

## Finders, Weepers

By Adrian Magson

The runner stands blinking into the sunlight like a small, pudgy rodent. He's wearing a neat paisley-print silk dressing gown and leather slippers, and looks like one of the Wise Men from a nativity play.

I don't need to check the photograph to see we've got the right man. Plumper than when the snap was taken, and wearing a tan he didn't have a year ago, but it's him: Gerald Martin Bream, once of South London – until he decided to go runabout with a bagful of his employer's money.

Problem is, he's got one hand behind his back and I can't see what he's holding. Even small, paunchy rodents have teeth.

I look at the large brown envelope in my hand. "Uh... Mrs. Tangmere? I've got a package."

Bream's gaze slips instinctively to the envelope, which holds a couple of old magazines, but he shakes his head.

"This is Mandeville Cottage, though, right?"

"Yes. But there's no Mrs. anybody here. I'm renting."

"Oh. Must be a computer glitch. Sorry."

I leave the paisley-print dressing gown and go back to the car where my partner, Reece is waiting. We'll come back later and pick him up.

Reece and I are people finders. We get called in when all other methods have been exhausted. Understandably, not all of the people who disappear want to be found – it's why they did a runner in the first place. Among their reasons for going are debt, guilt, anger, confusion, loss and fear. Fear is the biggie; it makes people go deeper than most. Fear of death, fear of retribution – sometimes fear of fear itself.

Bream, though, doesn't quite fit this category; he'd just got greedy without thinking it through; an accountant with dreams of freedom. After a lot of pointless dithering – mostly to do with professional reputation – the company had called in Reece and me.

By then, Bream had probably already spent a lot of the stolen money trying to hide his tracks. But he'd been dumb enough to hang on to his mobile phone. One call to the number, pretending to be a call centre offering a big cash prize, and he'd given away where he was hiding.

All we have to do now is go back and pick him up when he's dropped his guard, and we'll collect our fee. We don't always get asked to take the runners back, but Bream is what we call a 'take-away' – the client wants him on a plate.

Back down the lane, Reece is in the Range Rover, scowling over the Telegraph crossword. He's stuck on 26 Down.

"It's our boy," I confirm, sliding in alongside him. "Dinner or coffee?"

"Too many letters." He hurls the Telegraph into the back, a sign the crossword isn't going too well. "I need sustenance." Another sign.

We find a decent restaurant, eat dinner, then go back for Bream. We park down the lane again and walk up to the house and through the front door.

But someone has got there before us.

Bream's paisley-print gown is no longer neat, due to two bullet holes in the front. Unfortunately, Bream is still inside it.

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"Stone me," says Reece. We split and do a rapid tour of the place to make sure no one is waiting to pounce on us. It's soon obvious that nothing has been touched. Even if we've never been inside a place before, we can tell if a place is naturally tidy or if it's been cleaned up after a search. This one looks normal.

I feel uncomfortable and peer out of the window. The street lights are just coming on, and if anyone is waiting for us to come out again they'll have a clear shot.

"This is some weird shit," mutters Reece, staring around the room. "If they were after the money, why didn't they toss the place?"

"Maybe that wasn't the point." I peer closely at Bream's body. Just visible in the skin of his upper chest are two vivid impressions, like knuckle marks, only deeper.

He'd been punched before being shot. One of his slippers is across the other side of the room, confirmation of a struggle, as if he'd been forced back in off the doorstep.

We hoof it back to the car. Death doesn't happen often in our business – at least, not by our hand. We've tracked down people who died before we got to them, and we once found a man who had a heart attack the day after he returned home.

But nothing like this.

I ring Jennings. He's a sort of Mr. Fixit who makes his living in various ways, mostly security-related. Rumour says he used to be a high-level government spook. He approached us not long ago when one of his regular stringers was off sick, and we'd picked up several tracing jobs since then. Some were on the run after doing something illicit; others were unfortunate souls who went walkabout with no rational explanation. Either way, someone wanted them back and was willing to pay.

Jennings doesn't react well to the news.

"What the hell were you wasting time on Bream for?" he explodes, as if we've been laying waste to the home counties with a flame-thrower. "Melinda Blake is your current assignment."

Melinda Blake, late of Her Majesty's armed forces, is a private investigator whom nobody has seen for over a month, which is apparently out of character. Jennings sent us the brief a week ago, with a key to her flat so we could do an audit of her belongings. It wasn't going well, but along the way, we'd tripped over Bream's trail. Sometimes multi-tasking does that; one door closes, another opens.

"Change of plan," I explain. "We got a lead to Bream's whereabouts. It paid off. Well, almost. Blake's next on the list. What's the problem?"

"Leave it," he says after a lengthy pause. "I'll deal with the Bream thing. Get on Blake – and ring me when you find her." He clicks off before I can use the phrase I keep for people who upset me.

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The Corpos Fitness Centre is a modern, single-storey building near Battersea Park, catering to those who like their exercise in air-conditioned comfort. Forget pounding the streets in the wind and rain; that's for freaks, army types and London Marathon wannabees.

Melinda Blake, according to a membership card we'd found in her flat, is a member, so it seems a good place to start our search.

Finding where runners might have gone can be a laborious process. Nine times out of ten, there's a link, a clue, no matter how tenuous. Usually it's to a place from their past life – maybe their childhood – even somewhere they've fantasized about but never been. Reece and I work on the basis that tucked away in the fabric they leave behind, there's always something, often overlooked by friends and family.

We call this process the audit. It involves going through any rubbish we can find, from theatre tickets to the fluff in their pockets. We once found a runner from a dumped photo album. After drawing a blank everywhere else, we'd noticed snaps of a tiny village near St Tropez, southern France. It was a longshot, but that's where we found him one afternoon, drinking a cold Stella at a bistro in the local square, enjoying his new life.

So he'd thought.

Five-thirty in the afternoon is evidently a quiet time in the world of sweatbands and leotards, and from our vantage point in a café across the road, we count three people entering the gym. All are young-ish, good-looking and self-aware in the latest sportswear, which draws from Reece a sour comment about some people having no jobs to go to. He's still having trouble with the crossword.

“What's the story here?” he says with a sigh.

“Slim,” I tell him, like the information we'd been given by Jennings. “Ex-army, a private investigator. Her brother is worried about her and reckons she might have been threatened by somebody – possibly from a past job. A couple of her regular clients say she hasn't reported in, which isn't like her.”

We give the last fitness freak two minutes, then leave the café and push through a set of glass doors. The foyer shows photos of muscular men and women doing unnatural things with complicated equipment, and the décor is a mixture of Greek tiles, thick carpets and tinkling fountains. A vague smell of air-freshener and soap hang in the air, with that faint gamey element wherever bodies gather together in exercise.

Behind the desk is a friendly-looking young woman with an orange tan and big hair. She takes one look at Reece and thrusts out her chest. I don't even rate a glance.

“Mandy,” Reece says smoothly, eyeing the badge on her chest. “I wonder if you can help me?” His tone makes it perfectly clear that she can and, even if she can't, it might be fun anyway. Mandy swells with anticipation and I look away.

Much more of this and I'll get a bucket of cold water.

Two minutes later, Mandy is sashaying down the corridor on her high heels. If she'd had eyelashes painted on her rear, we'd have both been winked to death.

The moment she disappears, I slip behind the desk and run Melinda Blake's membership card through a swipe machine.

“You didn’t promise her anything, did you?” I say, while the machine clicks and whirs.

“I asked for details of the company’s lawyers,” he replies. “Said I’d slipped and fallen in the showers a couple of weeks ago, and need details of her people so my people can contact their people.” He smiles proudly at his inventiveness.

I look at him. We’d discussed tactics on the way here, such as which ruse to employ to gain access to their customer records. Somehow, his plan seems almost half-hearted, like Indiana Jones waving a silk handkerchief instead of a bullwhip.

“That’s it? You slipped? I thought you’d come up with something like...”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Something interesting... Daring.” The computer stops clicking and reveals an address – a new one.

In the background I hear a familiar clattering of heels in the corridor.

We’re up and out of there in seconds, before Reece can be called to task by the pneumatic Mandy.

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The new address turns out to be a small flat above a letting agency. Access is by a flight of metal stairs from a service yard at the rear. We hang back, watching the place, and I call Jennings as instructed.

“Okay, leave it for now,” he says, which surprises me. He usually likes to get these things done and dusted. “I’ve got something urgent for you.”

Ours is not to reason why, so we go to check on this other job. It keeps us busy for a couple of hours, by which time the traffic in the area has died down.

We park the car and Reece leads the way up the metal stairs. The door at the top is fitted with a simple Yale lock. At least, it had been.

Someone has kicked the door in.

Reece and I exchange a look. Shades of the late Mr. Bream. This doesn’t look good.

We step over splinters of wood into a short, carpeted hallway. The atmosphere has a dead, musty sadness about it, as if the soul has fled the scene. No memories, no presence, no trace of past warmth and not much future.

The bathroom is empty save for some washing on a line and a faint smell of soap and perfume. A pair of tights lays coiled in the bottom of the bath like a wet snakeskin, and one of the taps is dripping into a brown stain on the enamel with a *plunk-plunk* sound.

Across the hall is a small kitchen. It smells of fried food and spices and needs a clean.

“Cy.” Reece is standing just inside a bedroom along the hallway, looking down at the floor. I join him.

A woman is curled on the carpet, clutching her stomach. She’s face down, as if trying to bury herself in the worn pile. A pair of spectacles are a yard away and her shoes are lying nearby. One heel is broken off, the nails shining like a rat’s teeth.

I check her pulse. She’s gone.

Closer inspection reveals a soggy area of tissue just below her ear, and by the way the fingers of her right hand are twisted into her clothing, she'd been hit in the stomach first, doubling her over. The killer blow had come from above. No matter what the chop-sucky experts claim, it's a blow which requires considerable force.

"Still warm." Whoever did this isn't long gone. We might even have passed him in the street.

I survey the scene, trying to read what happened. I check out the living room, and find a briefcase sitting on top of a folded blanket on the settee. It's empty save for a crumpled sandwich wrapper, a three-day-old Standard and a Starbucks napkin. A travel bag on the floor holds some casual clothes, the sort you'd take if you were going on a trip and weren't fussy about creases. Apart from that, the room is depressingly clueless.

We check the rest of the flat. Nothing stands out; no paperwork, no receipts, none of the detritus of an established life. On top of the wardrobe in the bedroom, in a recess behind a moulded surround, is a jiffy bag containing a photograph in a plain black frame. It's the sort issued by official photographers, where necessity and cost triumph over style. A group of men and a woman in army camouflage are smiling self-consciously at the camera. The woman looks like the one on the floor, but as we haven't actually seen her face full-on, it's difficult to tell. She looks confident and tough and her head is cocked to one side as if she'd been caught off-guard. Not for the first time, I consider sadly.

"Provost," says Reece, pointing to a spot on Blake's uniform. "Army cop."

That figures. As a military policewoman, she'd have been drawn naturally to working as a private investigator.

In the kitchen, a pair of faded Marigolds are hanging over the edge of the sink. While Reece watches the street I do a thorough search of the place, starting with the back of the wardrobe, then a chest of drawers. They yield layers of dust and cobwebs but little else.

The bed and bedside cabinet yield nothing, so I move on to the kitchen and bathroom, checking cupboards, boxes and air vents. There aren't many places to look because there's so little furniture. Ten minutes later it's clear that whoever killed Blake has cleaned out anything which might have helped fill in her background. No correspondence, no letters, no invoices. No character.

"Nobody's life is this empty," I mutter. Even after a few days you pick up some rubbish. I check the bin in the bedroom. Not even a liner. Unnatural.

"A pro," says Reece. It would take a pro to be this efficient. Or someone living a very ascetic life. Then he says, "Hello."

There's something in his tone, and he's looking at the door. I turn and stare down the barrel of an automatic pistol, held unwaveringly at shoulder height. Behind it stands a youngish woman, slim, fit-looking, with short-cropped, dyed-blond hair and eyes that tell me I'm in trouble if I try even breath loudly.

"Who are you?" she says. Her voice is shaky, but steadier than mine would be in similar circumstances.

"I'm Alec," I reply. "He's Reece. By the way, we didn't do this." I'm not sure I'd believe me if I was her, but there's no harm in trying.

She moves sideways and says, "Sit. Both of you." We sit on the bed, while she looks down at the body. Her air of calm is surprising, and I wonder if I can get out of the way if she starts shooting.

“Unusual piece,” says Reece, nodding at the gun. “Baikal, isn’t it?”

It’s hardly relevant, but that’s Reece all over. If this woman is feeling hormonal, we’re dead meat.

“Why are you here?” she asks. She moves to the chest of drawers and rests her gun on it, still pointing at us. Never believe it when you see people in films standing around holding a gun like a plate of cucumber sandwiches; they’re heavy as hell and play havoc with the wrists and arm muscles.

I explain what we do, and how we just discovered Melinda Blake’s body on the floor. She blinks when I mention the information from Blake’s brother.

“Blake doesn’t have a brother,” she says.

Then Reece says, “That’s not Blake.”

He’s still holding the photo frame. He’s got his finger on the face in the photo. The one we thought was Blake.

It’s the woman with the gun.

“Her name was Cath Barbour,” Melinda Blake explains. “We were in the same unit. She was staying with me for a couple of days.”

“What kind of trouble are you in?” asks Reece.

“Who says I’m in trouble?”

“You must be – for this.” I indicate her dead friend. And the gun.

She sighs, then surprises us by dumping the gun on the chest of drawers and kneeling down by the body. If she thinks we’re a threat, she doesn’t care anymore.

“Can we move?” I ask. I don’t, though, in case she has a miniature Uzi tucked in her bra.

“Are you two ex-army?” she murmurs, ignoring my question and running her fingers across the dead woman’s face.

“No. Didn’t like the haircuts.” The closest we ever got was as Ministry of Defence investigators. It took us to Iraq for a while, working undercover, but it’s not something we like to talk about.

“Then this won’t be something you’re used to.” Her voice is soft, almost regretful, as if we’re not what she was hoping for.

“Death, you mean?” I give a shrug when she looks at me. “Actually, we’re more accustomed than you might think.” I explain about Bream, and how two deaths inside twelve hours is a little unusual.

She takes it all in, then nods and gets up, scooping up the gun on the way. “We need to find a photo printer,” she says. “Bring the frame.” Then she walks out.

We get in the car and she directs us to a shopping centre where there’s a medium-size chemist with a photo printer in one corner.

Melinda makes sure nobody is too close, then asks Reece to tear off the back of the photo. There’s a small plastic object taped to the inside. It’s about the size of a postage stamp, with one corner cut off,

“It’s a smart card,” Melinda explains, and points to a slot in the photo printer. “Put it in there.”

Reece does that too, and when the screen asks us what we want to do, Melinda leans across and taps the screen until it dissolves into a grid of thumbnail snaps of what is on the card.

“Don’t let anyone see these,” says Melinda, and moves out of the way while Reece and I take a look.

Good thing she warned us. We’re looking at a series of still shots. A young woman is lying on a single bed, with two men standing over her. It’s clear what the scenario is, but the scene is given a sharp twist in the final four frames. One of the men is hitting the woman. Only this isn’t some aggrieved punter taking his guilts out on a luckless street girl; he’s twice her size and he’s wielding a set of knuckle-dusters.

Knuckle-dusters? The indents on Bream’s chest.

The final shot shows the woman lying back, lower face destroyed, eyes open and staring. The expression reminds me of Melinda’s friend.

“Jesus,” whispers Reece, who doesn’t shock easily. “He killed her.”

I don’t say anything; I’m not sure I can trust my voice. Instead, I concentrate on the photos and point at two of the frames. “Can we print these?”

Melinda taps the screen. Seconds later, we’re studying the enlarged prints.

“They’re Army,” I say.

“Officers.” Reece sounds disgusted.

Just visible in the two shots is a uniform jacket, resplendent with ribbons and braid, hanging on the back of a chair. Beneath the chair is part of a hat brim.

“The hitter’s name is Collinson,” Melinda Blake informs us as we leave the shop. “He’s a major attached to an Intelligence unit. The other is a Major Pullman. They go everywhere together.”

“I received a complaint one day from a female private,” she continues as we walk back to the car. “She said Collinson and Pullman had picked her up in a bar and taken her to a hotel. They ordered her to strip off, threatening to end her career if she disobeyed or told anyone. Then they raped her.” She shrugs. “I filed a report, but the following day the complainant backed out. Said she’d made it up.”

“Why would she do that?” I ask.

“That’s what I wondered, so I did some digging. There’s a lot of history on these two, mostly anecdotal. They run a small group called the Hellfire Club. It’s an exclusive gathering for people of similar rank and inclinations, although I think they limit the kind of excesses you just saw to themselves.” She shudders, the first real sign of emotion. “They’re sick, and whoever they touch is left ruined.”

“So how come nobody’s stopped them?” says Reece.

The look she gives him should have withered him to a crisp. “They’re experts, that’s why, good at covering their tracks. It’s what they do.” The way she says it makes my neck tingle.

“What do you mean?”

“They’ve been trained in a branch of the Intelligence Corps dealing with Psychological Operations. They know how to influence people...to find their weaknesses and draw them in. Exploiting circumstances is what they do for a living. It’s how they find the other Hellfire members.” She looks drawn. “After I submitted the report on the rape complaint, things started going wrong. It was like I’d picked up a disease. Weird stuff began to happen...stupid, mostly, but in the Army it was enough to get me noticed. Then rumours started to circulate.”

“What rumours?”

“About me...and another female private. And an officer. Neither was true, but that didn't matter. When somebody reported missing funds and stolen weapons, even my own CO began to doubt me. I was frozen out and threatened with a transfer to some God-forsaken depot in Germany. The only alternative was to leave. I didn't need the hassle.”

“But you got hold of this memory card,” says Reece. “How come?”

“The private who'd alleged the rape sent it to me later. She'd found their camera bag in the hotel bathroom. Thinking they'd taken photos of her, she took the card. She didn't look at it until recently. When she did, she brought it to me. They must have found out.”

“What happened to this private?”

Melinda nods bleakly at the body on the floor. “You found her.”

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Reece and I exchange a look, probably thinking the same thoughts. The death of Melinda's friend is a warning of what's in store for her, too, if the officers catch up with her.

But it's not great news for us, either.

“We've been used.” Reece mutters quietly, getting there a moment before me. “They set us up like gun dogs.”

He's right. We find Melinda Blake and, hey-presto, they find her, too. I think back to see if I can recall any tail on us over the last couple of days. But when you're not expecting to be followed, why check the rear-view mirror?

I remember Jennings' response when we told him we'd called on Bream. He'd been frosty. Okay, he's not the most sociable type we've ever worked for, but even for him it was more than cool.

Because he'd been expecting us to find Blake first, not Bream.

“Jennings,” I say, and Reece nods in agreement. It was Jennings who'd supplied us with the story on Blake's 'brother'. If whoever was following us had been expecting us to lead them to Melinda Blake's hideout, simply because that was our current assignment, they would have gone in hard. It must have been a shock finding a short fat man in a fancy dressing gown instead of a former female army provost with a dye job.

It was too late to back out, so they shot him.

And now this. If the killers knew where Melinda was hiding, it could only have come from the information we'd given to Jennings.

And he'd expressly delayed us coming in here. Now we knew why.

“They'll be looking for us now.” concludes Reece.

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We settle Melinda in a small hotel with plenty of exits and head for Jennings' place in west London. It's in a Georgian terrace near the BBC, with state of the art security cameras everywhere, and we park the Range Rover right outside. Just so he gets the message.

I should feel like one of the Magnificent Seven walking across the pavement, but remembering what happened to most of them, I feel vulnerable instead.

Reece kicks on the heavy front door and it opens with a sigh.

A bad sign

We step inside and find one of Jennings' assistants, a chinless wonder with more muscle than brain, waiting for us. He advances like a runaway train, but Reece simply side-steps and clips him in the throat with the edge of his hand. He collapses and flops about on the carpet like a beached haddock.

We head on into the inner sanctum where Jennings has his office.

Or rather, had his office.

He's sitting in his chair behind his desk, and whatever he had in mind for his final action, improving the décor clearly wasn't uppermost.

"An officer and gentleman to the core," mutters Reece sourly, looking at the automatic in Jennings' dead fist. "He hasn't paid us yet."

I open a desk drawer and find a wad of notes in an envelope. I liberate the assets for our greater good, then go back to the outer office, where the assistant is just about sitting upright. He sees us coming and tries to crawl away across the carpet, but Reece steps on his ankle, pinning him to the floor.

"Where are they?" I say, bending down so he can see me. By the look in his eyes, it's clear he knows what happened and wants to get away before he becomes suspect number one. He also knows who I'm talking about: Majors Collinson and Pullman, pride of the Intelligence Corps.

"They...they've gone," he gasps, struggling to stay out of Reece's reach. "I don't know where. I saw them leaving... and found him like that."

"Makes your heart proud, doesn't it?" I say. The cream of the army, and they turn out to be sadists and women-killers. Thank God we didn't need them for something serious. Like fighting a war.

I reach for the assistant's tie and give it a nasty twist on the way past. I know – not gentlemanly.

But I'm no officer.

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Reece and I return to the hotel, during which time we agree a plan of action. It's clear we can't let things go, because Collinson and Pullman now know who we are.

We collect Melinda and take her to another, larger hotel, surrounded by busy streets, bus routes and underground stations.

I hand her a key-card and a holdall. "Go to room 211. Here's a change of clothes and some cash. Take off everything you own – jewelry included. Get dressed in the new stuff and leave the hotel through the rear car park."

She takes the key. "What then?"

"Just keep walking," says Reece. "Don't look back. Your trail needs to be clean."

"Why?"

"Because if they get to us, they'll surely get to you."

It's cold and brutal, but she needs to see the facts.

“You need to make a fresh start,” I explain. “Temporarily, anyway. Go to the beach, get a new job, invent a new name and background. It sounds drastic, but with those two still out there, it’s the only way. It won’t be forever.”

She still looks doubtful. “What are you going to do?”

“Go after them.” We don’t really have a choice. It’s no good going to the police, and while Collinson and Pullman are out there, they’ll always be a threat – to us as well as Melinda. They’ll never let up.

For them, it’s become part of the game.

The only thing they haven’t reckoned on is that we know how to find people, too. However good they are, or where they go.

And like I said, we don’t always take them back.

Melinda blinks and tries a smile. It’s shaky, but comes out right in the end.

“Okay. But when it’s finished, how do I find you?”

“You won’t have to. We’ll come find you.” I give her my best cheesy smile.

“It’s what we do, remember?”

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