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There was nothing remotely scary about the bearded man. Really, his face was rather pleasant, in a bland, rich tea biscuit sort of way. Pippa noticed him first at the airport gate, when the queue began to form and he lifted a small child over the rope to reach its mother. His beard had a new look about it, his pink-brown cheeks not yet shifted into its contours, but when the little girl grabbed it, the pain seemed real enough.

He was there again at the baggage reclaim, craning across the chugging conveyor belt to pick up his backpack. Pippa's case was almost the last to arrive; huge, unmistakably nylon, and corsetted in yellow security tape. It reached the top of the upward slope and paused, teetering drunkenly, before falling flat on its face, a disreputable granny at an upmarket wedding. Pippa, emerging from the loo, ran forward to claim it, but the handle had fallen inwards, and she could get no grip on the corners. It had been a cumbersome brute even when it was new, lugged to college for the first time, full of trust law and brave intentions. After seven years the itch was getting unbearable. She must have given a small squeak of annoyance, because the bearded man, ambling away towards Passport Control, turned back and in a single fluid gesture, reached over and rescued it.

'*Grazie tante.*' she said, her first Italian on Italian *pavimento*, but he smiled and replied with a guttural accent.

'No problem.'

He was youngish, about thirty, rather heavily built and very blond. But to someone he was an object of terror.

There is an arrivals barrier at Pisa airport, behind which friends, relatives and colleagues are supposed to wait. Some do, of course. The English do, and the Germans and the Dutch, welcoming their house guests to Chiantishire or the Garfagnana. The taxi drivers do, and the more aloof businessmen, distancing themselves from the somersaulting toddlers and the mammas who brave the one-

way doors to enfold their returning *ragazzi*, famished after a week of *schifoso* English food. And the young man in spectacles did, dapper enough to be Italian in his polo shirt and pressed chinos, but far too pale and uncertain. He held a neatly written cardboard sign, unobtrusively, as though its two words might cause offence.

Pippa pushed her trolley down the corridor behind the man with the beard. He carried only his backpack, a sensible, twenty-first century construction, waterproof, breathable and festooned with velcroed pockets. Into one of these he was stowing his passport, so carefully that he didn't look up as he passed through the doors, didn't hear the bespectacled man's indrawn breath, see his fingernails turn white against the card or his grey eyes, enlarged by the thick lenses, blink and blink again. The bearded man passed straight ahead, through the outer doors and into the Tuscan night.

Pippa stopped in front of the second man. He was three or four inches shorter than her and he was still trembling.

'Hi, I'm here.'

He shook his head, a baby gerbil bereft of its nest. 'No no. You've made a mistake. I'm....' He gazed down at the cardboard sign as though wondering how on earth it could have got into his hands. Then, with a rush of relief. 'I'm waiting for someone.'

'You're waiting for me.' said Pippa gently. 'I'm Philippa Laud.' She pointed at her name on the card.

'Jeez, I'm sorry. I'm a poet, you see.'

Pippa's heart plummeted, taking her face, all too visibly, with it. He watched them fall.

'It wasn't meant to be an excuse. Just – in the early stages of a thing, I go a bit cookie. It isn't genius, just bad manners.' He smiled suddenly, a rather large smile for his face. He still looked like a small rodent, but a more robust one. A hamster, maybe. 'On the way to the airport, at the edges of the fields, there were these girls.'

'Girls?'

'Girls. Waiting.'

'You mean you thought I...?' She looked down at her travelling clothes, the soft baggy layers that had seen her through from the dawn chill of Scunthorpe coach station. The figure underneath wasn't completely hopeless; she still got the 'not of many of those in a pound' gag from the odd workman, but the last time she heard it, she'd been walking away, and it wasn't a delayed reaction. As

for her face, it did all right in an English courtroom, but so did most that were topped with their own hair and bore no immediate signs of apoplexy. She had freckles and eyes just on the green side of hazel, but had missed the red hair to go with them, and had to make do with dark mouse, streaked with chestnut after a good summer. Her nose was cheerful but inelegant and she had the kind of mouth that had to keep smiling, otherwise the workman would call out that it might never happen.

'Sorry again. I'm still basically a hoser, I guess. We didn't get many hookers back home, least not that I ever came across. And then I had a bit of a shock just now.'

'Do you want to tell me about it?'

For a moment she was back in the office, bracing herself for the story: the stockpile of marital grudges, the neighbours' festering feud or the chaotic mêlée of a building dispute. But she had left that life, those loquacious miseries. She wouldn't have clients any more, only students, colleagues, bosses and friends. Which category the poet fell into, she wasn't yet sure.

'No, it's nothing. Thought I saw a ghost, that's all. Very Henry James.' He gave an abrupt shake like a small dog emerging from a pond, and put out his hand. 'Could we start over, do you think? I'm Gray Garrett. Well - Graham.' 'Gray' was an innovation, and he still felt like an impostor whenever he used it.

'Pippa. It was you, then, who sent the email? Gray at pick-a-sadding?' It sounded even more implausible than it had at the time.

'Picca-casa-ding. *La Piccola Casa d'Inglese*. The language school.'

'Of course. And you're the, what, Director of Studies?' The slim paperback concealed in her hand luggage, *How to Teach English Abroad with No Qualifications Whatsoever*, was already coming in handy. But Gray laughed.

'Nothing so grand, I'm afraid. I'm just a teacher, too, trying to keep body and soul in some kind of equilibrium until the world recognizes my contribution to lidderrature.' He grimaced. 'So, only another three hundred years to go.'

'And you're American, right?'

'Canadian.'

From the smouldering sensation in Pippa's cheeks, she guessed that they were as beetroot-coloured as the British passport she still

clutched. She only knew one thing about Canadians; that they detested being taken for their brash neighbours.

But this one didn't seem to mind so much; just stood gazing at the concrete staircase, presumably contemplating an ode to *Donky Rock Hair*, the unisex salon on the first floor.

'Gray?'

'Mmm?' He twisted his mouth into a tight rosette and sucked it into one cheek, looking more than ever as though he were doing something technical with a sunflower seed.

'How do we get to Lucca? Do you have a car or something?'

He thought it over for a moment. 'Probably a something.'

The something was straddling two parking spaces, as if unsure whether one would be enough, although it could probably have fitted inside a largish litter bin. It was white; very battered, very old, and very Italian.

'*Cinquecento* - the classic model.' explained Gray, opening the unlocked right-hand door with a chivalrous gesture. '*Prego*.'

'I can't.'

'What is it, claustrophobia? It feels bigger once you're in, Mounties' honour.'

'No I mean I haven't passed my t.... Oh of course, it's left hand drive. My turn to go - what was it you said?'

'Cookie?'

'I knew it was something close to my heart. I got through seven extra-large Millies on the flight.'

Whether the cookies were to blame or not, it took some serious negotiation between Pippa's elbows and knees before she managed to wedge herself inside the car. She hunched her head, tortoise-style, between her shoulders, trying not to imagine how many other scalps had been crammed against the roof and which of them were responsible for the oily green smears. With a Schrödinger disregard for the conventions of spatial physics, her suitcase was upended in the tiny boot, removing any hope of either rear visibility or anything approaching equilibrium.

'Is this your car?' Pippa asked, as the engine sneezed into life and they shot forward into the kerb. Gray shook his head distractedly, searching for reverse gear.

'Eenie's.'

'Ian?'

‘E and E.’ He had found it now, and the car spurted backwards before stalling inches from a large Mercedes. ‘Sorry. Never used a stick-shift back home. Elsa and Elisa. Owners of the school.’

‘Elsa and Elisa. I’ll try to remember. Who else is there I need to know?’

‘That’s it, really. Just the old ladies and us two teachers. I’ve only been here since last August myself. E & E do all the admin but they’re not exactly webwise, so when Zena shogged off, and they needed someone fast, I fixed it for them. I want to set up a proper interactive site for the school, but the old dears don’t go a bundle on the idea. They keep explaining how they’re scared of spiders. It’s a fascinating glimpse into the operation of metaphor, but it doesn’t get us much further forward.’

‘Hang on a moment.’

Gray’s foot stamped on the brake and the suitcase made a bid for freedom. Pippa unglued her forehead from the tiny sun visor.

‘I meant the conversation, actually. Who’s Zena, and where did she go?’

‘Sorry, didn’t I say? Your predecessor. Now she really is a Yank. She left on Monday night, without a single word. Not as reliable as us Colonials, you see.’

‘You don’t mean this last Monday night, do you? The day before yesterday? Wow. The advert was up yesterday lunchtime. I thought I was quick getting here.’

‘No point in letting the grass grow.’

He illustrated the principle by cutting across a decorative verge into a stream of oncoming traffic, executing a U-turn across a raised concrete island and following signs for some disturbingly major roads. The suitcase leapt in the air a few times, surveyed its surroundings, considered the folk wisdom about the frying pan and the fire, and jammed itself back into the Cinquecento’s boot.

Gray now appeared to be driving in the cycle lane, or maybe it was just the gutter; although to judge by the speed of the traffic overtaking them, it was probably the safest place to be. Unless, of course, you happened to be a cyclist.

‘Do you believe in God, Philippa?’

Oh no. She’d known there had to be a catch. It had all been much too easy; the advert on the TEFL website, the flurry of emails, the ludicrously cheap last-minute flight. And this was why. They didn’t want her mind at all, didn’t care about her complete absence

of finely-honed teaching skills or meticulous analysis of English grammar. No, it was her soul they were after, and the souls of all those poor benighted Italians whom she was to lure into the trap. No wonder they felt uneasy about spiders. She dared a sidelong glance at Gray's serious profile. Yes, he was just the type. If she was really lucky they would only be rabid evangelicals. If not....Images from every cult scare story jostled into her mind: enforced multiple marriages, mass suicides, a complete embargo on the latest Red Hot Chili Peppers album. Perhaps she should throw herself out of the car here and now, on the slip road to the Strada Statale Aurelia. Only judging from the contortions required to get into the car, they would be past Livorno by the time she worked out how to extricate herself. Honesty was unlikely to be the best policy, but it was all she could think of for the moment.

'I'm not sure. I think so.'

'Well, could you give Him the benefit and PRAY!!'

They had reached the end of the slip road and were presented with a stark choice between the S.S. Aurelia and the crash barrier. Judging from the mangled state of the steel, many before them had chosen the second option. Gray closed his eyes, muttered some tribal Canadian incantation - Pippa thought she caught the word 'Frontenac' - and jerked the steering wheel to the left. There was a violent rattling, a cacophony of horns, like the brass section of the LSO warming up and a screeching scrape of metal down the left hand side of the car. Seconds later it was balanced by a glancing impact on Pippa's door, as they were overtaken on the right by a tiny three wheeled Ape truck.

'There.' said Gray with satisfaction. 'Not too bad this time.' He glared at the dusty Ape trundling in front of them at a steady seven miles an hour. 'He had a nerve, that guy. What d'ye think, Pippa? Reckon we can pass him?'

But the power of speech had left her. Gray might not be the most macho of men, but the bravura of snatched survival clearly coursed through his genes like the rest. Or maybe it was just the effect of six months' driving in Italy.

'I think....' she began, when her vocal chords disentangled themselves, but the rest of her sentence was swallowed by another shriek from the left wing; the sound of fingernails on a blackboard amplified by a googolplex or two.

'Maybe not.' said Gray, waving a hand in apology to a

disappearing Alfa Romeo, its bumper festooned with small pieces of Fiat. 'I guess we'll just hunker down here, then. Was there something else you wanted to ask?'

One or two queries sprang to mind, such as the nature of the celestial vacuum that replaced the Italian Highway Code, but with the exhaust clanking behind them, the ambiance was ill-suited to cosmological debate.

'About Zena,' she bawled, simply for something to say, resigned to her inclusion in next morning's auto-fatality statistics, 'Where's she gone, exactly?'

As she spoke, the rest of the exhaust fell off and the noise diminished slightly.

'Greece, I think. She'd been talking about it for months, how she was going to take the railroad across to Ancona then pick up a ferry to Patras. It's a pity she didn't give E&E any notice, though. Things were pretty chaotic on Tuesday morning.'

'She really took off without telling anyone?'

'Not a word. Zena wasn't exactly the type for a tearful farewell scene but even a note might have helped. The first we knew of it was when she didn't turn up for her nine o'clock lesson. She didn't answer her cellphone either, so I called round at her flat. It's only a couple of minutes walk from the school.'

'And she'd gone?'

'So far as I could tell. She didn't have much in the way of personal possessions, at least not here in Italy, no books or CDs or photographs, and not many clothes, either. I don't think I ever saw her in anything but jeans and a couple of T-shirts. But her passport had gone, and her driving licence. I knew where she always kept them, and she never took them out, unless she needed ID for something. It's such a hassle if you lose things like that, especially in Italy. Oh, her cellphone was there, but it was only a cheap one, and out of credit, so I guess there'd be no point in taking it to Greece. Anyway, E&E didn't have anyone else, and my schedule's packed, so they asked me to see about finding someone.'

'But what if she comes back?'

Gray shrugged, glancing lightly off the crash barrier. 'Have to fight it out, I reckon. She's in breach of contract, so there shouldn't be a problem.'

Pippa thought about trying a hollow laugh, but decided she had probably had too many cookies. 'You haven't had much to do with

the law, have you?’

‘Torts and moots? No, nothing. Oh yeah - you were an advocate, weren’t you, back in England? You’ll be able to fix it, if we run into any problems. Anyway, she won’t be coming back, you can bet your bottom dollar on that one. Whoa!’

Gray wrenched the steering-wheel to the right, flinging his body after it, and manhandled the Fiat off the Aurelia and onto a deserted side road.

‘I thought we’d take the scenic route.’ he explained, apparently unaware that darkness had now fallen completely, and that the only light, apart from the moon and stars, came from the Fiat’s own single functioning headlamp. ‘Kind of like a literary trail. Over there, for example,’ He waved a nonchalant arm towards a looming hillside, its base scattered with orange pinpricks, ‘is San Guiliano Terme. The Shelleys moved there when Pisa got too jam-packed for them. The main piazza’s still named after Percy Bysshe. Cool, huh?’

‘Cool.’ agreed Pippa, gazing out into the night. A stanza of poetry, dormant for years, rose from the dusty cellars of her memory.

‘When the lamp is shattered,
The light in the dust lies dead -
When the cloud is scattered,
The rainbow’s glory is shed.’

‘Hey! You’re a fan, too!’

‘I was once. Before I went to - ‘ what would they call it in Canada? ‘- law school.’

‘Yeah, it’s heavy, that stuff. I knew a guy from high school who went in for it and he worked like seventeen hours a day I guess it doesn’t leave a lot of time for poetry.’

Pippa gave a murmur of agreement, feeling faintly dishonest. It hadn’t really been restrictive covenants or the Unfair Contract Terms Act that had nudged Shelley out of her life, only Jonathan’s vociferous disapproval.

‘There’s nothing in poetry.’ he had pronounced, with the certainty of a man who’d just laid a large bet on his own forthcoming partnership prospects. ‘No useful contacts, no money, no causes of action, even, except for a few squalid wrangles. It’s fine to have a cultural hinterland, especially for a woman, but you’d be better

sticking to opera and fine art.'

'You'd be better', from Jonathan, had always been more in the nature of a command than a suggestion, and so poor Shelley had been sidelined, along with her tartan tights and slipper socks. But now that that she had been formally designated a Rather Unsatisfactory Girlfriend (the final email had used lower-case, but the words were always capitalized in Pippa's mind) there was no reason why she shouldn't read poetry. And wear slipper socks, come to that, if it got cold enough in Tuscany. The tartan tights, she decided, could remain in exile.

Gray had been thinking along the same lines.

'You ought to start again. Italy's a great place for new beginnings. And for English literature. It's the main reason I came here. Now Byron...'

A long and complicated story of the mad bad Lord, the firebrand Shelley, an impetuous servant and a Pisan soldier occupied the rest of the journey, so that Pippa only needed to give occasional grunts of interest or outrage. Intent on making her grunts as intelligent and gratified as possible, and on trying not to flinch whenever Gray overtook a scooter, she hardly noticed that the countryside had given way to strung-out suburbs before they passed through a gate in the great ramparts and were at last in the ancient city of Lucca. Inside the walls there was almost no traffic, and only a few stray cyclists and pedestrians. 'Lucca shuts down early,' explained Gray, turning down a cobbled street only inches wider than the Fiat. 'All the nightlife's over on the coast at Versilia. I could drive you over one evening if you like.'

Pippa snatched at the first excuse to hand.

'I think I'm getting a bit old for discos, actually.'

'Old? Are you?' He turned to peer at her in the near-darkness, searching for signs of a face-lift or two.

'Well, twenty-five.'

'Huh.' He turned his attention back to the street, just in time to avoid a thirteenth century chapel and a couple of plump poodles. 'Zena used to go and she was forty-three. Mind you, it's not really my scene, either. I prefer - oh, here we are.'

He stopped the car suddenly and the engine stalled, dying away with a disturbing finality.

'We'll get your bags out and I'll move it later,' said Gray, without conviction. 'At least - I know a guy with a breakdown truck.'