

ONE

When his father had not returned by 4am, Sean Gunne knew that something was wrong. He had slept fitfully since his father had phoned him shortly after dashing from the house to attend a traffic accident. Now fully awake and apprehensive, Sean played that call over in his mind.

‘Sean! Sean!’ Denis Gunne’s voice had sounded tense, his urgency cutting through background noises which Sean couldn’t make out. ‘It’s Dad. I think I’ve been–’ There was what sounded like a gasp. Then the line went dead.

Sean had immediately dialled his father’s mobile. It rang a number of times before it was answered. ‘Yes?’ It was a man’s voice, but not his dad. There was a hint of an American accent.

‘I was just talking to my father,’ Sean said. ‘We got cut off. Can I speak to him?’

‘Sorry,’ the man said. ‘He’s attending to the injured. I’ll get him to call you as soon as he can.’ The line went dead for a second time.

That was over two hours ago, and there had been no word since. Sean sat up and reached for the phone and dialled his father’s mobile again. A recorded message told him the phone was out of range or switched off. He hung up and, with an increasing sense of foreboding, got out of bed and crossed to the window.

Orchard Road was quiet, bathed in the soft glow of the streetlights. Below his window, the driveway was empty. In the next-door garden, Sean caught a movement from the corner of his eye. A cat was slinking across the lawn. It stopped and

crouched by the hedge. Suddenly it sprang. Sean shivered and felt his body go cold.

No sound carried to his ears. But in his imagination he heard the stricken screech of the cat's prey – probably a fieldmouse. He sensed the creature's terror and felt its pain as if the cat's razor-sharp claws were tearing his own flesh. Sickened, he closed his eyes, overwhelmed by an ever-increasing feeling of apprehension.

There was no one to share his fears with and he felt acutely alone. It was a sensation he'd experienced often since his parents had split up. Now more than ever, he wished he was back at their old home. His grandfather slept just down the hall, but he was suffering from the onset of Alzheimer's and was easily confused if he was alarmed or upset. Sean knew he could not burden him with his worries.

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'Don't go, Dad,' he had pleaded earlier, made uneasy by the emergency call that had woken him. He had heard his father speaking on the phone in the bedroom next door and then the sounds of him getting dressed.

Emergency calls, even late at night, were a normal part of a GP's life. But this one, because of recent events, had alarmed Sean. So much so that he had got out of bed and gone to his father's room.

'There's been an accident,' his father had explained. 'Down at the roundabout. A child's been thrown through the wind-screen.'

'Why didn't they call an ambulance?' Sean asked.

'They did,' his father said, lacing up his shoes. 'But one of the drivers is local and he called me. The child is badly hurt and I can be there before the ambulance. It might make all the

difference.’ He straightened up and reached out to ruffle Sean’s unruly hair. ‘So, back to bed with you,’ he added. ‘No point in us both missing a night’s sleep.’

With that, he had dashed from the room and bounded down the stairs. Sean had followed him out to the landing. His father retrieved his emergency bag from under the stairs. At the front door, he turned to glance up at Sean. ‘Don’t go, Dad,’ Sean begged. ‘Let the ambulance deal with it.’

‘There’s a little girl hurt,’ his father said, a note of reprimand in his voice. ‘I have to go.’ Then he was gone. Sean heard the slam of the car door and the engine start up. He ran back to the window in his room in time to see the car accelerating down the street, its exhaust belching white vapour. He watched until it disappeared from sight, somewhat shamed by his selfish behaviour. He wanted his father to think the best of him, but tonight he had shown a side his father wouldn’t admire.

A cold breeze from the hall sent him scurrying back to bed where he snuggled down beneath the duvet. He dozed restlessly, his dreams filled with dark shadowy figures. Now, standing by the window for the second time that night, he felt those shadowy figures near and fear replaced his shame.

There was something wrong. His father was in danger. The lurking menace that had been encroaching on their lives for months had become real.

It had all started four months ago when an addict had come to the surgery demanding that Doctor Gunne prescribe drugs for him. He’d thrust a fistful of soiled euro notes at the doctor and had become abusive when his demand was refused. As he left, he claimed that it was common knowledge that Denis Gunne was crooked.

Since then many other young men and women had called on a similar quest. They were all alike, with pinched faces and

running noses and eyes filled with desperation that turned to naked hatred when they too were refused. One openly made threats, and that night the windscreen and side windows of Denis Gunne's car were smashed.

One morning, over a week ago, the police came. They were in the house for over an hour. When they left, his father had taken Sean aside. 'You have a right to know what is happening,' he said. 'The police are accusing me of selling prescriptions to addicts and supplying them with drugs. But that's something I would never do. You must know that, Sean.'

Of course he knew – had always known that his father was the most decent man alive. 'I know you wouldn't do anything wrong, Dad,' he said vehemently. 'And surely the police can't have any evidence against you?'

His father's face grew dark with worry. 'I'm afraid they have,' he said quietly. 'A number of addicts who've been arrested have claimed that I supplied them with drugs for money. Then, when my car was vandalised – or so I thought at the time – a prescription pad was stolen from the glove compartment. I kept it for emergencies and didn't realise at first that it was missing. I had a lot on my mind then, as you know ...'

He stopped for a moment, his face contorted with anxiety. 'Someone's been forging my signature on the prescriptions and selling them to addicts. The police have a number of them. They think they have a case against me.'

'But ... but why, Dad? Why would someone do this to you? Who would do it?'

'I don't know,' his father said. 'But whoever it is, and for whatever reason, they want to destroy me.'

Sean couldn't imagine who could hate his father that much. His dad had no enemies. But false rumours didn't just materialise out of thin air. And whoever had stolen the prescription pad

and forged his father's signature hadn't done it solely for money. They had to have had another motive. But what could it be?

Sean took deep breaths and tried to rein in his racing thoughts. Then, coming to a decision, he turned abruptly from the window and dressed hurriedly. On the landing he listened at the door of his grandfather's room. The old man was snoring and Sean knew he wouldn't wake for hours yet. Satisfied, he ran lightly down the stairs and slipped out of the house.

Above the roofs, the sky was suffused with the first pink tinges of dawn. But Sean had no eye for the morning's beauty. He hurried along the street and turned right at the end onto the main road. The roundabout was a quarter of a mile further on. When he reached the spot, it was deserted. Sean walked all around it, seeking evidence of an accident. But all he found were a few shards of dirty red glass, and they looked as if they had been on the road for some time.

He knew that the accident could have been cleared and that his father might have gone to the hospital with the victim. But there were no skidmarks, no remnants of shattered glass that would surely have flown in all directions after the impact, no sign of blood having been washed off the road. There had been no accident. It had been a ruse to lure his father from the house. Whoever was trying to destroy him had become desperate and more reckless. Whatever their motive, it seemed to have taken on a new urgency.

Alarmed, Sean retraced his footsteps. He had almost reached Orchard Road when a car approached from behind. Fearful, he turned to look as a police car pulled alongside him. The garda in the passenger seat had his window rolled down.

'What are you doing out at this hour?' he asked, an edge to his voice.

‘Was there an accident tonight?’ Sean asked. ‘At the round-about?’

The garda shook his head and glanced at his colleague. ‘Not as far as I know,’ he said. ‘What’s your name, son?’

‘Sean Gunne.’

‘Do you live around here?’

‘Just there,’ Sean said, pointing towards Orchard Road.

The man’s eyes narrowed and he glanced again at his colleague. ‘You Doctor Gunne’s son?’ he asked.

Sean nodded. ‘Ah,’ the garda said. ‘And where are you coming from?’

Sean recounted the night’s events. The garda took a book from his pocket and made some notes. Then he used his radio to inquire if there had been an accident. As he clicked off the radio mike, he looked puzzled.

‘No accident’s been reported,’ he said. ‘Your father must have used it as an excuse to go out. No doubt he’s got his reasons. Now, I’d be getting along home, if I were you. It’s not safe out alone at this hour of the morning.’

Sean wanted to shout at the garda that his father would not lie to him. But if there had been no accident, then *someone* had been lying. And where was his father now?

Sean turned away without a word and walked back home. He went into the kitchen and sat at the table. Agonisingly slowly, the clock ticked the seconds and minutes away. From the garden came the sound of birdsong, and as the sun rose, the room emerged from the shadows. From upstairs came the faint sound of a radio; it was the 7.30am alarm.

His father was not coming back. Something had happened to him. He had been lured from the house, almost certainly by whoever had spread the rumours about him. Sean had never felt so isolated. He missed being with his mother and Liam,

missed the closeness of the happy family they had once been. How could he tell Liam that his beloved father was missing – that ‘Doctor Dolittle’, as Liam called him – had gone out into the night and not returned?

Sean got up and picked up the phone. He dialled his home number, hoping that Liam would not answer. ‘Hello.’ It was his mother’s voice

Sean explained the night’s events and his mother laughed. He hated that laugh, just as he hated the cold, impersonal voice she had acquired lately. ‘Oh, I wouldn’t worry,’ she said. ‘He knows how to take care of himself. He’s just gone out. I’ve heard rumours of ... well never mind.’

‘But he wouldn’t lie to me,’ Sean said, aware as he spoke that he was beginning to have his doubts. But if his father *had* lied to him, he must have had a good reason. Had he gone to meet whoever it was had spread the rumours?

‘I have to get Liam ready and go to work.’ His mother’s voice cut across his thoughts. ‘I’ll talk to you later.’

‘But what if he doesn’t come back?’

‘He’ll be back,’ she said.

‘Bye, Mom,’ he said. ‘Say hi to Liam. But don’t mention anything to him about Dad.’

He hung up before she could reply. He switched on the electric kettle; his grandfather would be up soon and looking for his breakfast.

As Sean began to ready the table for breakfast, he searched his mind for any reason why someone would want to take his dad. Maybe it went back to when he had been a research scientist?

After qualifying as a doctor, Denis Gunne had moved into the field of genetic research, and had established an international reputation for his work. But he began to have serious

misgivings about the direction genetics was taking and gave it all up to retrain as a GP. Sean knew that genetics was an important and very lucrative field. A new discovery could mean billions to a company. His father had often spoken of industrial espionage and how research scientists were frequently bribed to divulge their findings to rival companies. Maybe he knew something from his former work that made him valuable to these people?

As he took the milk from the fridge his eye caught the photograph that sat on top. It had been taken on the day his father started his GP practice. In the picture he was clearly happy. Sean was smiling too, and Liam, seated in his wheelchair, had a grin on his face that threatened to engulf his ears. Beatrice Gunne stood a little apart from the group. There was a forced smile on her face, but her eyes were cold.

Sean turned away. There were sounds of movement from upstairs; his grandfather was getting up. Sean glanced at the clock. It was 8am. Standing in the kitchen, he closed his eyes. What was he going to do?

TWO

For two days, Sergei Bukanov, with the help of Denis Gunne, had been planning his escape. Now he was ready and about to tackle the most difficult part – getting out of the castle undetected and down to the shore of the island.

He picked up the plastic shopping bag in which he had concealed his spare tracksuit and trainers. Inside was a second plastic bag, its opening heat-sealed with a soldering iron so that it was waterproof. Another smaller sealed bag contained the precious computer disk.

He rolled up the outer bag, and then tied it tightly with nylon cord, leaving sufficient length to encircle his waist. Tucking it beneath his arm, he surveyed the room that had been his home for weeks. It was little more than a cell beneath the castle. There was a narrow bed, a wardrobe and locker; a desk littered with papers and books; a chair.

‘Mr Silvermann is not a patient man,’ Costello had said on Bukanov’s first day here, laughing in that sinister way Bukanov now knew so well. ‘He expects results within six months. If your work is not satisfactory or you break any of the rules, we have somewhere special where you can think about what you have done wrong. And I promise you, you won’t like it!’

Bukanov shivered at the memory. When he had refused to work he had found out what Costello’s ‘special place’ was: a dank, airless space in the very bowels of the castle, with barely enough room to move, and not a single shaft of light to illumine the pitch darkness. It was known as the ‘black hole’. He had been so overwhelmed by the experience that if it hadn’t been for Denis Gunne, who had persuaded him to co-operate, he might now be insane or even dead.

‘If we want to try to escape and stop whatever project Silvermann is working on here, then we must pretend to co-operate,’ Gunne had said, speaking in halting French because Bukanov did not speak English. ‘I know your family is dead, but mine is alive. I want to see my sons again.’

Since he arrived on the island over a week ago, Gunne had spoken continually of his family, the hurt of his marriage

break-up etched on his face. It had mirrored Bukanov's memories of his own family, killed in Chechnya by a Russian missile. He had been pulled from the rubble of their apartment building forty hours after the blast, unaware that his wife and children were dead. It had been dark beneath the rubble, and bitterly cold, with the stench of death all around. But it was the fear of slow suffocation that had tortured him and continued to haunt his nightmares.

Confined in the black hole, he had relived his entombment and knew that madness was close. But Gunne had saved him – it was Gunne who had first brought up the subject of escape. 'You could make it to the mainland and raise the alarm,' he said excitedly when Bukanov mentioned that he had once been a champion swimmer.

'It was a long time ago,' the forty-three-year-old Bukanov protested. 'I was young and fit then.'

'You're still fit,' Gunne said. 'You could make it. And wouldn't it be better to drown in the attempt than to remain here? They can never let either of us go. You know that.'

Put like that, it made sense. But the main problem, as Bukanov saw it, was not swimming the eight kilometres to the mainland, but getting out of the castle in the first place. They were held underground, in what were originally the castle dungeons, now greatly enlarged. The only exits were two staircases, both blocked off by electronically operated steel gates. One stairs gave access to the ground floor, the other to the top floor of the tower. A code-operated lift served both floors.

On Bukanov's first day here, Costello had taken great pleasure in displaying his security measures. The castle was alarmed and under constant video surveillance. All doors were controlled by electronic locks and opened only when the correct code was punched in. An underwater cable from the mainland

supplied electrical power and there was a back-up generator to maintain the security measures and radio communications in the event of a power cut.

Outside, surveillance cameras covered the only exit, and four Rottweillers prowled the security fence. Costello had offered to let Bukanov see them in action. Suppressing a shiver, Bukanov declined.

‘Even if you escape from the castle, there is no way of reaching the mainland,’ Costello had boasted. ‘The cruiser that is tied up at the jetty requires a coded card to start it. The only way out of here,’ he added, laughing, ‘is to swim for it.’

Now Bukanov was to attempt just that.

At the door of his cell he peered out. The single surveillance camera covering the main corridor was fixed above the archway that gave access to the mainframe computer room, which also housed two giant intake fans. It was Gunne who had pointed out that the camera would only pick up someone walking upright. If you crouched down, you couldn’t be seen.

The neon-lit corridor was deserted. At this time of night, the other scientists – Brandt, Dubrek and Stewart – were asleep. Only Gunne knew of the escape attempt. The others could not be trusted.

For most of the time, the scientists were allowed to move about freely within the confines of the underground area. But every day, often without warning, they would suddenly be ordered back to their cells. On these occasions Bukanov would hear the lift descending, and the door to the strongroom, situated beside the lift, would open with a hiss of compressed air.

No one knew what lay behind the steel door. Stewart said that one day he had glimpsed a man in a wheelchair emerge from the room, accompanied by another man. Both were dressed as if for a skiing trip. Stewart claimed that the man in the wheelchair

had been crying. But no one really believed him on that.

Crouching down as low as possible, Bukanov crept out into the corridor, through the archway and into the computer room. There, his interest lay not in the computer but in one of the huge intake fans. That was where he hoped to find a way to freedom.

‘This castle was once owned by a reclusive pop star,’ Denis Gunne had told him when they’d first spoken of escape. ‘One night he was attacked by a crazed fan who apparently rowed across to the island and managed to get into the castle through an underground passage at the lowest level. I heard that it was a tunnel used by smugglers in the nineteenth century. If the passage still exists, it could be the escape route we need.’

Bukanov had been sceptical of the story, suspecting that it was just part of local legend. But the next time he was alone in the computer room he examined the rock walls and the fan housings. He noticed a discoloration on the stone floor beneath one of the fans. The discoloration was caused by stone dust from when they had cut the rock to form a recess for the fan housing. He checked the floor beneath the second fan; it was clean. That could only mean one thing: they hadn’t had to cut the rock *because a hole already existed*.

Did this prove Denis Gunne’s story? Was this the entrance to the underground passage leading to the sea? Soon he would find out.

The grey steel cabinets that housed the mainframe computer were ranged at the rear of the room, opposite the entrance. A fuse box was attached to the wall nearby. Bukanov had checked it previously and discovered that each fan had its own separate circuit breaker, clearly marked. It was a simple matter now to open the box and flick off the switch that controlled the second fan.

The only other equipment in the room was a coffee machine and a mineral water dispenser. The coffee machine sat on a steel locker that contained supplies of coffee, sugar and long-life milk. Two days earlier, Bukanov had taken an unopened packet of coffee, emptied the contents down the toilet and hidden a screwdriver and pliers in the empty packet. Carefully folding the top of the resealable packet, he placed it at the very back of the cabinet where it wouldn't be discovered.

Now he retrieved the tools and began to work on the fan housing, using the screwdriver to remove the outer louvred grill. He could see the recess into which the housing was fitted. The edges were uneven and he could make out chisel marks on the stone. The opening had been cut by hand and it was obvious that the work had been carried out a long time ago.

Greatly encouraged, Bukanov pressed on. His next task was to unscrew the housing from its retaining clamps. The screwdriver was much too small for the job and at times he despaired of succeeding. But eventually the housing came free.

The fan and its housing were too heavy to lift, so he eased the housing out until it was balanced on the edge of the stone. Then he let gravity complete the task. As if in slow motion, the housing toppled onto the floor with a resounding crash.

Bukanov held his breath. Even above the roar of the other fan, the noise seemed loud enough to be heard all over the castle. Tensed, he waited for the guards to come pounding towards him. But no one came.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he stared into the recess. Immediately his heart sank. It wasn't much more than one metre deep. On the top edge he could see an opening for the air inlet pipe. But that offered no escape route.

Bukanov knew he was in serious trouble. If he didn't make it out, Costello would send him to the black hole, a fate worse

than death as far as he was concerned. Taking deep breaths to calm his thumping heart, Bukanov closed his eyes and concentrated. Why would someone, using a hammer and chisel, cut a recess in solid rock? It could possibly have been used for storing wine, but the space was very small. So, was it an attempt to reach an underground passage leading to the sea, and had the attempt failed? But a metre could hardly be considered a determined effort. And why had the aperture been formed so neatly if the attempt had failed?

That didn't make sense. Surely the logical thing to do would have been to make sure there was access to the passageway first and then shape the aperture? If a way out hadn't been found, there was little point in tidying up what had been done. But it *had* been tidied up. Did that mean that a way out had been found? So why was the tunnel blocked?

The truth dawned suddenly and Bukanov cursed himself for being a fool. The tunnel had to be blocked for the fan to operate properly. If it was left open, the fan would have sucked in stale air from the tunnel and not fresh air from the pipe leading to the surface.

He leaned in and tapped the back of the recess with his knuckles. It sounded hollow, which meant that what was blocking the tunnel certainly wasn't stone or brick. Encouraged by his discovery, Bukanov lifted himself, feet first, into the space. Gripping the housing brackets with his hands, he kicked at the rear wall. He felt it yield. On the third kick his foot penetrated the wall. It was plasterboard. He continued his assault until he had an opening large enough to crawl through.

He clambered back out and stared into the cavity. Beyond the now jagged plasterboard there was darkness. Bukanov shivered. He wished he had a torch. There was nothing for it now but to go forward into that darkness.

In other circumstances he knew that the fear of being trapped underground in the dark would have stopped him. But he had no choice: if it wasn't the tunnel then it would be the black hole, and Costello was ruthless enough to let him rot in there.

Taking long, deep breaths to calm his nerves, he picked up his plastic bundle and clambered head first into the recess. He wriggled his way through the opening and glanced back. He could still see light and it helped ease his feeling of panic.

He crawled on, aware that the tunnel was dipping and curving to his left. When he looked back, the light was now little more than a glow. Then it was gone and he was in utter darkness.

Terror gripped him. He was back in Chechnya again, his eyes and mouth filled with blinding, choking dust. He felt paralysed, unable to move. Every fibre in his body urged him to scream for help. It was illogical, for he would not be heard. But this panic had little to do with logic.

Slowly the paralysis eased and he crawled on unsteadily, his knees trembling. The tunnel held its shape, obviously man-made. Which meant that it had been cut for a purpose, almost certainly as an exit to the outside world.

It was all the encouragement Bukanov needed. He redoubled his efforts and soon broke into a larger space. Feeling about with his hands, Bukanov found that the walls and floors were uneven, jagged in places. This was a naturally-formed opening, not manmade.

As he progressed, the tunnel, which sloped downwards, got larger still. Soon he was able to get to his feet and walk, hunched over. Shortly afterwards he could straighten up and he sensed that he was in some sort of a cave. He felt his way along the walls and found an exit into another, larger tunnel. He moved cautiously on, still going downwards, becoming aware of a faint glow up ahead. Relieved and overjoyed, he

broke into a trot. The light grew stronger and now for the first time he could hear the roar of the sea. He reached the mouth of the tunnel and breathed in the ozone-tinged air. The night seemed bright after the utter darkness and he wanted to breathe in the light too. He moved around the pile of rocks that would have concealed the exit from the eye of a casual observer, and saw the sea spread out beneath him like a flat sheet of lead.

In the distance he saw the lights of Oldport. They seemed a long way away, and now that he had made it this far, his thoughts turned to what lay ahead of him. It was at least eight kilometres to the mainland – a daunting swim. In his youth it would have been a formality, but he was no longer young or fit, despite what Denis Gunne thought. But he had come this far and there was no going back.

He stripped off his tracksuit and trainers. Bundling them up, he hid them behind a rock. Dressed now only in shorts, he tied the plastic bag about his waist and scrambled down to the water's edge. About twenty metres above him, the castle loomed, its dark bulk outlined against the backdrop of the high-powered security lights. He turned back to the sea and waded into the water. It was bitterly cold. He should have taken precautions – rubbed fat or grease on his body as a barrier – but it was too late for regrets.

The water lapped at his knees. It was a perfect night for swimming, there was hardly a puff of wind and the sea was so calm. But the waters out there could still be treacherous.

He took a deep breath and thrust forward. He plunged his head under the water and tasted the salt on his tongue. Then, shaking the excess water from his hair, he settled into a smooth breaststroke, aiming for the beckoning lights ahead.

He did not look back.