway. One day, maybe not at all. So Alex felt under no obligation to rush.

Bruno would probably be asleep, in any case, and might as well be woken up in two hours' time as one.

Alex didn't give in to the temptation to look into the bags until he'd been driving through the Saturday-evening city traffic for fifteen minutes, over the river and down Via Marmorata. On an impulse, he parked by the Pyramid, outside the bar the whores warmed up in on winter nights where he'd sometimes come to be flirted with, he bought a final hot punch, accept a lift home from one of their clients. He strained back to tug the nearest carrier towards him, but couldn't quite reach it. In the end, because he was slightly drunk, he clambered over the seat and into the back, banging his funny bone on the corner of the headrest. He imagined himself jammed between the seats until he died. People would think he'd been worked over and left there by someone on the game.

When he finally did make it, winded by effort, he was annoyed to see that all the carriers contained, pushed down as far as they'd go, were smaller bags made of thick black glossy plastic, thicker than the kind used for rub-bish, the kind he'd seen photographs stored in. Each carrier contained a dozen, maybe more, of these, sealed shut with two-inch duct tape. Maybe he'd open one, he thought, but later. He'd do it with the care required.

He climbed back into the front seat and drove home as fast as he dared, down beneath Via Cristoforo Colombo and past Coin – the railings outside the department store his Saturday-morning haunt until two or three years ago, when he'd still been at school and feckless – the traffic

thinning as he took the curve in front of the church with the nail from the holy cross inside it. As if. That was the joke about Rome, the big sad joke, he thought, with all its talk of holy this and holy that, and all the unholy goings-on. He'd learned a thing or two already, had his own brief glimpses, and guessed the rest. And what he hadn't guessed, Bruno – old Roman lowlife hand and Vatican expert – had filled him in on.

It was after one o'clock when Alex parked the car directly beneath Bruno's flat, round the corner from Piazza in Piscinula. Tonight's our lucky night, he thought, two parking spaces found where and when they were needed. How often does that happen? Once every death of a pope, if that. He locked the car, swinging the key from his forefinger, reminding himself of someone he'd seen in a film. Bruno had given him his own key to the building so he didn't need to ring. He climbed the stairs in darkness, running his hand along the wall, until he was on the third floor. One more floor to go. But the darkness had already begun to lift before he reached Bruno's landing. Alex frowned, disconcerted, suddenly anxious. Speeding up, he saw a wedge of light from behind Bruno's door, which was half open. His heart beating fast, light-headed, he pushed the door back to the wall. 'Bruno,' he called, his voice low, as though he didn't want to be heard. He glanced into the first room on the right, the bathroom, and saw the towels on the floor, the medicines from the cabinet spilled into the bath; he smelt the Eau Sauvage