

AMBUSH

A Sanctuary Novel

COLLEEN COBLE

THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[[CIP TO COME]]

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

CHAPTER 1

WHAT HAD POSSESSED HER to agree to this crazy idea? Once Paradise Alden left Barnwell behind, turned east on 98, and entered the confines of Nova Cambridge, Alabama, she braked her green Kia Soul and, for the first time in fifteen years, took in the moss-draped trees lining the narrow streets.

Home.

She hadn't thought she would ever return to this place again. Once upon a time, she'd thought this corner of Baldwin County held everything her heart could desire—until that hopeful place inside had exploded into a thousand pieces.

Was she ready for this?

She passed Tupelo Grove University, west of Foley, where her mother had worked a lifetime ago. Beyond the city limits she left the memories behind for now and ran down her window to inhale the intoxicating scent of Weeks Bay. In early January the humidity lacked the fierce heat that would come in the summer, but the air held enough moisture to remind her.

The sound of a siren chased away her memories, and she instinctively let up on the accelerator. The speedometer hovered

eight miles an hour above the speed limit. The bubble-gum light atop the tan car behind her flashed, and she pulled to the side of the street. Her window was still down, so she pasted on a smile and angled it at the officer who strolled to her door.

His surly expression vanished. "Howdy, miss. You have any idea how fast you were going?"

His deltoid and trapezius muscles bulged under his short-sleeved shirt, and the rest of his body had the disproportionate appearance of someone who took steroids. The breeze ruffled his thinning brown hair, and his green eyes appraised her like a slab of steak.

"I forgot to turn on my cruise, and I'm afraid I was speeding, Officer."

He tapped his badge. "Deputy Creed Greene." He leered as he leaned on the top of the door. "Passing through? How about catching some coffee with me and I'll give you the lowdown on our nice town."

What a lech. She'd met his type plenty of times in her many years in the foster-care system. County deputies in this area would be stationed at the Bon Secour substation, and some felt they could do whatever they wanted. A quick peek down the empty street let her know she was on her own. "I'm starting work at The Sanctuary Wildlife Preserve. I'm the new vet, Paradise Alden." Her gaze dropped to his left hand. "And it appears you're married, Deputy. I doubt your wife would appreciate your having a coffee date with me."

His leer vanished, and he straightened before he whipped out his pad. "Driver's license."

She reached into her bag and pulled out her wallet, then passed over her license without comment. He walked to the back of her car and glanced at her plate, then got in his car.

Paradise tapped her fingers on top of the steering wheel as she waited for her ticket. The tin-pot dictator behind her was likely to stretch out the time as long as possible. The unfortunate truth was he was the law, and she wouldn't have much recourse for a complaint.

Twenty minutes later, he returned and handed her the copy of the ticket. "Slow down, Ms. Alden. I'll be watching you." He held on to his side of the ticket longer than necessary before he finally released it.

The ominous glare he gave her tightened her chest. Great. She'd made a formidable enemy on her first day back in the area. "I'll be careful." She stuffed the ticket in her bag, then waited until he went back to his car before pulling back onto the road to finish her journey.

Her pulse accelerated as she turned at the sign to The Sanctuary. The drive to the cluster of buildings next to the big parking lot wound through cypress trees interspersed with pawpaw, catalpa, and black gum. The undulating fields had vegetation and grasses for the African herds roaming that area, and she caught glimpses of water as well. The serene appearance soothed her fears. Maybe it would be okay. She glanced down at the angry red scars on her left arm and shuddered at the realization of what awaited her.

She parked in the lot and grabbed her bag. She glanced up into the giant oak tree reaching moss-draped limbs out over the roof of her car. No big cats up there. She shut her door and turned toward the people.

Time to face Blake Lawson, the man who had destroyed her life.

Her employment email instructed her to proceed past the ticket booth and the gift shop to a small building tucked un-

der another oak tree and its accompanying moss. The low-slung building appeared to have had a new coat of green paint, and through the window she spotted Blake and his mother, Jenna Anderson.

While Paradise stood unobserved she let her gaze roam over Blake. In the past fifteen years, he'd grown bulkier muscles and a couple of inches, but she would have recognized him anywhere. That shock of dark brown hair that stood out from his head like a plume had been tamed only with a short cut.

She'd heard he used to be a combat paramedic before the death of his stepfather, Hank Anderson, the town vet she'd worked for as a teenager. After the accident, Blake had managed to get discharged from the Marines to come help his mother at the wildlife refuge. Jenna had two small sons now too, and from what Jenna had told her, his little brothers had played a part in the decision too.

Paradise hadn't talked to Blake directly, and she suspected he wouldn't be any happier to see her than she was to see him.

She clocked the moment he noticed her by the stiffening of his shoulders and the way his smile fell away from his tanned face. Those blue eyes raked over her, and his mouth flattened as she stepped through the door into the open space that held two desks, a dilapidated sofa, and a small table and chairs for lunch breaks.

The muscle in Blake's jaw flexed. "Paradise?"

He'd had no idea she was coming? "Hello, Blake." She tore her gaze from him to greet Jenna. "You didn't tell him?"

Jenna shook her head. "Um, Blake, Paradise has agreed to help us out for the next year."

She couldn't gauge his thoughts, but before he could reply, a piercing scream came from outside. Was it a big cat attack? Par-

adise froze with her blood roaring in her ears. Sympathetic pain shot from her left shoulder down to her wrist at the sound. The confidence she'd mustered to take this job drained away and her knees went weak.

Blake slapped a stun gun into her hand as he ran past. "Come with me!"

She tried to obey the command, but her legs barely supported her as she went in the same direction. What if a jaguar was out of its enclosure? This time it might rip her arm right off instead of leaving her with weakness and a bad scar. Her mouth bone dry, she wobbled as she ran after him toward the barn.

A horse trailer was behind a pickup, and an old, swayback horse stood off to one side. Several people circled the elderly animal, and they stared with horrified expressions into the trailer.

Blake approached the group and spoke to a man standing by the back bumper of the truck. "What's going on?"

The man gestured toward the trailer. "Call the police station, Blake. There's a body in there."

What body? Then Paradise spotted a mass of blonde hair. Not a mane, not fur. Hair. A woman's hair. And she was clearly deceased. "Call the police."



The forensic team swarmed the scene collecting evidence into bags. Blake luckily stood upwind of the stench of manure in the paddock, but he hadn't had the good fortune to avoid examining the body. Deputy Greene leaned against the fence with his thumbs hooked in the loops of his belt, and Blake approached the officer. "Got an ID yet? She was on her stomach and I didn't see her face."

Greene nodded, and his gaze sharpened on Blake. "I'm not at liberty to say. You touched the body?"

The accusation in Greene's voice stiffened Blake's spine. "I was a combat paramedic in the Marines. I checked for a pulse, but she was already dead. Looked like someone used a knife on her." He'd seen several slashes on her arm.

Greene frowned. "The medical examiner will determine cause of death. Where did the horse come from?"

Creed had moved to town during Blake's senior year, and he'd been a bully back then too. They'd had a fight in the hall once when Creed slammed a friend's head into the wall. Becoming a law enforcement officer had only made his power trip worse. And now, apparently, he was also a detective in the sheriff's department.

Blake wanted to be as uncooperative as the deputy, but he restrained the impulse. "Dillard Ranch." The ranch abutted the preserve a half mile to the east, and the Dillards had been generous with their dying livestock ever since Mom and Blake's stepfather bought the wildlife refuge.

He spotted his mother under a towering magnolia tree and headed that way. His steps slowed when he saw Paradise standing with her. Seeing his first love again after fifteen years had been a bolt out of the blue. Why had Mom asked her to come, and even more importantly, why hadn't anyone told him? He wasn't sure what kind of pressure Mom had exerted to get Paradise to agree either.

He pasted a neutral expression on his face and joined the women. "Did anyone mention the woman's identity?" It wasn't hard to keep his attention on his mother, who stood wringing her hands and biting her lip. The trauma of this situation would leave its mark on his tenderhearted mom.

His mother's eyes were red, and she nodded. "It was Danielle Mason."

His eyes widened. "The animal rights activist?"

He should have recognized the frizzy blonde hair. The woman had been a major nuisance for the past two months. It was hard to get past the protesters and into the park on some mornings. When he'd offered to show the Mason woman around and prove how well the animals were doing, she refused. She'd made up her mind with no evidence.

"You realize the police will suspect us," his mother said. "It's no secret how the protests have adversely affected the park's profits."

His gut twisted. This kind of publicity could only make things worse. "No wonder Creed was so accusatory. He practically blamed me for tampering with evidence."

In his peripheral vision he caught a movement from Paradise, and he let his full attention swing toward her. Ignoring her wasn't going to improve anything. The sun touched her curly light brown hair and enhanced its red and gold lights. Standing about five-seven, she was a little taller than she had been at fifteen, but the last fifteen years had only increased her beauty.

Her amber eyes still wore a wary expression though. Maybe any kid who'd been through the foster-care system would wear the same armor. Getting past that steel plate she wore back then had been a rare honor, and he'd blown it.

"You haven't changed much, Paradise."

"Neither have you," she said in a subdued voice.

He wanted to ask her what brought her back, but now wasn't the time. One thing was certain—it wasn't a job. Some kind of big enticement had gotten her past her vow never to step foot here again.

Blake tore his gaze away and glanced around for his little

brothers. “Where are the boys?” They were five and seven, and he wouldn’t be surprised if they were poking around in the chaos.

“I saw them a minute ago.” His mother turned to peer around.

He spotted the youngest first. Five-year-old Isaac was in the fork of a tree branch, and his brother Levi sat under him in the shade with a book. The older boy was an avid reader already. The two looked a lot alike, but Levi had dark brown hair like Mom and Blake while Isaac’s was blond like Hank’s.

“Hey, boys, let’s go get some lunch. You hungry?”

Isaac jumped down from the tree. “I am.” He approached Paradise and stared at her. “Are you a girl lion? Can I touch your hair?”

She darted a glance at Blake, and her lips curved in that enchanting smile he remembered so well. “Did you coach him?”

Blake splayed out his hands. “Innocent of the charges.”

She had that mane of hair that exploded in the Alabama humidity, and her eyes were a golden amber color that reinforced the similarity to the big cat. It was so striking even a little kid like Isaac noticed. Blake used to call her Simba, a nickname she’d hated when he first met her. Until it became a pet name. Even if it had been used for a male lion in a Disney movie, it suited her.

She squatted in front of his youngest brother. “You can touch it.”

Isaac grinned and thrust both hands into her wild, curly hair. “It’s so pretty. I wish I had hair like yours.”

“Trust me, you don’t.”

He studied her. “I peeked in your car, and you have a teddy bear in the back seat. He looks old.”

“He is. My parents gave him to me, and he goes with me everywhere.”

“But you’re a grown-up.”

Her cheeks reddened, but she didn't ignore his little brother. "Even grown-ups have favorite things from when they were little."

She'd always liked kids and had often taken care of younger foster kids in the home. Yet here she was, still unmarried and childless. At least Blake assumed so since she'd shown up alone.

Paradise stood and glanced at the office. "If you tell me where to find my lodging, I'll get unpacked."

"I'll take you over and help carry in your luggage." A few minutes alone might help dissipate the tension between them.

Or maybe intensify it.



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CHAPTER 2

WHEN PARADISE HAD LIVED in Alabama, this Sanctuary property had been a respite from the trials of foster care. Since she'd worked for Hank Anderson, the vet in Nova Cambridge, the former owners sometimes let her help feed the handful of roadside zoo animals they'd collected and clean up the excrement. But this place had been her happy place, even more so than the vet's office. She'd felt needed by the wild animals. Now she would be responsible for caring for the wildlife she glimpsed as she followed in her car behind Blake's truck. There were a lot more of them now than back in her day.

She got out, he grabbed her large roller bag, and they walked toward a row of shotgun cottages. She shot a side-eyed glance Blake's way. Seeing him again had been a punch to her gut. She'd always heard you never got over your first love, but she'd minimized that notion in her head until the moment her heart stuttered in her chest at the sight of his face—until she remembered his betrayal.

Blake had been her world for the six years she'd spent as his next-door neighbor. Maybe it had been a mistake to come here,

but she wasn't sure of her path forward or how to get over her fear of big cats. Jenna's offer had been a lifeline she'd clutched with both hands. The possibility of getting to the bottom of her nightmares made the offer irresistible.

Blake stopped in front of a cute cottage barely bigger than a garage and set down her suitcase to unlock the door. "It's not big, but Mom had it renovated last year. It's got all new furnishings and a fresh coat of paint." He handed her the key, then folded his arms across his chest and stared at her. "Why'd you come back, Paradise? I thought once you'd shaken the dust of Nova Cambridge off your feet, you'd never step foot in Baldwin County again."

She searched his face for some reaction at seeing her again, but Blake had always been good at masking his feelings when he wanted to. She wasn't sure she was ready to reveal her nightmares and what had driven her back to face them.

His attention moved from her face to the scars on her left arm, and his eyes widened. "You get that in an attack?"

She instinctively covered them with her right hand. "A black panther mauling. Jaguar. Someone accidentally left a door open while I was working in his habitat." Reiterating the incident always stole her breath and left her shaking. She didn't want Blake to realize how traumatized she'd been. "I was on leave and afraid I could never work with the big cats I loved so much again. Your mom's offer felt like it was meant to be." She dropped her hand away from her scars.

Blake stared at her arm. "Ouch. It's still painful?"

"It is. And I don't have full strength back in it yet. I'm working on getting that back with exercises the physical therapist gave me."

He gave a quick nod. "Think you can do the job here?"

“I wouldn’t have accepted it if I wasn’t sure of that. I can take care of myself.”

“You don’t have to take on the whole world, Paradise. I’d hoped you would have learned that in the past fifteen years.” His gaze dropped to her hand. “Not married?”

“Never could trust a man.”

He flinched when her barb struck him. His betrayal had cost her everything—her home, her peace of mind, her ability to trust.

When he opened his mouth, she knew she couldn’t listen to one more platitude or excuse. Not today when the past was hitting her so hard. “I’d like to unpack. I’ll report for work at seven. Piggly Wiggly still in the same place?”

“Yeah, not much has changed in Nova Cambridge since you left. A few new stores opened when old ones closed. A few more paved roads, another gas station.” He pushed open the door to the cottage and stepped out of the way. “For what it’s worth, Paradise, if I had the chance to do things all over again, I would have talked to you first.”

Small comfort now. His remark didn’t deserve a response. Nothing could change what had happened to her life. She was the one who had to live with the consequences. Were any girls in her meager circle of friends still around? She wasn’t about to ask Blake, so she picked up her suitcase and stepped inside the cottage. He’d already turned to walk away when she closed the door, which helped ease the tension from her shoulders.

The interior was surprisingly airy and felt spacious. The open studio layout held a full-size bed on one side and a minuscule kitchen with a love seat and armchair on the opposite side. The cottage smelled like new furniture. Paradise found a walk-in closet near the bed with plenty of space to hold the meager belongings she’d brought. It took fifteen minutes to stow every-

thing, and then she decided to run to the Piggly Wiggly to stock the kitchen with food.

As she drove away she spotted Jenna still talking with Creed. The deputy stared at her car as it passed before saying something to Jenna, who stiffened. Paradise could only imagine his comment. Her thoughts sank deeper into the past as she drove the familiar back road across the bridge to Nova Cambridge, four miles from the preserve. It had been her home for her first fifteen years.

Before she could stop herself, she turned onto Oak Street to drive past the house she'd called home for the happiest years of her life. She parked across the street and stared. The last time Paradise had been here, it had a forlorn, abandoned appearance. Someone had brought the plantation style into the present decade and spruced it up. The shutters and trim were painted black instead of the brown they had been when her family lived there, and the roof was metal now. They'd painted the tan vertical siding white, and it contrasted with the black trim in an appealing way.

Did the people who owned the home now know what had happened inside? The murders had been all over the news twenty years ago, and the place had sat empty for several years.

As she watched, the door flew open and two children spilled into the yard. The little girl appeared to be around ten, and she ran to the tree swing with her long blonde braids flying. Paradise watched her with a growing lump in her throat. If only she could turn back the clock to before she'd awakened that night. Maybe she could have saved her parents.



The boys' bedroom had all the toys put away, and Blake sat on

the edge of the bottom bunk. "One more story," Isaac begged.

His big brown eyes were impossible for Blake to resist, and he pulled out *Green Eggs and Ham* for the umpteenth time. Seven-year-old Levi hung over the top bunk to see the pictures while Blake read the familiar story. He was barely two pages in when Isaac's eyes fluttered shut and his breathing grew even. Levi exhaled and moved away from the edge, then closed his eyes one page from the end. Blake put the book away and tiptoed to the door, where he shut off the light before he slipped out.

His mother had gotten a visit from the sergeant in charge of the Bon Secour substation, and Blake strained to hear Roderick McShea's rumbling voice in the living room. He was still there, so Blake picked up the pace to join them. The murder had the potential to further harm the refuge, and they were already teetering on the edge of solvency.

His mom's blue eyes were anxious above the tremulous smile of relief she directed his way. "There you are, Blake. Sergeant McShea was asking about the altercations we've had with Danielle Mason."

McShea was in his fifties and had managed to maintain the athletic build left over from his star quarterback days in high school. He was a hometown boy who'd gone to school with Blake's mother. He hadn't married until he was in his thirties, and his three kids were just now going off to various colleges.

He swiped his light brown hair off his forehead and stood to shake Blake's hand. "Sorry to bother you both so late, but it's been a hectic day. I wanted to hear the story directly from you both."

Blake settled beside his mother on the sofa while the sergeant dropped back into the armchair. "You have cause of death?"

"That will take a day or two for the medical examiner to de-

termine. I will say she appears to have been stabbed. It wasn't an accident."

"I saw knife wounds on her arm."

"Ah, yes. Detective Greene was upset you'd disturbed the body."

"I wasn't sure she was dead and was assessing whether I could help." Blake had known Rod all his life and didn't have to remind him of his past medical career.

"Of course." Rod's hazel eyes narrowed. "Your mom has told me what she remembers of the demonstrations outside the entrance to the preserve. Did you have any conversations with Ms. Mason?"

Blake controlled his dismay. Someone must have mentioned the two altercations. "Ms. Mason organized a group to blockade the entrance. About thirty protesters all held signs reading *Free the Animals* or *Death to the Keepers*. They banged on cars as they tried to enter, and screamed obscenities. I arrived at the scene and asked her to move back and allow entry to the park visitors. She refused and charged toward me. She barreled into me with her shoulder, then yelled that I'd hit her. She called your office, but luckily we had cameras at the entrance that showed I was telling the truth. She was very angry about it, and the next day her behavior was even worse."

"I reviewed that video this afternoon. Tell me about the next day too."

Unease moved through Blake's stomach. If the sergeant was reviewing the video, he must be worried one of them had killed the woman. "She set fire to the fence line. That night's video showed her pouring gasoline along the fence line and then lighting it. I confronted her about it the next morning, and she slapped me in the face."

“What did you do?”

Blake’s face heated. “I took a step toward her, but I didn’t hit her.”

“You wanted to?”

“For a second. It was a hard slap that surprised me. I think she wanted me to strike her, and when I didn’t, she got even angrier. I’d been carrying a bucket of raw meat for the bears, and I’d set it down to handle the situation at the gate. She grabbed it and threw the blood and meat in my face.”

He couldn’t remember ever being as mad as he had been that day. By God’s grace he’d managed to hold on to his temper. The woman had been nearly apoplectic with rage, and all he’d done was turn around and go back through the gate. “I locked the gate behind me and wouldn’t let her in until I called your office to report her assault.”

“She wasn’t arrested.”

“No. I should have pressed charges, but I didn’t want the negative publicity. Her group had caused enough problems without adding to them.”

“I see. Did she have a vendetta against you personally?”

“It might have developed after the two altercations. I haven’t been able to figure out why she targeted The Sanctuary. We rescue animals and give them acres and acres to roam. We love them and care for them. I tried to talk to her when she first showed up, but she’d made up her mind about us before she ever came with her followers. Her blog followers sent nasty messages too, and I had to shut down our social media accounts.”

Rod’s gaze fell away, and Blake read the heightening suspicion on his face. “I would never hurt her or anyone else.” Hollow words. Every criminal probably protested his innocence.

McShea rose and adjusted his belt. “Thanks for the informa-

tion. I'll be in touch if I think of anything else."

Blake ushered him out and locked the door behind him before he rejoined his mother. She sat with her face in her hands. She lifted her head and stared at him with tear-filled eyes. "He thinks we killed her."

"I know." Blake sank back onto the sofa. "We'll weather the gossip though, just like we always do."

She bit her lip and nodded. "And I'm sorry I blindsided you with Paradise. I tried to tell you several times but couldn't find the right words."

"Why would you hire her, Mom? She hates me now. It's going to be a source of conflict, and we don't need more stress."

"She's had a rough time, Blake. I heard about it through a woman who worked at her zoo. I was desperate for help here, cheap help, and she needed a place to heal. At least we could provide that."

Blake wasn't sure anything could heal Paradise Alden but God, and she thought God hated her. It was going to be a long year.

CHAPTER 3

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK THE next morning, Paradise had her hand on the lock to open the gate into the medical compound when a big cat screamed. Her heart pounded, and she wiped sweaty palms on her jeans as she forced her fingers to insert the key. The black leopard was in the other field, and she was safe.

She'd read the history of the rescued cats, and some of the stories of the living conditions were heart-wrenching. Still, when she was faced with the sight and smell of the big cats, her mouth went dry and she felt faint. This fear had to be eradicated if she held out any hope of living her normal life.

"Paradise."

She turned at the sound of Blake's voice and saw him striding across the grass toward her. He wore a safari shirt and camp shorts with boots, and she glanced at her watch. His first expedition wasn't due to start until nine, so she might have to put up with him awhile. She pinned a neutral expression in place and waited.

His gaze flickered over her and settled for a long moment on the scars on her left arm. "Doing okay?"

His fake concern didn't faze her. "Fine. The cottage is darling, and the bed was very comfy." She knew that wasn't his real question, but she wouldn't discuss her fear or her injuries with him. He'd lost all rights to any confidences long ago.

His jaw tightened. "That's good to hear." He paused and stared at the ground. "You're going to hear some stuff about the woman who was killed, Danielle Mason. She has been organizing protests against the refuge with some crazy claims we're mistreating the animals."

Paradise knew enough about him and his mother to know they'd take their care of the animals very seriously. "I'm sure that's been difficult."

"Very." He hesitated. "I think McShea suspects I might have had something to do with the murder. Danielle and I had two very public altercations. The going is likely to get very rough here, and if you want to bail rather than be involved, we would understand."

"You trying to get rid of me already?"

Amusement lit his face. "You know me better than that. If I didn't want you here, I'd tell you outright."

True enough. Maybe she should be open with him too, but the truth didn't come easily. Not yet. She wanted time to assess if she was here on a crazy idea that wouldn't pan out.

When she didn't answer right away, he pocketed his hands. "Well, I'd better get going. I have a large group in two hours, and I have paperwork to do first."

When he turned to go, she collected her thoughts and put her hand on his arm. "I never thought for a second that you would hurt anyone, Blake. Things have been a little—difficult."

He stared at the scars on her shoulder and down her upper arm. He reached out as if he wanted to touch them, then dropped

his hand back to his side. “I can only imagine how bad it’s been. It took a lot of courage to accept this job. I never thought you’d come back.”

She released his arm. “I’ll try to stay out of your way. This refuge felt like the right place to heal.”

There was so much she wanted to say, but the words stayed locked behind her teeth. He had no idea how much courage it had taken for her to come here and face him again. But her only answers were here in this place, where shadows from the past still reached out to shape her life.

He smiled down at her, and this time she stepped back from the full strength of that warmth. She’d nearly forgotten how easily he related to people. Her guard had to stay up around him, and she was only here for the truth. Once she got her courage back, she could move on with her life. Getting involved with Blake—or anyone else for that matter—wasn’t on her radar.

“I’ll let you get back to work.” She gestured to the enclosure. “I’m about to examine a fennec fox. Your mom thought she’d sprained one of her legs.”

He nodded and walked away in long strides toward a safari truck parked at the equipment building. Paradise stepped into the medical building on leaden feet. She’d been off work for the past four months, and she was relieved not to have to take care of a big cat. Not yet anyway. A fennec fox should be easy enough.

The clinic was housed in a metal building with painted concrete floors. It held the smell of various animals being treated here, and she caught a whiff of big cat. Her throat tightened and she hurried past the room where the animal had been.

A perky brunette in her early twenties turned to greet her with a bright smile. “Hi, I’m Lacey Armstrong, your vet tech. I’m so glad you’re here.” She gestured at the cage. “This is Rosy. She’s fa-

voring her right paw, and I think it's sprained. She's very domesticated and friendly. I don't think you'll have any trouble with her."

"Fennec foxes have fragile bones and are prone to sprains. Hopefully, that's all it is." Paradise glanced around the space. "Do we have an X-ray machine?"

Lacey nodded. "And an ultrasound machine. A vet's office in Mobile donated an old CT machine as well. We're pretty well set up even though we operate on a very tight budget."

Paradise opened the cage. "Hello there, Rosy. How are you doing?" The tiny fox stared at her with a mournful expression. "Not so well?" She reached slowly into the cage and the little creature let her gently touch her head. Rosy let out a protesting squeak when Paradise touched the injured paw. "Let's get this x-rayed."

"I'll do that for you." Lacey scooped Rosy out of the cage with gentle care and whisked her away to another room.

While she was gone, Paradise peeked in all the drawers and cabinets and found the exam room well equipped. Working here would be a pleasure as long as she didn't have to treat a big cat. At least not until she was ready to face that task.

Lacey returned and settled Rosy back in the cage. "All done. You can see the X-rays on the computer."

Fennec foxes preferred not to be touched, though they tolerated being handled, so Paradise let the little fox lay quietly until she saw the X-rays. "It's not broken, so that's good. I'll wrap it."

"We have a hospital area where injured animals are kept overnight, but there's no one to man it right now," Lacey said. "I live in town. Would you be able to check on her after hours? No other animals are in the hospital."

"Not a problem." In fact, she just might take Rosy home to keep her company.



Blake was never one to bury his head in the sand, and the current circumstances were severe enough that he had to act. After the first expedition, he sat on the fence by the wolf enclosure and pulled out his phone to call his cousin, Hezekiah Webster. Hez was an attorney in the area and gave The Sanctuary ten free hours of legal advice a month. They hadn't had to use him that often, but the past few weeks had been challenging, and Blake might already be pushing that limit.

Hez answered on the first ring. "Hey, Blake, how's it going?" His cousin's deep voice held the calm strength of a man used to commanding center stage in a courtroom.

"Not so great, Hez." Blake launched into the discovery of the body. "I think I'm going to be their top suspect. And with good reason. She and I had several altercations." He reminded Hez what had happened even though he'd consulted with his cousin when it all went down. "On the surface it would appear I had motive."

"This doesn't sound good. Let me see what I can find out about the case," Hez said. "For now, I'd suggest detailing your whereabouts the day before and the morning of the murder. Do they have a time of death?"

"The autopsy isn't back yet." Blake thought back to his schedule so far this week. "I think I've got a solid alibi. I've been staying at Mom's to help with the boys, and she and I watched a movie until late the night before. Isaac slept with me in my apartment that night too. Security cameras scattered around Mom's cottage should show I never left the upstairs apartment."

"That will help. Don't answer any questions without me pres-

ent, and don't offer any information on your own. If you've got a detective gunning for you, things can get twisted."

"Will do. Thanks for the hand-holding. Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll figure out who really did this."

"Once they find the scene of the crime, they should uncover more information. Do you know if they've searched the ranch where the meat originated?"

"They aren't telling me much."

"No, I suppose they aren't. How's Aunt Jenna holding up?"

"She's worried. We were already trying to make it on a shoe-string, and now we have this to worry about." Blake slid off the fence and kicked at a weed with his boot. The action didn't do anything for his frustration level. "And if this isn't bad enough, Mom hired a new vet."

"That should be helpful."

"It's *who* she hired. Paradise Alden." A long pause followed, and Blake knew his cousin was trying to place the name. "My first girlfriend."

"The girl next door who was in foster care? The one you . . . ?"

"Exactly," Blake said grimly. "And Mom didn't even warn me. When Paradise walked through the door, I thought maybe I was hallucinating. I haven't seen her in fifteen years."

"And how'd she seem?"

"As beautiful as ever. And as prickly. She'll be as easy to work with as a porcupine. She assumed Mom had told me about hiring her and was none too pleased to be dumped into a surprise situation. The funny thing is—I'm not sure why she's here. She's got horrific scars on her arm and seems jittery around the animals. She was mauled by a black panther—a jaguar."

"That would make anyone skittish. Hmm, strange she'd come back after all this time."

Blake was done talking about Paradise. The bigger problem still loomed. “Let me know what you find out from the sheriff’s office.”

“I’ll be in touch. Try not to worry.”

“Easier said than done, but I’ll give it a shot.” Blake signed off and put his phone away.

His favorite red wolf, a female named Daisy, pressed against the fence and yipped a greeting. The preserve had acquired her after hearing of her need for a home. She’d lived most of her life in a crate, and when they’d brought her to the park, she’d run around the acres allotted to the wolves for hours as if she had to stretch her legs and never stop. Red wolves were critically endangered. Daisy had given birth to four pups, bringing the pack of red wolves to a total of twenty-one.

Daisy wagged her entire rear end and yipped at him. Her pups rolled and tumbled together, and their fat bellies made Blake chuckle. He rubbed their warm bellies, then loved on Daisy a few minutes.

He left the wolf enclosure and walked to where the black bears slept in the shade, then moved on to the big cats and on through the African bush area, where zebras roamed with antelope and wildebeest. He was especially fond of the capybaras and river otters. The aviary exploded with sound when he paused and spoke to the parrots. They all tried to talk to him at once.

By the time he’d made the rounds to the easily seen enclosures, it was nearly time for the next safari. He’d been here with his mom and the boys for six months now, and he couldn’t imagine living any other place now. Or doing anything else—not even paramedic work. These animals had helped him as much as he’d helped them. Mom thought he’d given up his career, when the reality was he’d been relieved for an excuse to try to forget that

final week when he'd been responsible for the death of his best friend. If only forgetting was possible.

The current situations developing threatened this place he loved so much. And it wasn't just for himself that he wanted it to succeed—it was for his mom and little brothers. And it was for these animals he cared about so deeply. If The Sanctuary failed, where would they go? He had to do everything he could to save this special place.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

CHAPTER 4

PARADISE PRESSED HER FINGERTIPS to her eyes, burning from lack of sleep. Every time she'd closed her eyes last night, she'd seen the body in the horse trailer. Some kind of distraction would help. She settled at her miniscule desk in the clinic and opened her MacBook. She called up the list of online articles she'd saved in a Scrivener file and began to read through them again. The first one was the article blaring a brief note about the murders:

Nova Cambridge Couple Murdered. A neighbor reported a disturbance at the home of Granger and Becky Alden just after midnight on February 2. Law enforcement found the bodies of the couple in the home. A child was reportedly unharmed. Police are investigating.

Then she called up the next article announcing the sale of the Steerforth property to Hank and Jenna Anderson. The initial paragraphs mentioned the vision they had for founding a sanctuary for abused animals. Paradise knew some of Jenna's early story. She'd married Blake's dad at seventeen right out of high school and had given birth at eighteen. Her first husband had

died in a Marine helicopter accident when Blake was a year old, and she'd raised her son alone.

When Blake enlisted in the Marines, she'd finally remarried. She would have been forty-two or so when Levi was born. Hank had been a wonderful man who'd inspired Paradise to become a vet herself. Paradise found the article a fascinating addition to what she knew about the family, but it was the final paragraph that had brought her here:

The 120-acre preserve had been in the Steerforth family since the late 1800s. The property initially served as a working farm and ranch until the Steerforths added a roadside zoo. The property went up for auction after owner Mr. Steerforth died in an auto accident. Hank and Jenna Anderson purchased the property and moved their animals to the ranch, then opened The Sanctuary Wildlife Preserve to the public.

Paradise stared at the words until the screen blurred. While there was no guarantee the answers to the murder of her parents were here, she had to come and find out for sure. And she had to find her way back to the career she loved. Her future depended on her success here.

"Knock-knock," a female voice said from behind her.

She turned to see Jenna smiling at her from the doorway. Though Blake's mother was nearly fifty, she didn't look a day over thirty-five with her stylish chin-length bob and boho-chic sense of style. Blake had gotten his thick dark hair and blue eyes from his mom, and they could have been siblings.

Jenna stepped into the office. "Settling in all right?" She dropped into a wooden chair near the desk.

"It's been a quiet morning." Paradise told her about the fenec fox. "I'm going to take a cart around the place and see what all we have to work with."

“Take Blake’s expedition this afternoon. It’s a behind-the-scenes excursion, and you’ll see everything we’ve got.”

Paradise would rather do it on her own, but she gave a jerky nod. Working with Blake came with the job. “I like what I’ve seen so far. The animals are well cared for and seem happy.”

“We do our best.”

Now might be a good time to dig out some truth. “How’d you decide to buy the property? I remember this place when I lived in town. The Steerforths let me help out sometimes when I wasn’t working for Hank, but they only had a few animals. A couple of lions, a tiger, a zebra, and an ostrich named Katie. I think there was a bear too.”

“You worked for Hank, so you already know of his love for animals.”

Paradise nodded. “His passion was contagious, and when I left here, I knew I wanted to be a vet too.” She didn’t pry with more questions. When Paradise had lived here, Hank had been married to someone else. Paradise didn’t know the details of his first wife’s death.

“Too many people want an exotic pet without taking into consideration the needs of the animal. Those animals are often kept in tiny cages or enclosures and have no quality of life. They’re abused and abandoned. The animals the Steerforths took in here were in terrible shape, and the wife, Mary, was mauled by a tiger. The animal had to be put down, and the husband abandoned the farm, just walked away and left them. Then a week later he died in that auto accident.”

Paradise winced. “That had to have been hard to watch.”

“It was terrible. Hank went over twice a day to feed the animals, and we ended up buying the farm along with the animals three years ago. Blake went into partnership with us too, but he

didn't participate except monetarily at first. When Hank died, Blake was discharged from the Marines and came to help out. I don't know what I would have done without him. He handles the boys like a pro and jumps in everywhere I need him. I won't sugarcoat it though—things have been tight, even with our generous donors.”

“I know you kept some of the employees from the farm. Are you trying to keep too many of them employed?”

Jenna shrugged. “We can't run it alone, and at least they were familiar with the animals. I probably could let go of a couple, but I hate to do that. They love the animals.”

“It's a little weird being back here after so many years. I drove past my old house yesterday. Someone has fixed it up.”

Jenna nodded. “One of our employees bought the place. Evan Hopkins. You might remember him.”

Paradise managed to hide her shock. Evan had been a seventeen-year-old neighbor when her parents were murdered, and she considered him her top suspect. After school the week before, she'd walked in on him in their house. His excuse about being too drunk to know he was in the wrong house had convinced her father, but all these years later, she thought it much too flimsy to be true.

To hear he'd purchased her home was a punch to the gut. Was it to cover up evidence that might have existed somewhere? It seemed unlikely after all these years, but she wasn't sure she believed it was a coincidence he'd been the one to buy it.

“I'd be interested in seeing the inside sometime if he would let me.”

“I'm sure he would. Evan is a hard worker and a great guy.”

“Where does he work on the preserve?”

“He's a big cat keeper.”

Paradise licked dry lips. She'd avoided the big cats, but she wouldn't be able to put it off much longer. Not if she hoped to accomplish her goals.



Blake glanced at his watch. It was the last encounter of the day, and half the seats were empty, like usual. Most people liked the morning excursions so they could escape the Alabama heat and humidity, though in the winter the afternoon usually filled too. A young couple who seemed more interested in each other than learning about the animals sat on the bench seat that stretched across the back of the vehicle.

At the sound of quick footsteps, he turned an automatic smile toward the sound, but it died on his lips when he saw Paradise mount the stairs. "Uh, you need me?"

She shook her head. "Your mom suggested the encounter would be a good way to get familiar with the animals and the park." She slid into the long seat on the right side of the bus. "I'll sit here so I can face you and hear you easily."

And unfortunately, he'd see her out of the corner of his eye the entire time. Even with all that had happened between them, her guarded amber eyes drew him right in.

He flipped on his mic and turned around. "Good afternoon, you're about to embark on an inside tour of The Sanctuary. You'll see river otters, chimps, bears, the African delta, and lions lazing in the sun."

Paradise flinched at the mention of the lions. Was she truly up to this job? He hated to see her fear, but she would have to get over it. The big cats often required vet care.

He drove to the first stop, the grizzly bear refuge, and shut

off the engine. He grabbed a bucket of raw meat morsels and opened the truck door. "You can get out if you want or watch from the windows." The vehicle was open air with a canvas roof, and the couple in the rear would be able to watch from their seats. The couple stayed put and didn't look up from their ardent conversation in the back.

Paradise followed him out of the truck and approached the fence with him. He rattled the fence and called for Serena, his favorite grizzly. She'd come to them when authorities closed down a roadside zoo. Even half-starved she'd been socialized and friendly. Since arriving here, she'd roamed the acreage with obvious delight. As usual she lumbered toward them, and he poked food through the fence for her and the three cubs who followed her.

Paradise examined her condition with a steady gaze. "She's beautiful, not even thin from the winter."

"She was a chub when she entered her cave. She gave birth last month and brought her babies out to show them off. She's a good mama."

They watched the cubs tumble together in the grass for a few moments. "It's a wonderful thing you're doing here, Blake," Paradise said softly. "I see the hand of love and kindness everywhere."

"We care about the animals. It's Mom's lifework."

"And yours?"

"It is now. I used to wonder why she cared so much. Now I know."

"What about your paramedic career? Are you sorry to leave it behind?"

Did she really care? "I came to help Mom and my brothers, but I soon loved it as much as they do. The animals all have

different personalities, and every day I'm eager to interact with them. And I don't have to worry about getting shot." *Or losing a friend.* "I can't imagine doing anything else now."

A sharp, short report rang out, and his combat reflexes took over. He jerked Paradise down with him as he ducked. A bullet zinged by his head and hit the lock on the gate. "Get down, everyone!" The people who had disembarked hit the dirt, and several heads inside the truck ducked down below the windowless openings.

"This way." He scrambled on the ground with Paradise to just behind a small viewing shack where they squeezed into the space between the back wall and the fence. The four other people scabbled after him too, and he checked to make sure no one was hurt.

"You okay?" he asked Paradise.

"Fine." She was pale but composed. "You tempted fate with that comment about not getting shot at any longer. More activists?"

"Looks that way."

Several more shots zinged off the metal lock at the gate. He thought the gunshots were from a 9-millimeter. Was the shooter trying to break the padlock and let out the bears? He popped his head out and saw the barrel of a pistol poking through the back window of the safari truck. The seemingly innocuous couple were the ones responsible for the attack.

He pulled out his phone and shot a text to his mom. *Call 911 and send them to the grizzlies.*

"You can't trust anyone," he said. "I thought that couple was more interested in making out than learning about the animals. It was all a front."

No more shots rang out, and he saw the couple running away

down the path into the thick brush. Blake rose and held out his hand to help Paradise up. She ignored his help and scrambled to her feet. "Are the bears okay?"

He jogged over to the gate, now hanging open, but there was no sign of Serena and her cubs. "I don't see any blood. They probably took off at the first shot."

"Who would risk hurting the animals like that?" She brushed the dirt off her jeans. "The bears could have been hit by a ricocheting bullet. We need to check on them. Can we find them?"

"I'm sure Serena led her cubs to safety."

"You don't know that they weren't hit."

True enough. Normally, Serena had never shown a sign of aggression and loved attention from the workers, but her protective instincts could change that. "I'll get the tranquilizer gun."

Paradise had been around wild animals long enough to know it wouldn't do much to stop a charging grizzly. Serena could be on them before the sedative could work. All he could do was pray the friendly grizzly knew they were trying to help.

He walked to the truck and retrieved the tranquilizer gun, then reluctantly picked up a rifle as well. Paradise grimaced when he returned with the deadly weapon.

"I don't think I'll have to use it." He pointed to the bucket. "Let's take some food with us. That might distract her if she's hungry."

She grabbed the pail of food by the handle. "What if we try to call her over again like you just did? It might reassure her."

He nodded. "Be ready though. I'll need tools to fix the gate, and she might try charging through it."

Paradise banged the metal pail against the fence. No movement or sound occurred for several minutes. She did it again and called out Serena's name. Blake heard a snuffle, then the bears

wandered into view.

“I don’t see any blood on them,” Paradise said.

A truck engine roared toward them before it stopped and two officers got out. The cavalry had arrived.



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