ROME — In 1965, John F. Kerry and David Thorne were college-age kids driving around Europe together in a used English cab they bought for $100 and named Baxter. Inspired by Ernest Hemingway, they went running with the bulls in Pamplona. They drove around England, through France, along the Italian coast, two young men with a summer to kill.

The friendship has shaped Kerry’s life in so many ways that even Hemingway might have found it too far-fetched for a plot line. The two were side by side in Yale’s secretive Skull and Bones society. They went off to Vietnam and returned to lead antiwar protests together. Kerry married Thorne’s twin sister. Thorne was by Kerry’s side when he lost his presidential bid.

It all came full circle on the airport tarmac in Rome on Wednesday. Thorne, the US ambassador to Italy, greeted his old friend and new boss, Kerry, the US
secretary of state. Kerry emerged from the plane, pointed at Thorne, bounded down the steps, and shouted, “Ciao!”

Kerry’s relationship with Thorne is among the most unusual in politics, providing insights into how the secretary of state came to view the world, and how he will continue to lean on Thorne for counsel as he confronts the globe’s thorniest problems.

“It’s been a journey,” Thorne said in an interview inside his ornate office at the US Embassy. “It’s been difficult at times [but] it’s part of a family, and it doesn’t break.”

Kerry concurred, saying in response to e-mailed questions from the Globe, “Our lives have been incredibly intertwined in every respect: Family; pluses/minuses; wins/losses; moments of joy and jubilation/moments of sadness. We’re just as close as you can be with a longtime friend.”

Thorne and Kerry first met a half-century ago, introduced by a mutual friend at a greasy spoon diner off the Yale campus called “My Brother’s Place.”

Their first conversation was about women — actually, one woman in particular. They came to realize they were dating the same girl, Janet Auchincloss, half-sister of Jacqueline Kennedy. (Neither of their relationships lasted long with her).

They connected through the experiences of growing up overseas. Kerry spent several formative years in Berlin while his father was in the foreign service. Thorne grew up in Italy while his father worked as a diplomat, having been appointed by President Eisenhower to administer US assistance for Italy, and later becoming publisher of the Rome Daily American, an international English-language newspaper.

“I didn’t know anyone that had this similar experience,” Thorne said. “He was the only guy I’d known, either in prep school or in college that had that experience . . . On that a friendship was built.”
Kerry spoke French, German, and Italian; Thorne spoke Italian, Spanish, and French. (They are still known at times to break into conversation in Italian, though Thorne chides Kerry because the ambassador’s Italian is better. “His French is very good,” Thorne says. “So I have to give him grief about something.”)

Their European childhoods led them to become lifelong soccer players, and they were both good enough to make the varsity team at Yale. It was Thorne who was sitting next to Kerry on the bench during a match against Harvard when word spread in the crowd — and then to a devastated Kerry — that President Kennedy had been shot.

They signed up together for the military, and it was Thorne who met Kerry at a dock in Long Beach, Calif., when Kerry came home after his first tour of duty. Terrible news had just spread. Thorne motioned his finger to his head, and Kerry knew what he was referring to: Robert F. Kennedy had been shot.

The death of their close friend, Richard Pershing, in Vietnam was a formative event for both men, turning them against the war they had just finished fighting in. They joined together in protests on the Washington Mall in April 1971. A photo shows Kerry leaning over, listening intently to Thorne. They’re both dressed in military fatigues.

Those protests brought attention to Kerry, and led into a congressional campaign in Massachusetts in 1972. Thorne helped run the campaign, but Kerry lost.

Thorne also introduced Kerry to his future wife: Thorne’s twin sister, Julia. And for 18 years, they were brothers-in-law, before Kerry and Julia Thorne divorced.

But the relationship between Kerry and David Thorne survived. In 1985, when Kerry and Julia Thorne had separated and Kerry had just become a US senator, David Thorne gave Kerry a key to his Back Bay home. When coming home from Washington to visit his young daughters, Kerry would sleep in a bedroom upstairs on Thorne’s attic floor.
When Kerry ran for president in 2004, Thorne was his campaign treasurer and ran online activities.

“He is more like a brother,” said Bob Shrum, a top adviser on Kerry’s 2004 campaign who had dinner with Thorne — and Henry Winkler, the actor best known as “the Fonz” from “Happy Days” and quite popular in Italy, and all of their wives — at the ambassador’s residence.

“He’s someone John can utterly trust,” Shrum said. “He can tell John — whether he’s the Democratic nominee for president, the senator, or the secretary of state — what he thinks.”

As Kerry transitions into a State Department with a massive bureaucracy he will lean even more on Thorne. “Any creative and unusual ideas Kerry has, he’ll bounce off Thorne,” said Doug Brinkley, who wrote a biography of Kerry that relied on letters that Kerry wrote to Thorne during the Vietnam War.

“He’s always been an ambitious person,” Thorne said of Kerry. “But this ability to carry American foreign policy — the idea of carrying American values to the world has been a part of his life since he was a 10-year-old boy. This is just the final, full manifestation of that. . . . This is what he was meant to do.”

On Wednesday night, as the sun began to set in a cloudless sky and Kerry’s plane arrived, the scene was far from the one Thorne and Kerry had nearly a half-century ago, when they were driving the broken-down English cab around Europe.

After Kerry emerged from the plane and they shared a big bear hug — Thorne grabbed Kerry’s waist with both hands, then smacked Kerry’s neck with his left hand — they boarded into a black Cadillac.

A motorcade of more than a dozen cars transported them through the Italian countryside into Rome — past the Circus Maximus, past ancient baths, and past the Vittorio Emanuele II monument. Arriving at Kerry’s hotel, the two old friends climbed out of the car and Kerry scurried off to a meeting with the secretary general of NATO.