

# AMBUSH

*A Manxman's Tale*

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THOMAS NELSON  
Since 1798

*Ambush*

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For my grandsons Elijah and Silas whose love of the Out  
of Africa Wildlife Park provided the nugget for this story.

Love you both!

## HAHAHAHA

HAHAHAHSSSSSSHH 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 over the years. 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 under 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 also played a part in the decision.

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? Paradise 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.

## HA

HA in Alabama, this Sanctuary property had been a respite from the turmoil after her parents died. 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 everything, 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 determine. 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 information. 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.