

SHADOWS OVER ENGLAND ♦ 3

AN HOUR UNSPENT

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In loving memory of
Maxine Snyder Higson Seward
(November 1913–May 2017)

A woman who in her 103 years created a family
with faith, love, and selflessness.

Grandma, you were more than a matriarch—
you are an example to emulate.



Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.

Ephesians 4:28



ONE



May 11, 1915
Poplar, London, England

Barclay Pearce shouldered his way through the mob, invisible. He'd learned over the years how to blend into any crowd, and this one was no different. Stand at the back of a group of shouting men, raising a fist when they did. Even as he used the tip of his boot to nudge a few of the bricks intended as missiles out of view. His chest banded at the thought of those bricks flying through the boarded-up windows of the store.

Mr. Schmidt had long since packed up his family and fled. His used bookshop, in which Barclay had passed innumerable happy hours over the years, had been closed for months. Never mind that his family had been in England for generations—his name sounded German, which put a target on his back.

The shaking fists gave way to a forward surge of bodies.

Barclay ducked into the nearby alley, which muffled the angry shouts of the men in the streets. Most of these men had been his neighbors for the last twenty years, though only a certain sort would know it. He'd moved invisibly among them, a shadow in their streets. He'd survived. He'd built something.

And now they were tearing it down, brick by brick and piece by piece. Helping the enemy break England—though they wouldn't see it that way.

The shrill whistles of many bobbies entering the area pierced the air, but for once they didn't make Barclay's pace alter in response. For once, he wasn't the one they were after. What was a mere thief in the face of riots as widespread as these? They were running rampant all over the city, from the prosperous West End all the way down to this shadowed crevice of Poplar.

No, the police didn't care a whit about him today. He was only one insignificant thief—a thief whose hands were relatively clean right now, at that. They were after the mobs and the raging fury that swept through them.

It made no sense to him. He paused at the door he wanted, tested it. Locked. Understandable, today. But that wouldn't hinder him. Barclay glanced around to be sure no one paid him any heed and then, with the help of his favorite pick, had the door open in ten seconds flat. Yes, the *Lusitania* had been sunk. It was a tragedy. It made the war more real than ever. But why did that ocean of angry men think *this* was the answer? Did they really think that taking their fear out on anyone in London with a German-sounding name would bring that ship back to the surface of the waves? That it would teach the German High Command a lesson?

The warm, musty air in the back hallway assaulted his nose as he stepped into the creaking old building. Not old like Kensey Manor in Cornwall, with history seeping beautifully from its stones like music. Not old like the symphony halls, with their majestic columns and promise of audible glory. Just *old*. Tired. Ready to be put out of its misery.

He made his way up the familiar steps, to the flat everyone in the family thought he'd given up. But he'd kept slipping money to the landlord every month.

It was worth it, to have a place to stash things he didn't want to take with him into the good part of Town. Wouldn't do to store any stolen goods in Peter Holstein's house in Hammersmith—he wouldn't risk bringing trouble on his brother-in-law's head. Especially not now. With a last name like *Holstein*.

Plus, it provided a good drop location for Mr. V, into whose palm Barclay had pressed the second key.

He jogged up the rickety steps to the fifth floor and slid along the corridor until he came to the fourth door. A quick turn of his key, and he was in the last flat they'd called their own, Georgie, Nigel, Fergus, and him.

It was empty of all but the furniture that belonged with it—and hadn't been much fuller when the four of them had called it home. They traveled light, did their family. Because they never knew when they might have to pick up and run.

He paused for a moment, so easily able to see Georgie lounging on that lumpy, faded sofa of an evening. Grinning up at him. Trying to cover that his day's take hadn't been from where it was supposed to be. Trying to worm his way out of division duty, because he hated counting out the coins. Trying to bend every rule Barclay had ever set just to see if he could.

Blast, but Barclay missed him. Where was he now? In a trench somewhere? France, unless they'd moved the British First again. Fighting German lads no older than he was.

His throat went tight. Bad enough that Georgie was there. What if Charlie was too?

He'd never know it. Never even hear about it if his flesh-and-blood little brother died in this wretched war.

His blood went heavy and sluggish in his veins. He'd never given up looking for him, not for eighteen years. But he'd failed. Barclay had just turned twenty-eight, meaning his brother was twenty-four. But still nowhere to be found. Charlie had vanished

into London's orphanage system as surely as their mother had into its prisons.

What was he like now, that brother who had been wide-eyed and full of laughter at six, when Barclay had last seen him? Like Georgie, mischievous and stubborn? Or more like Fergus, smart as a whip? Or like little Nigel, even-tempered and optimistic?

Barclay blinked, clearing his eyes of the shades of memory, real and imagined. He said a quick prayer for them all—a habit he was trying to form, even though it still felt too bold, going daily before the King and begging a favor. He'd made his livelihood based on invisibility, always reckoning it safest to stay invisible to God too. But according to his brother-in-law, Peter, that was a fool's mission. God saw him anyway, in complete clarity. So why try to hide?

And besides—it was a risk worth taking. Georgie was on the front lines, and Charlie well could be too. He—they?—needed every prayer Barclay could mutter.

The shouts outside grew louder, battering the glass in the one tiny window of the flat. He'd better hurry. The mob could turn violent at any moment, and he didn't much fancy weaving his way back through them when they did.

He'd kept this flat because it had the perfect hiding place. A few silent steps to the corner and he could pry up the splintering trim and reach into the hole it covered. His fingers closed on the large envelope Mr. V must have stashed there. They'd missed each other at Whitehall today, but there had been a simple message waiting. *You have work at home.*

Whatever this was, then, it would be what kept him busy for the next day or week or month. He could only hope it didn't involve fishing charred slips of paper from an ash bin like yesterday's assignment had. Not that the words on those slips had made a lick of sense to him, but who was he to question the man who promised him payment every week if he remained at his beck and call?

He refitted the trim into its place, slid over to take a seat on the lumpy couch, and opened the file.

Cecil Manning, clockmaker. Owns a small shop, employing three, and a team that assists him with the Great Westminster Clock when necessary.

Barclay's brows drew together. What in the world could V possibly want with a clockmaker? He read on, noting Mr. Manning's address—only a five-minute walk from Peter's house in Hammersmith—and the reason behind V's interest.

Manning yesterday had a meeting with one Mr. Anderson of the patent office. Mr. Anderson reported directly to the Admiralty, saying that Mr. Manning is developing a device that would allow aircraft to shoot through their props. This report was dismissed as unlikely to be successful and hence unimportant, but I disagree. Discover what Manning is building, if it will work, what he would need to make it viable. If there is a prototype, procure it. If plans, get them to me. I would prefer that he turn them over to the Admiralty willingly. But if he won't, take them.

Barclay hissed out a breath. A bit different, that, than slipping into an abandoned consulate and stealing paper scraps from a dead fireplace. This was more like the assignments V had given Rosemary and Willa—the kind that required gaining the confidence of a mark and then stealing from him.

The kind of job Barclay hadn't done in a year. And didn't quite know if he should do now.

He wanted to change. Was *trying* to change. But when one's government told one to slip back into one's old habits . . . was it wrong? Or justified?

He tucked the envelope into the inner pocket of his jacket as he rose and strode toward the door again. Such questions would have to wait. Just now, he had somewhere else to be.

He could hear windows breaking as he gained the street again, despite the continued shrill of the police whistles and the shouts to desist. There would be more arrests tonight—there had been hundreds already over the weekend, even in the better sections of Town. Men usually decent but who had fallen prey to that savage instinct to lash out, strike back.

They'd do better to follow Georgie's lead and enlist if they wanted to fight. And chances were they would, eventually. Those who were able. On the average day, the streets had already shifted, filled more with women and refugees than able-bodied Englishmen.

He headed the opposite way down the alley, away from the tumult. The rest of the family should just be getting to Pauly's pub.

The streets of Poplar were as familiar as his own thoughts. It took no effort to navigate through them, to nod to the familiar shopkeepers who had all barred their doors and now stood at their windows, peering out anxiously to see if the mob would surge in this direction. He slid up to a beggar hunched against one of the buildings, slipping a tuppence into her upstretched palm. "Better get inside somewhere, Mags."

Her gnarled fingers closed around the promise of dinner. "New men on our streets. From Stoke Newington. Seen 'em?"

"From Dante's crew. They won't bother you." He bent down to hook a hand under the old woman's arm and help her to her feet. "Better hurry, luv. Trouble's only a street away."

A smile appeared out of the web of wrinkles she called a face, revealing gums with only half their teeth. Poor old duck. She reached up to pat his cheek. "You're a good lad, Barclay. Your mum must be proud."

He smiled—that old wound had long since healed over. “If you hear who started this row, let me know. I don’t like violence in my streets.”

She cackled as she hobbled her way into the shelter of the alley. “You’d do better’n the bobbies at shutting ’em all down, you would. We ought to ’lect you to the council.”

“Ha.” Talk about too visible. But he’d do what he could later, after the authorities had cleared out. He watched her until he was sure she’d found a place to tuck in and then turned.

The pub was only two streets over, a steadier home than any other he’d had since he was ten. Too close to all these riots, to be sure. And knowing Pauly, he’d likely be standing at the door with that odd assortment that made him *Pauly*—a crowbar to warn looters away, and some sort of food to offer them, to remind them of why they wanted to heed the warning. His had always been a place where all were welcome, so long as they left their fights outside.

Barclay turned the corner, his gaze latching upon an unexpected sight—a nondescript grey bowler over silver-gold hair. V stood at the bus stop with a newspaper open, though the bus would have just come through two minutes ago, assuming it hadn’t been drafted into use in a more affluent part of the city. Barclay frowned. Why meet him here if he’d already slipped his next assignment into the wall at the flat?

Well, it certainly wouldn’t be a social call—he must have more business, perhaps some that had just come in. Barclay jogged toward him with a hint of a smile, a lifted hand, and an “Oi!” Just as he would approach any other acquaintance.

V turned toward him, his own vague smile in place, as if he were accustomed to the Cockney greeting. Maybe he was. Who could say? For all Barclay knew, the man had been born a street away. Or on Grosvenor Square. Or on the moon, for all the information he could glean from V’s accent and demeanor.

“Pearce.” He stretched out a hand to shake in greeting, as if they were two normal blokes.

Barclay shook. “Good to see you, V. Going home for the day?” He shot a glance at the sign for the bus. And wondered where *home* was for the man. A mansion? A box? Or did he step into a rabbit hole that swept him to a netherworld each night?

Perhaps Barclay had been reading too much of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to the little ones.

V smiled a little. “Shortly. Glad I came across you. I’ve something for you.” He tucked the newspaper under his arm and made an awkward show of opening the satchel he carried. From it he pulled a thick envelope, not unlike the one that had been stashed in the hidey-hole.

It wouldn’t be another assignment, not here on the street corner. “Dare I ask?”

“Just look when you have a few minutes.” He tucked the poorly folded newspaper into the satchel and closed it. “You know, I think I’d be better off catching the tube. See you at the OB in the morning?”

He phrased it as a question, but it was a command. Barclay nodded and resisted the urge to ask what they needed of him at the Admiralty’s Old Building when V had already slipped him another job. But V wouldn’t say, not here. He’d just have to report to the OB tomorrow and find out.

If he kept up this rate of work for them, they might as well give him a uniform.

It was such a ridiculous thought that he nearly smiled as he turned back toward the pub. He let it bloom after all when he spotted the figure rushing toward the door from the other direction, eyes alight.

Lucy no doubt had found an interesting story to regale them with at dinner, given that gleam in her eye. He lifted his brows as he neared the seventeen-year-old he’d counted as a sister since

she was an orphaned babe too small to tell them her own name. He'd been the one to dub her Lucy. He suspected her parents had called her something far different.

"You look amused. What have you been up to today?"

"This and that." Her grin was infectious. "But I've been a good girl, I promise."

He chuckled and held open the pub's door for her. Of all his siblings—the ones old enough to have been involved in the family business, anyway—Lucy had seemed the least sorry to agree to give up their old ways. "I've no doubt. Any word from Georgie today?"

Her nod was eager. She must have a bit of India in her blood, to account for the almond-shaped eyes and dusky gold of her skin, but those were her only hints of who she'd once been. "A letter, yes. We didn't open it yet."

They'd have been waiting for him. Which warmed him straight to the core. Nodding his thanks, he followed her inside, where scents of roasting meat greeted them, along with a healthy dose of noise. Much of which came from their long table in the corner. Most everyone was there already, even Willa and her soon-to-be-husband, Lukas. He filled the empty seat Rosemary had left them. And when she returned from Cornwall in a couple weeks, she'd bring Peter, who would sit where Georgie used to.

Maybe someday their clan would grow outright again. If they could convince the war, through guile and prayer, not to steal any of them away forever.

Barclay took his chair in the center, where he could reach over to cuff Fergus playfully on the shoulder. The boy, getting lanky at twelve, grinned at him. "You're late."

"I was working." He fingered the new envelope V had given him, opened the flap. If he had given it to him out in the open, it must be all right to review it in public. "How was school?"

Fergus grunted. He hadn't adjusted quite as well as the younger

children to the idea of going to school. And Barclay could hardly blame him—he was a bit old to be thrown into such a thing, even if he *was* as smart as a whip.

But education could change the world for him. It was worth a few growing pains. Worth the coin it cost them—using up the last of what Rosemary had earned from V the year before. If they kept working for him, they could probably, maybe, if they scrimped elsewhere, keep sending the little ones to school in the years to come.

“I still don’t see why I need all this nonsense. I know my numbers. My grammar. You read history to me every night.”

“I’m no professor.” Perhaps he would have been, in a different world. He could imagine spending his days with books, as his father had once done, in front of a classroom of eager minds. Or *should-be* eager minds, if Fergus was any indication. But then, he also could imagine spending his days in a workshop, with gadgets and gears spread out before him. Or in business somewhere, where he could manage people all the day.

Perhaps, if he’d gone to school for more than that one blissful year before it all came apart at the seams, he could have known one of those worlds. But *this* was his world now. A family of thieves he loved as much as he did the brother he hadn’t seen in nearly twenty years. A mysterious employer who gave him envelopes with . . . paper and keys? Odd. A growing faith, now that he had people to explain things to him and wrap up beautiful leather-bound Bibles to give him at Christmas.

He fingered the keys. Unfolded the papers. A few cards spilled out, snagging his attention first.

Retta, seated to his left, snatched one up, her golden brows scrunching. “Mr. Barclay Pearce.’ That much is clear enough. But where’s the direction? It’s—wait, this is the house across from Peter’s. The one for let.”

“What?” But it was. He stared at the house number under his

name on that heavy paper, then pulled forward the typewritten sheet with V as the only signature. His eyes went wide as he read. “V has let it for us. Says he needs us to have a reputable address, and he imagines Pete and Rosie will want their own space when they come to Town. Says we can consider it part of our retainer.”

Maybe it *was* tied to the new assignment, then. Perhaps, given the clockmaker’s residence in Hammersmith, V thought it would work better if they could claim a place of their own nearby.

Likely wouldn’t last beyond the assignment. But still. They could enjoy it while it did.

Fergus picked up one of the keys, his face pure boyish delight. “The white one? But that’s even bigger than Peter’s place! I bet it has six bedrooms if it has one.”

The rest of the table noted the awe on their faces and chimed in with questions and shouts of joy at the explanation. “But why, do you think?” Elinor’s blond brows were drawn together, her lips pursed.

Barclay glanced behind him, making sure none of the other patrons were paying them any heed. Then leaned across the table so he could pitch his voice low. “I suspect it’s because of the job he just gave me. There’s a clockmaker I’m to get to know—the one who maintains the clock of Big Ben, it seems. He lives just a few streets over from Peter. V must want us to stick close.”

“The Great Clock?” Lucy’s brows shot up. “What’s he up to? Nothing suspicious, I hope.”

“No. No, some new invention V thinks could help our boys, that’s all.” He shifted against the niggle inside that said, *If that’s all, why would you steal from him? Why repay innovation with deceit?*

“Well.” On the other side of him Elinor grinned and bumped her shoulder into his. She was getting far too pretty, and it was a guarantee of headaches. It was just too much to hope that all his sisters would find blokes as good as Rosemary and Willa had.

Why did God have to send him so many sisters? Responsibility for them kept him up nights.

But Elinor's grin was oblivious to the trouble she caused just by having a dimpled smile. "That gives me a fabulous idea for my challenge to you. I challenge you to steal . . ."

He narrowed his eyes while the others all hooted and drummed their fingers on the edge of the table. "No things, El—"

"Oh, I know." Laughing, Ellie silenced the drumming with a dramatic flourish of her hand. "I challenge you to steal an hour, Barclay Pearce. From Big Ben's Great Clock."

"A . . ." He chuckled and shook his head. Their challenges had been getting more absurd lately, it was true—in part because he'd made them all swear off actual *stealing*. Aside from their increasing morality, they couldn't risk getting caught. Not now, working for V. Who paid far better than any fence ever did. "How the devil am I supposed to steal an hour?"

Elinor grinned. "You're not, I believe the saying goes. You're supposed to *fail* to steal an hour, thereby proving once and for all that you're not half the thief you think yourself."

He let a grin curve his lips, let his fingers close around one of the keys. Surveyed each of the faces of the children he'd claimed as siblings—the ones who'd let him, who'd claimed him back. The ones who had grown up with him, the ones who'd come along later, the little ones who remembered nothing but being theirs.

"The Great Westminster Clock, huh?" He flipped the key into the air like a coin, caught it, and stood to help when he noted Pauly coming their way with a tray loaded down with bowls. "Nothing to it. That hour's as good as mine."

As long as he could spend it right here.