

# WEDNESDAY MORNING

*This sad little vignette is what happens when you combine old Beatles songs, BBC documentaries, and far too many hours being far too nice to far too many children. And M. Fae does not apologize. Oh, and don't forget your hankies.*

“SO that’s it, then?” Doyle asked, his incredulity painfully obvious.

“Mmhm,” Bodie agreed absently, trying to decide if this shirt could serve another day before it needed washing.

“It’s just over, finished?”

“Finito, kaput,” Bodie said crisply, stuffing the shirt into the launderette bag, starting now on the aertexT-shirts he used for running and squash.

“You’re serious about this?”

“Never more so.”

Not one for pacing, Doyle was propped up against the wall, and to the casual observer, he would have looked relaxed, at ease. “You’re just going to leave, up and off, just like that?”

“No, not like that,” Bodie said sarcastically, doing his impersonation of Tommy Cooper, “like this.”

“It’s not something I think you can joke about, Bodie.”

“Yeh? Well, it’s a free country, you can think whatever you like,” Bodie told him, the last of the T-shirts sorted, starting now on the drawer where he kept his socks and underwear and gun harnesses. “But what you think doesn’t matter a monkey’s uncle. I’m going.”

“But you can’t just up and off—”

“And what’s to stop me, eh?” Bodie demanded, cruel in his unthinking haste. “Let me tell you, Cowley’s small print isn’t worth the paper it’s written on.”

“Yeh, but there’s more than just a contract to hold you here,” Doyle told him, fingering the clutter of after-shave and the calamine lotion left from their last holiday, when they’d gone to Guernsey and Bodie had spent too much time on the beach with him, fair skin burning quickly, Bodie’s discomfort putting a serious crimp in their plans to spend the entire week fucking their way across the Channel Islands. Sharp-eyed, face hard, Doyle glowered at Bodie, repeating himself that bit more loudly: “I said, there’s more than just a contract keeping you here.”

“Ray,” Bodie said, more with weariness than compassion, “I’ve already told you. There’s nothing at all keeping me here.”

“Not even me?”

“You? Oh, Christ, I don’t believe it!” Hands on hips, his packing interrupted by sheer astonishment. “You? All right, so we’re good mates, but it’s not as if we’re married or anything daft like that, is it?”

“I’m not trying to say anything like that. I’m just pointing out,” and he was also struggling to hold on to his temper, “that you and me, well, we had something...”

“What we had,” Bodie said crisply as he stacked the unwanted clothes into the tea-chest for disposal, “was fucking and friendship. Hardly something worth hanging around this dump for.”

“What d’you mean—”

“Oh, come on, Ray, look around you. England’s

finished, the sun set on the bloody Empire years ago, but half this stupid bloody island won't admit that. What is there here for the likes of me, eh? Rotten weather, a job that's getting nastier every day, doing the Government's dirty work— Christ, Ray, I actually went out and voted against this lot. And now Cowley's talking about promoting us—"

"Yeh, exactly. Better money, no danger—"

"You don't get it, do you?" Pitying, almost.

"I don't see—"

"You can't see the nose in front of your face, sunshine. No danger. That means no excitement. It means sitting behind a fucking desk, answering the bloody phone, pulling our forelocks to keep the bloody Minister happy. What kind of life is that, for fuck's sake?"

Doyle came nearer, standing beside his partner, flinching in pain when Bodie deliberately moved away, putting distance between them. "We neither of us are as young as we used to be—"

"What the hell is the matter with you? You're sounding like an old man, and you're not. At least your body's not. I'm not so sure about what's going on under that mop of yours."

"Yeh? Well, there's not a fucking thing going on between your ears, is there? Running away like a naughty schoolboy. Going off to see the world again, are you?" Vicious now, to hide the sting of tears. "Running off to sea again?"

"That's a mug's game," quietly, distantly calm. "I'm going to the Foreign Legion."

"Oh, yeh, the poor man's Beau Geste. The Foreign Legion? What the hell for?"

"Look at me, Ray," Bodie demanded, grabbing Doyle by the shoulders, shaking him. "Look at me. What do I look like? Even when I'm in civvies, what the fuck do I look like?"

Doyle stared at him, his eyes painfilled and painful to see. There was a yellow streak a mile wide in him, and he wanted to lie, to pretend, to break Bodie down and make him stay. But he straightened, stepped back. Told the truth. "A soldier. You always look like a soldier."

"That's right, Ray. That's what I am," he said fiercely, thumping himself on the chest directly over his thundering heartbeat, "in here, where it counts. And I miss all that, miss the family, miss the camaraderie..."

"And you don't have any of that here." Not a question, but an answer, one that Doyle would

have to bear, and with it, the sense of failure, the knowing that he wasn't enough. "So now you're going to where you can have it again, with a bunch of strangers..."

"Ray, don't carry on like this. You've never been a soldier, you've no idea what it's like. It's... just different from everything else, and some of us can't give it up."

"Oh, no, Bodie," Doyle said, his voice as small and bitter as his smile, "it's not can't. You *won't* give it up."

"Yeh, well..." He escaped into taking his papers out of his hiding place, not caring now, of course, either that Doyle knew that particular secret or that Doyle knew just how many passports Bodie carried.

"Can I write to you?"

"No."

"No? Oh, yeh? You can't fucking stop me—"

"You won't know how to reach me."

"I dunno, Bodie the Bastard Englishman, c/o The Foreign Legion, France, that should find you."

Bodie fanned the passports out under Doyle's nose. "I could pick any one of these, Ray, and you only know the name on one of them. Anyway, the Legion take away your old name and give you a new one when you join."

That was when Doyle did, actually, understand. "So it's not me. What you're doing is running away from you. A new name, a new personality, is that it, Bodie?"

"And what's wrong with that?" Low, vicious, dangerous, the sheen of civilisation dulling to show the self-honesty beneath. "I've done things in my life, Ray, things I hate myself for, but I didn't think I had any choice. So what's so wrong with me wiping the slate clean? I've already paid my debt—"

"But you've never been in prison."

Bodie had, but the experience in the Congo had nothing to do with atonement and everything to do with revenge and adding another dirty mark to his tally.

Realisation wasn't slow, not now that Doyle knew some of what was behind Bodie's tidy little façade. "You don't mean prison, though, do you? You're talking about the Paras and the SAS. CI5."

"Only CI5. The other two were what I wanted to do."

"So if you're such a fucking soldier in here—" Doyle jabbed him, stopping just short of doing real damage, settling for merely winding Bodie, "then

why'd you leave the Paras *and* the SAS both, eh?"

Bodie walked away, going through into the living room, giving Doyle his viciousness, sadly aware of whence it stemmed. "I'm surprised you think I left."

"With the way you keep on running away? I'd be more surprised if you had left."

Bodie ignored that dig, seeing right through it. "I was moved on because I was too good for them to chuck me without a second chance, and the SAS is a bit more lenient, as long as a bloke's discreet."

"And you think the Legion won't care?"

"I *know* the Legion won't care."

A long silence, made emptier by Bodie going through his books, leafing through them, separating them into piles, two poetry books going into his bag, an assortment going into the wooden crate, the rest going back on the shelves. "Don't suppose there's any chance of you tying up the loose ends now, is there?"

"You mean you expected to—" He glared at this man, the man who had been his friend for over five years, his lover only very slightly less than that. The man who had been packing when Doyle had come over unexpectedly, the job in Cornwall wrapping up a lot faster and messier than anyone had predicted. "You were planning on leaving me without so much as a by-your-leave, and now you think you can ask me to tie the loose ends up for you? What the fuck made you even consider something that stupid?"

Bodie twisted round to look up at Doyle.

"Because you were my friend."

Were. That was the only word Doyle heard. Were. Past tense. Finished. Finito. Over. He closed his eyes, holding the pain far, far inside, pressing it down the way he would to staunch the flow of blood in any external wound. "And if I hadn't come back early," if I hadn't come over here to make love to you because I had missed you so much, because I'd been so scared I was going to die yesterday without ever telling you I loved you, "what did you have in mind?"

"I was going to leave you a letter."

Doyle laughed at that, a tearing sound, raw and harsh and ugly. "Oh, yeh, that's my Bodie. Always keep your papers in order and don't forget to do your letters. What was my letter going to say, Bodie? Gone off to join the Legion, clean up behind me, your old pal, Bodie. Was that what you were going to give me?"

"For fuck's sake," and it was startling to hear pain in Bodie's voice, frightening to see the cracks showing, "what do you want from me?"

"I want you to stay!" Doyle roared, needing to turn away, needing to walk out of Bodie's reach before he either killed the other man or threw himself at his feet. "I don't want you to run away, and—"

Only yesterday, he'd been pinned down in the prettiest little cottage by the sea, two gunmen actively trying to kill him, the routine operation gone horribly, terribly wrong. "You never know the minute, Bodie, and I don't want you to die."

"And unless God died and you got promoted, what you want isn't worth a piss in the wind. We're all going to die—me, Cowley, you. All of us. It's just that some of us aren't afraid of it."

"I am," Doyle said with agonising clarity. "And you said you were, too."

"Yeh, and I've said a lot of other things too, Ray, and you should've known better than to believe me. You should've *known* better."

"Yeh, I should, shouldn't I? More fool me for trusting you, eh?" It was supposed to be a barb, poison-tipped and sharp, but all it did was hang Doyle's pain out for all to see.

"I'm sorry," Bodie said, too gently, so gently that it almost broke Doyle.

"What for? It's not as if you asked me to love you, is it?" And how bitter a sweetness to finally say it, and like this, the words framed in goodbyes. "Nobody's fault, Bodie, just one of life's sick jokes. You know," and he gave them both the gift of his smile, swallowing hard to keep the pain at bay, "I swear, when I die, I expect to find God laughing. Probably sharing the joke with Cowley as well."

"Probably." An awkwardness, with nothing to fill it but words that would be best left unspoken. "I'd better get this lot finished."

"Be for the best. Don't mind tying up the loose ends, but I'm not charring for you."

"Thanks, Ray," Bodie said, passing him on the way to the bathroom, giving him a friendly mock-punch on the arm. "you're a brick."

"Thick as one anyway," Doyle said when Bodie was gone. Slowly, he picked his way between the boxes, settling himself on the floor, unashamedly going through Bodie's bag to find the only two books Bodie was making room for in the one bag allowed him by the Legion. A paperback Oxford Book of English Verse, not very specialised, but

probably had enough favourites from enough poets to keep Bodie going. The other volume, very slim, hard-bound, the dark-blue fabric fraying at the dented corners. Of course. A book of war poems, Sassoon and Owen, Yeats and Whitman. Part of Bodie, that, part of him Doyle had never even thought about.

"Find anything interesting?" Bodie, from the doorway, sharply.

"As a matter of fact, yeh," Doyle told him, carefully and unhurriedly replacing the books. "Stuff I wish I'd thought about before."

"It wouldn't've made any difference. Honest, Ray, it wouldn't."

"I know, I know. Just all this's come as a bit of a shock. I though I was coming home..." He had to stop there, had to shove the pain a bit farther away before he could find his voice again. "And instead, you're leaving." He gave Bodie another smile, his anger having no place here, where there really was no-one to blame, only two people whose needs were as different as night and day. "Don't look so worried, I'm not going to have a fit of the vapours or throw myself off the balcony."

Bodie was fumbling around, putting toiletries in his kit, an amazing amount of stuff packed, thanks to that cherished military skill, into a surprisingly small bag. "I really am sorry," he said in the general direction of Doyle's left knee, whether because he didn't want to see Doyle's eyes or because he didn't want Doyle to see his, no-one had any way of knowing. But he was sorry, obviously had never intended to cause this much pain. Had known Doyle, perhaps, as much as Doyle had known him.

"Right," Bodie said a shade too heartily, squirming at the probable scene now that it was time to actually say goodbye, "that's that lot done. I...em...I'm catching the train down to Dover, going to take the Hovercraft over..."

"Wouldn't want you to mess up your plans, would we?" He hadn't intended to be so sarcastic, the bitterness showing through beyond his control. Quickly then, to cover up and to close the dam before it could all come spilling out, "So what goes where?"

"The crates go into storage at this address," a crisply folded piece of paper put into Doyle's hands, "and this," several large denomination notes, again crisply folded, "is to buy the lads a few drinks, have a bit of a farewell do."

Without the guest of honour. Doyle would give the money to someone else, let them handle it, he wasn't going to a fucking wake.

"The rest of the stuff..." Bodie looked around, shrugged. "Anything you want, help yourself. The telly and the hi-fi are bought," as if Doyle didn't know that, Bodie's opinion of HP well known, "and you like a lot of the records, of course. Anything you don't want, see if the lads could use, and just dump the rest."

"Got it," Doyle said tightly, making Bodie look at him, forcing Doyle to find another of his dwindling smiles. "Anything for the Cow?"

Of course, he thought, almost finding it funny. A letter.

"Just this," Bodie said, handing Doyle the white envelope. "All the other paperwork and bank stuff, all that's been taken care of."

Doyle did not say a word about how institutions warranted advance notice of losing Bodie when all that had been planned for him was a posthumous letter.

"So," Bodie said, looking around the room, "that's about it. I'd best be off."

Doyle couldn't agree, couldn't lie that much, not even for Bodie.

"Will you drop me a postcard, let me know you're all right?"

"Ray..."

"All right, all right." God, this was hard, it was too hard... "Listen, I know you left next-of-kin blank when you joined our mob. Do me a favour, and don't do that with the Legion?"

"Fair enough," Bodie said, beginning to realise just how much he must have meant to Ray Doyle, just how much love there must be there. "I'll put you down. Care of CI5, because we—you—get shifted around so much."

"Yeh, that'll be best."

"So that's it, then."

"Yeh."

"Look," Bodie began, clumsy, beginning again. "Don't get stuck on me, Ray. I mean—"

"It's all right, I know exactly what you mean."

"You should give Murphy a ring, he's a nice bloke..."

He should be furious that Bodie was passing him on like a borrowed book, but a treacherous gratitude was welling in him, that Bodie cared at least enough to try to set him up with a nice bloke, now that Bodie was leaving him behind.

Bodie picked his bag up, slung it over his shoulder. Stopped in the door for a minute. Nodded goodbye. Then he was gone.

The door slammed shut, and Doyle sat down as if his legs had been amputated. Around him lay the detritus of Bodie's belongings, the remains of the life Bodie hadn't wanted and he, Ray Doyle, was at the centre of it. At the centre of nothing at all.

Outside, the city was making all its usual noises, full of life and vibrancy, and along its streets, Bodie was walking away from him.

Alone, Doyle simply sat there for a long time, waiting until Bodie would be on the train. He started sorting through the unwanted bits and

pieces, his watch marking the time until Bodie would be at the coast. Moved on to the bedroom, stripping off sheets he'd lain on when Bodie and he had, or so he had thought at the time, made love. Cleaned out the drawer where they kept the lubricant, finding the photo of them that Doyle had asked some stranger to take when they'd gone down to Whipsnade that weekend, doing all that as he knew Bodie would be catching the Hovercraft.

He sat down again then, turning Cowley's letter over and over again in his hands. He didn't even have that much for himself.

Doyle sat there, alone, wishing he'd at least been brave enough to kiss Bodie goodbye.