

CHAPTER FOUR

Things were not too bad, thought Sean Maguire as he admired the item resting neatly on his left wrist. He had never owned a wristwatch before, not that he had owned many possessions in his life. It had not been easy growing up in the tenements of Dublin's North Inner City, especially for a Monto Babe, the name given to the illegitimate children of prostitutes who worked in the largest red-light district in the British Empire.

Growing up, Sean always felt different. Not that many would notice in a community where poverty was widespread. In some strange way, he believed he was not truly part of his birthplace. However, being different and growing up in Dublin's slums did not mean he was better off.

His adoptive mother was a kind lady who treated him just as she did her eight surviving children. Although Sean always felt like an outsider among his adopted siblings, one could never tell from Peggy Maguire, who treated Sean as if he were her own flesh and blood. The same could not be said of Peggy's late husband, Francis, who introduced cruelty into Sean's life from an early age, never missing a chance to remind him: 'He was just a little bastard, cast out from the loins of a Monto Whore,' even before Sean understood what the phrase meant.

Sean's final memory of his adopted father was vividly etched in his mind.

It was fifteen years ago when the aul fucker returned to the tenement they shared with six other families. As was his custom, the master of the house came back after spending the night drinking the few measly shillings that aul Francie Maguire had earned on the docks earlier that day. The event that left an indelible mark on Sean's consciousness, shaping his future life, happened by chance. Late one night, he was awakened by an unbearable pressure on his adolescent bladder. Lying awake while his siblings slept, he weighed his increasing discomfort against the need to brave the cold and go outside to urinate. Eventually, the pain became so intense that he had to run the gauntlet. Miraculously, he managed to get out of bed without waking the others.

Feeling his way through the darkened room, he crept onto the dimly lit landing, faint shafts of moonlight spilling through the skylight above. A noise from the floor below halted his progress. He watched as the staggering, stuttering heap of drunkenness that was his stepfather struggled to navigate the rickety staircase. Hidden within the recess of the landing, Sean observed the figure with a mixture of curiosity and loathing.

The figure slowly ascended the stairs, brushing past the bannister and the wall with each step. Sean wondered how this pitiful drunkard had managed to instil a sense of terror throughout his young life. Transfixed by the figure as it struggled up the second flight, he felt the embryo of an idea begin to form in his mind, drifting back and forth within his stream of consciousness.

Sean never told anyone about what happened that night, burying the memory deep in his mind. Occasionally, he would recall every detail. Just as Francie Maguire reached the last step, drunk as he was, some inner sense or instinct for self-preservation sensed an imminent threat. Much like an animal reacts when it realises it has suddenly become prey to a more potent force and is about to take its last breath.

The last thing that old Francie Maguire remembered was the whites of his attacker's eyes closing around him, followed by a sensation of floating backward, then darkness.

‘All the aul wans in the locality felt sorry for Peggy Maguire.’

‘Such a lovely woman and to be a widow at her age, trying to raise nine snappers and not a penny to show for it.’

‘Still, it could have been worse, at least the first three were in their late teens and could earn a few shillings, and that Monto Bastard she had taken in all those years ago was old enough to fuck off to the colonies. Such a tragedy to befall a poor decent man, taken to God by a dodgy staircase and the demon drink. Sure, everyone in Dublin knew the tenements were death traps.’

Nobody in the neighbourhood found it unusual when Francie Maguire was discovered at the bottom of the stairs the next morning. Wasn't it normal for men and women to fall to their deaths in the shabby tenements?

For their part, the local Constabulary in Store Street couldn't care less about another useless bastard meeting an early end. The police didn't bother to investigate such matters in early twentieth-century Dublin—just another lost customer to the local pubs. Suspicion wasn't even raised when young Sean left to join the merchant navy the following week.

‘About time he fucked off and stopped living off a family that hadn't two farthings to rub together,’ was the consensus in the locality.

As he left Dublin for the very first time at the ripe old age of thirteen, Sean's childlike mind kept telling him that he was on the cusp of an epic adventure. After sneaking onto a mailboat from Kingstown to Holyhead, he made his way down to the South of England, taking a job on a merchant ship as a mess boy. Nobody asked him his age or where he was from, which was convenient, as he would have failed to answer correctly on both counts. Life on the boats was tough. You worked from 7:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m. The last two hours were spent cleaning the kitchen in preparation for the next day. Not that Sean spent much time cooking. His duties as a mess boy were confined to preparing tables, cleaning, and washing up.

Two years passed, during which Sean moved from the kitchen to the engine room. It was there that he learned about engines and developed a remarkable talent for fixing things. He then spent the next thirteen years in the engine room, keeping the old, broken-down engine running. He would have liked to say that he saw what the world had to offer during those years, but one cannot truly experience the majesty and mystery of the world from the pit of an engine room. Still, it was not a total loss because, at that time, he learned to take care of himself, acquired a trade, and most importantly, developed a survival instinct. By the time he disembarked from a passenger boat at Dublin's North Wall on December 5th, 1914, the boy who had left fifteen years earlier had become a man—one whose unique skills could be valuable in a city where most young men had either gone off to war or were idle layabouts who never escaped Mammy's apron.

Sean Maguire had no desire to end his life in the Wild Atlantic Ocean courtesy of a German torpedo. For this reason, he jumped ship, leaving the British merchant navy forever. After all, this wasn't his war, and he cared little about defending small nations. The problem was that the authorities had begun conscripting all serving merchant seamen into His Majesty's Royal Navy at the outbreak of the war, and technically, Sean didn't have permission to leave. Still, having joined

without papers and working under an assumed name for all those years, he saw his chance, seized it, and, as the saying goes, the rest is history. However, he did not feel entirely safe, as during his years of service, he had unintentionally revealed details of his background. Sadly, this oversight left a trail leading directly back to the north side of the city, where Sean Maguire could be easily tracked if the authorities so desired.

Arriving back in Dublin after fifteen years, it was as if he had never left. The streets retained their dark, dreary appearance. Everything seemed grey and gloomy. The half-clad chisellers still lurked in the streets and alleyways, looking to make or steal a farthing, avoid school, or both. Turning onto Mabbot Lane, Sean saw Peggy standing at the doorway of her home, which she shared with five other families. She didn't notice him at first, giving Sean the chance to study her. The intervening years had taken their toll on Peggy Maguire, he thought. She had grown smaller, her tiny frame bent over as she swept the outside entrance of her shared home.

The years had certainly changed Sean, though you might not think so by Peggy's reaction when she caught a glimpse of the man now approaching. Her initial curiosity vanished in an instant when she recognised him. Placing the brush against the doorframe, she opened her arms, her tiny frame clasping him as tightly as her strength allowed. For his part, Sean wrapped his large frame around Peggy, his broad shoulders holding her with a tenderness that belied his physique. Although she had aged, the warmth in her eyes retained the gentle spirit that had taken him in all those years ago. He was not of her blood; nonetheless, she loved him as her own, which, to Sean, was the only love he had ever known. She never asked why he had returned; she didn't have to. Anyone returning home during a war was running from something. Peggy knew he had been in the Navy, as from time to time she would receive a note containing a few lines of limited English, just to let her know he was still alive.

Finding work in Dublin during these times was difficult. There was one guaranteed source of employment if you wanted to join the defence of small nations, but for Sean, that was not an option. Nobody would hire a returning misfit, regardless of his talent. However, he managed to find some casual work after a few weeks at Jewish Jimmy's scrapyard, where there was always an opening for a skilled young man willing to take on any job. Sean's years working with marine engines had taught him how to fix, repair, and maintain even the most rundown systems — a skill that was especially rare in Dublin at the time.

It wasn't long into his apprenticeship with Jewish Jimmy that he was asked if he wouldn't mind staying back for a few extra hours of work. Jimmy Eastman was known throughout the city as a fixer, involved in a wide range of activities, most of which bordered on the illegal. One didn't need to be a genius to know that the extra work had to be done away from the prying eyes of the local Peelers, especially the boys in the castle.

It was at this time that Sean first encountered Tom Clarke and Sean MacDiarmada, although at the time he was unaware of their identities since he had not been formally introduced. He knew enough about life to sense that it was better not to ask too many questions. Jimmy Eastman was a known Fenian sympathiser and was probably still a member of the Brotherhood. He correctly guessed that, over the years, the cause of Jewish Jimmy had taken precedence over the cause of Ireland. This did not mean that Jimmy Eastman stopped helping the Brotherhood. However, their relationship had become one of mutual convenience rather than a reflection of Jimmy's genuine desire to free Ireland.

Sean distinctly remembered the first time he saw Clarke and MacDiarmada. It was about four weeks into his apprenticeship with Jimmy Eastman. It was late in the evening, just before they closed for the night. The two men walked into the yard, heading straight to Jimmy, who was standing outside a corrugated shed that served as a makeshift office. Both Clarke and MacDiarmada spoke with Jimmy in the yard for a few minutes. At the end of the conversation, Sean noticed that Clarke gave Jimmy a small package, and then Clarke and MacDiarmada left immediately afterwards.

Jimmy brought the package into the shed where Sean was working, handed him the wrapped package, and spoke.

‘Can you do anything with this?’

Unravelling the package, wrapped in a dirty oilcloth, Sean carefully examined the contents, which contained a single Mauser pistol. Based on its design and condition, it most likely came from the Franco-Prussian War. Despite the age and condition of the weapon, Sean knew enough about mechanisms to determine that, with the right tools and spare parts, he could repair almost anything.

‘Leave it with me for a day or two, and I’ll see what I can do,’ he said. Although Sean was confident that he could service the pistol without much trouble, he didn’t need to tell Jewish Jimmy that the task was more straightforward than it looked. Otherwise, Jimmy might decide to hire someone else, removing the need for Sean’s services.

Repairing the Mauser was as simple as Sean believed, but he waited two days before returning the item to Jimmy.

‘Do you think you can do the same with rifles?’ asked Jimmy upon inspecting Sean’s handiwork.

‘Probably, but I will likely need spare parts, and it depends on how many you want repaired. Additionally, it would be helpful to know the age of the rifles and their storage history.’

‘No need to worry yourself on that score, young man,’ was Jimmy’s brief but sinister response, indicating that further enquiry was both unnecessary and unwelcome. Sean knew enough about Jimmy Eastman’s reputation not to pursue the matter any further.

A period of over eight months followed, during which Sean spent most of his days working on guns. After the first encounter with the Mauser, he never saw who brought the weapons in but was instructed by Jimmy to go to a specific spot in the yard, remove the small stash, and work on them in a tiny, corrugated shed at the back of the yard. Some of the weapons, especially the pistols, required a lot of work, but most of the rifles were relatively straightforward, needing few spare parts, which meant fewer of the required weapons would need to be cannibalised.

‘You have to hand it to those Germans; when they make something, they make it to last.’

Neither Sean nor Jimmy ever spoke about the extracurricular activity again after that first night. The routine of collecting the consignment, working on it, and returning the finished product to its original place continued steadily over the next few months. Sean knew that the guns he was working on were part of a consignment of weapons smuggled into Howth by the Irish Volunteers in July 1914. All of Dublin knew that the Germans had supplied the Irish Volunteers back then with weapons far inferior to the guns provided to the Ulster Volunteers. Faced with this dilemma,

the Volunteers needed to salvage whatever part of the consignment could be turned into a functioning arsenal. But for what purpose? Thought Sean. Better not to think too deeply about such matters, he decided, dismissing any further questions, knowing that his interests lay in not giving it too much thought and not asking too many questions.

There was something else troubling Sean. Why was Jewish Jimmy taking such a risk by permitting this activity in his yard? Jimmy Eastman was a cautious person who avoided unnecessary risks, so it didn't make sense to Sean why Jimmy was involved with the Brotherhood. Indeed, Jimmy probably had longstanding ties to the I.R.B. and was an old Fenian. However, facilitating this kind of activity during wartime was treasonous and could lead to death or prison. Did the Brotherhood have leverage over Jimmy that made him risk everything to get these guns repaired? Or was he so confident he would never be caught? Possibly both, thought Sean.

If he had concerns that his late-night activities might be discovered, they were eventually relieved by another chance event, which was to alter his secretive return to Dublin—or so he thought at the time. As with many other parts of Sean's life, it happened almost by accident. Since his return, Sean had deliberately avoided visiting any of the pubs around the city, especially those in Dublin's north inner city, believing that such habits were the quickest way to get caught.

Dublin's pubs were known as the best sources of information for the local police. Any new customer, regardless of their background, would eventually catch the attention of the authorities. There were far too many drunkards looking for their next free drink, who would not hesitate to reveal the location of a returning visitor to Dublin without a credible explanation.

Despite this, and against his better judgment, he agreed to meet a childhood friend, Amy Dalton, who by this point had entered the only business accessible to a woman living on the fringes of Dublin's respectable poor.

Not that this was always the case.

As a young girl, she was no different from other children in a community where poverty was common. Her life improved when she met a young serviceman from Yorkshire, who was stationed in the local army barracks. Like many other young women, the sight of a bright uniform and the chance to escape poverty was irresistible. She married her soldier a year later and left Dublin with her husband, who was sent overseas, as was customary when a soldier married a local girl. Her new life abroad was short, however, as she returned to Dublin four years later, a widow with two dependent children and no money.

Locals never took kindly to young girls marrying above their station, especially to a soldier from an occupying army. As a result, Amy chose the only trade that could provide her with an income, leaving her two young children in the care of a maternal aunt who lived off Great Brunswick Street on the other side of the River Liffey. Upon hearing of Sean Maguire's return after many years, she sent word to Peggy, asking him to meet her at O'Flaherty's on Purdon Street.

Phil O'Flaherty's pub, located at the corner of Purdon Street and Mabbot Street, was a mirror image of the buildings in the surrounding area of Monto. Poets, playwrights, prostitutes, and patriots frequented the pub, each enjoying the same level of anonymity. The only exceptions were soldiers and peelers, whom Phil distrusted equally. Phil O'Flaherty was a known Fenian

sympathiser, and while it was acceptable for a Tommy or sailor to visit Monto seeking pleasure, they dared not step inside his establishment.

As a result, the pub served as a refuge for women working in Monto's notorious Red Light district, provided they did not entertain clients on the premises. It was a place where women could meet friends, including members of the opposite sex, strictly outside working hours.

Arriving first at the pub, Sean took a seat in the small snug just inside the front door. After a few minutes, Amy joined him, entering the snug from the same entrance. Although fifteen years had passed since he last saw her, he still thought of her as the young girl who had befriended him at school all those years ago. She had aged over the years, but to him, she was still the same, with her deep brown eyes and smiling face.

They discussed how their lives had changed over the years, reminiscing about their early childhood in the neighbourhood; neither mentioning their current occupations or reasons for returning to Dublin. Amy talked about her marriage to a British serviceman, her two children, and where they were currently living.

Having finished their first drink, Sean left the snug to go to the bar. He failed to notice that another male had entered the snug, and it was only when he heard raised voices that he decided not to wait for his drinks but returned immediately to the snug. As he entered, he saw Amy, clearly upset. This time, she had company. Hovering over the table menacingly stood an imposing male figure. The man, in his mid-forties, was slightly taller than Sean, broad-shouldered, and powerfully built, as if he had spent most of his adult life labouring on the nearby docks.

'Come on, you have work to do. Rent isn't paid sitting on your backside in this place,' snapped the male figure, clearly angry at her reluctance to comply.

'I am not leaving yet,' she replied, 'just give me an hour; that's all I want.'

'I'll give you a lot more if you don't come right now, you daft cow.'

Sean had spent enough time looking after himself over the years to understand what was likely to happen next. He had developed a skill for protecting himself in such situations. Although the other male was larger and possibly stronger, Sean had the advantage of speed and agility. Furthermore, he was better suited to manoeuvre in a confined space. Instinctively, he stepped back as the other male swung his right fist, trying to end the fight before it even began.

Moving swiftly inside the assailant's left arm, he used his momentum to press the man's face against the oak frame. The now-victim, disoriented by the blow to the head, wobbled slightly. Sean seized his opportunity, pulling the still-dazed male's jacket over his torso, removing his arms as a threat and rendering him helpless. He finished the contest by driving his full weight onto the victim's exposed right arm, smashing the elbow joint.

Not content with disabling his victim, his rage uncontrollable, Sean applied the full weight of his body, driving his right foot against the outside of his victim's right knee. The sound of bone and cartilage tearing from their socket had the desired effect; the cowering heap now occupied the space between the table and the door.

'Get out of here, Sean,' cried Amy. 'Run. This is not the place to stay and wait for the others to arrive.'

‘But what about you?’

‘It’s too late for that now. Just go. I’ll sort something out.’

Sean instinctively slipped into survival mode. Calmly, he stepped out onto the evening street. The streetlights only deepened his confusion. His first thoughts were whether he’d been right to run away. He could escape, but what about Amy? The man, clearly an enforcer, had some sort of hold over Amy. Otherwise, why would he insist she leave the pub with him unless he believed she would agree? He didn’t look like the kind of person who was not used to getting his way.

‘Still, Amy is a big girl who works the streets; she knows how to handle herself,’ thought Sean — a vain attempt at justifying his cowardice in running away. The last thing he needed was to ‘come across the others,’ as Amy described. Worse still, what if the local Peelers started poking their noses around? He thought as he continued making his way among the revellers who stalked Dublin’s red-light district at night. Keep calm. Saunter. Resist the temptation to run. Don’t draw unnecessary attention; his thoughts began to race as his mind started to work. He was sure that nobody was paying any attention to him as he made his way along Mabbot Street towards Summerhill.

Suddenly, he stopped as he began to realise that his primal instincts were now leading him home. Dublin was a village, and gossip would spread quickly about his identity. The fact that he lived with Peggy Maguire would be known within minutes. The last thing he wanted to do was land a whole heap of trouble on her doorstep. Worse still, Amy had been with him, and once her employers began to investigate, it wouldn’t take long before they obtained the necessary information by whatever means necessary.

The idea filled him with dread, but his survival instinct outweighed all other considerations. Sean was sure that the best plan was to lay low for a while. But where could he go? Instinctively, he turned left, heading toward the bright lights and crowds he knew would be on Sackville Street.

Stretching out before him was the large concrete structure of Nelson’s Pillar. As he approached the monument, the solution to his immediate problem became clear. Crossing the street, Sean reached the tram stop just as the number fifteen pulled up, ready to begin its journey toward Phoenix Park. He boarded the tram alongside other passengers, sure he hadn’t been followed. As the tram moved along the River Liffey, he gradually began to relax, still mindful of the other passengers.

Twenty minutes later, Sean disembarked at the terminus a few hundred feet inside the main gate of the park. From there, it was only a short walk to his workplace, Jewish Jimmy’s scrapyard and sanctuary. He easily climbed over the wall into the yard. Access to the scrapyard, even when locked, was relatively simple since no one in their right mind would consider robbing the place. What’s more, even if they saw someone climbing over the fence, they wouldn’t notify the Peelers, as Jimmy wouldn’t take kindly to anyone inviting the police to snoop around his yard unaccompanied.

It took Sean a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Walking across the yard, he headed to the shed where he had been working on two Mauser Gewehr 98 rifles earlier that day. Entering the unlocked door, Sean noticed that everything was where he had left it earlier, settling

into the corner of the shed, he covered himself with an old blanket. Lying there motionless for what seemed like an age, he eventually fell asleep.

Getting up early the next morning, Sean was at his bench repairing a Mauser pistol when Jimmy arrived. Noticing the unfamiliar presence of his employee, Jimmy Eastman chose not to comment on the unusual situation. He had been in the criminal world long enough to wait for the right moment to ask questions. It was better to find out what had happened discreetly and at his own pace, Jimmy thought, watching his young apprentice diligently at work. Not much in Dublin escaped Jimmy Eastman's beady eyes.

Edith Barrett sat motionless in her Queen Anne chair beside the writing desk. From her vantage point, she gazed out the front-facing window onto the street below. Like a perennial monarch surveying her fiefdom, she studied the tiny creatures going about their insignificant lives. At fifty-seven, Edy had built a considerable fortune as the sole owner of the two best brothels in Dublin's notorious red-light district, affectionately known locally as Monto.

Although things had never been straightforward, her late father had provided young Edy with the head start she needed.

Michael Barrett, known as Micko, owned the most popular alehouse in the area. Edy, being the only child, inherited everything when her father died at the age of forty-nine, making her the sole beneficiary of the pub and the rental income from two Georgian houses on Lower Mecklenburgh Street. These elegant mansions had been the foremost residences in eighteenth-century Dublin. However, the Act of Union of 1801 effectively removed both the landed gentry and capital from this once-great city. In the decades that followed, these once-grand houses now accommodated the hordes of families that made up Dublin's poor.

The gradual decline caused by this event in the heart of the city meant that by the early twentieth century, Dublin had gained an unenviable reputation for having some of the worst slums in Europe, if not the worst. Housing conditions in Dublin's north inner city were a constant concern for Edy. But not in the way most people would expect.

For Edy Barrett was no philanthropist.

Within a year of her father's death, she had cleared every tenant from numbers seven and eleven Mecklenburgh Street, leaving both properties vacant for her business venture. She graciously took advantage of the ready supply of innocent young women flooding the city, hoping to escape poverty. This, combined with the demands of the substantial military presence billeted in Dublin, enabled her to leverage the principles of demand and supply to their fullest extent. Refining Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Edy put her grand plan into motion, creating the most fashionable brothels in all of Dublin.

She wasn't lacking a sense of humour, as number seven had been the former residence of the renowned architect James Gandon, who designed two of Dublin's most notable buildings. In his honour, she renamed number seven *The Custom House* and number eleven *The Four Courts*. Not that any wayward Tommie or sailor who had recently arrived in Dublin's port would ever have the opportunity to savour Edy's delights. On the contrary, both *The Custom House* and *The*

Four Courts were reserved strictly for officers and wealthy patrons, most of whom belonged to the upper echelons of Dublin society.

Indeed, it was reputed that a young prince, later to become King Edward VII, lost his virginity in one of Edy's establishments while serving as a young cadet at the Curragh Military Camp.

Her greatest asset as a businesswoman was her ability to recognise opportunity even in the bleakest situations. This skill had served her well from the start when she turned both properties into the most profitable outlets in the city. Not that establishments like Brown Thomas or Cleary's Department Stores would appreciate the comparison, but both brothels generated a healthy profit, and no matter how the city's economy performed, there was always a demand for Edy's services.

She operated on the principle that every situation, no matter how dire, always presented some opportunity. Even in her choice of husband, this penchant for seeking opportunities was evident. Marrying John Thompson, the Chief Clerk in the Ballast Office, had been carefully considered. Although twenty years her senior, John held undeniable attraction as the Chief Clerk and, as such, could alert Edy to the impending arrival of any merchant or naval ship into Dublin Port. This information would be immediately followed up by Edy, whose quality merchandise would follow the crew even as they disembarked.

This cosy arrangement worked well for the first few years, although Edy chose to break with custom and tradition by not adopting her husband's surname upon marriage. For the most part, the marriage was relatively harmonious in the early days until John became troubled by a conscience. This gradually weighed on him over the following years, leading to his excessive fondness for fine whiskies, which he consumed in large quantities.

He had outlived his usefulness after giving her their only child. Unceremoniously, he was sent to the outskirts of Glasnevin, where he would eventually drink himself to death, which, unfortunately for Edy, was taking a lot longer than expected.

Their only child, Teresa, was sent to boarding school at an early age. For reasons known only to herself, Edy deliberately kept her daughter at arm's length from both the business and her personal life. Like her mother before her, Teresa was also married off to a suitor who brought a degree of respectability to the family name. Living in a grand family home in the northern suburb of Glasnevin with her husband and three children, Teresa always remained a world apart from the business and was equally estranged from her mother.

Both brothels operated on a straightforward business model. Edy had a steady stream of clients from Dublin's rising upper class who were regular visitors to her establishments. These were her premium clients, with discretion maintained in accordance with their level of prominence. New clients were recruited from ships arriving at Dublin Port by showcasing the courtesans in carriages owned by the Princess, with the young ladies elegantly dressed in their finest. All this ensured that only the wealthiest clients could enjoy her most luxurious hospitality.

As their allure waned over time, suitable replacements were found, consigning the older models to the shilling houses and eventually to the kip houses, should they be lucky enough to survive that long. If the naive cows became pregnant, they were quickly expelled from the brothel to seek whatever refuge they could among the residents of Monto. Most women who had given

birth simply went out for a walk one morning and never returned, leaving the upbringing of their illegitimate children to the kindness of the family that had taken them in.

An unusual aspect of the trade was that all the brothels in Monto were owned and run by Madams. Consequently, a certain number of men were needed to help maintain order among both the girls and the clients. Their primary role, however, was to protect the business interests of the Madams, especially from the ambitions and greed of other brothel owners. This group of men acted as lookouts, bouncers, and enforcers; their primary duty was to maintain order and keep everyone in line. In some cases, they also provided other services for the Madams, although most had long since lost interest in such activities for themselves. However, it was sometimes necessary to give the impression that such a relationship existed, if only to maintain control over the girls.

Generally, life expectancy for men was around ten years, after which they lost their strength, good looks, or both. It was of no use to keep someone in employment longer than necessary, as such kindness was neither good for business nor reputation, which was most certainly true in the case of Edith Barrett, the Princess of Monto.

It was for this very reason that Edy felt slightly troubled as she looked out the window that evening. It had been two days since an unknown assailant had severely beaten her head man. In a small place like Dublin, the identity of such a person would usually become known within a day to those in the know. Yet the assailant had completely vanished into thin air. Most disturbing of all was the way this assailant had dispatched her man. The speed and ruthlessness both frightened and intrigued her. What she did know was that this unknown male had been talking to one of her girls, Amy Dalton, in O'Flaherty's pub. The facts were a little sketchy, and it wasn't entirely clear whether this male was a punter trying his luck or if Amy knew this young man of mystery from another life.

Edy wisely chose not to confront the issue immediately, preferring to let the situation unfold naturally. She knew it would have been relatively easy to identify the man who interested her, but openly asking about his identity would reveal a vulnerability that Edy was unwilling to accept.

Privately, she remained confident that the information would eventually reach her from the dozens of bottom feeders eager for her good favour. Yet, it had now been over two days, and there was still nothing about this mysterious male. She understood well that if she didn't address the issue quickly, she might soon suffer a similar fate as her foolish head doorman. She correctly guessed that Amy probably knew the young man, but Amy was not like the other girls.

'A little too wise for Edy's liking,' truth be told, and so Edy Barrett kept her counsel before curiosity finally got the better of her.

It was never a good sign to be summoned to the first floor of the Princess's domain, especially so soon after the head man had been beaten up in a pub by an old friend. Amy felt a disturbing sense of dread as she ascended the stairs to the first floor of the Custom House. Yet even though she sensed that no good would come from her mistress's request, Amy was clever enough not to display any sign of fear. If she showed vulnerability, it would confirm her guilt and possibly invite retribution. Upon entering the drawing room, she saw the Princess with her back to the door, facing the window. No words were spoken for what felt like an eternity, until Amy felt compelled to break the silence.

'You looked to see me, Ma'am,' Amy said as she clasped her arms tightly by her side, endeavouring to maintain her composure.

'This business in O'Flaherty's pub last Tuesday was very nasty. Not good for business. What with protecting the girls and all that,' Edy said, her words a veiled threat.

Far from safeguarding the girls, thought Amy, though she dared not voice this aloud, opting instead to remain silent, correctly guessing the Princess's ulterior motive.

'I believe that you may know the young man concerned.' The feigned uncertainty was now a direct threat that both parties clearly understood.

Realising that her options were vanishing, Amy chose her next few words carefully.

'I knew him years ago when we were children. Haven't seen him in years. Think he was abroad.'

'How did you meet up?'

'We just happened to bump into each other on the street.' A blatant lie, both parties knew it, but the Princess was happy to let it slide.

'Where can I reach him?'

'I'm not sure.'

Probably true, thought Edy, but it wasn't the response she desired. She waited silently, her gaze fixed out the window. Shifting her position, she persisted.

'Is he from around these parts?'

'His Mam still lives around here.' Amy nervously started to shuffle her feet.

'And who might that be?'

'Peggy Maguire.'

'Hmmm,' was Edy's slow, languid response. Yet there was something more in her reaction when Amy mentioned the name Peggy Maguire. She couldn't quite identify what it was, as the Princess remained steadfast, staring out the window, but Amy could sense it. It was as if a ghost from the past had come to visit Edy. With that, Edy raised her hand, signalling that the meeting had ended and that Amy's continued presence was neither required nor wanted.

Back to work, Amy thought as she left the room, while the Princess continued gazing silently out of the window.

The following afternoon, a well-appointed horse-drawn carriage pulled up outside Jimmy Eastman's scrapyard. Inside, a well-dressed, attractive, middle-aged woman stepped out and entered the front office. Once inside, she immediately sought a private word with the proprietor. After a brief meeting, one of the young employees was summoned to the office.

'Meet your new employer,' was Jimmy's greeting as Sean entered the room.

Looking at the somewhat dilapidated armchair in the corner, Sean watched the woman sitting uncomfortably. Clearly out of place in these surroundings, he thought. They had never met in

person, yet Sean Maguire knew precisely who she was. Anyone who had ever lived in Dublin's tenements knew Edith or Edy Barrett. It seemed that some form of dowry had been arranged between his former employer and his future one in the time it took him to walk across the yard. The only thing Sean didn't know was the exact terms and conditions. Prudently, he decided that it was probably best not to ask too many questions. With that, Edy rose from her chair, stood fully upright, enhancing her frame to its fullest, as she walked past both men, offering a brief acknowledgement before departing.

As the carriage vanished from sight, Jimmy faced his young apprentice.

'Finish up whatever you have to do by this evening.' These were the last words ever spoken between Sean and Jewish Jimmy.

The following morning, Sean reported for duty at number seven Mecklenburgh Street, where his mistress outlined his duties. These initially included driving her around the city, supervising the other male and female staff, and possibly other tasks yet to be specified. At Edy's insistence, he was required to live on the premises, which turned out to be a room in the basement. Not the most promising accommodation for the role, but considerably better than what he was used to.

Calling at the homestead that evening, he was surprised to see Peggy sitting alone in the dark. Although lost in thought, his arrival was not unexpected. Sensing his presence, Peggy slowly lifted her head and looked directly at him. 'I see that you have found new work,' she said, then turned her head away as quickly as she had raised it.

Angered by her rebuke, he snapped, 'It's not as if I had any choice in the matter,' though he regretted the outburst as soon as the words left his mouth. Peggy had never interfered in any decision he had ever made, even when he headed off to sea at the age of thirteen. She loved him, of that he was certain. Deep down, he knew she was right to express her disdain. Yet there was something else in her manner, which he couldn't quite understand. At first, he thought it was coldness, but on reflection, he saw it for what it was:

Deep-seated fear.

'Be careful, son. Edy Barrett is not a woman to get involved with,' were Peggy's final words on the subject, her gaze firmly fixed on a faded picture of the blessed Virgin hanging loosely on the wall.

'I can look after myself.' He made a meek attempt at reassurance as he placed a ten-shilling note on the table. Peggy didn't acknowledge the money. Heading back to the Custom House, Sean remained troubled. As far as he could recall, he had never argued with his mother. Sure enough, Edy Barrett was no saint, but there was something in Peggy's demeanour that didn't quite sit right. He knew she would disapprove of his new employer, but it was something more profound. There was a sadness to Peggy, a sort of resignation. Was there something Peggy knew about the Princess that others didn't? Indeed, both women were around the same age. Had their paths crossed years ago? Was there some dark connection between them? Approaching the brothel, he began to chide himself for his foolishness. Perhaps he was reading too much into Peggy's response. Either way, there was no going back. He had accepted the position. Not that he had any other options.

Working for Edy proved to be better than Sean initially feared. His duties, though limited, were not as taxing as working in the scrapyards. Managing employees and rivals became relatively

straightforward, especially with the rumours circulating in Dublin at the time. Stories of how easily he had dealt with his predecessor spread through the city day by day. Reputation was vital in his line of business. The stories being shared and retold around the narrow streets of Monto ensured Sean Maguire built a reputation as an enforcer. His notoriety was further boosted by the fact that the Princess, instead of seeking revenge, was clever enough to employ the victor, and everyone in Monto knew that Edy Barrett knew how to seize opportunities and was certainly not someone to cross.

To his surprise, Edy appeared to be a decent employer, compared to some of the other madams. Occasionally, she would require him to courier private messages across the city. On the first Friday of every month and every Sunday morning, he would transport Edy to the Pro Cathedral to attend mass. Sometimes he would transport girls to private houses in other parts of the city, returning hours later to collect them. This drop-off service was reserved for Edy's most exclusive clients who could never be seen in Monto. Other premium clients preferred to be collected, clandestinely shepherded into the Custom House, where privacy was guaranteed. On rare occasions, Edy would ask him to drive her around the city in the evening, savouring the sights and scents of the city. She was a generous benefactor who bought him clothes befitting his newly acquired position. As an additional bonus, Edy allowed Sean to operate the hackney privately on Sunday afternoons when the occasion permitted, taking her percentage of the profits. After all, Edy was a businesswoman, and it was no harm to have Sean operate as a hackney from time to time, maintaining appearances to the outside world.

Over time, Sean began to get the distinct impression that she was developing a fondness for him. Although Edy had a reputation for maintaining her distance from the hired help, she gradually started using the hackney for excursions around the city in the evenings more often. A notable change, observed by all, was her tendency to summon him to her office on a regular basis. She enjoyed hearing about his travels to distant corners of the world. Despite being a wealthy woman, Edy had never travelled beyond her birthplace. Her longing for a life that had somehow slipped away in the blink of an eye now started to resurface in the character of Sean Maguire. This behaviour did not go unnoticed in the household, with everyone concluding that Sean was rapidly becoming the Princess's stud. Edy herself also became aware of the rumours. Far from being annoyed, she privately relished the idea that he was her man, even though no physical connection had taken place. Sean, for his part, also became conscious of the rumours and wasn't particularly perturbed. After all, for a woman in her mid-fifties, Edy Barrett was still attractive, wearing her age well — more so than could be said for some of her peers of a similar age within the locality.

But ghosts from the past returned to haunt him when he unexpectedly met an old acquaintance from his days with Jewish Jimmy. One evening, while waiting on Lower Sackville Street to take a woman back to Monto, an elderly gentleman suddenly entered the carriage. Initially startled by the intrusion, his fears were briefly eased when he recognised the man as one of the two who had first brought the guns into the scrapyard all those months ago. Even if he hadn't remembered the man from his past, he immediately knew the gentleman as Tom Clarke, owner of the tobacconist on the corner of nearby Rutland Street and Sackville Street, but more importantly, a leading member of the I.R.B.

'I see you have changed jobs,' said Clarke as he settled into the carriage.

'Yeah, I was offered a better deal, and Jimmy was happy to let me go.' Sean felt uneasy about the chance encounter.

'Have you given up the repair business?'

'Nobody has asked me since my time with Jimmy,' Sean said, trying not to sound unnerved as he kept his eyes fixed straight ahead.

'Probably for the best,' was the reply from the back of the hackney.

With that, Clarke requested to be taken to the Olympia Theatre on the other side of the Liffey. Usually, Sean would have told the unwelcome visitor to sod off, as the hackney wasn't for hire. However, Thomas Clarke's sudden visit was no coincidence and certainly not one that Sean could refuse.

Dame Street buzzed that evening as patrons gathered outside the theatre for the eagerly awaited opening night of the long-anticipated return of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Although it had been fifteen years since Wilde's death, his popularity among middle-class Dublin audiences never waned. The Irish adore their comedies, especially those that satirise the particular quirks of their nearest neighbour.

Little attention was paid to the dark hackney that pulled up outside the Palace Street entrance to Dublin Castle. Nor did anyone notice that the hackney had been parked for quite some time. None of the would-be theatregoers or the soldiers on duty suspected anything unusual about the elderly gentleman who subsequently stepped out of the hackney, naturally assuming he was about to join the queue outside the theatre. Instead, the gentleman briskly walked down the adjoining laneway, his pace slightly slowed by age and the cobbled street, which marked the narrow entrance onto Temple Bar.

At that point, the hackney driver turned his carriage around and headed back towards College Green, most likely seeking another fare among the dozens of other hackneys. It would never have occurred to anyone on the street that night that somehow Sean Maguire had unwittingly been sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood.