

PROWL

A Sanctuary Novel

COLLEEN COBLE



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Prowl

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CHAPTER 1

THE SUN PEEKED OVER the eastern horizon in a perfect Alabama sunrise as Ivy Cook lugged the pails of raw meat out of the Gator utility vehicle and walked toward the hyena enclosure. She shivered a little in the February chill. She'd arrived at work early to do what she'd been paid to do under cover of darkness.

She paused when she saw the hyenas head for the fence. The leader, Clara, always gave her the creeps with her laughing mouth and evil eyes. A hyena pack was weird, too, with a dominant female that didn't let any of the others eat until she was full. The males all ate last even when Ivy tried to toss food their way. They watched Clara for permission.

Ivy had heard her boss, Blake Lawson, mention he was giving them to a nearby zoo. If the owner and head zookeeper didn't trust the hyenas, she shouldn't either. And she didn't. She opened the outer gate and locked it behind her, then approached the inner one.

A sound came from her right, and she spun that way. Nothing there. She was losing it. Rubbing the gooseflesh from her arms, she reached into the pail and began to toss food over the fence. Clara ate piece after piece while her clan watched avidly.

“Let your clan eat,” Ivy said. Clara’s returning stare held animosity, and Ivy stared her down. “You can’t get out of here too soon for me.”

She had worked here for two weeks, but it felt like two years with the stink of the animals and the hard work involved. But if she had any hope of paying off her gambling debt, she needed the extra cash, and this job had seemed an easy way to earn a little. She’d been wrong. Now that she was here, Ivy wasn’t enjoying the work or the animals. The smell got to her, and so did the fear of them.

The sooner she got the information she’d been hired to extract from Paradise Alden, the sooner she could leave.

The first chance Ivy got she’d look for a job that didn’t involve getting so icky. She wiped blood from her hands onto the grass and shuddered. She stood and whirled at a soft scraping noise. Still nothing there. Why was she so jumpy this morning?

She retraced her steps and locked the gate behind her, then moved on to the tiger enclosure. Her gut tightened at the sight of the tiger staring at her. Some of the keepers were able to touch the ones born and raised here, but Raj was new and was kept separated from the rest. He was not one of the animals they could trust, but Ivy didn’t trust anything with teeth and claws.

“Hi, Raj,” she said in a calm voice. She unlocked the gate and stepped into the outer perimeter area. She moved toward the inner gate and caught her breath. It was open.

Barely breathing, she backed away toward the exit behind her.

The huge cat moved to the open gate and pushed through. His golden eyes followed her, and he crouched with his tail lashing the air. She didn’t dare take her eyes off him, but she would have to in order to get through the outer gate.

She edged back two steps, then three, reaching her hand

behind her to find the gate. Her blood thundered in her ears and her breath rasped in her throat. She had no chance against those teeth, those claws.

Tears blurred her vision as her fingers touched the gate. Maybe she could escape. This might not be the end.

She was so intent on escape she barely took note of the sting at the back of her neck. The gate resisted her attempts, and her vision blurred even more. Her legs didn't seem to want to work either. The tiger took another step closer, and she knew she wasn't going to make it.



The smell of big cat in the treatment room made wildlife vet Paradise Alden's mouth go dry. The black jaguar lay limp and seemingly unconscious for her to treat the abscessed tooth, but she couldn't assume Midnight wouldn't react. The fingers on her right hand started to stray to the ugly ridge of scar tissue on her other arm, from an attack when a panther came through a door left open to the habitat, but she took hold of her fear and moved toward the animal instead.

Her new vet tech, Warren Gibson, moved to the side. "Respiration and heart rate are good. Should be an easy extraction, and we can let her wake up."

She could only hope.

Her pulse accelerated as she ran her fingers over the jaguar's smooth fur. She was a beautiful specimen. Her arrival yesterday to The Sanctuary Wildlife Preserve had caused a lot of excitement mixed with worry when her mouth problem surfaced. And it was up to Paradise to make sure she made the move to her new home easily. The poor thing had been in a ten-by-ten cage her

whole life until the owner died, and his kids had to get rid of the beautiful black cat.

Paradise steeled herself and plunged into the task. Thankfully Warren was right, and fifteen minutes later, the female jaguar was back in her crate sleeping off the anesthetic.

“Nice job, Doc.” Warren’s red hair stood up like a rooster’s comb, and his easy grin vanished when his gaze lingered on her scars. “It took a lot of courage to jump in there after all you’ve been through.”

“Piece of cake thanks to your skill with anesthesia.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. Her first day as the vet in Nova Cambridge would start in half an hour. She would be working mornings at the clinic before returning to the park. Midnight had been an emergency she’d squeezed in this morning, but the quick procedure had made her late.

She grabbed her bag and raced for her green Kia Soul. Though she glanced around the compound as she drove off, she didn’t catch sight of anyone, not even Blake, whom she’d hoped would see her off on her new adventure. A morning kiss for good luck would have come in handy.

The outskirts of Nova Cambridge came into view around the corner, and she accelerated. It wouldn’t do to arrive late and find customers waiting in their vehicles or at the door.

She braked at the sight of the new blue-and-white sign hanging from a post outside the veterinary business. Pawsome Pets—Paradise Alden, DVM. Paradise was buying the business from Jenna with quarterly payments, but she still wasn’t sure how she felt about the new venture she’d been talked into. Caring for domesticated animals hadn’t been on her radar, not when her heart belonged to the wild ones since her teen years.

She parked in the lot and hurried to unlock the front door.

Luckily no one was outside to notice her late arrival. She stepped into the waiting room and stopped short at the scent of sweet cake instead of cleaning solution. Congratulations banners and balloons fluttered from the ceiling and reception desk.

Blake Lawson and his mother, Jenna Anderson, shouted, "Surprise!" Jenna's boys, Isaac and Levi, bolted toward her with shrieks of excitement. Five-year-old Isaac already had cupcake frosting around his mouth, and he planted sticky hands on her jeans. "Are you surprised, Paradise?"

"I sure am." She scooped him up, and he wrapped his arms and legs around her like a monkey. She turned a wide smile toward Blake and Jenna. "I wondered where everyone was when I left." Paradise should have realized something was up when they weren't outside to wish her well on her first day. Especially when this whole vet thing was their idea.

Blake's thick dark brown hair was still damp, and his blue eyes were tender. "We couldn't let this monumental day go uncelebrated, babe. Brownies and cupcakes are on the table over there." He gestured to a decorated card table piled high with treats. "We're taking you to Jesse's tonight to celebrate."

"That sounds wonderful." She stepped into the circle of his arms and inhaled the scent of his eucalyptus and cypress soap. His lips found hers, and her breathing quickened. His steady presence was her world ever since she'd found her way back to him. He'd broken her heart when she was sixteen, but she'd forgiven him.

He pulled away reluctantly. "*You're* wonderful. And you'll do great with this. It will expand your horizons."

She leaned against his broad chest. "I think coming here did all that." It was hard to remember her former quiet, lonely life. Blake and his family had burst the bubble she'd pulled around

herself since the murder of her parents, and while it hadn't always been easy to reveal the soft parts of her heart, doing so had changed her for the better.

The door opened, and her new receptionist entered. Honey Hopkins was Evan's wife, and though Paradise had hesitated to interview her because her husband worked at The Sanctuary as a predator keeper, she'd soon been won over by the perky blonde's customer service skills.

"Good morning," Honey sang out. "Are we ready for the influx of patients? Everyone in town is excited to meet you, Paradise. You're a little bit famous after all the hoopla at The Sanctuary."

Hoopla? Was that how people felt about the trauma they'd all lived through? Paradise managed to smile. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Who's our first patient?"

"A wiener dog named Chloe. She's as fat as a potbellied pig but very sweet." Honey glanced out the window. "Here she comes now with her owner. Let the games begin."

Paradise pinned on a smile and waved goodbye to Blake and the family as they headed toward the back exit. They paused long enough for the boys to grab another cupcake, and she wished she had time for a sweet treat to help her face this new adventure.

CHAPTER 2

THE GATOR WAS MISSING from the lot, so Blake walked across the compound to make rounds. His sweatshirt warmed him against the mid-February chill, and the fresh scent of the morning air added to his sense of well-being. They'd mostly finished cleanup after the tropical storm two weeks ago, thanks to the hard work of the community and the park's employees.

He still smiled at Paradise's surprise this morning. Her amber eyes had filled with moisture at the family's excitement for her, and he prayed her first day would be a good one. He glanced at his watch. Just after ten and the first visitors would be here soon.

He found the Gator outside the tiger enclosure, but he didn't see anyone around. He lifted the lid on the predator food and frowned. The raw meat had barely been touched. Where was Ivy?

He shaded his hand as a familiar truck pulled into the lot. Clark got out and approached him. It always struck Blake how alike Clark and Kent Reynolds were. They were twins and it showed. Being around his best friend's brother helped Blake release some of the pain and guilt he felt over Kent's death. Clark had hated him for a while after Kent's death in Afghanistan, but

he'd stepped up to help Paradise save Blake during the tropical storm and flood a couple of weeks back, and all those hard feelings had been washed away.

Blake slapped him on the shoulder when Clark stopped in front of him. "You're just the man I wanted to see. That main perimeter fence by the tigers looks like it could let go. I'm not sure even you can fix it, but I wanted you to take a look before I spent the money to replace it."

Clark gave a cocky grin. "I can weld anything but a broken heart and the crack of dawn."

Blake grinned at the familiar line. "I believe it."

Clark's appearance had changed since he'd released his anger and grief. His broad shoulders were squared instead of hunched with defeat, and his shaggy brown hair stayed neatly trimmed.

Clark shuffled and looked down at his feet. "I had an idea. Feel free to say no. What would you think if I moved my trailer into that empty lot out by the cottages? It could be my salary for working around here."

"That's not enough of a salary, but I'd be thrilled to have you work for the park. I can cough up some actual dollars too."

"Not necessary. I would still have time to do the occasional odd job for gas and groceries. I like being here. It's given me purpose, and you're not so bad to be around."

That was saying a lot coming from taciturn Clark. Blake squeezed his shoulder. "You're a good man, Clark, and I'm honored to call you friend."

The man's brown eyes glistened. "I'll move the trailer over tonight. Thanks, buddy."

He started for the fence perimeter, but Blake called him back. "Did you see Ivy's car when you came in? I'm not sure she fed the animals."

“I saw her car but not her.”

“Thanks, I’ll try to find her.”

He’d had his doubts about the new hire, Ivy Cook, when she showed up for work. Mom was a soft touch, and the girl was the granddaughter of a friend from church. Doing a favor wasn’t always the best idea, but so far Ivy had done a good job. If the predators hadn’t been fed yet, it would set his day back by hours. He might have to call all hands on deck to feed them before he took out his first busload of visitors.

The hyenas barely gave him a glance, and even Clara slept through his call. The Birmingham Zoo was picking them up this afternoon, and he’d be glad to have them gone. He’d never been able to look at them the same since they’d tried to kill him during the tropical storm.

He moved to the tigers and found all of them hungry. He fed the ones who would be in the pool performing for visitors later before moving on to the last enclosure. Raj was new and a little hostile. He banged on the metal fencing around the enclosure. “Raj, meat.”

The big white cat licked his chops and settled onto his haunches. He turned his huge head and stared at something in the corner inside the inner enclosure. Blake followed the direction of Raj’s gaze and froze. What appeared to be a pile of clothing was something much more terrifying.

Ivy Cook lay curled in a fetal position, and she wasn’t moving.

His stomach plummeted at the sight of way too much blood.

He started to open the gate to the outer enclosure and stopped. The inner gate wasn’t latched, and it swung a bit in the breeze. There would be nothing to stop Raj from coming through the inner enclosure to the outer one.

Had Raj been in the outer perimeter when Ivy came to feed

him? Blake spotted drag marks from the outside gate into the inner area, and the likely scenario played out in his head in sickening detail.

He whipped out his phone and called Evan Hopkins to bring him a tranquilizer gun. "And call 911." He grabbed the bucket of meat and took off running to the building beside the enclosure. Time seemed to slow as his feet slapped against the grass and hard dirt on the path to the shelter. His fingers fumbled with the lock at the door, and it seemed an eternity before he stepped into the dim interior that held the strong odor of cat urine. He made sure the door to the habitat area was locked, then went through the security door.

Please let her be alive. He threw down some raw meat before he opened the door to the habitat. *Please, God, let him smell the food and come.*

He could barely breathe while he waited for the big white cat to amble into the interior and go to the food. When the last of the tiger's lashing tail was through the door, Blake pressed the button to shut the cat inside away from the habitat area, then raced back outside to run across the habitat to Ivy. Evan sped toward the enclosure with the tranquilizer gun.

Blake reached the gate at the same time as Evan. "I coaxed Raj into the building with food, so we won't need the gun after all." He hurried with Evan through both gates and headed toward Ivy, who hadn't moved.

When he dropped to his knees and touched her, his gut made a sickening twist. He pressed his finger to her neck to make sure.

"She's dead."

Paradise's first day had been more fun than she'd imagined. With only five patients, she only had to work two hours, but the owners of the three dogs and two cats had made her feel like an integral part of the community. Two of the families had been former classmates when she'd lived here, so it felt as though she'd slipped back into the flow of life in Nova Cambridge. Her longtime friend Abby Dillard—now McClellan—had been here with her beautiful golden.

This quiet town was only fifteen minutes from Foley and the shopping malls, and only half an hour from the busyness of the Gulf Shore beaches, but it was another world along these quaint streets. How had she ever left this place?

Paradise mopped the exam room and grimaced at the stinging scent of antiseptic before heading back to the park. Honey had offered to do the cleaning, but Paradise needed an opportunity to get to know her spaces. There was something about the detail of cleaning that made the place seem familiar—and hers.

Her phone sounded with a message, but she ignored it until she was finished and in her car. Once she was behind the wheel, she dug out her phone and tensed. In her inbox were results from the DNA test she'd run to try to find the brother she hadn't known she had. It was already nearly eleven, and she had a full afternoon at the park. The results would have to wait until she had a chance to log in to her computer and take a look.

She buckled in and drove out Beach Road toward the Weeks Bay Bridge. She braked to avoid a fox that darted out of the ditch and across the road. An ambulance, its lights flashing and sirens blaring, came up fast behind her, and she pulled over to let it pass. Right behind it, two sheriff's department cars zoomed past as well. They disappeared over the bridge, and her gut clenched. Could they be going to The Sanctuary?

She stomped on the accelerator and headed in that direction. The emergency vehicles weren't in sight when she crossed the bridge and turned onto Bay Road. Maybe they'd turned off on Beach Road. A few houses were out that way on Bon Secour Bay.

But she caught the shriek of the sirens as she neared the turn-off to the preserve, and her pulse skipped. Her fears for the boys were ever present ever since Isaac had gone into the tiger enclosure. The boys were adventurous and no amount of diligence kept fear from raising its head. She punched the button on her dash to call Blake, and her mouth was dry as she waited for him to pick up.

When the call went to his voice mail, her agitation increased and so did her speed. She took the turn nearly on two wheels and prayed for Blake's family as she raced to see what had happened. Maybe a visitor had been injured. None of the scenarios were good.

She followed the flashing lights of the two sheriff's cars through the parking lot and out toward the employee area near the predator enclosures. The fact that the emergency vehicles were directed to private areas wasn't a good sign. She parked in her usual spot and jumped out. Blake stood talking to their archenemy, Detective Creed Greene. It figured that they'd have to deal with him.

She steeled herself for his familiar leer—he was like most of the other men she'd met with one thing on their minds. At least Blake had shown her how a real man acted.

She rushed to his side and touched his arm. He drew her against his side with his left arm as he spoke with Creed. She heard *tiger enclosure* and *checked for pulse*, but she heard no name mentioned. She examined the faces around her and spotted Jenna and her boys heading their way. The tenseness in Paradise's throat released, and she nearly sagged against Blake.

Jenna reached them, and she waved an employee over. “Evan, would you take the boys to see the capybaras?”

Irritation creased his forehead, but he nodded. “Sure thing, Boss.”

“Hazel had babies,” Isaac told him. “I get to hold one now. They’re old enough, right, Mama?”

“They are.” Jenna waited until they were out of earshot. “Do we know how Raj managed to get to Ivy?”

“Not yet,” Blake said. “I found her in the inside enclosure. There would have been no reason for her to go in there, and I think maybe Raj dragged her to his lair.”

Paradise shuddered at the graphic image that sprang to life with his words. How had this happened? Blake was meticulous about safety precautions at The Sanctuary, but human error was always a concern. She didn’t know Ivy well since she’d just started, but she’d seemed pleasant and was hardworking. The young woman had wanted to chat about personal things, and Paradise suspected she was lonely.

The deputy took his detective position to the nth degree, and she knew he’d be pointing blame before he left. That was his *modus operandi*. Accuse first and pivot later. Wasn’t a detective supposed to examine the evidence before he came to a conclusion? Creed Greene made snap decisions first and tried to find details to support his belief. It was all backward.

“Is the tiger secured?” Greene asked.

Blake’s fingers tightened around Paradise’s waist. “I coaxed him into the shelter so I could get to Ivy. I left him locked in there.”

Creed turned toward the walkway to the predators’ area. “I’d like to see the scene and the body now that the paramedics are done making sure there was no sign of life. Forensics should be here soon as well.”

Blake's arm slid away from Paradise, and he turned toward the walk. "I'll take you."

She hugged herself in spite of the warm sun touching her arms. They'd all hoped their troubles were over, but they weren't that lucky.