

A man with a light beard and mustache, wearing a dark flat cap and a tweed jacket over a white shirt and a purple patterned tie, stands in a snowy, dimly lit street at night. Warm streetlights and building lights create a soft, golden glow in the background, with snow falling gently around him.

CANADIAN CROSSINGS

BOOK THREE

*The*  
BRIGHTEST  
OF DREAMS

SUSAN ANNE MASON

CANADIAN CROSSINGS  
BOOK THREE

*She*  
BRIGHTEST  
OF DREAMS

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SUSAN ANNE MASON



BETHANYHOUSE  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2019949894

ISBN 978-0-7642-1985-6 (paper)

ISBN 978-0-7642-3548-1 (cloth)

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Cover design by Koechel Peterson & Associates, Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota/Jon Godfredson

Author is represented by Natasha Kern Literary Agency.

20 21 22 23 24 25 26      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For all the British Home Children  
and their descendants  
who have made their home in Canada.  
May this story shine a light  
on the hardships they endured  
and demonstrate the strength and courage  
it took to forge a new life here.  
Thank you for making Canada  
an even stronger country!

Trust in the Lord with all your heart  
and lean not on your own understand-  
ing; in all your ways submit to him,  
and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5–6 NIV

# PROLOGUE

DERBYSHIRE, ENGLAND

SPRING 1919

Quinten Aspinall stood in the Earl of Brentwood's study, awaiting his employer's imminent return. With any luck, after his daily ride over the estate, his lordship would be in good spirits and more receptive to Quinn's petition.

Even so, Quinn couldn't banish the nerves that dampened his palms as he struggled for a calm that had escaped him of late. Would Lord Brentwood understand Quinn's reasoning and agree to his request, or would his employer deem it necessary to terminate Quinn's position at Brentwood Manor?

Quinn took in a breath, attempting to focus on his blessings rather than his trials. The war was over. He'd survived. A major accomplishment to say the least. Yet that blessing paled when he thought about the fate that had befallen his family.

Becky, Cecil, and little Harry. *Lord, keep them safe—wherever they are.*

That simple prayer cemented his commitment to his present course of action. He would do whatever was necessary to find his family and bring them home.

After recovering from his injuries, Quinn never imagined he'd

be asking for a leave of absence to travel overseas. But then again, he'd never imagined his mother would place his three younger siblings in an orphanage or that the orphanage would ship them off to another country.

The door creaked open, and Lord Brentwood strode into the room.

Quinn straightened his shoulders and clasped his hands behind his back in the proper servant stance.

"Mr. Aspinall! Davis told me you were here. Home from that blasted war, I see." The exuberance on Lord Brentwood's ruddy face matched his tone. He tossed his riding gloves on the desk. "Good to see you again, lad. How are you feeling?"

Quinn reached out to shake his employer's hand, the old rush of affection rising in his chest. In truth, he'd missed this place and his position as the earl's personal valet. "I'm happy to report I've been given a clean bill of health."

"Excellent." His lordship moved to the credenza that housed his favorite spirits. "Does this mean you're here to reclaim your old job?"

Quinn hesitated, mindful that his answer might alter the man's jovial mood. "Yes and no, my lord."

The earl's hand stilled on the crystal decanter. "That sounds rather cryptic. Care to elaborate?" He poured a hefty splash of brandy into a snifter and carried it over to the massive cherrywood desk, the place where he usually spent each afternoon taking care of business pertaining to the estate.

"I do wish to resume my duties, sir, but . . . perhaps not right away." Quinn swallowed. "I require a short leave of absence first."

The earl frowned. "Does this have something to do with your family?"

"It does." Of course his lordship would figure that much out, since Quinn had always made it clear how much his family meant to him. "I need to make a trip to Canada."

The earl's glass halted halfway to his mouth, a curious gleam brightening his eyes. "Canada? Whatever for?"

Memories of Quinn's visit to the Dr. Barnardo's Homes for children crowded his mind, threatening to unravel his carefully held control. "Upon my return to London, I went to see my mother." He swallowed. "I found her living in a workhouse, my younger siblings now in an orphanage."

"I'm sorry to hear that." The earl's brow furrowed.

"I then paid a visit to the children's home, only to learn that my brothers and sister have been shipped off to Canada as indentured workers without my mum's knowledge." Growing restless, Quinn wished he had leave to warm himself by the flames in the fireplace. Since his time in the trenches, he couldn't get used to the constant dampness that seemed to perpetually seep through his bones. "Unfortunately, my mother is in ill health. I fear she'll not last the summer."

Visions of his emaciated mother had haunted Quinn for the four years he was away at war. He never imagined her looking even frailer than when he left. But when he'd found her bedridden in a workhouse infirmary upon his return, he knew he had to do something. Quinn suspected guilt played a large part in her listlessness, as though she deserved to die for abandoning her children. If he could find Becky, Cecil, and Harry and bring them home, it might give his mother a reason to get well. She didn't deserve this life of hardship solely because her husband had died prematurely.

Heaven only knew Quinn had tried his best to help her over the years, sending almost every shilling he earned back home to care for the family. To find out now that it had all been in vain was beyond excruciating.

"So, you're asking for a leave to find your siblings?" The earl studied him from behind the enormous desk.

"Yes, my lord."

"And if I refuse your request?"

Quinn resisted the urge to look away from the man's direct gaze. "Then I will respectfully have to resign my position. Though it would pain me to do so."

“It would pain me also.” Lord Brentwood shifted on his chair and leaned forward. “Whereabouts in Canada will you be going?”

“I’m not sure of the exact location. The ship lands in Halifax, Nova Scotia. From there, it will depend on where my brothers and sister were sent. I haven’t been able to discern that information as of yet.” Quinn clenched his hands into fists against his rising agitation. He still couldn’t believe the director of the Dr. Barnardo’s Homes wouldn’t give him any information other than the name of the ship and the landing point in Halifax.

Quinn shoved one hand into his pocket until his fingers met the familiar iron key he carried with him everywhere—the last thing his father had given him before he died. It had been the key to their family home in London, and by giving it to Quinn, his father had effectively bestowed upon him the title of head of household. The cool metal reminded Quinn of the promise he’d made and gave him the boost of courage he needed to continue. “If it’s too much to ask that you hold my position, I’ll certainly respect your decision, sir. But this is something I have to do. I won’t rest until my family is back together again.”

The earl nodded. “A sentiment I understand all too well.” A shadow crossed the man’s features and, for a moment, real anguish flashed in his eyes.

To Quinn’s chagrin, he realized he’d not even inquired about the earl’s family and how they had fared since Quinn left for the war. “I trust Lady Brentwood and Lady Amelia are both well?”

“They are. Thank you for asking.” He paused. “My niece, on the other hand, is a different story.”

“Miss Julia?” Quinn sucked in a breath at the memory of the vivacious girl. She’d come to live with the earl and his family at the age of thirteen, following the sudden death of her parents. After an appropriate time to grieve and become accustomed to her new home, Julia had eventually found solace in the company of her cousin, Amelia, and the squeals of girlish laughter often rang throughout the halls of Brentwood Manor. “I hope nothing dire has happened to her.”

“Not in the way you’re thinking. But bad enough.” The earl pushed up from the desk. “Julia insisted on helping with the war efforts—against my wishes, I might add. She went off to aid the medics with the wounded soldiers, a task no proper young lady should undertake.”

“Having been a wounded soldier myself, I think it a noble undertaking. I know I appreciated any help I received.”

The earl shot him an annoyed glance.

Quinn almost bit his tongue. He would have to get used to keeping his opinions to himself when they were not asked for.

“I had a feeling nothing good would come of it.” His lordship lifted his chin in a manner that meant only one thing. Disapproval. “Right before the war ended, she ran off with one of the Canadian soldiers.”

“Oh. How . . . unfortunate.” Why did the weight of disappointment hit Quinn so hard? It wasn’t as if he could ever have hoped to win the girl’s affections. She would never have looked twice at a servant, except maybe to request a task be done.

“I believe your trip to Canada could prove most fortuitous.” The earl leaned an arm on the back of the chair, a pensive look on his face. “While you’re there, I’d like you to find Julia and bring her home.”

Quinn snapped to attention. “I beg your pardon?”

“Julia’s departure has devastated my wife and daughter. I’ll admit I came down rather hard on the girl, and unfortunately, we parted on bad terms. A circumstance I greatly regret.” He let out a sigh. “I’d go in search of her myself, but I can’t afford time away from the earldom right now. In the aftermath of the war, I’ve lost three of my tenant farmers—two in battle and the other from illness. I simply must rectify the situation, or the future of Brentwood could be in jeopardy.” His lordship came to stand by the fire, his strong profile highlighted by the flames. “Since you’re already headed overseas, I must take advantage of our association and ask for your help.” The earl moved back to his desk and pulled a velvet pouch from one of the drawers. “I’m prepared to

give you whatever funds you might require to cover any expenses incurred on my behalf.”

Quinn’s mind reeled. He couldn’t afford to be distracted from his main goal, yet he didn’t wish to refuse his employer, not without a very good reason. “Do you know where she’s living in Canada?”

“The man she left with, Private Samuel McIntyre, hailed from Toronto. That much I was able to discern. It would be the most logical place to start.”

Even with Quinn’s limited knowledge of Canadian geography, he knew enough to realize that Toronto was a far cry from Halifax. But then, it was feasible that his siblings might have been sent somewhere near there. The Barnardo organization had a receiving home in Toronto, and many of the orphans ended up on farms in the province of Ontario. Still, it would take time away from Quinn’s own search to have to look for the earl’s wayward niece.

An uncomfortable idea twisted Quinn’s gut. “Is it possible that Miss Julia might be married to the man by now? I can hardly wrestle her away from her husband.”

“I don’t believe that’s the case.” The earl’s shoulders drooped suddenly. “Amelia admitted several days ago that she recently received a letter from Julia, postmarked from Toronto. She said her cousin sounded rather desperate. That she needed to find a new place to live, but money was an issue, and she didn’t know what to do. Though Amelia was not happy about it, I insisted on seeing the letter.” His brows swooped down. “I hate to think of my niece being in trouble. I want her to know she can come home, though I fear she may not have that impression right now.” He straightened, adjusting the sleeve of his riding jacket. “Finding Julia will no doubt be a challenge, one I’m willing to reward handsomely should you succeed.”

Quinn stared at his employer, the man’s impressive carriage and intelligent gaze confirming that he was every inch a person of title. The earl had given Quinn a position in his household at a time when he’d been quite desperate, and over the years his lordship had promoted him from footman to his personal valet.

In truth, Quinn owed the man a great deal. How could he refuse to help him? Besides, if Julia was indeed in dire straits and Quinn could offer her some assistance, then he had to try. “Very well, your lordship. I’ll do my best. But even if I do find Miss Julia, she may not wish to return to England. I won’t force her to board a ship against her will.”

“I understand.” The earl pursed his lips. “Perhaps an added incentive might ensure you do your utmost to persuade her.” He walked toward Quinn, a gleam in his eye. “If you succeed in your endeavor, I will reward you with one of the tenant farms for your own. Free and clear.”

Hot tingles shot straight up Quinn’s spine. His own property? A place where he could reunite his family and fulfill the promise he’d made to his father nine years ago? How could he turn down the chance—no matter how slim—to provide a real home for his mother and siblings?

He squared his shoulders and nodded. “You have my word, sir. I’ll do everything in my power to bring your niece back to you.”

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## CHAPTER I

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NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA

MAY 28, 1919

Quinten strode along the Halifax sidewalk with determined intent. Today he would obtain the information he needed—even if he had to throttle the stubborn clerk to get it.

He'd just bid farewell to Emmaline and Jonathan, friends he'd made on the long voyage over. During their time at sea, Quinn had spent many hours talking with the pair, though poor Jonathan had been indisposed for a good deal of the trip due to extreme seasickness. Another young woman named Grace had also joined their entourage, and they'd discovered the three of them shared a similar quest. Emmaline had come to Canada in search of her father, and Grace was looking for her sister, a young war widow, in the hopes of bringing her back to England. Grace had left for Toronto the same day the ship docked, while Emma and Jonathan opted to stay in Halifax until he had sufficiently recovered to travel again. This morning, the pair had boarded a train bound for Toronto, and Quinn heartily wished he could have joined them.

If he'd been able to ascertain the whereabouts of even one of his siblings by now, it might have been a possibility. However, an overly zealous clerk in the inspection office stood between Quinn and his next destination. Today, he would not leave without that information.

With a grunt, he opened the heavy door and stepped inside. The Inspection Office, he'd learned, was the first stop for all immigrants. Anyone who failed the medical inspection would be quarantined or, at worst, sent back home.

Inside the room, an acrid smell of smoke and rotting wood lingered. More than a year after a devastating explosion had laid waste to a good part of the harbor, as well as the city itself, the horrific effects remained, and with the windows still boarded up, little fresh air could enter to dissipate the unpleasant odors. The city must have suffered serious financial consequences due to the scope of destruction. Why else would so many buildings still not be repaired?

Quinn glanced at the counter and held back a groan of frustration. The same difficult man sat there, writing in his ledger. Would today be any different from the last four times he had talked to Mr. Churly?

*An apt name to be sure.*

Despite their previous run-ins, Quinn pasted on a smile, determined to win the man over to his way of thinking. Sooner or later, he was bound to give in.

"Good morning, Mr. Churly." Quinn removed his hat with a slight bow. "How are you this fine day?"

The man glanced over his pince-nez glasses and gave Quinn a stony stare. "Your cheerfulness will get you nowhere, Mr. Aspinnall. My answer will be the same today as it has been the last three times you've been here."

"Four," Quinn said quietly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I've been here four times. This makes my fifth."

Mr. Churly snorted. "Then you're five times a fool, for my answer has not changed. I am unable to divulge the whereabouts of your siblings. That information is confidential."

From the corner of his eye, Quinn became aware of movement. He glanced over to see a young woman emerge through a curtain from a back room. She came forward carrying an armful of books

and set them on the counter, sparing Quinn a sympathetic glance. He recognized her from his previous trips to the office.

“Never mind gawking, Miss Holmes. Get back to your station.” The clerk’s harsh tone made the girl wince.

“Yes, sir.” She gave a slight lift of her shoulders, as though apologizing to Quinn, before ducking back into the recesses of the building.

Quinn held back a sigh. Unlike the boorish Mr. Churly, Miss Holmes exuded sympathy. Quinn sensed an underlying desire to help him. If only he could speak with her alone, he was certain he could persuade her to give him the information he so desperately needed. Unfortunately, it appeared Mr. Churly never took a break from his duties.

“Please, sir.” Quinn took out the worn photograph he carried with him, one depicting all his siblings together, and laid it on the counter. Perhaps the sweet faces of Becky, Cecil, and Harry would sway the man. “I’ve traveled a very long way to find my family. It would mean the world to me—and to my very ill mother back home—to learn where my siblings are and how they’re faring. Won’t you help me?” Quinn was not above begging at this point.

As the clerk begrudgingly glanced at the photo, his hand stilled on the ledger. Then he cleared his throat, placed the pen in the inkpot, and released a loud breath. “It’s not that I don’t empathize with your plight, Mr. Aspinall. But from what I understand, the children who are sent here through Dr. Barnardo’s organization—the ones who aren’t orphans, that is—have been relinquished by their parents. The families no longer have any rights to them. You certainly cannot interfere with your siblings’ placements. They will be subject to binding contracts, and as such, their employers won’t take kindly to anyone trying to contact them or perhaps attempting to lure them back home.”

“I understand, sir.” Emboldened by this divulging of at least some bare facts about the children’s plight, Quinn leaned forward to look the man in the eye. “I only want to ensure they are healthy and happy so I can report back to my mother.”

*May God forgive me for this fib.*

When Quinn had learned his siblings had been shipped off to Canada without his mother's consent, he'd vowed to do everything in his power to get Cecil, Becky, and Harry back where they belonged. Maybe then his mum would have a reason to live.

The man gave him a long look, this time not in anger or annoyance but in sympathy. Hope fluttered to life in Quinn's chest. His lips curved upward in anticipation of the man's capitulation at last.

But then the clerk shook his head again. "I'm sorry. I could lose my job if I gave out that type of information." He lowered his voice. "Your best bet would be to try the Fairview receiving home on the outskirts of the city. Some of the orphans are processed through there. Otherwise, I'd suggest traveling to Toronto. I understand Dr. Barnardo's has several receiving homes in that area. Perhaps you'll have more luck there. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ." He rose from his stool, gave a stiff nod, and disappeared through the curtain behind him.

The same stab of disappointment pierced Quinn's chest. He still had no concrete idea where his younger siblings had been sent. Yet maybe he'd received one tidbit of information he could use. All he had to do was figure out the location of the Fairview home.

He pocketed the photo, shoved his cap back on his head, and turned for the door. A brisk wind blasted his cheeks the moment he stepped outside. Though it was almost June, the proximity to the ocean kept the temperature at springlike levels. Quinn huddled inside his overcoat and pulled the collar up around his ears, scanning the buildings across the street. Perhaps he could find a taxicab. Surely the driver would know the whereabouts of the residence.

"Excuse me, Mr. Aspinall?" A tentative voice came from the alley between the Inspection Office and the next building.

Quinn turned to see the young woman from inside. She moved into the light, not fully coming onto the walkway. Wordlessly, she held out a piece of paper, her eyes imploring him.

He walked closer, effectively blocking her from sight, and accepted the paper.

“I have to get back before I’m missed,” she said. “But this might help with your search.” She turned to go, but Quinn reached out a gentle hand to stop her.

“Wait. How . . . ?”

“There were only three children with the name Aspinall. It wasn’t hard to find.” She pulled her shawl closer around her.

“Thank you, miss. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“I think I do.” Her eyes filled with moisture. “My younger sister went missing during the explosion a year and a half ago. I searched for two days, fearing she’d been killed, until a kind woman helped me find her in one of the emergency medical centers. I can only imagine what you’re going through, being so far from home.” She gave a wobbly smile. “Godspeed on the rest of your journey. I hope you find them safe and in good health.”

“Thank you again.” He squeezed her hand before she disappeared down the alley.

As he watched her retreating back, Quinn prayed the girl wouldn’t get in any trouble for helping him. With unsteady fingers, he opened the folded paper. The scrawled handwriting read: *Rebecca Aspinall, Hazelbrae, Peterborough. Cecil and Harrison Aspinall, Dr. Barnardo’s Homes, Toronto.*

He lifted his head to stare blindly down the street. Where on earth was Peterborough? Toronto, he knew, was a large city. He’d learned as much from his friends on the ship who were headed there. Quinn refolded the paper. He would find out where Peterborough was in relation to Toronto, and if it made sense to go there first, he would. If not, Toronto would be his next destination. Too bad he hadn’t learned this yesterday. He could have joined Emmaline and Jonathan on the train this morning.

But no matter. God’s timing was always perfect. Quinn had to believe that. He shoved the slip of paper into his pocket and headed toward the train station.



“Yer rent’s two weeks overdue. If you want to stay, I need payment in full today.”

Julia Holloway’s foot stalled on the first stair that led up to her room on the third floor. She’d hoped to sneak by without her landlord hearing her, but he must have been waiting for her to arrive home.

She turned to find the man, clad in a filthy undershirt that didn’t quite cover his belly, staring at her from the open doorway to his apartment. The sharp smell of sauerkraut and onions, mixed with ripe body odor, was enough to make Julia gag.

“Are you going to give it to me now, or do I have to follow you up to your room?” Mr. Ketchum adjusted one brown suspender over his shoulder.

“That won’t be necessary.” Julia swallowed back her fear as she rummaged in her bag for the last few dollars she had left. Funds she’d set aside to buy groceries. But eating would have to wait. She clutched the bills in a ball and held it out to the landlord.

“Count it out proper-like,” he instructed, making no move to take the offering.

Slowly she smoothed out the wad and counted it for him, bill by bill. “Four dollars.” She held her breath as she waited for him to take the money.

His eyes narrowed. “That’s not the full amount.”

“I . . . I know, but I get paid tomorrow. I’ll get the rest to you then. I promise.” She hated the quaver in her voice but was powerless to stop it. Her part-time janitorial job didn’t pay much, and if she got evicted from this hovel, she didn’t know where she’d go. There wasn’t anywhere better she could afford, not on her limited income.

Leering, Mr. Ketchum scanned her figure from the kerchief tied around her hair, past her plain dress, to the unflattering boots on her feet. “I can think of another way to pay me.” He took a step toward her.

Julia used every ounce of willpower not to flee. “As I’ve told you repeatedly, sir, I’m not that type of girl.” She held out the money, willing her hand not to shake.

Finally, he grunted and snatched the bills from her. She pushed her fingers into the pocket of her apron, discreetly wiping away the grime of his touch.

“I want the rest by tomorrow, or you’ll find your things out in the alley.” He spat a brown stream of tobacco onto the floor by her boot, then turned and lumbered back into his flat.

Julia did not waste a second. She flew up the three flights of stairs and down the hall to the room at the farthest end. With shaking fingers, she unlocked the door, let herself inside, and shut it, sliding the lock into place. She leaned her forehead against the wood, waiting until her heart rate slowed. Only then did she take a full breath and turn around.

A gasp strangled in her throat. The blankets from her bed lay in a twisted heap on the floor. Her pillow had been ripped open, feathers spewing everywhere. The drawers in her small dresser had all been pulled open, her clothing rumpled and tossed.

*How dare he!* Heat flooded her cheeks at the thought of Mr. Ketchum rifling through her undergarments. If he’d been searching for cash, he hadn’t found a thing. She kept her money on her person at all times for this very reason.

She crossed the tiny space to retrieve the blankets and straighten the bedding, doing what she could to sweep up the feathers. Despite the horrid living conditions, she did her best to keep the room clean and tidy. It helped that she didn’t have many possessions. Her one satchel with a few changes of clothing was all she’d brought when she left England. Her fingers sought the gold chain around her neck, the one memento she’d kept from her former life. Inside the filigree locket was her only photo of her departed parents. Nothing in her life had been the same since their untimely deaths.

Had she known that fleeing to Canada would only result in more tragedy, she never would have left Brentwood Manor and the protection of her uncle. How had her shiny dreams for the future turned into such a nightmare?

She ran the chain through her fingers, then resolutely tucked it

back beneath the bodice of her plain cotton dress. In this neighborhood, it wasn't wise to display anything worth stealing.

Julia walked over to the window, rubbed more of the dirt away so she could see the street below, then wiped her palm on her apron. Would she ever feel clean again? She yearned to soak in a hot tub filled with scented water, a luxury from home she often dreamt about. The best she could manage here was a quick wash with cold water from the ewer on her nightstand. Even if she managed to find the shared lavatory free, she could never relax in the tub, not with the many unscrupulous types in the building.

*Oh, Sam, why did you leave me? Why couldn't you accept the help that was offered you?*

She bit her lip, fighting the sting of tears. This kind of thinking would get her nowhere. It wouldn't help her toward her goal of saving enough money to escape this ghastly existence. And it wouldn't help her find her purpose in life. After what had happened to Sam, Julia was more determined than ever to do something worthwhile. To be of service to those who suffered. Her thoughts turned to the injured soldiers she'd assisted during the war, a ministry that had brought her such fulfillment. Too bad her uncle could never understand that.

Julia pressed a hand to her mouth, fighting a roll of nausea and homesickness. If only she could go back to Brentwood and see her aunt and her dear cousin Amelia again. But that simply wasn't possible. Uncle Howard had made it clear that if she chose to leave with Sam, he would cut her off from his money and his protection. His ultimatum had only fueled her stubborn pride and made her more determined to go.

Now, in the aftermath of the bridges she'd burned, Julia had never felt more alone. Whatever her future held in store for her, she would have to discover it on her own.