

# RESCUE IN THE ROCKIES

RITA FEUTL

COTEAU  
BOOKS



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# CHAPTER ONE

When she heard the latch of the heavy wooden door snap shut behind her, Janey panicked. She spun around, desperate to grab at the handle, to climb back into the life she'd just fled.

But the door was gone.

Even worse – the entire building attached to that wooden door had vanished. Janey turned again and frantically searched her surroundings, fear pushing away the anger and embarrassment that had led her to this point. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again. It didn't help. The mammoth, century-old Banff Springs Hotel, with all its towers, gables and ballrooms, had simply evaporated. Poof.

Janey took a deep breath, trying to calm the queasiness building up inside her while she figured out what was going on. Had she hit her head? Was she dreaming? No. This unreal landscape felt real to her. She was outdoors, but it was definitely not the wintery world she'd been in only an hour before. Gone were the snowdrifts from this morning, the smell of exhaust from the tour buses idling in the cold, the flurry of tourists taking selfies. Instead, she stood in a wide-open world, autumn leaves swirling gently around her feet and slopes of fir trees piercing a balmy, balloon-blue sky.

Despite the warmth, Janey shivered and hugged her woollen jacket around her, grateful that she hadn't taken it off before she'd stormed out of the hotel suite, desperate to get away from the weird stuff between Granny and Charlie and that stupid, stuck-up Max. But she wished she hadn't rushed so recklessly through the hotel, down a bunch of staircases,

out a heavy wooden door and into – this.

Because where was “this”? Was she still in Banff National Park? Or even the Rocky Mountains? How would she even know? She scanned the valley before her. Hold it. There! Facing her was the same Cascade Mountain that Granny had pointed out this morning as they drove in. The small peaks on the mountain’s left side always reminded Granny of a fan of playing cards held in someone’s hand. Janey almost smiled. Her grandmother loved her gin rummy.

Okay. This wasn’t so bad. She was still in Banff, facing Cascade from somewhere on Sulphur Mountain, which overlooked...Janey’s heart skipped a beat. The other thing that was gone? She scanned the valley to make sure, but the bustling town of Banff, festooned in wreaths and Christmas lights, had melted away. She’d heard that the air was thinner at higher altitudes. But could a whole town disappear into, well, thin air? Not a single building or the smallest stretch of pavement to be seen, only a serene landscape full of firs, pines and bare-limbed aspen.

Wait. Janey’s skin prickled. She took a deep breath. Was it happening again?

A few years ago, Janey had found herself popping into the lives of people who had lived decades, even centuries, earlier. But she’d been younger then and dealing with some family issues that had changed her life. Things settled down after that and Janey had come around to thinking that all the time travelling had simply been weird, stress-fed dreams. Now that she was almost 15, she was pretty sure that being transported to another time and place couldn’t happen.

But this – this vast wilderness of mountains and valleys that seemed to have swallowed up every atom of her modern

life – this felt pretty real. A magpie flashed past, cawing and scolding and squawking at the world. The magpie sounded real. The scent of leaves, dry and dusty in an autumn sun, and the slope of the mountain under her own feet – these couldn't be more real.

So what was going on here? Janey shook her head, trying to piece together her day. She and Granny *had* driven to the Rocky Mountains this morning. They *had* checked in to the fanciest hotel Janey had ever seen because they'd been invited by Granny's new boyfriend, Charlie. And Charlie *had* brought along his annoying grandson, Max. If you looked up pain in the butt in the dictionary, you'd find a picture of Max, all blond and sour-faced. Just thinking about him made Janey's anger and embarrassment boil up again. She kicked at the crispy mound of leaves beside her, grimly imagining his superior expression somewhere underneath the pile.

That's when a huge black boulder in the meadow on Janey's right shifted. It not only shifted, but one end swayed and turned toward her. At the same time, a breeze sprang up and Janey breathed in something foul and rancid. She stared, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

A bear. A big, black, stinky bear.

Oh crap! There was a rule. But what was it? Was she supposed to make herself big and tall? Roll up in a ball? She couldn't remember. The gears in her head weren't moving.

The bear took a step toward her. Janey's brain may have stopped working, but her feet developed minds of their own. They moved backwards, turned and sent her bolting down the slope, dodging massive rocks and naked trees. Her brain woke up. Distance. Janey needed distance. She lengthened her stride as much as she could, imagining herself on a soccer

field, running down a kid on the other team so she could steal the ball away. Or racing toward a finish line, the feel of the winner's ribbon against her body only a whisper away. Anything to urge her forward and not think about what was happening behind her.

It wasn't working. The bear was gaining on her. Its snorts and grunts grew louder, and Janey caught another whiff of rancid fat, this time mingled with rotten eggs. If she had to die, why did it have to be here, now, with this disgusting stench?

Fear and momentum sent Janey flying downhill at a speed and direction she could no longer control. She couldn't stop; she couldn't turn; she could only keep running from the danger chasing her down. But she was about to pay for this lack of control.

A large hole had appeared just ahead of her, a hole as big and black and stinky as the bear chasing her. A hole with a small fir tree growing out of it.

The fir tree was a puzzle that Janey had no time to grasp. In fact, she couldn't grasp or grab at anything as she raced down the slope. She was too busy trying to weigh her choices: bear or hole? Hole or bear? But choice was an illusion. When Janey tried to brake, her feet found no resistance, just a porridge of sloppy, wet leaves. Arms flailing, she skidded toward the opening and the tiny fir tree poking from it. Hoping to slow her descent, she sat down, hard. It didn't help.

Her feet slid in, then her body, and she was plummeting through the hole, like Alice, into darkness and a rising panic.

Her hands reached out, desperate to hang onto something. A tiny flicker of relief swept through her when she realized that the shadowy branches whipping past her grew

larger as she fell. Janey grabbed at one, then another and another, until she scraped to a rough, bruising stop on a sturdy, but swaying, branch. She gasped and tried to collect herself, but the smell of rotten eggs swirled around her. She felt sick to her stomach. Janey shook her head, trying to clear it and make sense of a sudden piercing noise. Nope, that high-pitched sound wasn't coming from inside her head. Someone was screaming. And it wasn't her.

Why had she let her grandmother talk her into coming to the Rocky Mountains just before Christmas?



The key scraped in the lock and the front door opened, letting the chill of a November midnight seep into the room. Janey planted herself in front of the entrance, pasted a frown on her face and tapped a non-existent watch on her wrist.

“Didn’t you say you’d be home from your date by 11, young lady?” Janey asked, trying hard to look disapproving. It didn’t work. Amanda Kane only grinned, gave her granddaughter a quick hug and deflected the question with one of her own.

“When’s it going to be my turn to pace the floors and wait up for you?” With her heels on, Granny bent just a bit to peck Janey lightly on the cheek.

Janey snorted. “Not happening. Nobody in the least bit interesting. Or interested.”

Granny collapsed gratefully on the couch, pulled off her high heels and rubbed her toes tenderly. “What about Michael?”

“Why do you wear those things if they hurt you so much?” Janey asked, sidestepping her grandmother’s question.

Her feelings about Michael were...complicated. Luckily, her question worked.

“Your grandfather used to ask me the same thing,” Granny said, then paused. Janey knew she was adding up the years since he’d died, not long after Janey was born. She also knew what her grandmother was going to say. But at least it kept Granny from thinking – and asking questions – about Michael, the twin brother of Janey’s best friend, Nicky.

Granny sighed, then smiled. “I’ll give you the same answer. They may pinch my toes, but they make the rest of me feel good.” She looked directly at her granddaughter, her smile turning into a wicked grin. “And Charlie likes the way they make me look too. He’s said –”

Janey clapped her hands over her ears. “TMI, Granny. Too much information. I don’t want to know what he thinks about your high heels.” She was happy her grandmother was dating, but she didn’t want to think too much about Granny’s new...*boyfriend*? With his grey beard and slightly balding head, Charlie Warden could hardly be described as boyish.

Still, she was glad to see her grandmother so happy. It had taken more than a year for Granny to recover from her cancer. To help out, Janey and her parents had moved from Toronto to Granny’s small house in Edmonton. While her parents lived in the apartment in the basement, Janey slept in the main-floor back bedroom close to Granny’s. Most times they all ate together.

The setup worked because Janey’s mum was away a lot. She designed and oversaw the building of emergency housing for an international aid organization. Whenever a country had a landslide or an earthquake or masses of refugees who suddenly needed shelter, her mum was on the next plane.

Right now, she was in Cambodia because of flooding.

Janey was proud of her mum, but wished her job didn't take her away so much. Just before she heard Granny walking up the front-porch stairs, Janey had been in the kitchen, crossing off another calendar square with a big red marker. Only 32 days until her mum was back. That's when Christmas would really start.

"...and he's asked us to go with him!" Granny said excitedly.

"Wait. What?" Janey pulled herself back to what her grandmother was saying.

"I said, Charlie's the first guy they call if they need a great Santa Claus this time of year. And the week before Christmas, he has this special gig at the Banff Springs Hotel. He's their official Santa."

Janey could see how Charlie's beard and his deep, rumbling voice would be good for the role.

"When he's there," Granny went on, "he has to show up at all the events – a brunch with Santa, Santa's story time, the staff Christmas party and so on. The hotel gives him a whole suite to stay in – two bedrooms, two bathrooms and a central area – and he's wondering if we want to come along."

Janey frowned. Something wasn't adding up. "Who – you and me? You, me, Mum and Dad? Hold on. With two bedrooms, where are you sleeping? No. This is going into that TMI zone again, Granny. What are you saying?"

"The invitation's for us. You and me. In one of the bedrooms. With its own bathroom."

"But right before Christmas? What about Dad? And Mum? She'll be back by then."

Granny paused. "I guess your dad didn't tell you?"

Janey shook her head. She and her dad had chatted at dinner before he'd gone out, but the main topic was her lost cell phone. And he was still out. "Tell me what?"

"Ahh. Come sit by me, kiddo," Granny said, patting the spot next to her.

Janey chose to ignore the small seed of suspicion taking root inside her. She settled into the couch and pulled a quilt over both their laps. The furnace was on a timer, and at this hour of the evening it was off, assuming the family was all tucked in their beds.

"You know how your dad's office is going to close for the holidays," Granny began.

"Yup. He says that the way the weekends work out, he'll have nine days off. He's already promised we can cut down our own tree this year." The last part of the sentence came dangerously close to a squeal. Janey couldn't help it. Christmas was her favourite time of year, hands down. The lights, the colours, the presents...

Granny nodded and started to say something, but Janey couldn't stop herself. "This'll be the best Christmas ever. Mum'll be here – remember last year how she was stuck in Indonesia until Boxing Day?" Janey avoided mentioning the Christmas before that, when Granny had been so sick.

"This year we'll have movies and decorations and carols and cookies and...everything. And all of us, here together."

Granny nodded. "Yup. We'll all be here. Your mum and dad managed to get tickets so they could fly back together and land here on December 23. So I thought we'd drive down to Banff and stay until the 24th. That's when the kids at the hotel all send Charlie, a.k.a. Santa, back to the North Pole. We could leave right after that and be home on Christmas Eve.

I'd even let you pick all the road snacks."

"Wait. Mum *and* Dad? But she was supposed to be home the week before that. I'm counting the days."

"Well, your dad looked at airline websites this morning, spur of the moment, and saw a flight to Cambodia going cheap. It comes back in time for Christmas. So he decided to take it." She took Janey's hand. "I think he misses your mum."

Janey felt stunned. "Well I miss her too," she said finally, pulling her hand away to cross her arms. "And what about me? Why can't I go to Cambodia?" Janey knew she was sounding childish, but this was all happening so fast.

"It was a single ticket, Janey. He couldn't find another one that cheap. Not for those dates. He almost didn't go. But then I told him about this thing at the Banff Springs. Charlie asked me a week ago, and I'd sort of dismissed it. But this could work out for all of us. Your dad can go and meet your mum for a little holiday before Christmas, and we can go stay at a fairy-tale castle in the Rockies. It would be a lovely, lovely place to spend a few days in December."

Great, thought Janey. She'd spend her holidays being third wheel to her grandmother AND her grandmother's boyfriend. And they'd all be living together in the same place. Ugh. Was he the type of guy who stayed in his pyjamas until he had to go out? Or breathed morning breath all over everyone because he didn't brush his teeth until after breakfast? She shuddered.

Besides, when was the last time she and her parents were on a family holiday? Not for forever. She wouldn't mind jetting off to some foreign country. Was Cambodia hot in December? Instead of shivering in the Rockies, she could be getting a head start on her tan. And she could finally ride an

elephant... Were the Asian elephants the ones with the big ears or the small ears? Not that any elephant had small ears but compared to the African elephant –

“...and Charlie has asked his grandson Max to come along too. They, of course, would bunk together in the other bedroom.”

Hold on. What? All images of elephants vanished. “What are you talking about, Granny?” Janey rose to her feet. “How old is Max? Is Charlie only asking me to come along so I can babysit his bratty grandson? No way. How old is he? Will I have to change diapers? Or play endless stupid wrestling games?” Janey babysat a little boy who always greeted her with a Mexican wrestling mask and a head butt into her knees.

“I think Max is about 16, so I don’t think the diapers apply. And the wrestling, well that would depend on how you two get along,” Granny said drily.

“Granny!” Janey tried to figure out what was worse, feeling obligated to look after a little kid or feeling awkward around an older guy. This trip was sounding like way more trouble than it was worth. She was about to veto the whole thing, when she caught the wistful look on her grandmother’s face.

“Your grandfather and I never did stay in that hotel,” Granny said. “When we were young we could only afford to camp in Banff. And by the time we could think about splashing out for a stay like that, he was gone.”

Oh sure. Lay a guilt trip on me, Janey thought. “Couldn’t we just go on our own?”

“It’s still a splurge, kiddo, and besides, this’ll be fun, going with the official Santa. Charlie says there’s room service and a fabulous spa. And it’ll be all decked out for Christmas. I bet it’ll be gorgeous.”

Janey knew that if she said no, her grandmother would never say another word about it. But she sensed that the getaway meant a lot to Granny. Was it Charlie or the Banff Springs Hotel that was the real draw? Or was it the Christmas festivities? She knew that Granny loved the holiday as much as she did. Christmas was the prize for getting through all the gloomy November days.

She sighed. Maybe the grandson wouldn't be so bad. And maybe a stay at a fancy hotel would be fun. Her best friend Nicky raved about a fancy tea she'd had there. Would a few days living in the lap of luxury kill her? She could make her grandmother happy, maybe get in a day of skiing, and then be home in time to finally celebrate Christmas as a family.

"Okay, Granny," she said. "Let's go to the Rockies and take in a little pre-Christmas revelry. But I will pick the road snacks – caramel corn and chocolate balls and maybe some of those wasabi peas."

"Are you sure?" Granny studied her granddaughter.

"Yup. My taste for spicy food has really improved."

"I'm not talking about the wasabi peas," Granny said.

"Let's go to Banff. We'll kick off the season in style and then meet Mum and Dad back here looking pampered and relaxed." She eyed her grandmother speculatively. "Did you start dating Charlie Warden because of these Santa gigs? Were you just looking for another reason to hand out candy canes, Mrs. Amanda Kane?"

"Horse feathers," said Granny, getting up. But she grinned as she went into the kitchen. "I'm just ready to have a little fun." She opened the fridge to hunt for something to drink, which is why Janey almost missed Granny's next words. "You don't...you don't think I'm being a bit of a fool, do you?"

In the light of the open fridge door, Janey admired the way her grandmother's post-chemo corkscrew curls had loosened into a halo of soft waves, once again dyed her signature, impossible blond. Her grandmother had been so brave. Janey waited until Granny pulled her head out of the fridge, so she could look her in the eye. "You mean to tell me that a woman who's stared down cancer and won is worried about some bald old guy with a beard and a belly and what he might think of her?" she teased. "He wouldn't have asked if he didn't want you along, let alone your gorgeous granddaughter." Janey swung her shoulder-length brown hair to one side and swished across the kitchen.

Granny laughed, and the familiar glint returned to her eyes. She poured herself a glass of buttermilk. "You know, since your dad feels he can fly off to somewhere exotic, it might be a good time to hit him up for a Banff clothing allowance. I know you like shopping at those second-hand stores, but even that costs money. Charlie asked us to pack something a little more formal, like a dress, which your dad may feel happy to pay for."

"Devious, Granny. You're just devious."

"I think it might be one of those win-win situations," she said, as another key fumbled in the lock, this time at the back door. Granny and Janey watched as her dad stepped inside.

"What?" He looked a bit sheepish.

"So I hear you're bringing Mum back for Christmas..." Janey paused, "...without me." A little guilt wouldn't hurt, she figured.

"Oh, good. You know." He hung up his coat, then came into the kitchen. "Yes, I'm meeting Mum. We haven't seen each other in almost four months, and she needs help hauling

all her gear back. I did want you to come along but there was only one of these really cheap tickets left. And,” he looked even more sheepish, “our 20th anniversary is coming up and we’re looking at this as sort of a second honeymoon. I’ve booked us a romantic little hotel...”

Ughh. Why did the adults around her want to share information she didn’t want to hear? Was it the weather?

“Win-win,” Granny muttered.

Right, thought Janey. “OK. So, while you’re jetting off to meet Mum in some exotic place, the rest of this family will be spending some time at the swanky Banff Springs Hotel. For which, in order to keep up family appearances, I shall require a few interesting additions to my winter wardrobe.”

Her dad looked at Janey’s outstretched hand. “Am I supposed to kiss this or just fill it with money?”

Granny rinsed her glass in the sink. “Give the princess a little credit,” she said to Janey’s dad. “And I do mean *credit*.”

He eyed them both sceptically. “This princess is still way too young for credit cards. But maybe a small amount of cash – to be spent wisely – is in order.”



Janey did feel like a princess when they pulled up to the hotel entrance and two bellmen whisked their suitcases inside. A valet waited patiently next to knee-high snowbanks as Janey gathered her backpack and the half-open bags of popcorn and other snacks from Granny’s ancient yellow Cadillac.

This *is* a castle, she thought as she followed her grandmother through the polished, brass-trimmed doors. The lobby was grander and more festive than anything she could