

CANADIAN CROSSINGS
BOOK ONE

The
BEST OF
INTENTIONS

SUSAN ANNE MASON



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For my dear friend,
Sally Bayless,
fellow writer and valued critique partner,
who shares this writing journey with me.
Our friendship has been a wonderful
and unexpected blessing.

“My grace is sufficient for you,
for my power is made perfect in
weakness.”

2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV

PROLOGUE

MAY 1919

Grace Abernathy stood at the rail of the *SS Olympic*, staring out over the calm expanse of sea as the last trace of sunlight disappeared over the horizon. Darkness spread outward to encompass the water, pierced only by a single beam from the masthead light. All traces of warmth vanished with the sun, and Grace shivered within her new wool coat—the one Mum had insisted she buy for the trip.

After her second full day at sea, Grace forced herself not to stare longingly back toward England, her beloved homeland, but instead concentrated on her destination with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Toronto, Canada, the city where her sister had settled five years ago. So much had happened in those five years to both of them.

Would Rose have left home that spring of 1914 if she'd known the world would soon be engulfed by war and that her life would be forever changed? Grace gripped the rail in front of her as a wave slapped the hull, sending a spray of cold water droplets upward. The churning sea below mirrored the emotions surging beneath her calm demeanor. Rose needed her help, and Grace would not let her down.

She reached inside her coat to finger the small gold cross Rose had given her before she left.

“Wear this close to your heart, Grace, and remember I love you. We’ll be together again one day, I know it.”

Now a war widow with an infant to care for, Rose had begged Grace in her letters to come to Canada, but the danger of sailing during wartime and the responsibility of caring for their ailing mother had kept Grace from leaving their Sussex village. Once the travel warnings had been lifted, Mum insisted Grace go to Rose and convince her to come home, since the hope of seeing her grandson was the only thing keeping her alive. And so, with Aunt Violet agreeing to take Mum in, Grace had finally purchased her ticket to cross the sea.

The cry of a gull overhead drew Grace’s focus back to her surroundings. With the wind on her face and the rush of the water beneath her, she felt free for the first time in her life. Free of the constraints of her hometown, free to pursue the adventure she’d always longed for, and almost free—but not quite—of the guilt that chained her soul. She prayed that bringing Mum’s only grandchild home would be the key to loosening those chains once and for all, and at last allow Grace to pursue her own dreams. Her own goals.

But first, there was Rose.

“How about a kiss for a soldier, darlin’?” A rough voice cut through the night air.

Goose bumps erupted over Grace’s body at the slur of the man’s words. The fact that she was alone at the ship’s rail at this late hour made matters worse. The lay passengers shared the ship with many soldiers returning to Canada, and though the crew worked hard at keeping the two groups separate, it wasn’t always possible to corral the military men. Most of the soldiers were respectful, but the captain said he couldn’t guarantee the women’s safety and had warned them to remain belowdeck after dark.

Yet, unable to sleep in her stuffy quarters, Grace had craved the fresh sea air and had dared to risk coming up alone. Bracing herself, she faced the uniformed man. “My husband wouldn’t appreciate

you talking to me that way, sir. Kindly leave me alone.” She turned back to the water, hoping her quaking knees would not betray her.

“Husband, eh? What kind of man would allow his lovely wife to run around on a ship full of soldiers—alone?”

A heavy hand landed on her shoulder. She jerked and attempted to step away, but the man pulled her closer. His breath reeked of spirits and tobacco. His jawline was covered in several days’ growth of beard that didn’t hide the angry red scar marring his face.

Her heart thumped hard against her ribs. Why hadn’t she worn her hat instead of tying a kerchief around her hair? At least then she’d have a hatpin to use as a weapon.

“If you value your hand, you’d best remove it from the lady. Now.”

Another masculine voice issued the challenge from behind her.

The soldier whirled around, scowling. “Mind your own business, pal. My lady friend and I are looking for some privacy, if you get my drift.”

Grace turned to see a tall man dressed in a fedora and trench coat, standing perfectly still. His dark brows were drawn together in a frown, and a pulse ticked in his clean-shaven jaw.

“I highly doubt that, since the lady is my wife.” His gaze never wavered.

Grace fought to keep her jaw from dropping.

The soldier’s eyes narrowed. “If you’re her husband, why haven’t I seen you together? I’ve been watching her since we boarded yesterday, and she’s been alone the whole time.”

Grace’s heart thudded. *Since we boarded?* She gripped the lapels of her coat together.

The stranger didn’t blink. “I’ve been in our cabin. Feeling a bit under the weather. But I’ve got my strength back now.” He took an intimidating step closer. “I suggest you return to the other soldiers where you belong. And don’t think about bothering any of the other women on board.” Another step brought him within striking distance. He towered over the man. “Do I make myself clear?”

The soldier regarded him for a few seconds, as though deciding

whether or not to engage in a fight, then spat a stream of brown tobacco juice onto the deck. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.” With a humorless laugh, he stuffed his hands in his pockets and strolled away.

The stranger moved to Grace’s side, not taking his focus off the soldier until he was out of sight. Then he turned his attention to her. “Are you all right, miss?”

“Yes, thank you.” She released a breath and allowed her stomach muscles to relax. “I appreciate your help.”

Up close, the man’s eyes radiated compassion and kindness.

Thank you, Lord, for sending a protector.

“It’s the least I could do . . . for my wife.” He chuckled.

Grace hoped he couldn’t see the heat in her cheeks.

“My name’s Quinten Aspinall. It appears we’ll be traveling companions.”

“Grace Abernathy.” She pulled her collar up around her neck. “I probably shouldn’t have come here alone, but I had to get out of the cabin. I was going stir-crazy, not to mention that my roommate snores rather loudly.”

“That’s why I’m out here as well. And—”

“Quinten?” a female voice said. “Is everything all right?”

For the first time, Grace noticed a young woman standing in the shadows. She came toward them, her brow furrowed. As she drew nearer, Grace was awed by her beauty. Flawless skin, ebony hair, and striking blue eyes. Unlike Grace in her sensible gray coat, this girl was the height of fashion, dressed in a matching red cape and feathered hat.

“Everything’s fine, Emmaline.”

Grace frowned at the man. “You left your wife to help me?”

“Oh, he’s not my husband.” The girl trilled a perfect laugh. “We met yesterday on the ship.” She strolled over to them. “My traveling companion hasn’t found his sea legs yet, so when Quinten saw me up here alone, he gallantly offered to serve as my protector until Jonathan rallies.”

Grace did her best not to gape. This girl was traveling with a male companion? How unconventional.

“It seems my services might be required here as well.” Mr. Aspinall winked at Grace. “May I be so bold as to suggest we form an alliance while on board?”

“What sort of alliance?” Grace didn’t bother to hide her skepticism. A woman traveling alone couldn’t be too careful.

“You have to admit there’s safety in numbers. And I, for one, could use some friends on this voyage.”

Emmaline laughed. “You might as well agree. He’ll only hound you until you do. Trust me, I know from recent experience.” She held out a gloved hand. “I’m Emmaline Moore. And I’d be happy to have a friend on board too.”

“Grace Abernathy.” She smiled as she shook the girl’s hand, finding her infectious good humor as soothing as a tonic. “I’d like that.” She hesitated a moment, then offered her hand to Quinten. “Very well, Mr. Aspinall. It appears you’ve made another friend.”

“Friends it is. And please call me Quinn.”

A spray of salt water showered the deck. Quinn led her and Emmaline to a more sheltered spot and gestured to the deck chairs. “Why don’t we have a seat and get to know each other better? I’d love to hear why you’re traveling to Canada. And why Emmaline has a mysterious male companion who is neither a relative nor a husband.”

Grace settled into her chair. “I’ll admit I’m curious about that as well.”

“It’s no big mystery.” Emmaline perched daintily on the edge of one of the lounges. “Jonathan and I grew up together. We’re like brother and sister. When I told him I intended to travel to Canada to find my father, he insisted on coming with me—in separate cabins, of course.”

“How fortunate you are,” Grace said. “I wish I had someone to travel with.”

“What’s the reason for your trip, Grace?” Quinn’s face was shrouded in shadows.

“I’m going to visit my sister. Her husband died in the war, leaving her alone with a new baby.” She fingered the cross hanging from her neck. “I hope to convince her to come home with me.”

“I’m very sorry for your sister.” Emmaline’s expression grew sad. “This war has been such a terrible waste of lives.”

“That it has.” Grace breathed in the salty air. “You said you’re looking for your father?”

“Yes. It’s a long, rather gloomy story.” She pulled her cape up under her chin. “I’d believed my father to be dead all these years, but when I discovered he’s alive and living in Canada, I had to find him.”

“I don’t blame you.” Grace thought of her own father, gone these many years. She’d sail to China if there were a chance to find him alive. “And what about you, Quinn?”

A sudden gust of wind threatened to lift the hat from his head. He removed it and held it on his lap. “My story is similar to both of yours in that I’m searching for family members. Siblings actually.” His jaw became tense, his eyes stormy. “I’d rather not get into the details though.”

Grace feared his was not a happy tale. It seemed they each had their own obstacles to overcome on this trip. Yet for the first time since she left home, she didn’t feel quite so alone. “Well, I’m grateful to have you both as traveling companions. And I pray that once we reach the shores of Canada, we’ll find the answers we seek.”

Quinn nodded, his face grim. “God willing. I only hope we can live with whatever we discover.”

Grace shivered, burrowing further into her coat, wishing to dispel the ominous tone of his words. Only God knew what was in store for each of them. Faced with such an uncertain future, all Grace could do was rely on her faith to sustain her through the journey.



CHAPTER I



April 1914

Dearest Grace,

I made it! I've arrived in Toronto. The month of April is still cold here with only the barest hint of spring. Reverend Burke has helped me find a lovely boardinghouse in the heart of the city. Mrs. Chamberlain, the proprietress, is a kind, generous woman. She's taken me under her wing, along with several other girls from back home, and has made me feel most welcome. Living here, I can almost forget I'm thousands of miles away from you. Almost . . .

TORONTO, ONTARIO

MAY 1919

“Here’s your address, miss. That’ll be two dollars and fifty cents.”

Grace paid her fare, alighted from the vehicle, then stood on the sidewalk, clutching her valise with trembling fingers.

She could scarcely believe that after a six-day ocean voyage, a journey by train from Halifax to Montreal, and another train from Montreal to Toronto, she had finally reached her destination.

Her first impressions of Canada were as varied as the three cities she’d visited since her arrival at the Nova Scotia port. Cold, gray

Halifax still harbored remnants of winter with traces of snow that hugged the landscape. Foreign and vaguely frightening, Montreal was filled with tall buildings and strange, lightning-fast snatches of the French language. And now, Toronto. Having been in the city for less than an hour, she'd yet to form a complete picture. On her ride from Union Station, she'd passed an eclectic mix of buildings, from office towers to historic churches, until they'd finally come to a residential neighborhood with tree-lined streets.

It was hard to believe that a mere three weeks ago Grace had been at home in Sussex, caring for her mother, her life as normal as could be expected after the ravages of war. She and Mum had been slowly coping with the news of her brother Owen's death in one of the last battles before peace had been declared. Her mother had not dealt well with the blow and had sunk into a deep depression at the loss of her son. Nothing Grace said or did seemed to lift her spirits.

Which was why so much depended on this trip.

Grace drew her attention back to the lovely redbrick house before her—a far cry from the fleapit she'd imagined. Rose and the baby must love living in this charming home. The first leaves were beginning to bud on the trees in the yard. A welcoming pot of pansies decorated the wide front porch. Above her, an upper balcony ran the length of the house, interrupted by a jutting turret room. Where did Rose stay? Likely on the third story, where an appealing dormer window peeked out over the roof.

Grace inhaled deeply and pressed a palm to her stomach, which rolled and tossed as though she were still aboard the ship. Would Rose be surprised to see her at the door? Even if the telegram had reached her by now, Rose wouldn't have any idea how long it would take Grace to get from Halifax to Toronto.

She walked up the stairs and knocked on the front door, praying Rose was right and that Grace would be welcome at Mrs. Gardiner's, at least until they'd sorted out their plans. Her sister seemed genuinely fond of the woman who had taken Rose and the baby in when she could no longer stay at the boardinghouse. For the moment, however, Grace forced her worries aside and focused

instead on the long-awaited reunion with her sister. Tingles of anticipation shot through her. She could hardly wait to hug Rose and hold her new nephew for the first time. Kiss his sweet cheeks and catch up on all her sister's news.

Several seconds went by with no response. Was everyone out? Grace knocked again, but no one appeared. Disappointment sat heavy on her shoulders. She set her suitcase on the porch and turned to look back at the street. Only then did she spy a For Sale sign almost hidden by a wide tree trunk. Rose hadn't mentioned that Mrs. Gardiner was planning to sell her house. Perhaps that was the reason Rose had talked about getting a place of their own as soon as Grace managed to find work.

She swallowed the metallic taste of guilt. Rose didn't realize that Grace had no intention of procuring a job or renting a flat, because she planned to do everything in her power to persuade Rose to return with her on the next ship home.

After another knock with no response, Grace picked up her suitcase and descended the front stairs. Her frazzled mind struggled to come up with a new plan. She'd never even entertained the possibility that Rose wouldn't be here.

Next door, a woman stepped out onto the front porch.

Grace's steps slowed. Perhaps a neighbor might know something about Rose or her landlady. She headed across the lawn.

The plump woman wearing a flowered dress shook a mat over the railing. She glanced up as Grace approached. "Good afternoon. Can I help you?"

Grace put on her friendliest smile. "I hope so. I'm looking for Mrs. Gardiner. She doesn't appear to be home."

The woman's hands stilled. "I guess you haven't heard. She moved to Vermont to live with her daughter. I'm keeping an eye on the house until it's sold."

Moved to Vermont? What about Rose and the baby? Surely she hadn't put them out in the street. "Do you know if Rose Ab—I mean Easton—is still living here? She and her baby have been boarding with Mrs. Gardiner for a few months now."

The woman paused. “I remember a young woman and a baby, but I don’t know what happened to them after Cora took ill. I’m sorry. Wish I could help you, dear.” She laid the mat over the railing. “Why don’t you try Reverend Burke, the rector at Holy Trinity Church? He used to visit them quite often. He may know where they went.”

“Thank you. I’ll do that.” Grace bit her lip, realizing she had no idea how far away that might be. “Can you tell me where to find the church?”

“It’s about ten blocks away.” The woman pointed to the next crossroad. “Just follow Sherbourne Street. You can’t miss it.”

Grace held back a sigh. Ten blocks sounded far, but it might be good to get some exercise after all the time spent on trains lately. “Thank you again,” she said, and with a lift of her chin, set off.

The ten blocks didn’t take nearly as long as she’d imagined. When the landscape changed from residential to urban, the streets became more crowded. People walked at a fast pace and jostled Grace, who struggled to keep up with the flow. A flash of homesickness went through her as she thought longingly of the uncluttered roads in her village where the only obstruction to a pedestrian’s stroll might be a farmer’s cart halted by a stubborn mule.

As she fought to navigate her way through the newness of the city, worry for her sister plagued her. What had happened to Rose and little Christian? Surely Reverend Burke had found them an alternate place to live. Perhaps with another kind soul from his parish.

A church tower came into view, and as Grace got close enough to read the sign, she was relieved to find it was indeed Holy Trinity. She stepped out of the flow of pedestrians onto the church walkway.

Would anyone be here on a Wednesday afternoon? She tugged the handle of the large wooden door. It gave easily under her hand, and she entered the building. Once her eyes adjusted to the dimness, she moved farther into the church and scanned the rows of pews. A few women sat scattered throughout. Nowhere did Grace see a clergyman. She was about to leave when someone touched her shoulder.

“Can I help you, miss?”

Grace turned to find a regal-looking woman staring at her with undisguised curiosity.

“Yes. Do you know where I might find Reverend Burke?”

“At this time of day, he’s probably at home.”

“Oh. I see.” Grace felt suddenly foolish. She had no idea of the etiquette involved in calling on a minister at his place of residence, but since she couldn’t afford to wait until Sunday, she’d have to figure out a way to see him.

“Would you like me to take you to the rectory?” The kind woman smiled.

“Yes, please. If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all. It’s right next door. Follow me.”

She led Grace to the little bungalow that sat back from the street, almost hidden from view. The woman marched up to the front door and knocked.

Grace’s heart began to thump when the door opened, and a rather rumpled older gentleman answered.

His gaze toggled between the two women. “Mrs. Southby. This is an unexpected surprise.” His eyebrow raised in a question.

“This young woman would like to speak with you, Reverend. I offered to bring her over.”

The minister looked down at Grace’s suitcase, then back at her face. “Are you here about our Newcomers Program?”

“N-Not exactly.” Her tongue seemed to tangle as she searched for a way to begin. She’d hoped for a little privacy, not eager to spill her story on the minister’s stoop.

“One moment,” he said. “Let me get my jacket, and we’ll go across to my office.”

Mrs. Southby smiled at her. “You’ve come to the right place. Reverend Burke is a godsend for so many people new to our country. I’m sure he’ll be able to help you too.”

Grace supposed that because of her suitcase and her British accent the pair had jumped to a logical, albeit erroneous, conclusion.

Five minutes later, Reverend Burke said good-bye to Mrs. Southby and offered Grace a seat. He then took his place in the wooden captain's chair behind the cluttered desk. "Now, what can I do for you, my dear?"

On the wall, a cuckoo clock struck the top of the hour. Every chime jarred Grace's nerve endings. She must be tired from the long trip or unsettled over the unexpected turn of events.

She licked her dry lips and attempted to pull herself together. "My name is Grace Abernathy. I'm Rose Easton's sister."

Instantly, the man's smile fell away, and sorrow filled his blue eyes. "Oh, my dear. I wondered if you'd come when you received my telegram."

"Telegram?" Icy prickles rippled down Grace's spine, erasing all thoughts of what she wanted to say.

"Yes. The one I sent to your mother in England." The chair creaked as he leaned forward. "Did she not receive it?"

The sudden desire to bolt seized her, but her feet seemed glued to the wooden floor. "No, she didn't. I'm here because Rose asked me to come."

He stood and came around to sit in the chair beside her. A loud sigh escaped his bulky frame. "There's no easy way to say this, Grace. I'm sorry, but Rose came down with the Spanish flu. She passed away about three weeks ago. It was all very sudden and tragic."

Grace's throat constricted, the air backing up in her lungs. "No," she whispered. "It can't be true. Someone would have . . . I would have known. . . ."

He shook his head sadly. "I sent a telegram to the postmaster in your village as soon as I could. I don't know why you didn't receive it."

Grace tried to recall where she'd been three weeks ago. That was about the time she'd moved Mum to Aunt Violet's where she would stay while Grace was away.

"I . . . it . . . no, it can't be." She covered her mouth with her hand to still the trembling of her lips. "I was supposed to bring

Rose home. Home to Mum.” Her whole body began to shake. The thought of her mother receiving such terrible news without Grace there to comfort her brought the hot rush of tears to her eyes.

“I’m so very sorry, Grace.” A warm hand squeezed her shoulder.

She stared at a knothole in the wooden floorboard. The handle of her purse bit into the flesh of her hands.

All her plans to take Rose and little Christian back to England, to reunite their family and make them whole again, vanished in an instant. Her chest filled with heat that burned up her throat and clogged her airway. With shaking fingers, she pulled a handkerchief from her purse and wiped her streaming eyes. “What am I going to do now?” she whispered. “I planned to stay with Rose at Mrs. Gardiner’s. She wanted us to be together. . . .” A strangled sob escaped.

“This has come as a terrible shock.” The minister went to the credenza, poured a glass of water, and handed it to her. “Might I suggest that I take you to my friend, Mrs. Chamberlain? She runs the boardinghouse where Rose first lived when she came to Canada. I’m certain Harriet will be able to offer you a place to stay while you decide what to do next.”

Grace could only blink as tears continued to blur her vision, her mind too fuzzy to absorb his words.

He must have taken her silence for agreement, for he nodded. “Right. I’ll telephone Harriet and let her know we’re coming.”

Grace sipped the water and fought to gain control of her emotions. Amidst the haze of grief, one question screamed through her mind. Why had God brought her all this way, only to learn that her sister was gone? That little Christian had lost his mother?

Grace snapped to attention, her fingers tightening on the glass. “What happened to the baby? He’s not in an orphanage, is he?” She would never allow her nephew to be raised in such a place. He belonged with his family—or what was left of it.

Reverend Burke paused, the telephone receiver in hand. “No need to worry. Christian is being well cared for.”

But the guilty expression on the man's face did nothing to reassure Grace.

"Who's looking after him? Someone from the church?" It couldn't be Mrs. Gardiner if she'd moved to Vermont. Grace's hands shook, sloshing the water as she set the glass on the desk. "Tell me and I'll go and get him right away."

She had no idea how she'd care for an infant, but she would figure it out soon enough. And in the meantime, Christian would be safe with someone who loved him.

The minister set the receiver back in the cradle with an apologetic shrug. "The hospital officials were going to call the Children's Aid Society unless I could provide a family member to care for him. With you and your mother so far away, I didn't have much choice."

A sickening sense of dread formed in the pit of Grace's stomach. Not Rose's dreaded in-laws. The ones who had disowned their son because he married Rose. The ones Rose specifically tried to hide the baby from after her husband's death.

She squared her shoulders. "Tell me where he is."

"I did the only thing I could. I contacted the boy's grandparents." A look of regret crept across his broad features. "Christian is living with the Eastons."