

RETURN *to the* CANADIAN WEST • BOOK 2

WHERE TRUST LIES



JANETTE OKE
.....
LAUREL OKE LOGAN



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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List of Characters

The Thatcher Family

Beth—Elizabeth Thatcher

Mother—Priscilla Thatcher

Father—William Thatcher

Julie—Beth's sister, four years younger

Margret Bryce—Beth's married sister, two years older

John Bryce—Margret's husband

JW Bryce—Margret's toddler son, Beth's nephew

The Montclair Family

Charles Montclair—Father's business partner and family friend

Edith Montclair—Edward's mother and Mother's closest friend

Where Trust Lies

Edward Montclair—Beth’s childhood friend and would-be suitor

Victoria Montclair—Edward’s teenage sister

Others

Jarrick “Jack” Thornton—Beth’s romantic interest from *Where Courage Calls*

Emma—the Thatchers’ maid

Miss Lucille Bernard—JW’s nanny

Lise—the Montclairs’ maid

Monsieur Emile Laurent—French guide and friend of Father’s

Penny, Jannis, and Nick—friends from aboard ship

CHAPTER
1

BETH GRIPPED THE VELVETY ROSE PETAL and gingerly tugged until it released from its place in the still-fragrant bloom. *What a shame! If only I had a way to preserve the whole bouquet.* But during much of the trip she had occupied herself with considering her homecoming scene at the Toronto station, and this solution seemed best. If she descended from the train carrying a box of fading long-stemmed roses, Mother would instantly be on alert to the fact that there was much more to tell about Beth's year of teaching in Coal Valley than she had previously disclosed. A flood of questions and assumptions would ensue, many more than Beth was prepared to answer. And she could think of no better way to conceal Jarrick's farewell gift—while still secretly treasuring it.

With a sigh she freed another of the wine-colored petals and gently tucked it with the others in the white handkerchief on her lap. She of course knew she needn't collect them all, but it was painful to face discarding even the smallest, most tightly curled petal. She drew the lace hanky with its delightful essence close to her face and breathed in deeply . . . remembering.

She could still see Jarrick back at the Lethbridge station, touching his pocket holding Beth's Toronto address and telephone number. Tall and broad-shouldered, his copper hair glinted blond where the sun's rays shone on it, trim mustache over a smile that also held sadness at her departure. The day-dream of soon receiving his first letter, maybe even hearing his voice at the other end of the telephone, made her face grow warm. *If only there's a reason to return to the West. If only news arrives soon inviting me to another year of teaching in Coal Valley this fall . . .*

Beth glanced out the window of her compartment as the train slowed for the Toronto station. She knotted the corners of the handkerchief and tucked the sweet-smelling little bundle safely away in her handbag. Next she quickly unwrapped from around the remaining rose stems a second handkerchief, repeatedly moistened during the journey to keep the flowers fresh. She rinsed and wrung it out in the sink basin in her compartment and tucked it away in a corner of her carpetbag. Her pulse was racing as the train whistle sounded and the station came into view. With a last nostalgic glance at the barren stems in their florist box, Beth picked up her carpetbag and followed the porter, who carried two more bags for her down the narrow hallway.

Squeezing past other passengers, she descended the oversized steps and arrived on firm pavement. Despite her anticipation, Beth felt exhausted. *No more trains!* she thought with a sigh. *At least for the next few months. It's so good to be home. Why does travel consume so much energy—even when I mostly sit?*

She scanned the station around her to locate her porter again. What she noticed first, though, was her father, his arm waving above the crowd.

But it was Julie's voice she heard. "Bethie! We're over here!"

Beth chuckled to see her younger sister's head bobbing intermittently into view. She pushed through the mass of travelers and into the arms of her family.

"You're home, darling. Oh, welcome home!" A tangle of arms encircled her, along with laughter and excited greetings.

Beth finally managed, "I can't tell you how good it is to see all of you! There simply are no words—"

"We've been *so* anxious for you to be home," her mother put in quickly, patting Beth's face with a white-gloved hand. "You look well. Are you well, Beth? But you seem thinner. Have you been eating?" Her mother leaned back to survey Beth, who was dressed in the same travel suit she had worn when she left Toronto last year.

"I'm fine, Mother—never better. Truly."

Julie pressed closer, grasping Beth's arm. "There's so much to tell you! Just wait till you hear! It's simply glorious." Julie's eyes danced with delight.

Immediately the girl was shushed and nudged aside by Mother. "Now, Julie, all in good time. All in good time." Turning back, her mother quickly said, "Here, darling, let Julie take your bag." Something in Mother's tone caught Beth's attention, but by then Julie had quickly grasped the carpetbag, and Beth was wrapped in her father's long, warm hug.

All speaking at once, they took her other bags from the porter, Father paid him, and the joyful family headed for the street. Her trunks from the baggage car would be delivered in due time, the porter had said.

They tucked themselves into Father's Rolls-Royce, and he nodded to the driver. Beth stared out at the long lines of traffic on familiar, nicely paved roads crowded mostly with rowdy little roadsters, delivery trucks, and periodically a sleek expensive touring car—all swerving at random to

dodge an oncoming streetcar or daring pedestrian. *What a contrast to Coal Valley!* she marveled silently. *I must have forgotten. . . .*

At last, they left downtown, rolled through a residential area under a canopy of trees, and stopped on the circle of brick pavers in front of the lovely place Beth had called home most of her life. She drew in a satisfied breath as her mother and sister climbed out ahead of her, Julie giggling and Mother pushing her forward with familiar admonitions. Beth was grateful to find that all was as she had left it ten months earlier. Her eyes lifted to the façade of the three-story stone English-manor-style dwelling. *It seems far larger than I remember*, she noted as she stepped out of the car.

As if on cue, Margret and her husband appeared in the open doorway. Beth ran up the front steps and into the embrace of her older sister, and on to John's as well. But her gaze soon was searching beyond them. Margret, wearing a knowing smile, placed a hand on Beth's arm and nodded toward the wide parlor doorway. Beth's hand flew to her mouth. A sturdy little figure with chubby legs was moving away from them as fast as he could. *My beloved JW!*

"Margret, he's gotten so big! Oh, he's grown up." A mixture of joy and sadness filled Beth's eyes with tears. Wiping them quickly away, she hurried toward her precious little nephew and tried to scoop him up in her arms.

But he twisted and wriggled free, taking refuge behind his father's legs. *He doesn't remember me!* The realization struck like a cold wind from the Rockies. Margret slipped an arm around Beth with a small chuckle. "Just give him a little while—he'll soon be following you everywhere until you're begging for respite."

Beth smiled, but she still mourned silently, then was fur-

ther jarred with another realization. *I don't really know him anymore, either.*

“He’s such fun for us, Beth,” Margret was saying. “You’ll see. We even taught him how to say ‘Auntie Beth’—though it still sounds more like ‘Annie Bet,’ I’m afraid.”

“He’s even *talking?*”

“Yes, more every day, it seems! He’s well ahead of others his age.” Margret paused and gave a little laugh. “At least, we think so.”

Julie had crept up behind JW, and the almost-two-year-old giggled when he saw her. “And you say Annie Bet just as perfectly as you say Annie Doolie, don’t you, little man?” Her tickling fingers sent the toddler squealing up the hallway with Julie chasing behind.

Margret gave Beth’s waist a gentle squeeze and led her into the dining room, explaining that lunch was waiting. “We want to hear all about your life out west, Beth. Mother shared most of your letters, but I’m sure there’s much more to tell.”

Beth pictured the flower petals safe in her bag. *More than you know, Margret dearest. More than you know.*



Beth opened her eyes cautiously, looking around the once-familiar bedroom. It had felt strange to wake up with her arms over the blankets rather than tucked deep beneath as she was used to in response to Coal Valley’s chilly nights and Miss Molly’s woodstove-heated home. She remembered the feel of the thick carpeting last night as she had made her way to the large, inviting bathroom. And that long soak in the huge tub was absolutely delightful—a stark contrast to the iron tub near Miss Molly’s kitchen that needed to be filled by hand from the stove.

But any opportunity to quietly reorient herself was interrupted by a quick knock, the door opening, Julie's sparkling face and "Time to get up, lazy bones!" greeting her. Beth couldn't help but laugh.

"Come on, breakfast is laid out, and your trunks are here." Julie pulled her into a sitting position and urged her to hurry before darting out as quickly as she had arrived.

Beth dressed and joined the rest of the family downstairs. She certainly was no longer accustomed to having the breakfast items on the sideboard being quietly refilled by a servant while the family ate and chatted around the table. But mostly they all had mercy on Beth, letting her eat and drink her tea without bombarding her with too many more questions.

After the meal, and once her luggage had been carried up to her bedroom, Mother insisted on helping Beth unpack and organize her things. Margret came along and dropped into the window seat, while Julie scurried between the trunks, peeking and poking and commenting on whatever caught her fancy. Beth, her mother, and their maid, Emma, pulled items out to store away. *Wouldn't Miss Molly be astonished if she could see all this commotion just to unpack?*

"Oh my!" Mother sounded genuinely alarmed. "What on earth is this?" She held up a simple calico blouse.

Beth took the garment from Mother's hands and tucked it back into the trunk with the other modest clothing, explaining quickly, "It's what I wore for teaching. I had items like this sewn for me. This made it so much easier for the students to relate to me." She was aware of a defensive tone in her voice and tried to produce an easy smile.

The very idea seemed to leave her mother speechless. She was lifting out similar skirts and shirtwaists, her eyes wide

with dismay. She held several of the garments up and turned first to Margret, then to Julie.

But Margret only said, “How gracious of you, Beth, to think of helping them feel at ease. No wonder your teaching was successful.”

Julie laughed brightly. “Don’t worry, Mother. From my visit I found she was well-suited to the area. But Bethie,” she coaxed—and for a moment Beth appreciated her deft change of subject—“you really haven’t told us *everything* about your adventures. Isn’t there anything else—*anyone else*—we should know about?”

Beth shot a sideways frown at Julie, then answered evenly, “No, I think I’ve been quite thorough about it all. And from last night’s dinner discussions and our breakfast conversation, I’m sure you’ve all heard a sufficient account, at least for now.”

Julie leaned into the trunk, near enough to whisper in Beth’s ear, “Liar!” Her sister’s short visit to Coal Valley had given her the edge over others in the household. Julie knew about Jarrick—had met him. And there was no way to predict what the girl might dare say next. Beth was relieved to see her sister sidle away toward the dresser with a brush and a box of hairpins.

But Julie wasn’t finished with her little game. Before Mother could question her about her evocative comment, Julie declared, “That’s all right, Bethie.” And with a teasing shrug, she added in a mock haughty tone, “It seems I’m the only woman among us anxious to hear *all* of the truth laid out *fully*.”

This time it was Mother who frowned, directing her words to Julie but obviously meant for all. “I will wait for an appropriate time for further discussions . . .” Mother’s voice drifted away.

“But we can talk about *our* secret now?” Julie insisted, leaning in closer.

Beth closed the trunk lid and straightened. “All right, what’s going on?”

Mother sighed, gave an almost imperceptible nod, and with a squeal of delight Julie burst out, “Don’t put your trunks away just yet, sister darling. You’re going to need them!”

Mother dismissed Emma with a wave of her hand and motioned for Beth to take a seat beside her on the bed. Beth’s heart raced. *What on earth . . . ?*

“As you know, we have wanted for several years to do some traveling. But with Father’s business requiring so much of it, we’ve not been able to do so. He has, however, agreed that now you all are of sufficient maturity that we would be able to go on our own. We have arranged for a cruise to see some of the large cities and other sights along the St. Lawrence and also along the eastern coast of Canada and the United States.”

Margret was nodding with an affirming smile. Mother hurried on, “Ships are not at all the cumbersome, unsuitable transports they once were—now very modern and comfortable, equipped with every convenience. I’ve heard they even hold indoor swimming pools, if you can imagine. Many of our friends have found a cruise to be an excellent way to travel.”

“New York City!” Julie burst out. “Just think of it!”

Beth felt her heart pounding and swallowed hard. “And when are you—when is the planned departure?”

A moment of silence hung awkwardly around them. The other three exchanged glances, then turned back to Beth. Mother finally said slowly, “The plan is that we—all of us—will leave for Quebec City this coming Monday. In fact, we’ve agreed to travel with Mrs. Montclair and her daughter Victoria. We’ve been planning this for several weeks now.” Her mother’s voice had grown more confident with each phrase.

Beth studied her hands, avoiding the eyes fixed on her.

They're waiting for an answer. Expecting enthusiasm. My agreement. Yet she suspected that if she said much immediately she would disappoint them all. "I've just come home, Mother." Beth swallowed again. "I had thought . . . I'd looked forward to . . ." Beth looked around at their expressions. She struggled for the right response. "I'll need to consider it." Another pause. "I certainly do need a bit of time to think it over."

All the anticipation had instantly dissipated. Margret stood and slipped away with a pat on Beth's arm, Julie quickly followed, and Mother last of all. She hesitated at the door. "We were so excited to tell you, Beth. Particularly Julie. I wish you had . . ." She stopped and sighed. "Your response is rather unexpected since you've often begged to travel. I hadn't thought there would be any doubt of your agreement." She shook her head. "And I don't know where you might stay, what you will do, if you do not join us. Father will be gone also. The house will be as good as empty. Please *do* consider carefully, darling. We've missed you dreadfully all this time. It hasn't been the same with you gone. And I don't think I could bear to leave you behind." Mother's last statement followed her into the hall.

Beth gazed down at her partially unpacked trunks and refused to give in to tears. But as she reached trembling hands to continue the task, her heart felt heavy in her chest.



"Would you have time for a walk with me?" Her smile for her father felt a bit tremulous as she looked at him from the door of his study.

He set aside the book he was reading. "Of course, my dear." He stood and slipped into his jacket, then followed her out.

Wrapping her shawl around her shoulders against the unusually cool June evening, Beth descended the broad steps with Fa-

ther and surveyed the possibilities. The driveway, though long, was not suitable, so she turned instead toward the expansive lawn. Beth expected that at least a circle or two of the property would be necessary to express all her thoughts and feelings.

With a chuckle Father fell into step beside her. “I don’t suppose these shoes have ever been on the grass before.” Beth stopped to look down at his hand-sewn calfskins. She had become quite used to walking outside whenever she wanted to think. Father took her arm, though, and they moved forward together. “My dear,” he said with a laugh, “I’m not as fussy as all that! It’s just that I’ve never walked the grounds before. It simply never occurred to me. Could it be I’ve become one of those dreadful snobs?” His eyes grew large as he feigned fear at the thought.

Beth laughed despite her emotions. “Never, Father. Not you.”

For some time there was silence as she gathered her thoughts. They crossed the lawn to a long row of French lilac bushes shielding the property from the street. Several large clusters of fading flowers still clung to the branches, emitting a familiarly pungent fragrance Beth had always loved. She breathed in deeply, then turned to her father. “I’m not sure I want to go,” she whispered.

“Mother mentioned that to me.”

Beth looked away for a moment, shaking her head and wincing. “What else did she say?”

“That’s not important right now.” They walked on a little farther, stood for a while before some large purple irises.

Shaking her head, Beth exclaimed, “I just got home! I can’t even explain how wonderful that feels. I haven’t even finished unpacking yet!” The next sound she made could have been a sob or a chuckle.

“I see.” Father tucked his hand under her arm. “Would it have made a difference if you’d had a week or two before departure?”

“I don’t know.” She sighed. “Maybe—but probably not.”

“What is it, then, that’s bothering you about this little venture?”

Beth turned to begin walking again, Father beside her. “Well,” Beth admitted, “primarily, I’m worried that I’ll get a letter asking me to teach again. And if they don’t hear back from me quickly, they might fill the position with someone else.”

“So you think the trip might put in jeopardy the possibility of a return to your school out west?”

“Yes, it could.”

“I see. It sounds as if you’ve decided to take the position if it’s offered?”

Beth whispered her answer, lifting her eyes to meet his gaze. “I have, Father. I love it there.”

She watched as sadness flickered across his eyes, and she turned her head. He gave no reply. Another long silence passed as they continued their circle of the grounds, Beth wrestling with conflicting thoughts. She finally asked, “Can mail be forwarded to wherever we are?”

“Yes, that would be a rather simple matter.”

“And we’d receive it whenever we arrived in port?”

“That’s typically what happens when I travel. Do you recall how many letters you’ve written to me over the years? And I’ve received every single one.” He paused and then said, “I can’t promise there wouldn’t be a delay. But then again, sending a telegram is always an option. In addition, we could instruct Jacob here to open any letter addressed to you that seems to be from the school board and telegraph the news to the ship when it comes.”

The thought ignited a faint hope. “That would be very helpful.”

“You might *enjoy* the trip, Beth. Have you yet considered that possibility?”

She felt herself softening. “Where will *you* be, Father? Why aren’t you coming?”

“Ah, yes, well . . . I shall be in South America. Mr. Montclair and I have acquired some new contacts there that need immediate attention. We may even hire an aeroplane once we’re in-country to visit the factories where the goods are produced. Who would have ever dreamed of such a thing? I may very well *fly*.” He held out his arms in mock wings and winked at Beth.

His dramatics made Beth laugh again. They had reached the tidy rows of fruit trees far to the back. A few still wore their late-spring blossoms. Father reached up for one to tuck in Beth’s hair.

He added more seriously, “The economy around us is booming once more after so many difficult years, and perhaps we shall see it grow as never before. And though I’m not as convinced as some who are throwing caution to the wind, I do believe in a steady expansion of our business endeavors—striking while the iron is hot, so to speak.” He paused thoughtfully. “I have always *enjoyed* travel, Beth, which is why I suppose I’m well-suited to this business. But I do regret my many absences from home. I’ve been gone too frequently as you’ve all been growing up. However, that is the harsh reality of life. I’m afraid there is a cost to *any* achievement, and often a decision to strike out in one direction means being forced to release what we leave behind, including those we regard with fondest affections.”

Beth knew by the look in his eye and the way his voice was

tightening that he was not really talking about his business any longer.

“I would like to keep you close with us always, my dear,” he said quietly. “But I could never begrudge you the privilege of making up your own mind and choosing your own road. In fact,” he said with a playful smile, “last year there was a rather easy path in front of you. You could have settled down with young Edward Montclair with the blessings of both sets of parents, and lived quite comfortably, I’m sure.”

“Oh, Father,” she interrupted, blushing at his teasing words. “You know he could be a friend only.”

“Actually,” he said, turning serious once again, “I rather doubt Edward will stay for long in the West. But you have chosen otherwise. Perhaps there is a little of me in you after all.” He took her arm, and they continued on. “You bear enough resemblance that your mother will certainly blame me for your nomadic propensities far away from us. I’ve no doubt that you’ve already encountered hardships and gone without much to which you were accustomed, but it seems to have suited you well. In fact, you seem all the stronger for it. I’m very proud of you, Beth.”

She leaned her head against his chest and slipped her arms around his waist. “Thank you, Father dear. It means more than I can say that you understand.”

She could hear him chuckle again, deep inside his chest. “Then again, sometimes choosing to strike out on one’s own takes one closer to *new* friends and special people.”

A gasp caught in Beth’s throat, and she buried her face in his suit jacket. *Julie! What has she been telling out of turn?*

But as they moved on, he said, “I received the most unusual telephone call two nights ago—on the evening before you came home. It was from a man, someone I’ve never met.

Imagine that!” He chuckled, not with humor so much as significance. “I think this man is someone I will need to meet. Someone I would very much like to get to know. At any rate, he asked to speak with *you*, my dear.”

Breathless, Beth asked, “What . . . what did you say?”

“I told him that you had not yet returned to Toronto, but that he could telephone again this evening to determine if you had interest in receiving his call.”

“Father!”

“I was *very* cordial, Beth. I introduced myself, asked him how he knew you. We had a little chat, the two of us. It was very . . . enlightening.” Though his words were lighthearted, he had turned his head and was studying her face carefully.

Beth, heart beating fast, tried not to imagine any details of what they had discussed. “Are you going to tell Mother about him? I’m afraid she’ll make a fuss. Are you—?”

“No, dear. I shall not tell your mother. But before he calls tonight, I believe it would be wise for you to do so.”

Beth gulped and nodded.