

A green parrot with a red beak is perched on a dark wooden heart-shaped object. The background is a golden, ornate pattern. The text 'Love Potion Number 10' is written in a white, cursive font across the middle of the image.

*Love Potion
Number 10*

a novel

A Jana Bibi Adventure

Apr 10

Betsy Woodman



Best Foot Forward

Drip, Drip, Drip

Jana awoke abruptly. Downstairs, in the fortune-telling salon, Mr. Ganguly was screeching something like “Water! Cold! Help!” She had not heard him put those words together before. She sat up in bed, still groggy, now hearing footsteps on the staircase and, next, a frantic knocking on the bedroom door.

“Jana mem!” came Mary’s voice. “Come now! Come quickly!”

Jana pushed her feet into her bedroom slippers and grabbed her heavy wool dressing gown off the foot of the bed, hurriedly wrapping it around herself as she made her way down the stairs. In the salon, Mr. Ganguly was flapping and jumping, trying to avoid drops of water coming from the ceiling through the elaborate wrought-iron filigree of his enormous cage.

“Bloody hell!” Jana almost never used unladylike language, but this occasion called for it. Water was dripping down one wall, ruining last year’s paint job, soaking the painting of Mughal ladies feeding parrots, and turning a deck of tarot cards that Jana had left on the side table into a soggy sponge.

She quickly got Mr. Ganguly out of his cage and onto her shoulder, then turned and ran up to the bathroom off her bedroom. There was no water to be seen there. She held the flowered enamel washbowl under the tap on the wall and twisted open the handle. A very few drops could be coaxed out.

She went downstairs again, and now the whole household was awake. Lal Bahadur Pun came running from his night watchman's post in the courtyard, small Tilku and old Munar from the room they shared in the basement. Mary was moving surprisingly fast for her bulk, hurrying to the kitchen building and calling for Lal Bahadur Pun to follow her. Between the two of them, they finally managed to turn off the main water line from the town water supply to the compound.

Jana went back into the salon. The water had stopped dripping, but it was puddling on the polished cement floor, and heading straight for the rug she had bought at the Kashmiri Palace. She quickly bent down and felt dampness on one corner of it. Not *too* bad, she thought, and began rolling it up. Mary and Lal Bahadur Pun arrived back with rags and started mopping here and there, Mary throwing a rag at Tilku and yelling at him to make himself useful. Munar fetched his broom of long soft sticks and swished it around, which merely served to make dirty swirls on the wet floor.

Finally, all five members of the household stood and stared and tried to assess the damage.

"Pipe froze," said Lal Bahadur Pun.

"Too cold in this place," said Mary.

"We should turn the water off at night," said Lal Bahadur Pun.

"*Now* you are saying that," said Mary.

"Jana mem, I thought the house was falling down, everyone was yelling so much!" Tilku said.

"At least we don't need to wash the floor today," said Munar, though that wasn't exactly true.

"Water! Cold!" Mr. Ganguly observed and flapped his wings as if shaking off the water from a birdbath.

"It had to happen *today*, of course," said Jana.

Of course. It had to happen on the day that the reporter was coming from the *Illustrated Weekly of India* to interview Jana and photograph all of them.

"I suppose we still have to do the photo shoot," said Jana. "We'll just have to keep to the dry side of the salon. And perhaps take some of the pictures outside."

"We will put our best foot forward," said Lal Bahadur Pun. "Only show the good side."

Best foot forward. That should be our motto, thought Jana. All of a sudden, she was desperately in need of a good pot of tea. Some fried eggs and toast with butter and guava jelly wouldn't hurt, either.

The others, too, all seemed to be thinking suddenly of tea.

"But tea requires water," said Lal Bahadur Pun.

"There's still a full jug from yesterday," Mary said. "Already boiled."

"Bit of a waste to boil it again," Jana said, "with fuel so expensive." Seeing the unanimously horrified looks, she added quickly, "But better than going without tea."

Lal Bahadur Pun and Mary and Jana went out the side door and through the courtyard to the kitchen, where, as Mary had said, the big clay jug of water from the day before was still full. Mary put the kettle on the electric hot plate, and Jana filled a small bowl, found some parched grains in the food cupboard, and went to feed Mr. Ganguly.

Meanwhile, Lal Bahadur Pun went back and forth inspecting the pipes, figuring out how to allow the water to flow to the kitchen building without having it reach the broken pipe

upstairs in the house. "There must be a valve somewhere," he kept saying. Finally, he found an ancient rusty valve on the kitchen wall, which grudgingly allowed itself to be turned shut.

The Show Must Go On

By eleven A.M, when the reporter was due, there was a semblance of normality in the house, although half the salon was damp and forlorn. Mary and Jana had carried a couple of kerosene tins of water from the kitchen up to Jana's bathroom, allowing Jana to heat a bowlful with the immersion heater and take a makeshift sponge bath.

To think, Jana scolded herself, that she had been growing impatient with her bathing arrangements! She had been longing for a modern bathroom, with a large gleaming white tub like the one she'd had at the nawab's, and hot and cold running water going to a lavabo with a drainpipe, not a bowl you had to empty down the hole in the corner of the floor. At least yesterday the water had come out of the tap on demand—better than today's situation. She should have known when she was lucky! A memory popped into her head of her grandfather boasting about the house having running water. The pipes are probably the original ones he put in, she thought; they should have been replaced long ago.

After washing up, she dressed in her green silk fortune-telling costume, complete with the emerald necklace she had thought was just costume jewelry when Ramachandran had given it to her from the storeroom at the Treasure Emporium. On discovering that it was genuine, she had considered locking it in a bank vault, but today she was glad that

she didn't have to go fetch it. Really, why have an expensive necklace if it caused you a lot of bother?

Moreover, she had to admit (although vanity was not her habit) that the green of the gems brought out the green in her hazel eyes. Would the photos for the *Weekly* be taken in color? Surely so, if they wanted to make the best of Mr. Ganguly's brilliant green plumage and bright red beak.

It remained to do something with her mane of hair, which was long and curly to the point of unruliness. "Oh dear," muttered Jana, looking in the mirror. "This mop!" Usually she tucked it into two simple braids, but with her fortune-telling garb, she needed something more formal.

"Mary, can you do anything with this hair?"

"Of course, Jana mem." Mary took up the hairbrush and studied Jana's head.

When Jana's two little daughters were still alive, Mary had always made small feeder braids at their temples, then woven them back into the main braids. Now she did something similar to Jana's hair, but also concocted an elegant swirling chignon.

"Jana mem, you tell that man from the *Weekly* that he is lucky that we are talking to him today," Mary said, brushing, twisting, and plaiting with deft flicks of her fingers, without even looking at what she was doing.

"I think we'll just act as if everything is normal," Jana said.

A skeptical look crossed Mary's round, pockmarked face. "Normal. Well, normal for this household is not normal for anyone else."

"Would you want it to be?" Jana asked.

Mary put the last few hairpins in Jana's hairdo. "This house—and the people in it—are usually better than normal," she said. "But pipes bursting is worse."

Jana sighed, and Mary went on: "Not many other people's

pipes burst last night. On Maharajah's Hill, no one lost water."

"How do you know this, Mary?"

"The potato wallah told me. He also said that here in the Central Bazaar, only two, three other houses had pipes burst. Old houses, like this one."

"Aha. Well, perhaps we'll do a renovation soon. Maybe put in a hot-water boiler."

A smile flashed across Mary's face. "Very good idea. On a cold morning, very nice. Even that boy Tilku might wash."

When Mary had left, the thought occurred to Jana that the emerald necklace would pay for a modern bathroom, with a shower as well as a real bathtub, long enough to lie down in, and a boiler. Something to decide later, she said to herself, as she checked to see if it was securely fastened around her neck.

A Reporter

Young Mr. Gopal at first aroused Jana's protective instinct. He was thin and stoop-shouldered, like an impoverished university student who scrimps on meals to buy textbooks and burns the midnight oil before exams. His smile was perhaps too ingratiating, but Jana chalked that up to nervousness.

She tried to put him at ease. "I'm so sorry you had to brave the cold. It's quite unusual even for this altitude." With Mr. Ganguly on her shoulder, she led the reporter into her sitting-room-dining-room-fortune-telling salon and pointed to the stained wall. "You can see that the frost last night was too much for our old plumbing."

Mr. Gopal gave a long, drawn-out wiggle of his head to express concern.

"Bad bird!" Mr. Ganguly squawked, and Mr. Gopal drew back with a start.

"Don't mind him. He had a rude awakening this morning," Jana explained, transferring the parrot to his perch. "It may put him in a bad mood for the whole day."

"I am very sorry about that," said Mr. Gopal, with a worried frown.

"Come, let's sit here," Jana said, gesturing to the table in front of the bay window, and Mr. Gopal put his shoulder bag down and faced the view.

"Beautiful!" he exclaimed. "Lovely!"

"It is, isn't it?" Jana always liked it when someone complimented her on the majestic mountain panorama, as if she'd had some part in creating it. "Tea, Mr. Gopal?"

First he refused, and then she insisted, and finally he agreed. Mary brought the tea tray and they each had a cup. Then Mr. Gopal began his interview, or, as Jana soon felt, his interrogation. I suppose he's just being conscientious and wants to do a thorough job, she thought.

"*Achcha*, Mrs. Laird, please give me your full name."

"I was born Janet Louisa Caroline Elizabeth MacPherson. I married Mr. William Laird, so Laird is my name now."

"I see. Thank you. Your date and time of birth?"

He wrote it carefully in his notebook: January 26, 1902.

"So, you are now fifty-nine years of age," he said. "You are quite well preserved."

Well! The cheek of the fellow!

"Your time of birth?" he continued.

Six A.M. Jana remembered her mother telling her.

"Are you going to cast my horoscope, Mr. Gopal?" she asked.

He looked puzzled for a moment, then said, "Oh, no, no, that's not *my* line of work. I just want to be on solid ground when gathering information. And you have lived in India all your life?"

"Almost all," said Jana. "I was back in Scotland from . . . let's see . . . 1919 to 1925. Otherwise I've been here. Well, not *here*. First at a mission station—my late husband was a missionary—then in Bombay, then at Terauli, just south of Delhi, where I was violin tutor to the nawab's children."

"And here, in Hamara Nagar—how did you happen to become a fortune-teller?"

Jana, after some thought, replied: "It was—community service, I suppose you might say. Some leading merchants of the town thought we needed an extra tourist attraction in the Central Bazaar, to help put the town on the map. They wanted to persuade people in the government not to place a large dam here."

"I see. Congratulations on the town still being here," Mr. Gopal said. "Now, you're living alone here—that is, without family?"

"My household staff *is* family to me," Jana said. "We take care of one another."

"I see. Including that rather fierce-looking man at the gate? A Gurkha, is it not? What's that costume he is wearing?"

Jana smiled. "Subedar-Major Lal Bahadur Pun. He's a retired soldier and expert bagpipe player. With a distinguished record for service during the last war. The tartans are his dress outfit. But sometimes he wears his military uniform."

That seemed to give Mr. Gopal pause, and he jotted down something in his notebook.

"And the strong-looking woman who brought us tea?"

"Mary Thomas. My ayah—well, she was my children's ayah, and then she became more of a cook and housekeeper.

A very resourceful woman, and strong-willed. Not to be tangled with.”

Mr. Gopal’s eyebrows went up. “There was also one small boy in the courtyard, when I came in.”

“Ah yes, Tilku. He’s a Nepali lad, an orphan, who was living at the Victoria Hotel.”

“And what does he do with himself all day?”

Jana paused. “Oh, he runs around town delivering messages, and talks about cricket with his friends. Or he chats with the bird, and takes him on walks.”

“And the bird? Mr. Ganguly, you call him? You claim he’s psychic, no?”

Jana’s first impulse was to say, Good heavens, I’m the last person to make such a claim about an animal; underneath this fortune-telling guise, I share the empiricism of my Scottish Enlightenment ancestors. And, after all, it had been *Mary*, spreading gossip among the townspeople, who had started that particular rumor, and the national press and All India Radio that had publicized the story about Mr. Ganguly inducing the police chief’s son to talk. But then Jana reminded herself that this kind of thing was helping the town build its reputation as a special place and a destination for tourists.

She thus said, “Oh . . . at the very least, he’s a sensitive creature and a very observant one. And sometimes animals just seem to have more of a sixth sense than humans do, you know? For example, dogs who run and sit at the gate just before their master comes home. And bird migrations . . . how on earth do they know where they’re going?”

Mr. Gopal thought this over and nodded. “Indeed. Well, do tell me about how you acquired our little sensitive friend here.”

“I . . . well, it was more that he acquired me, really. It was at the nawab’s. . . . One day we just found a parrot in the

garden. He'd had his wings clipped but could still fly a little. He didn't seem very happy."

"And when was that, Mrs. Laird?"

"Let's see . . . it was in about 1956 or so, I think? Five years ago?"

"I see. What month?"

"March? April? May? Time has flown so, and so many things have happened in between, it's hard for me to remember."

Mary reappeared, and Jana asked her, "Mary, do you remember what time of year it was when Mr. Ganguly arrived at the nawab's?"

"It was very, very hot," Mary said. "Mangoes were ripe."

"You're right, of course," Jana said.

"And the nawab's daughter had just had her birthday—that was April twentieth, I think."

"Ah, yes, it's coming back to me now."

"More tea, Jana mem?"

"Mr. Gopal?" Jana asked.

"No, thank you," he said.

By now Jana was tiring, but Mr. Gopal continued, asking more and more detailed questions. Just doing his job, Jana supposed, but really, did he have to know *everything* about their day? When they all got up and when they all went to bed? What their favorite foods were? Their amusements? Which wallahs came to their house at what time in the morning?

Mr. Ganguly listened and kept shifting his gaze from Jana to the reporter, his pupils dilating and contracting. He suddenly spoke. "What's your name?" he asked Mr. Gopal. "Your name?"

"Your bird would make a good reporter himself," said Mr. Gopal.

"Yes, there isn't much that he misses," said Jana.

Mr. Ganguly persisted in his query, and Mr. Gopal gave his name. Not satisfied, the parrot leaned forward, fixed the reporter with a stern eye, and asked again.

"Oh, Mr. Ganguly, don't be tiresome," Jana said. "Here, have a nut."

With the parrot distracted, they continued, Jana feeling increasingly worn out.

The interrogation finally came to an end, and Mr. Gopal said, "May I take some photos of you and the parrot in front of the window? And of him alone on his perch?"

"Of course," Jana said.

Then, having taken a couple dozen photographs indoors, Mr. Gopal suggested that he snap the entire household outside, in front of the sign reading "Jana Bibi's Excellent Fortunes" on the gate to the house.

"Just a nice spontaneous picture," said Mr. Gopal.

"Of course," said Jana, and called the rest of the household.

"We're going to be in the magazine," Tilku said as they gathered outside. "I am going to be famous."

"*Chup.* You be quiet," said Mary. "And stand still."

Click. Click. Click.

"I believe I have captured you, Mrs. Laird. You and your staff," Mr. Gopal said, and his tone had a smugness that Jana didn't quite like.

When Mr. Ganguly Adopted Jana

"Mother, you can never resist adopting strays," Jana's son, Jack, often pointed out.

But who adopted whom? Both in India and in Scotland, various animals had wandered into Jana's life: several stray cats; a dog or two; lizards; once, even, a fawn. She adopted

people, too, and they, her. All the members of her household had shown up just when she needed them, and announced that they were there to stay.

Mary, fleeing a violent husband in South India, had come to the mission station when Jana had three children under the age of five. She'd still been there—her pockmarked face a badge of security—during the smallpox epidemic that had carried off Jana's two daughters, and she'd kept Jana from throwing herself down a well in the aftermath of those terrible days.

Lal Bahadur Pun, with his irrepressible nature, military bearing, and super-loud bagpipes, had rid her home, the Jolly Grant House, of a troop of rhesus monkeys.

Tilku had established himself as Mr. Ganguly's friend. Old Munar, whose sweeping essentially just rearranged the dirt, had been hired by Mary; he had a gentle, saintly manner, did no harm, and regularly told the others to be happy about their own fates.

Mr. Ganguly was not the first bird to enter Jana's life. As a child, she'd made friends with a crow, and smuggled out bits of her lunch to it. But Mr. Ganguly was her first—and, so far, only—parrot.

It had actually been Noor, the nawab of Terauli's youngest daughter—then ten years old—who had first noticed Mr. Ganguly.

A flock of ringnecks visited the garden, as they did every day, calling to each other, swooping down like an emerald cloud, and investigating the possibilities for a feast in the mango trees. But the parrot Noor found on the grass did not seem to have come as part of the flock. His wings had been clipped, not very expertly, and he was obviously used to humans. He was potentially very elegant, with his black chin stripe giving him the air of being in evening attire, although he was clearly in distress. It was obvious that he had plucked

at his own breast and pulled out a few feathers, which made him look mangy and disconsolate.

"He's in party dress," said Noor. "Although a ragged party dress."

"I wonder where he came from," said Jana.

"Maybe he escaped from a fortune-teller in the town," Noor said. She reached down and scooped up the bird with her two hands. He fluttered a little but did not seem fearful or averse to being held. Then Noor held out her finger, and the bird climbed onto it.

Jana was impressed at how intrepid Noor was, but then, aristocrats were often like that, exuding a fearlessness born of always having been protected. Some people didn't know enough of the world to be afraid of it.

"I don't think he'll bite," said Noor. "Or, at least, he'll give us good warning."

Jana, too, put out her finger. The parrot climbed onto it, then up onto her arm, where he also seemed surprisingly at ease.

"He likes you!" said Noor. "I think he has adopted us."

"Do you suppose he talks?"

"Hello," said Noor to the bird, who looked up but did not answer.

Noor turned to Jana. "Can we keep him?"

"I suppose," said Jana. "If no one comes to claim him. And if he wants to stay."

"How can we test that?"

"Let's put him on the wall and see which side he seems most interested in."

The parrot showed a distinct preference for the garden side, turning his back on the fields beyond the palace.

"Shall we bring him inside?" Noor asked.

"Let's just see what he does," said Jana. "Perhaps he has a home he wants to fly away to later."

But the bird did not fly away. In fact, he stayed in the garden overnight, taking shelter under a bench. The next morning, Noor placed some bits of mango in a dish and put it in front of him. The bird looked very interested, downed the fruit in short order, and said, "*Aur! Aur!*"

"Did you hear what I heard?" Noor's face brightened with astonishment.

"I think so," said Jana.

"He asked for *more*."

"Well, let's get him some," said Jana.

When he had eaten another helping of mango, the bird said, quite clearly, "*Shukriya*," and then, "Thank you."

"He speaks two languages?" Noor said.

"*Merci!*"

"At least three, it appears," Jana noted.

By now they were convulsed with laughter, and were beginning to draw a crowd—Mary, several children from the servants' quarters, and a dozen of the palace staff.

"We should give him a name," said Noor.

One of the musicians who played in the garden at night was named Ganguly, and the name popped into Jana's head.

"Mr. Ganguly," she said to the bird. "Would you like that to be your name?"

The bird looked up, flapped his wings, and went back to the dish of mango.

"That's his name now," said Noor.

As time went by, it became more and more likely that no one would claim the bird. The palace staff made inquiries in the nearby village, and no one was missing a parrot. Mr. Ganguly's wings were allowed to grow out, the bare spot on his chest filled in, and he flapped about the garden more vigorously. He still did not fly great distances, however, or join any of the visiting flocks of ringnecks.

He allowed himself to be brought inside the palace, and sometimes perched on the back of a chair in Jana's room or on the windowsill in the room where Jana gave the children their violin lessons. He seemed to have distinct tastes in music, not liking anything slow or mournful but dancing spontaneously to lively tunes. Waltzes were not to his taste, either.

"Come, dance to this Strauss waltz," Noor would coax, without success.

Jana said, "If God had wanted parrots to waltz, I suppose he would have given them three legs."

It was Mary who first asked the question: "Do you think he knows how to tell fortunes?"

They spread some cards on the table in the music room, and Noor planted herself in a chair, with Mr. Ganguly in front of the cards.

Mr. Ganguly seemed familiar with the situation. He said to Noor, "*Nam? Nam kya hai? Name?*"

Noor and Jana and Mary all burst out laughing, and this seemed to egg Mr. Ganguly on. As soon as Noor told him her name, he walked back and forth in front of the cards, finally picked one, and handed it to her with his beak. Then he did a little bow.

When this got a round of hand clapping, he flapped his wings and gave another bow.

"What fortune has he picked for me?" Noor asked.

The card was a nine of hearts.

"What does that mean, Auntie Jana?" Noor said.

Jana had a glimmer of memory of her mother doing parlor tricks after dinner in the white-pillared house in Allahabad, delivering wittily optimistic forecasts to her elegantly clad guests. Wit failed Jana now, but she could still come up with optimism. "Nine of hearts? Obviously, that will bring you—the best of luck."

“Well, I hope so!” Noor said. She tickled Mr. Ganguly under the chin. “Good bird.”

“Good bird,” he repeated.

How old, Jana had often wondered, had Mr. Ganguly been when he’d arrived? How long might he live with her, cheering her up with his proclamations of “Good bird!” and “Jana Bibi zindabad!” She had read that Indian ringnecks could live to be twenty, thirty, even fifty years old, but for her small emerald-colored friend, how much of that was left? No one knew. But then, she sometimes reminded herself, none of us knows how many days and years we have left. Mr. Ganguly clearly did not worry about this, so neither would she.

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