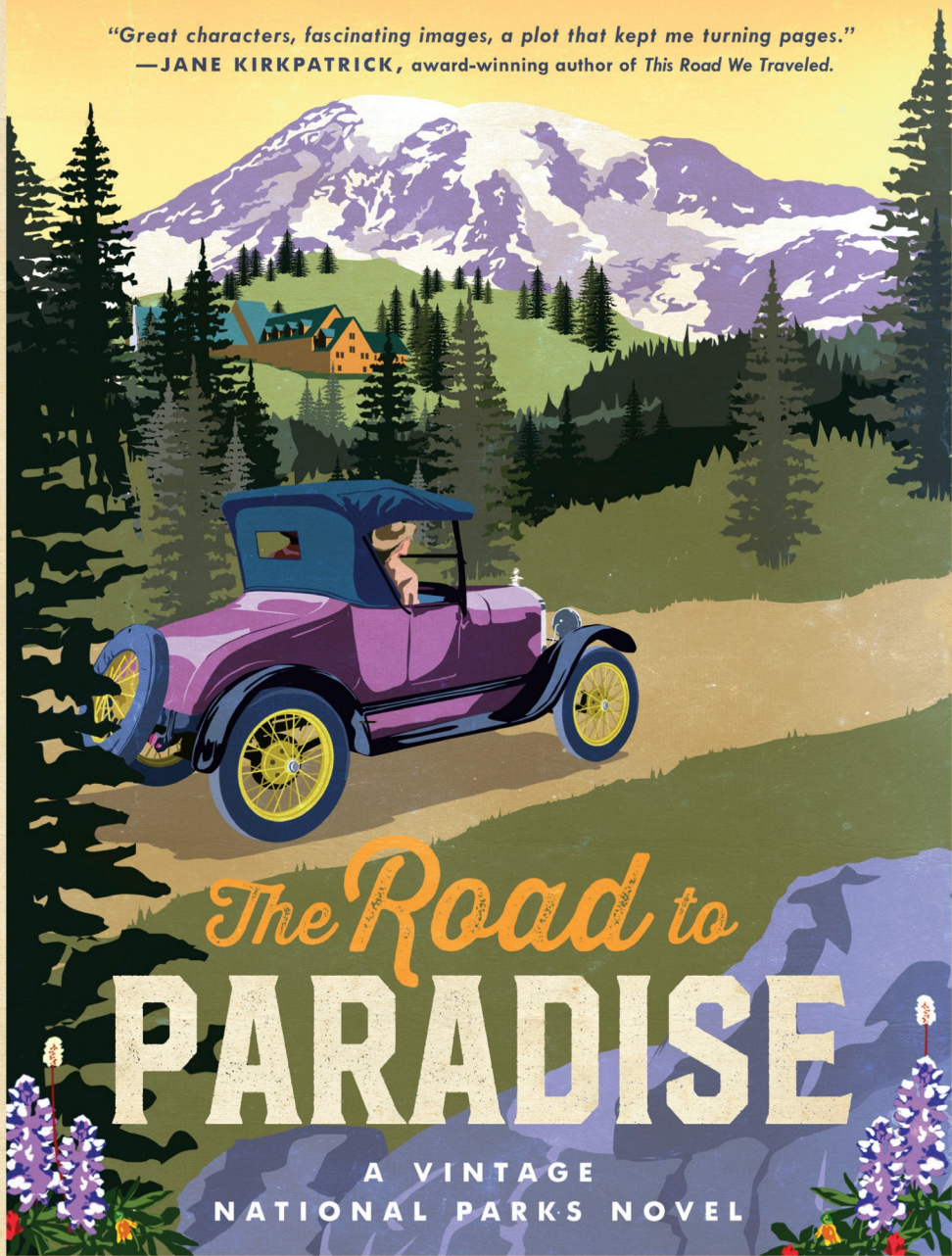


KAREN BARNETT

"Great characters, fascinating images, a plot that kept me turning pages."

—JANE KIRKPATRICK, award-winning author of *This Road We Traveled*.



The Road to **PARADISE**

A VINTAGE
NATIONAL PARKS NOVEL

Praise for
The Road to Paradise

“Don’t miss Karen Barnett’s new release *The Road to Paradise*. This novel combines endearing characters taking on big challenges, nail-biting moments hoping that the land developer doesn’t win the day, the magnificent setting in the national park at Mount Rainier, and happiness that there will be more books like this one. Keep it up, Karen.”

—LAURINE SNELLING, best-selling author of the acclaimed
Red River of the North series and many other novels

“A story as invigorating, inspiring, and perilous as Mount Rainier itself! *The Road to Paradise* by Karen Barnett pulled me in with humor and fascinating characters and a delicious romance, then kept me up late as Ford and Margie strive to save the national park that seems determined to kill them. The author’s experiences as a park ranger give this novel both authenticity and passion, and I can’t wait for her next national parks book!”

—SARAH SUNDIN, award-winning author of *When Tides Turn*

“Karen Barnett has done it again: held me hostage from the first page and made me like it. This seasoned author takes us to new heights as we encounter stories behind the formation of our national parks. Great characters, precise and fascinating images, a plot that kept me turning pages. *The Road to Paradise* is a top-notch novel that will remind readers of why we love our national parks and make us want to visit every single one, envisioning where the characters found their faith, friendships, and love. But I don’t plan to climb Mount Rainer . . . this author already did it for me!”

—JANE KIRKPATRICK, award-winning author of *This Road
We Traveled*

“A true delight. With its expertly rendered setting of breathtaking beauty and danger, combined with charming characters and a swiftly moving plot, *The Road to Paradise* is a journey worth taking more than once!”

—JOCELYN GREEN, award-winning author of *The Mark of the King*

“The majesty of Mount Rainier shines in Karen Barnett’s lush novel. The story is both gentle and inviting, with a warmth that meanders its way along every page and a setting that captivates. Barnett’s broad brushstrokes pay homage to a magnificent landscape, yet her gentle sketches draw the reader’s heart to the intricacies of God’s creation—not only in nature itself, but in the human heart.”

—JOANNE BISCHOF, author of *The Lady and the Lionheart*,
RT Book Reviews 5 Star Top Pick!

“As fresh as the northwest woods, *The Road to Paradise* is just that, a reading adventure replete with romance, suspense, and poetic prose, all wrapped in a gorgeous vintage cover. Having lived and worked in the national parks, I found this novel to ring with authenticity and spirit. Karen Barnett does credit to one of America’s most picturesque historic places. Well done!”

—LAURA FRANTZ, author of *A Moonbow Night*

The Road to
PARADISE

BOOKS BY KAREN BARNETT

FICTION

Mistaken

The Golden Gate Chronicles

Out of the Ruins

Beyond the Ashes

Through the Shadows

The Road to
PARADISE

A VINTAGE
NATIONAL PARKS NOVEL

**KAREN
BARNETT**



WATERBROOK

ROAD TO PARADISE

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This is a work of fiction. Apart from well-known people, events, and locales that figure into the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*In memory of Shelley Eddleman.
Thank you for sharing your love of books, tea,
gardens, and especially the Lord.
Your influence lives on through your students.*



*“You can never get a cup of tea large enough or
a book long enough to suit me.”*

—C. S. Lewis

Of all the fire-mountains which, like beacons,
once blazed along the Pacific Coast, Mount
Rainier is the noblest.

—John Muir, *Our National Parks* (1901)



June 1, 1927

*Mount Rainier National Park
Ashford, Washington*

*T*he promised view of the mountain peak waited, cloaked in mist like a tissue-wrapped gift not ready to be unveiled. Margie Lane drew a small, leather-bound journal from her pocket and braced it against her knee to jot down the words flooding her mind. The lush treetops in the valley below inspired her. Twisting sideways in the automobile seat for a better view, she tucked her skirt tight under her calves and then placed pencil to paper.

As Superintendent Harry Brown guided the old truck around a bend in the gravel road, Margie scrawled a jerky line across the linen page. She bit her lip and tucked the book back into her pocket. Best wait to record the thoughts tonight after she'd settled in.

The vista sent a shiver across her skin as she composed more lines for her evening log, storing them in her memory. *Droplets hanging from each*

fir needle like so many diamonds. She frowned. Diamonds were her mother's business. *Beads of dew, each a tiny mirror reflecting the brilliance of the mountain sky.* She filled her lungs with the cold, moist air, heavy with the fragrance of ferns and trees. No jewels could compare to the majesty of God's creation.

As a child she'd dreamed of living and working in Mount Rainier National Park, a park her father had campaigned to create. In time she realized that the daughters of United States senators didn't run off to live in the woods. They endured a slow death at the hand of high-society parties and tedious political functions.

But one fact remained—Philip wouldn't think to look for her here. Margie brushed knuckles across her cheekbone, the skin still tender. Her throat tightened at the memory.

The superintendent glanced at her with a smile. "Enjoying the scenery, Miss Lane?"

She dropped her hand, her fingers landing on the simple pearl necklace she'd chosen to bring on this adventure. "It's breathtaking. How much farther?"

"Only about fifteen minutes. I'll take you to headquarters, and you can meet the rangers."

Margie's heart jumped. She'd longed to meet the stalwart men of the mountains since she'd first turned the pages of Thoreau, Emerson, and Muir. Surely the men of whom Superintendent Brown spoke—the caretakers of Longfellow's forest primeval—would approve of her desire to shake off the trappings of the material world and immerse herself in the simplicity of God's creation. They needn't know the rest. "How many rangers work at the park?"

He pushed back his hat and glanced at the sky. "The whole park? We have six permanent rangers and bring on seventeen or eighteen more dur-

ing the summer months. You'll be working with Chief Ranger Brayden, getting things ready for the camping season."

The first man she'd need to impress. Hopefully she'd memorized enough botany and zoology books to suffice. Margie tightened the scarf around her shoulders as the cool spring air teased her neck beneath the edge of her cloche hat. "Has he worked long for the National Park Service?"

Superintendent Brown snorted. "Ford was born on this mountain, and he'll probably die on this mountain—like his father before him. The park service couldn't find a better man to look after this land."

"Ford?"

"He goes by Ford. Ashford Brayden is his rightful name. Can't think of anyone who calls him that, though."

"Didn't we just pass a town named Ashford?"

The superintendent nodded. "His parents were friendly with the Ashford family, the folks who homesteaded the area."

Margie sighed. Ranger Brayden—born on a mountain, untainted by human society. He sounded like the embodiment of Rousseau's noble savage. "I'm positive we'll get along splendidly."



Ford grunted as he swung the double-blade ax, sending yellow chips scattering. The spindly fir listed across the road at a steep angle, its root wad torn from the soggy ground during the storm. A massive cedar on the far side had broken the smaller tree's fall, and now it hung like a drunken man draped over a friend's shoulders. After a few more blows from the ax, the wood creaked. Ford jumped clear as the tree crashed the rest of the way to the muddy road. He wiped his grimy fist across his brow before slogging down the slope.

Steam rose from the warm back of the waiting Belgian. Athena stamped her hoof on the gravel-covered hardpan.

Walt Jennings wrapped a chain around the gnarled trunk. “That makes six trees we’ve cleared between here and Narada Falls today. I thought it’d take all day to open this stretch after last night’s blow.” He snapped the fasteners and straightened. “What’s stoked the fire under you?”

Ford grasped the horse’s bridle. “We could have campers this weekend. Those city folk get perturbed when their fancy automobiles can’t make it up to Paradise.”

“I enjoyed pulling that roadster out of the wash last week. That fellow was pretty hot under the collar seeing his flashy two-seater up to its fenders in mud.”

Ford clucked to the mare. The animal snorted once before dragging the log to the far embankment. “Just means more work for us.”

“We see more of those folks every year. Last summer their cars and tents were parked higgledy-piggledy all over the meadows.”

Ford sighed. He understood Jennings’s concern. Additional people and automobiles meant extra mess and noise. The society folks brought their city ways right to the mountain’s flanks without ever considering the dangers. They desired a simple diversion, a taste of freedom before departing in a swirling cloud of exhaust.

Wilderness showed no mercy, no favoritism. He knew that fact too well.

As the log teetered on the edge of the road, Ford bent to unhook the chain. Giving the log a shove with his boot, he sent the timber crashing into the ravine, snapping a small sapling in its path. He glanced at the misty sky. The clouds were burning off, and the mountain threatened to make an appearance. He couldn’t wait to get back to headquarters, prop

his feet on the porch rail, and inhale a strong cup of coffee. Likely as not, Jennings would head to his cabin to read. That suited Ford just fine.

A quiet afternoon alone with his mountain? Nothing could be better.



Superintendent Brown parked the automobile near a cluster of quaint buildings, just six miles past the park entrance. Margie stepped off the running board and sighed as her new calfskin boots sank into the muck. They'd been far too clean anyway. Perhaps a few smudges of God's good earth would improve them. Hopefully it would improve her as well.

Best of all, staying out here in the wilderness would keep her safe.

The superintendent banged the car door shut. "Welcome to Longmire, or as we fondly refer to it—Quagmire. In the summertime, most folks like to continue on up the hill to Paradise, but we keep the headquarters here. The Paradise meadows are pretty enough in July and August, but we'd be buried to our necks in snow during the winter."

She glanced around the settlement. Whatever jokes the man might make, Longmire's charm couldn't be denied. The limbs of the towering hemlock and fir trees hung low over the squat wooden buildings, roofs were coated with dead needles, and curls of smoke rose from stone chimneys. The National Park Inn, with a wide porch running nearly the full length of the building, stood out in particular. "It's lovely."

"The Longmire family homesteaded here and built a mineral-springs resort. When the park was established in 1899, the administration made quite a few improvements to the area. Lately we've added a couple of new structures, but we hope to make more changes in the future. Big plans. You might mention that to your father." The stocky fellow hitched up his trousers and smoothed his green jacket.

“I’ll do that.”

“Of course, it’s not at all like you’re accustomed to, living in Tacoma and Washington, DC.”

Margie tightened the belt of her wool cardigan as a tremor raced through her shoulders. Thanks to her father’s connections, she stood on sacred ground. She didn’t like to think what sorts of steps he’d taken to make it happen. “I’m certain I’ll adapt, sir. I’ve anticipated this adventure my entire adult life.”

The corners of his lips twitched, and he turned away with a slow shake of the head. “If you say so. Let’s go inside. I’m sure Ranger Brayden will be delighted to meet you.”

As if on cue, a tall figure appeared in the doorway. Ducking under the low frame, the man stepped onto the wooden porch. “Superintendent—I wasn’t expecting you today. You brought a guest.”

Margie froze midstep. The man facing her resembled nothing short of a Greek Adonis—his blond hair glinting in the filtered rays of light, eyes grayer than a bitter tempest. If her imagination had dreamed up such a visage, it couldn’t have done a better job.

Superintendent Brown placed a hand behind Margie’s back and gestured to the stairs.

The mud released her feet with only a minor squelch of protest, and Margie climbed the three stone steps to the porch, her heart pounding. Here was the man who would teach her the mysteries of the forest, the secrets of the mountain—her spiritual guide into the divine wilds.

The superintendent shook the ranger’s extended hand. “Ford, I have someone for you to meet. This is Miss Margaret Lane, and she’s going to join you fellows for a spell.”

The ranger’s eyes narrowed, lips thinning to a line above his rugged chin. “What do you mean?”

Margie pressed a smile to her face. “Ranger Brayden, it is such an honor to meet you.”

The man dragged a hand through his hair, brows drawing low. He gave her a quick nod. “Nice to make your acquaintance, Miss.” He turned back to the superintendent. “I don’t understand. Joining us?”

Superintendent Brown cleared his throat. “Miss Lane, why don’t you step inside and have a seat. Ranger Brayden and I will be with you in a moment.”

Margie swallowed as she pulled her attention from the ranger’s stern face, her stomach quivering. His reaction left little room for doubt: her presence was not welcome.

He stepped back and pushed open the door for her to enter.

She brushed past, the overwhelming odors of sweat and sawdust speeding her steps. A crackling blaze in the stone fireplace warmed the room, casting an amber glow across the dim interior. Two wooden rockers sat together like close companions, and a rag rug softened the plank floor. A ledger sat open on a table. One chair stood askew from the other five, as if Ranger Brayden had been seated before coming to greet them.

A narrow stairway led up to what must be a small loft. The ranger’s office, perhaps? The building seemed cramped for park headquarters, but perhaps these men didn’t spend much time indoors.

She wandered over to the hearth, running her fingers across the smooth gray stones. Volcanic andesite, probably hewn straight from the mountain, like Ranger Brayden himself. Doubt curled around her heart. Who was she to think she might belong here? Mama had argued against Margie’s decision, and running home would only prove her right.

She lowered herself into one of the waiting rockers, the chair creaking as she sat. She’d do whatever it took to prove herself worthy of this position.

After all, going home was not an option.



“Harry, she won’t last a day.” Ford dug his fingers against the weathered porch rail.

“Lower your voice; she’ll hear you.”

Ford spun, grinding his heel into the floorboards. “I don’t care what she hears. What were you thinking?”

Superintendent Brown raised his hands. “Give me a minute to explain.” He pulled off his large hat, smacking the brim against his palm. “I know you’re not going to approve, but frankly the brass don’t care. We’re struggling to make ends meet. The feds make the rules, but they don’t like to pay the bills.”

“What do bills have to do with this woman?” A twinge pulled at his neck, already sore from poring over the ledger books. He didn’t need Harry to tell him they were in trouble.

Brown stepped close, glancing toward the doorway before returning his attention to Ford. “Her daddy’s Senator Thomas Lane. When a wealthy tycoon with Washington connections asks you a favor—”

“And greases your palm?”

His boss scowled. “Let’s say, a few donations crossed my desk. Not for my pocket—for new park facilities. We’re stretched thin after putting up the new community center in the campground. And you still want that administration building by next year?”

Ford lifted his head, staring up at the moss-blanketed roof. The building wasn’t that old, but it had been poorly planned. His father had dreamed of erecting a two-story log building with a wide porch designed to welcome weary travelers. If only they had the money. “What are we supposed to do with her?”

Brown folded his arms across his ample girth. “She’s working for you,

even if her father is paying the bills. She can make nice with the visitors, teach them about the flowers, the trees. The senator assures me she's very knowledgeable." He grunted, jerking his chin toward the small parking area. "She can give Jennings a hand with the naturalist programs. Let her give some talks, show people around. Quote poetry." He rolled his eyes. "Trust me—I heard plenty on the way up here."

Ford pinched the bridge of his nose. "How long? And where's she going to stay?" A young, dark-haired beauty living among his men? It sounded like a recipe for disaster.

"You've got empty quarters, and I'm betting she'll be ready to return to civilization in a few weeks. But Ford, don't do anything to hurry things along. We don't want her running home to Daddy in tears. Understand?"

As a Douglas squirrel chattered in a nearby tree, the sound rattled in Ford's head along with his boss's demands. "This scheme is doomed and you know it, Harry. I'm not the man for this job—entertaining little rich girls? I'm not cut from that sort of cloth." His mouth went dry. "It's bad enough we have to pander to the townsfolk who come out on the weekends—now they can demand work?"

"You want to keep your job? Continue living here in the park?" Brown's bushy eyebrows folded inward. "Find a way to make it work. Show her a good time." He snorted, a smirk pulling at the corners of his mouth. "Who knows? Maybe she can turn you into a gentleman."

Ford gritted his teeth. "Unlikely."