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# COLLEEN COBLE

A SANCTUARY NOVEL

# AMBUSH

A black panther is perched on a large, moss-covered rock in the foreground. The background is a dense, lush forest with various green trees and foliage. A body of water with lily pads is visible in the lower left. The overall scene is vibrant and naturalistic.

# AMBUSH

*A Sanctuary Novel*

**COLLEEN COBLE**



THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

*Ambush*

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## 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, caltapa, 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."

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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.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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**COLLEEN COBLE** is the *USA TODAY* bestselling author of more than seventy-five books and is best known for her coastal romantic suspense novels.

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