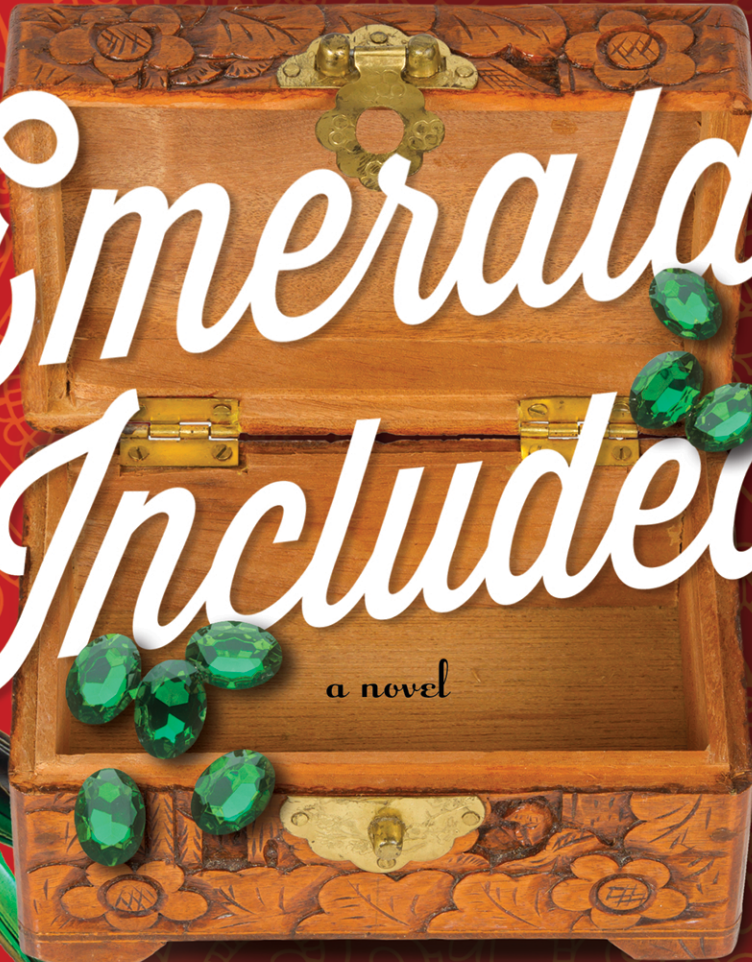


A Jana Bibi Adventure




Emeralds Included

a novel

Betsy Woodman



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel either are products of the
author's imagination or are used fictitiously.



Best Foot Forward

News from Glasgow

Bundled up in a heavy cardigan over a wool pullover over a warm jersey, Jana took Jack's letter and settled down in the window seat of the salon of the Jolly Grant House. She was grateful for the midafternoon sun streaming in. Her son's dutiful missives from Scotland had become quite scarce recently, and she'd wondered why. Had he been sick? Working too hard at that engineering job?

A moment later, she did a double take. Had Jack really used the word "marvelous"? That was pretty gushy for him. She reread: "We plan to be . . ." There it was, in plain, unmistakable English and Jack's strong, forward-slanting handwriting.

"Mr. Ganguly!" she cried. "Jack's going to be married!"

Her parrot detected the excitement in her voice; he picked up on any emotion, good or bad. He stopped tearing at the knot in the rope dangling from the roof of his cage, flapped his emerald-green wings, and cried, "Jack zindabad!"

"Yes," said Jana, "long live Jack!"

She turned back to the letter and read on, hungry for details. Just who was the lady who had captured her son's heart? Here, in her small town high in the Himalayas, more than four thousand miles away from Jack, Jana was not able to pepper him with questions and get immediate answers.

The things Jack saw fit to mention or omit in letters never ceased to amaze her. Such as the big promotion he had gotten at his engineering firm the year before—six months had gone by before he'd modestly sent her a tiny printed announcement.

So, how long ago had he met . . . ah, here was her name. Katarina. Katarina Esterhazy. Goodness, Jana wondered, what nationality is she?

Jack, obligingly if surprisingly, had anticipated this question. "She's Hungarian, but she's been here several years. She got out by the skin of her teeth in 1956."

Well, wasn't this all most intriguing! Her more-Scottish-than-thou son was marrying an Eastern European who had escaped from behind the Iron Curtain, and not one of the young women he met at dinner parties around Glasgow.

"As an unattached male," Jack had once revealed, "one is invited to fill in more often than one might expect."

Jana could well imagine the invitations coming in fast and furious. And why not? Jack Laird was definitely a catch. She considered his assets: the MacPherson castle outside Glasgow and the MacPherson fortune, first-class degrees in all his studies, the solid position with the established engineering firm. Not to mention extremely pleasant good looks, if she did say so herself. Jack was a highly successful combination of his American father's sandy hair and athletic build, Jana's good bone structure, and his own steady gray-blue eyes.

Granted, Jack was reserved, even a bit shy, and that could be a drawback when looking for a mate. She wondered whether Katarina was outgoing and had managed to coax Jack out of his shell. Or perhaps Katarina too was shy, and the two of them had been drawn to each other's quiet ways. Had it been a case of opposites attracting or similar people finding that they saw the world the same way?

Moreover, what did Katarina look like? Jack, the wretch, hadn't even put in a photograph. "Hungarian" conjured up two contradictory images in Jana's mind—people fleeing with bat-

tered suitcases, and the ultra-sultry Zsa Zsa Gabor, blond with prominent cheekbones and a come-hither look in her eye. If my son has fallen in love with a Zsa Zsa Gabor, Jana mused, he's seeking the opposite of me. She glanced into the mirror at a hazel-eyed woman of sixty, whose olive-colored skin and braided curly hair did not often see the inside of a beauty salon. Plus, she usually dressed for comfort rather than style—layers of sensible Western clothing in winter, salwar kameez in summer. Not exactly Zsa Zsa's evening gowns, with their plunging décolleté.

Jana flipped over the aerogramme and found even more news. "We're hoping that a visit in mid-May would be convenient for you," Jack had written.

"Hoorah," Jana cried. "High time!"

"High time!" Mr. Ganguly repeated.

"Come on, Mr. G," said Jana, "let's go tell Mary."

A moment later, the parrot was on her shoulder and they were heading out of the house to the detached kitchen on the far edge of the side yard.

Mary, at this moment, was not ideally situated for getting big news. She was absorbed in cleaning a chicken she'd bought this morning from the wallah who came around twice a week, shortly after sunup. Fortunately, Mary did not have to behead the chicken; the wallah did that beforehand, as a special favor. However, she still needed to pluck it and remove its entrails, a messy job. The large canvas apron she wore over her old white work sari was spattered with red, like the abstract paintings one saw in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*.

Mary was a sturdy South Indian woman with a round face, dark eyes, and a smattering of pox scars across her cheekbones. Strands of black hair now escaped from the bun at the nape of her neck. Brandishing a blood-smeared knife, she was an intimidating sight.

On seeing the pair of disembodied chicken feet on the floor—or maybe it was Mary with the knife—Mr. Ganguly went into a series of piercing screeches. Jana beat a hasty retreat back into the side yard. Mary wiped her knife on her apron, took the apron off, rinsed her hands, and came out, too.

Meanwhile, the noise brought the other members of the household up from various corners of the compound. Twelve-year-old Tilku appeared first, followed by old Munar, the sweeper, his broom of long reeds in his hand. Last of all, a very groggy Lal Bahadur Pun arrived; Jana felt bad about interrupting the Gurkha's sleep, since he'd been up all night at his watchman's post, keeping them all safe. At least this let her tell everyone the news at the same time.

She looked around at the circle of puzzled faces and said, "Everybody—I have an announcement. Something you will be happy about." She paused to give them a chance to guess.

"Madam is getting married," said Lal Bahadur Pun and Mary together.

Jana burst into laughter; she knew that this was their fondest hope. Their faces fell when she said, "No, not *me*. But . . ."

Mary's glance fell on the aerogramme Jana still had in her hand. "Jack sahib?"

"Yes!"

There was a chorus of "*Jack sahib ki jai!*" and "*Mubarak ho!*" and Tilku did a couple of dance steps. Then came a burst of questions: "Where, Jana mem? When? Who is the lady?"

"I'm not sure when," said Jana. "I think in Scotland, though."

Tilku did not let a lack of information deter him from making suggestions. He said brightly, "We will all fly to U.K. in an airplane and go to the wedding, yes? Maybe one of those double-decker planes, where one can sit upstairs or down." Tilku, who aimed to be a pilot, collected pictures of aircraft.

Lal Bahadur Pun announced, "Yes, the best thing is for us all to go to the U.K. *I* will compose a tune and play pipes for the wedding march."

Munar merely murmured, "Wedding, good. Thanks be to God."

Mary, however, weighed in forcefully with her own idea: "They should come here for their wedding. And then they should stay forever."

"I don't know if we can talk them into having the wedding here," Jana said, "but they *are* coming for a visit, soon."

This brought another round of cheers.

"When?" Mary demanded to know. "When are they coming?"

"In May, if all goes well," said Jana.

"Good." Mary grinned broadly in anticipation. "By then it will be nice and warm."

"But I'll be in boarding school!" Tilku wailed. "This is no good! How can they come then?"

"You can see them on term break," Jana said. "Or maybe they could go visit you at your school. Don't worry, we'll figure it out. You won't miss everything."

Meanwhile, Mary was mulling over another problem. "Jana mem," she said, "where will they stay? Jack sahib stayed at the hotel last time he came."

Jana hesitated barely a second. "They're staying here," she said firmly. "Mary, when you're finished with the chicken, shall we go around the whole house and see what we need to do to get ready?"

She went back into the house to look for the clipboard and a pencil and pad of paper and swapped her cardigan for a coat. When she'd moved into the Jolly Grant House, almost two years earlier, she'd done a lot of repairs, not to mention chasing out the troop of monkeys that had been there for years, and cleaning up the mess they had created. She spent lots of money before she even moved in, but the lower two floors of the look-out tower had never received any attention. The second year she was in residence, a pipe had burst in the large main room that served as her living room, dining room, and fortune-telling

salon, and a good number of rupees had gone just to get things back to scratch.

This year, she vowed, the house was going to be perfect. It was going to be up to the standard of her meticulous, observant son, and it was going to give a wonderful welcome to her Hungarian future daughter-in-law. The house and all the people in it would put their best foot forward.

✿ *A Prayer to Grandfather Jolly*

By the time Mary had found Jana at the front gate of the compound, a cold February wind had come up and the shadows were lengthening. Jana tried to write with her gloves on, finally getting too annoyed and stuffing the gloves into her coat pocket. Mr. Ganguly was plucking at a strand of her hair.

"It's a good thing Jack and Katarina aren't coming until May," Jana said to Mary. "I don't see any way to put central heating in this house. Any affordable way, that is."

She was already realizing that "perfection" was a relative term. Perfection in Hamara Nagar was not what perfection in Delhi would be, or Scotland, let alone some far-off paragon of luxury such as America.

"Still," she said to Mary, "we want to make things as pukka and comfortable as possible."

Jana tried to put herself in the shoes of a complete stranger—Katarina's shoes—and see everything about her home as if for the first time. Stepping out into the street, she cast her gaze on the ornamental wall surrounding the entire compound, the brick pillars flanking the metal front gate, and the shiny brass plaque engraved with "Jolly Grant House, 1890." All seemed in order until she took a close look at the sign that read, "Jana Bibi's Excellent Fortunes." In just two years, sun and rain had taken

their toll. The feathers of the parrot pictured in the corner had gone from brilliant emerald to pale yellow, and the ruby-red beak had turned pinkish gray.

"We can't have fading paint, can we now, Mr. Ganguly?" Jana said. "We want the sign to look as good as you do." Also, she was struggling to dispel a niggling worry that her future daughter-in-law might be put off by her small fortune-telling business. She hoped that Jack had already explained it to his fiancée.

Next, she stepped through the gate to survey the general appearance of the house and felt a rush of affection for this fantasy designed by her maternal grandfather, Ramsay "Jolly" Grant. The exuberant spirit of old Jolly seemed present in the lattices and gables and verandahs, and in the six-sided tower attached to the southeast corner.

People in town were proud of this eccentric structure; all one had to tell a team of rickshaw pullers or a porter was "Grant sahib's house" and they knew where to go, even though old Jolly had been dead for fifty years. Jana's friend Rambir, writing in the local newspaper, had mentioned the house as one of the historic spots that tourists should visit (and get their cards read in the bargain).

Of course, the sniffier side of Jana's family had always referred to the place as "Grant's Folly." Jana's paternal grandfather, James MacPherson, had described it as an "Indo-Hebridean vulgarity"—without ever having seen the place in person.

No one, however, regardless of their taste in architecture, could deny that the setting was majestic. The red corrugated roofs of the house and the conical hat of the tower made a romantic silhouette against the forested hills and the enormous expanse of sky.

"Jana mem," Mary said, bringing her back to her immediate surroundings. "Courtyard needs weeding."

"Oh, Mary, of course you're right," Jana said. "It *always* needs

weeding. Why are weeds so much quicker than people?" Her eye fell on a broken flowerpot and then strayed to the bench, which was encrusted with bird droppings.

She added "Clean up courtyard" to the list.

"All right, let's go inside," Jana said, and she and Mary went through the ornately carved wooden front door. Jana reached for the old-fashioned light switch.

"Light bulb out in chandelier," she wrote. "Umbrella stand broken. Coat rack too small. Wall needs touch-up paint."

They crossed to the far end of that hall, where a short passageway jutted off diagonally toward the tower. Through a door that also needed paint, they entered a large, echoing room, which had an exit on the far wall to provide access to the side yard and cookhouse. Mary crossed the room and tugged on the door, which finally opened with a long, complaining screech.

"This door always sticks, Jana mem," Mary said. "It's hard to go in and out when you're carrying a tray of food."

Jana went around the perimeter of the room trying to open the ten pairs of French windows; the curly wrought-iron handle of one of them fell off in her hand. She grimaced at the peeling paint of the frames and grimly jotted down "Replace all windows in dining room."

Then she stood in the middle of the huge room, with a sudden pang of nostalgia for things she had never seen but had only heard about.

"My grandfather gave dinner parties in this room," Jana said. "Big *tamashas*."

Jana herself had not had anything resembling a dinner party since she had moved to the Jolly Grant House. Everything about such a project, from making up the guest list to planning the menu, intimidated her.

Her favorite people in the town were of varying faiths, tastes, and dietary restrictions. No meat for some; no eggs for others. Many eschewed alcohol—at least in theory. Editor Rambir and his science teacher wife, Ritu, would certainly accept food

cooked on her premises; the more conservative Ramachandran, probably only a piece of fruit. While her Anglo-Indian optometrist, Mr. Niel Powell, would love bacon, her Muslim neighbors Hajji Feroze Ali Khan and his wife, Zohra, would sooner starve than touch it.

Someday, when she solved all the possible problems surrounding what to serve to which combination of people, she would give a party. Maybe even a big one, preceded by cocktails! And bring in the string band from the Victory Hotel, to add to the ambience.

For the foreseeable future, however, she would at least have nice family meals with Jack and Katarina. When they arrived, she couldn't just do what she did when alone, which was to shove aside her music papers or fortune-telling cards on the salon table, make space for a plate, and then eat while reading a book.

"It's time to fix this room up," she said firmly. "Don't you think, Mary?"

Mary agreed. The clipboard list grew: Replaster and paint walls. Fix pockmark in floor. Buy curtains—table—chairs—sideboard.

"Well!" said Jana. "On to the next!"

They climbed the stairs to the second level of the tower, Mary puffing a little and Jana feeling a tug at her knees. Upstairs, the six-sided contours of the floor matched those of the dining room below. This room too had decrepit windows, and the ceiling paint was peeling, although that didn't seem to bother the lizards that stuck up there as if with glue.

The landing also gave onto two small empty rooms. Holes in the wall and sealed-off pipes were evidence that they had been the WC and bath for the larger room. This must have been a very nice guest suite when her grandfather Grant had lived in the house. Well, it would be again, Jana decided.

"We'll put Katarina here," she said.

"And Jack sahib?" Mary said. "Where will he sleep?"

"We could clean out the storage room on the basement level," Jana said tentatively.

"No, madam." Mary said "madam" to Jana only when being emphatic or disapproving. "There is no European WC there. And Tilku will make noise."

Jana ignored this reference to the squat toilet. She pointed out, "Tilku will be away at school."

"*Munar* will make noise," Mary said implacably. "He snores like a bear. No. Servants' quarters are not for Jack sahib."

"Oh!" said Jana, put in her place. "The lookout room, then. Let's go look at it."

Up the final flight of stairs they went, to a sunny hexagonal room with a warm brown wooden ceiling. There was ample space for a bed, Jana decided, on this highest level of the tower. All they needed to do was shift the armchairs and side tables, bring in a luggage rack, and voilà, Jack would have his own domain, out of the mainstream of the household comings and goings. The relative quiet, the views of the gorges and hills on one side and the streets of Central Bazaar on the other—all this would make very nice guest quarters for her private, reserved son.

However, he would have to travel to the main floor for a bathroom—or use Katarina's? He wouldn't actually have to go through her room, Jana decided. Satisfied that the logistics were possible and proper, Jana asked Mary, "What do you think? Would Jack enjoy being up here in the lookout room?"

"Cent percent!" was Mary's verdict. "We will have first-class quarters for both Jack sahib and the lady he is going to marry. Also, I will make first-class food when they come. Like a ten-star hotel. Twenty-star, even." Her eyes gleamed.

She loves a challenge, Jana said to herself. It's a good thing, too; she's had quite a few of them working for me. Mary had been Jana's ayah when Jana's children were small; soon, she'd taken over the cooking; and now, in addition to that, she was a relentlessly efficient and thrifty housekeeper. The word "ser-

vant” didn’t begin to explain what Mary was: the Rock of Gibraltar.

Mary went off to see whether Tilku was stirring the chicken stew, as ordered, and Jana was left in the lookout room. She stood by the west window and watched the sun sink from the darkening sky into the gray and mauve bands of the winter horizon. Then she switched on the lamp, went to the low cabinet beneath one window, and poured herself a small cordial glass of LPN10. The tonic that had made the local pharmacist famous had turned out to be a delicious aperitif, too. She settled back in one of the easy chairs and thought some more about the implications of undertaking a new round of renovations.

Just think of the expense, said a small, sensible voice in her head. Just think of the bother. Oh, shut up, she told the small voice. You can’t let this marvelous old house slide into ruin. Because that’s what houses *do*, if you’re not constantly improving them. If you’re not going forward, you’re going backward.

Plus, a spiffier house made it much easier to be hospitable. Hospitality—wasn’t that what houses were *for*?

Why, her grandfather Grant had built a whole separate annex for guests. Sold off long ago, that building now housed Ramachandran’s Treasure Emporium, beloved by tourists and by Jana herself for its mix of priceless antiques and formidable junk. In Jolly’s time, scholars and artists and philosophers, Europeans of all stripes, and Indians rich and poor had stayed there—sometimes for days, sometimes for weeks.

It was an article of faith to old Jolly that Germans and Frenchmen could get along, and (Lord help us) even Englishmen and Irishmen. He broke the ice by serving excellent food and drink, bringing in crates of champagne and caviar and olives and cheese by muleback, even before the motor road to Hamara Nagar was built.

Emulating the emperor Akbar, he’d hosted leisurely conversations between a Muslim imam, a Hindu scholar, and a Jesuit

priest, keeping them happy with the best of tea and coffee and whatever delicacies their religions allowed them to eat.

Hospitality was *his* religion. In a letter to a friend, he wrote: "In both the Bible *and* the Qur'an, does not the prophet Abraham kill the fatted calf for his guests? And don't the Upanishads say, 'Guest is God'?"

Dear Grandfather Jolly, Jana now said to the memory of her generous ancestor, I have not yet lived up to your standard in hospitality. But from this point on, I promise you, I'm going to try harder. I will first set the stage.

A Fuse

Late that night, Jana tried to get the list of needed home repairs out of her mind. At least her own bedroom, directly above the salon in the main part of the house, was in good shape. She looked around it gratefully, shed her layers of clothing, and wrapped herself in a woolly robe.

Then she went into her clean but stark bathroom. Not many modern comforts there, but at least the single aging pipe usually delivered an adequate supply of water. She righted the tin tub that had been propped up in the corner, slid it across the bare cement floor, and positioned it under the tap. When the tub was full, she dipped a finger in and grimaced. Icy! It would take a good long while for it to heat up. She got the immersion heater down from the alcove in the wall and plugged it in. Immediately, there was a nasty little spit of electricity from the outlet, and Jana found herself plunged into darkness.

"Oh, blast," she said. "Not again."

She pulled the plug from the outlet and tucked the heating coil into its cubbyhole, then groped her way back to her bedroom, where she found her flashlight in the bedside table drawer.

The faltering little beam lasted for about five seconds, just long enough for her to locate her bedroom slippers.

Now in pitch-darkness, she heard some activity on the ground floor of the house. Mary's voice floated up the staircase.

"Power has gone, Jana mem."

"Yes, I know," Jana said. "And so has my torch."

"I have a candle, Jana mem."

A few moments later, Mary appeared, holding a candlestick with a burning taper. Her black hair was unloosed, reaching almost to her waist; the kohl that usually rimmed her eyes was smudged.

"I was washing my face," Mary said. "And pfft—no light."

Jana followed Mary down to the ground floor and out to the cookhouse, where Lal Bahadur Pun was already up on a ladder, inspecting the fuse box.

"*Khatm hogya*," the Gurkha announced. "Gone. Finished. See, this looks all black."

"Have we got another?" Jana said.

"This is the last one, madam," Lal Bahadur Pun said. "I can put a one-anna coin in place until morning."

"Won't that be dangerous?" Jana asked.

"Not if we are careful," said the Gurkha. "Don't turn the lights on. And don't use the hot water coil or the electric hot plate."

"I do very little cooking at this hour of the night," Mary said dryly.

"No coin in the fuse box, I think," said Jana. "We'll get along without power tonight. Thank you, Subedar-Major."

Back in her room, she put on her pajamas and a thick sweater, snuggled down beneath the blankets and quilts, and blew out the candle. No reading in bed this evening, nor listening to All India Radio. She settled down to sleep.

In the morning, she took up the clipboard again and added to the list of improvements: hot-water tank. It was the dratted

heating coils that always blew the fuses. Besides, she regularly gave herself an electric shock when she dipped her finger in the bathwater before taking the immersion heater out.

“We can’t have Jack and Katarina electrocuting themselves with bucket baths,” Jana said to Mary. “And there should be a hot-water spigot downstairs, too. As for the cookhouse—just think how much easier running hot water would make the washing up.”

“If we get a tank, we also need new pipes,” said Mary.

“I suppose you’re right,” Jana said, and added “hot-water pipes” to her list.

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