

2004 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Moonstone Winner

# PARADISE PAVED

By Karen Rosenbaum



ELAINE SWALLOWED DOWN DOWN DOWN HER fear. There, it was there someplace ricocheting around inside her ribs. She couldn't tell anybody, certainly not Stevie and Ben, who were wrestling over Stevie's last Tootsie Roll in the back seat. If she told them, they'd beller, and she'd have to think of some way to calm them down. She stared out the front window of the Pontiac, across the shimmery asphalt parking lot to the supermarket.

Mama and Daddy had disappeared through those doors more than an hour ago. She'd kept track on her Minnie Mouse watch. An hour and fifteen minutes.

And she just knew they weren't coming back.

"E-laine!" whined Stevie. "Ben's pinching me." He kicked the back of her seat, Mama's seat really—Elaine had climbed over as soon as Mama had handed her the bag of Tootsie Rolls, hissed, "Be decent to each other," and closed the door behind her. Elaine had divided the candy—which Ben gobbled up first—and settled down to read her *Archie and Veronica* comic book while her brothers read *Superman* and *Donald Duck*. But they were all fast readers, even Stevie, who was just six, and by now they had read each other's comic books and eaten all but that one Tootsie Roll and were feeling cramped and hot in the car even though they'd rolled the windows down all the way.

"E-laine!" Stevie yelled again.

She turned around. "Stop it!" she shouted. Ben paused for an instant, then resumed secretive manipulations of Stevie's thigh. "Ben!" She reached over and tried to pull his hand away.

"When are they coming back?" Stevie spluttered. "Why are they so long?"

"They're always long," Elaine said, but it seemed to her they weren't always *this* long. What could they be doing in Safeway all this time? She knew that, unlike the little grocery store in

Boulder City, the big Las Vegas grocery stores had slot machines, and Mama saved up her nickels to play them. But an hour and fifteen minutes?

She peeled a big red star off the back of her left hand, the one Miss Hunsaker had stuck on this morning to reward her for playing Miss Hunsaker's favorite song, "Deep Purple," without one mistake. "Listen," Elaine said, "if you stop fighting, I'll tell you a story."

"Bout what?" asked Ben. He finally let go of Stevie's leg. Stevie started unwrapping the last Tootsie Roll.

"Well," Elaine said, "about angels."

"Angels," said Stevie, taking a big bite. "Good."

"What kind of angels?" asked Ben.

"Boxcar angels," Elaine said.

For an instant, Stevie and Ben both sat still.

"Boxcar angels don't exactly live in boxcars." Elaine pulled a stick of gum out of her shorts pocket and divided it in two. "Here." She handed the pieces over the seat.

"Angels live in heaven," Stevie said, swallowing the last of the Tootsie Roll and stuffing in the gum.

"But boxcar angels spend a few days every month hiding out on freight trains. That way they can see the world from down here and see how they can help people. People don't even know they are angels until afterward."

"Do they have wings?" asked Stevie.

"They hide their wings. They wear big coats. And hats to hide their halos. Anyway, once upon a time, there was a girl who was almost ten years old . . ."

"Once upon a time means it isn't true," Ben said. "And in Sunday School, they said that angels don't really have wings."

"Well, this is my story, not a Sunday School story. My angels have wings. Anyway, this girl—her name was Joya—she lived in a trailer with her mother and her little brother and her cat and they hardly had any money and they all slept in one bed."

"Joya's a funny name," said Ben.

"I wish we had a cat," said Stevie.

"And when it got to be Halloween, Joya didn't have a costume for the carnival at school. She hated to tell her mother because her mother worked so hard, she was a waitress at the



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donut shop, and she didn't have time to make Joya a costume, so Joya went to the store and looked at the costumes you could buy. There was a skeleton suit, all black except for the shiny white bones that glowed in the dark, and there was a pirate outfit and a cowgirl outfit and some princess outfits with crowns and net. Joya wanted to be a cowgirl, and she looked real hard at the cowgirl costume box. Her brother had a cowboy hat and a cap gun she could probably borrow. But she didn't have a vest or a skirt with fringe or boots."

"This story sounds a lot like Cinderella," said Ben.

"Just wait," Elaine said. "So Joya went home and she got her most worn-out skirt from her closet and she took the kitchen scissors and she cut up the bottom so it kind of looked like fringe."

"Uh oh," said Stevie.

"When her mother came home from the donut shop, she saw Joya cutting up her skirt on the kitchen table, and she got really mad. Joya only had three skirts, and now one of them was ruined. Just then there was a knock on their trailer door, and a big, wide woman in a gold cape and a big hat said, 'Do you happen to have a plaid skirt with a raggedy bottom? I'm on a scavenger hunt, and if I could find a plaid skirt with a raggedy bottom, I'd have everything I need. I'd win. And I'd give the person who gave me the plaid skirt with the raggedy bottom four big bags of groceries and three wool blankets and two Halloween costumes.'"

"That's dumb," said Ben.

"When are Mama and Daddy going to come back?" asked Stevie.

Well, thought Elaine, they might come back. After all, they wouldn't leave the car, would they?



ELAINE STRAPPED MINDY into her carseat, then handed her the plastic bowl full of Rice Chex she was supposed to have eaten in Sunday School, if they'd stayed. "Don't wolf them down," Elaine said. "Eat them one at a time."

"Little squares," said Mindy, who was used to Cheerios. "Good."

Elaine climbed into the front seat. Rob was already behind the wheel.

"I don't know," he said, loosening his tie. "I don't think I can do it. Can you?"

"We should probably try it more than one Sunday. Maybe it was just the speakers today." She shook off her shoes onto the floor. "We could try a different place. How about Pasadena? There are more colleges in Pasadena, and it's about the same distance."

"It wasn't just the speakers. It was all the people around us. Young marrieds like us. They are probably *very* nice people, they probably would bring us lasagna and brownies and help

us unpack the U-haul if they'd known we were just moving in." He sighed. "They're so sunny and cheerful and sure of themselves. I could tell. They believe it all—they even *know* it is true—angels and gold plates and stone tablets and burning bushes and everything else. And I know it's *not* true."

"Well," Elaine said, "I don't even know it's not true. I don't know anything. I never knew anything. But I *hoped* it was true once. Didn't you?"

Rob closed his eyes and nodded. Elaine chewed on her lower lip. "Maybe I still hope that. And maybe some of *them* are like us, underneath." She grinned. "It's just that it's hard to trust all those blondes with gorgeous tans." She fastened her seat belt and yanked on her too-short skirt. "I kept looking around the chapel, and it seemed to be getting smaller and smaller. Then I got a cramp in my foot."

Rob sighed. "Well, I know it's for Mindy that we were going to try it, but let's rethink this. We're going to tell her that a lot of this is malarkey but it's good to have a community and heritage? So she can go to meetings but she should keep her mouth shut?"

"Maybe she won't think it's malarkey. Maybe she'll be a true bleached believer."

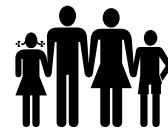
"Hungry," said Mindy, holding out her empty bowl. "More little squares."

"Is that someone coming?" asked Rob. A man in a light suit was walking across the parking lot. Rob stepped on the gas and backed the car into the street. Elaine smiled at the man, who may or may not have intended to talk with them.

"I liked singing the hymns," she said as she opened up the Rice Chex. "I love 'The Spirit of God like a Fire Is Burning.'"

"Yeah," Rob said. "Those hosannas are great. Let's teach Mindy the best hymns."

"More little squares," said Mindy.



WHERE WERE YOU?" Mama asks when Elaine opens the heavy passenger door of the ancient Oldsmobile, the one Mama stopped driving, thank heaven, three years ago, before she broke her hip and forgot how to walk. "Why did you leave me alone?" Her voice is high and hysterical.

"I just ran into the clinic to get their wheelchair, Mama." She clamps the wheelchair brakes, much stiffer than those of Mama's own wheelchair, which she had laboriously heaved into the trunk back at Mama's condo garage. "I was only a couple of minutes. Here. Let's get you out." Mama swivels awkwardly towards the door. Elaine bends her knees, braces her back, and puts her arms under her mother's arms. "Hang onto me," she says, and gets her up and rotated. "Now sit."

"Everything's so much work." Mama reaches for her heavy black purse. "The simplest things are so much work."

Sometimes Elaine contradicts her. Today she just wheels her into the clinic, gets the medical card out of her mother's purse, and presents it to the receptionist.

"Shirley, how are you?" Doctor Teal, her brown hair pulled back in a shiny tail, plops onto the examining room stool so she's eye level with Mama. She knows she has to speak loudly.

"I'm rotten," says Mama. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," laughs Doctor Teal. "But why are you rotten?"

"Listen," Mama says, "if you were eighty-eight, you'd feel rotten too."

"Eighty-nine," says Elaine. "You're eighty-nine now, Mama."

"That's even more rotten," says Mama.

"Do you hurt anywhere?" asks Doctor Teal.

"I hurt everywhere."

Doctor Teal looks concerned. "Where exactly?"

"You name it," Mama says.

"She says her knees and legs and feet mostly," Elaine offers.

"And my hands and shoulders," says Mama.

Doctor Teal stands and puts her stethoscope on Mama's rounded back. "Take a big breath for me now." She listens. "Sounds fine. You're quite a remarkable lady, Shirley. What's the secret of your good health and longevity?"

"Clean living," Mama says promptly. "No cigarettes, no alcohol, no caffeine." She looks darkly at Elaine who uses, she knows, though in moderation, alcohol and caffeine.

Doctor Teal pats Mama's arm. "Where are you living?"

"My own home."

"It's a condo with elevators and wide doors. They sold their

house in Boulder and moved to Vegas the year before my dad died," Elaine says. "We have someone to live here with her. A wonderful woman, Conchita."

"A busybody," says Mama. "And she picks her nose."

"Where do you live, Elaine?"

"In L.A. But I'm here for a week at least every other month."

"Have you thought of moving her down there with you?"

"She ought to move up here with me," says Mama. "I've got plenty of room."

Elaine sighs. "She made me promise years ago that we wouldn't take her out of her home. In L.A., she'd have to be in an assisted-living facility. We don't have any bedrooms on the first floor." She shrugs. "Our lives are in California. My husband is still working. And we help our daughter with her new baby. They live close to us."

"Everybody's just waiting for me to die," says Mama. "Me, too. I'm more eager than any of them."

"You've probably got years yet, Shirley." Dr. Teal holds her hand, and for a moment, Mama softens.

"Know how much I weighed when I was born?" Mama says.

"That's not in your chart."

"I weighed thirteen pounds, four ounces. Ended my mama's birthing days." She squeezes Dr. Teal's hand. "I had a hard time getting into this world, and I'm having a hard time getting out."

"That's because you aren't ready."

Mama grunts. "Every night I pray the Lord to take me. I'm ready."



MAMA TAKES LITTLE naps in her reclining chair in the den. She can sleep and still hold onto the newspaper or the pen she uses on the crosswords or the TV remote. Elaine waits till Mama wakes up, then sits on the piano bench to strap on her sandals. "I'm going down to the grocery store. I want to fill up your larder so that you and Conchita won't have to worry much about food till the next time I come."

"We used to do that two-year food storage program," says Mama. "But you can't do that in a condo."

"This will be for about two months." Elaine poises her pencil over a pad. "I've made a list. Do you have any special requests?"

"Cashews," says Mama. "And root beer."

Conchita is watching television in her room when Elaine knocks on her door and tells her where she's going. Then she drives the massive Oldsmobile over to Safeway and parks near the cart-return. She relaxes once she passes through the automated doors into the cool store. Las Vegas is much hotter than L.A.

A woman who looks familiar is holding up a large cantaloupe and sniffing the stem end. Someone from school maybe—Elaine hasn't been good about keeping in touch with

her high school and college friends, hasn't gone to any reunions. She smiles at the woman in a vague, non-committal way.

"Elaine," the woman says.

The name comes to her. Lou Anne's partner on the college debate team. "Susan."

"Are you living here?" Susan puts the cantaloupe in her basket.

"No," says Elaine. "But I'm here a lot now. I have a high-maintenance mama. And you? Have you been in Vegas all this time?"

Susan nods. "Twenty-five years in the classroom. Married the principal my fifth year."

"You teach English."

"English, yes." Susan shifts her weight to her other foot. "Does it show?"

Elaine laughs. "I remember how literary you were." Susan looks literary still, with her narrow, Virginia Woolf face, her little round glasses. "Do you have kids close by?"

"A boy at UNLV. Girls have flown the coop. Both married, Kitty in Phoenix, Renee in Houston. Five grandkids." She shows the fingers on her right hand, then becomes serious. "Remember Lou Anne?"

"Lou Anne Garston. Sure. I thought of her when I saw you."

"Lou Anne Raven now. She has ALS. She can't even talk. It's so sad. And her youngest is only a junior in high school. And A.J. Hunsaker, remember him?"

The name takes Elaine by surprise. "I remember A.J."

"He died last month. Shot himself."

"No."

"Yes. You had something going with him, didn't you?"

"We both worked on the campus newspaper. We ran around a little together. His aunt was my piano teacher back in Boulder. He shot himself?"

"It was on the front page of the *Sun*. He was the president of the Rotary Club or something like that. They found him in his office. Maybe he had cancer. I think Lou Anne wishes she could shoot herself."

"The Rotary Club!" Elaine says. "But we were all such radicals!"

"Well, shooting himself sounds radical. But nothing else. I was driving behind him one day about a year ago. He was in one of those humongous SUVs, the kind that could do combat with a tank. And on the back were all these revolting bumper stickers, NRA, Armed with Pride, stuff like that." She stopped talking. "You aren't into that now, are you?"

"Lord no."

"And someone told me he had signs on his lawn, Silent Scream sort of thing, big pictures of aborted fetuses. Neighbors were very unhappy, even the anti-choice ones. No one wants to buy on a block with a yard like that. "Hey," says Susan, "I don't have anything frozen yet, and you have an empty basket. Let's go next door to the smoothie place. We've got at least a quarter-hour of catching up to do, and I have a bad back. I can walk, but not stand."

"Fifteen minutes," says Elaine. "I can do fifteen minutes."



IT TAKES MORE than fifteen minutes. As she loads the car with groceries, as she drives back to the condo, as she hauls bags into the kitchen, Elaine thinks about A.J. Hunsaker. A.J. Hunsaker was the first guy who had asked her to go to bed with him, the first guy she'd told no. She had been surprised—guys then didn't just go around asking things like that. She'd not been at all tempted. She'd been a little Mormon girl, after all, even if she was a pacifist with long, straight hair, who plunked out chords on her guitar and sang "If I Had a Hammer."

Conchita finds her stuffing orange juice concentrate cans into the freezer. "Your mother upset. She worry about you." She points with her chin to the groceries. "I put away."

Elaine scurries into the den. "Hi, Mama," she says brightly. "I ran into an old friend—took a little longer than I'd planned."

"I never thought," says Mama, "that I would see the day when a child of mine would abandon me."

"Mama!" Elaine says. "I just went to the grocery store."

"Would leave me here alone. I can't be alone."



**"People can't believe things just because they love someone who believes."**

Elaine pulls the piano bench over close to Mama's feet. "You weren't alone." She sits. "Conchita was here. We wouldn't leave you alone."

"Alone," Mama says again. "I'm always alone. When is your daddy coming back?"

Elaine stares at Mama. She *looks* normal.

"Mama," she says. "Daddy isn't coming back. He can't. Don't you remember?"

Mama starts crying. "I get so confused," she says.

"He would come back if he could. He wouldn't leave you by yourself if he were alive."

"I'm so alone," she sobs. "Don't you leave me alone, too."

"I'm never very far away. Just an hour by airplane. I come often."

Mama stops crying. "I know." She swallows. "I want you to do something for me. I want you to promise me something." Elaine feels wary. "What's that, Mama?"

"Promise me."

"Promise you what, Mama?"

"Promise me you'll go to church again the way you used to

when you were young.”

“Oh, Mama,” Elaine says. “None of us can be the same as when we were young. I could just as easily climb the monkey bars at the elementary school; I could just as easily take tap dancing lessons again as I could be the little girl who believed everything everyone told me.”

Mama sniffs. “You never believed everything everyone told you.”

“I tried. I wanted to.”

“If you don’t promise, I can’t die. I want for us to all be together in heaven. I’ve got to stay alive till you go back to church.”

Elaine laughs. “But Mama, I don’t *want* you to die. You’ve just given me another reason to *not* go back to church.”

“I don’t think Rob would mind your going.” Mama rarely mentions Rob. She pauses. “If you really cared for me, you’d do it.”

“People can’t believe things just because they love someone who believes.”

“If your Daddy had believed, then maybe you’d believe.”

“Like Daddy,” Elaine says. “He adored you, but he couldn’t believe all the things you believe.”

“If I’d been a better mother, you’d believe.”

“Mama! That’s a terrible thing to say about both of us. You’re a wonderful mother. And I’m a pretty good mother, too. We care for our children; we teach them the best we know how, the best we can.” Elaine fusses with the maroon fleece blanket over Mama’s legs. “You know, I’m glad you believe even if I can’t. And if you’re right about things, if you’re right about heaven, then you can pray me and Daddy right into heaven with you.” And if you’re wrong, Elaine thinks, you’ll never know. “Look,” she says, “you got two out of three church-going kids. In our family, that’s probably a record.”

Mama’s chin wobbles. “But girls matter more. Nobody expects girls to leave.”

“All of Aunt Mildred’s girls left. Four of them.”

Suddenly Mama looks weary. “Hey,” Elaine says, “speaking of family, I haven’t shown you these pictures of the world’s cutest baby.” She reaches for her shoulder bag, extracts a fat envelope. “Look.” She sticks big glossy prints in front of Mama’s face. “Here Rob is holding her.” She looks at her watch. “He’s tending her right now, too, so Mindy can work a few hours a day. And here she is on Greg’s shoulders—he’s such a doting dad.” She smiles at another print. “Look. Isn’t she adorable? That’s the outfit that I got her with the money you sent.”

Mama glances at the photograph. “She looks a little like you,” she says.

Elaine gathers up the pictures and drags the piano bench back.

“Whatever happened to Miss Hunsaker? You remember—my piano teacher?”

Mama tries to concentrate. “I haven’t heard anything about her for a long time. I don’t think she ever married. Guess she’s still in Boulder. There was another Hunsaker though, one you knew in college, and something happened to him.”

“Her nephew. A.J. He died.” Elaine sits up straight. “Do you know what I remember about Miss Hunsaker? It was in the sixth grade, and Mrs. Gould couldn’t teach the last month because she was too pregnant, and they didn’t let too-pregnant women teach grade school then, and so they got Miss Hunsaker to substitute for all of May. I don’t think Miss Hunsaker liked kids much, and I know she didn’t like teaching the sixth grade. Anyway, one morning, she stumbled into the classroom in a long, yellow, organdy kind of dress and high-heeled sandals. She kept giggling. And then the principal and the fifth grade teacher came in and took her off to the teacher’s room, and when she came back, they’d cut about two feet off the bottom of her dress and probably filled her up with coffee. Do you remember that?”

Mama cocks her head. “I think so. It was a scandal.”

“It was! Hey! How would you like to drive over to Boulder tomorrow? Look around the town?”

“I’m so hard to move,” says Mama. She looks at her legs, now elevated, under the fleece.

“We can stay in the car if you want. Just see how the old house looks. My schools. Maybe Miss Hunsaker’s house. The tennis courts where we used to roller skate. Daddy’s grave in the cemetery.”

“And the church,” says Mama. “If you don’t mind hauling me around.” She points to her wheelchair. “Did I tell you I want to be buried in that chair?”

“You did, Mama.”

“You’re going to tell me it’s not possible, aren’t you? That’s what Steve says.”

“He doesn’t know everything. Maybe we could get a custom-built coffin. It’d cause quite a stir at your funeral.” They both laugh.

Elaine opens up the piano bench. “Want me to play something for you?”

Mama closes her eyes and nods. Inside the piano bench are old piano books and older sheet music. Elaine pulls out, then puts back “On Wisconsin” and “Shrimp Boats Is A-Coming” and a blue hymnal. She flattens “Deep Purple” against the music stand and sits down.

“When the deep purple falls,” she sings to the chords, “over sleepy garden walls . . .” She can almost see, standing at her right elbow, Miss Hunsaker, a pen in her right hand, a short, fat glass of something clear and tinkly in her left. When she would lean over Elaine to correct her hand position or draw arrows to the problem notes, Elaine could smell Miss Hunsaker’s strong, juniperish breath.

“And the stars begin to flicker in the sky . . .” Miss Hunsaker wore gauzy, low-necked blouses, even at 9:30 on Saturday mornings. “Through the mist of a memory, you wander back to me . . .” Elaine looks over at Mama, dozing in her chair, “breathing my name with a sigh.”

Elaine plays on, humming the second verse. Conchita peers in, surveys the room, disappears with a quick wave. In the mist of a memory, Miss Hunsaker also waves, waves with her angel wings, waves with her glass of gin, and winks at Elaine. Then she too disappears. ☺