



LOVE ★ HONOR

HONOR BOUND



HALLEE BRIDGEMAN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LOVE  HONOR
BOOK 1

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This book is dedicated to the men and women who have served in the United States Army Special Forces branches. Specifically, to my father, Bill Poe, who was in the 2nd Battalion 75th Ranger Regiment, and to my husband, Gregg Bridgeman, who served in the 20th Special Forces Group (Airborne). Your selfless service and warrior spirits served as an inspiration for many of the characters in this book.

Be devoted to one another in love.
Honor one another above yourselves.
—Romans 12:10

Glossary of Military Terms and Acronyms

AO: area of operations

B-7: life preserver

BIRD: helicopter

BOUNDING OVERWATCH: a military tactic of alternating movement (leapfrogging) of coordinated units to allow, if necessary, suppressive fire in support of offensive forward movement or defensive disengagement

CAP: Captain

CHU: containerized housing unit (a small, climate-controlled container)

CRRC/CRICKET: combat rubber raiding craft

COMMISSARY: store on military base that sells groceries and household items

DFAC: dining facility

DV: distinguished visitor

EVAC: evacuate

EXFIL: exfiltrate (withdraw)

FEET DRY: at the target destination (in naval aviator lingo, it literally means “no longer over the ocean but now over land”)

HQ: headquarters

HIGH SIDE: the SIPRNET

INTEL: intelligence

KLICK: kilometer

LZ: landing zone

MEB: US Army Marketing and Engagement Brigade

MERC: mercenary

MIKES: minutes

MRE: meal ready to eat

ODA: Operational Detachment Alpha

OPCON: operational control

PCS: permanent change of station

PR: personnel recovery mission

PX: post exchange (a department store on a military installation)

RECON: reconnaissance

ROGER: understood and acknowledged

ROGER, WILCO: understood, acknowledged, and will comply

SCIF: sensitive compartmented information facility (a secure location where classified information can be reviewed)

SIPRNET: secret internet protocol router network (a network the Department of Defense uses to transfer classified information)

SITREP: situational report

CHAPTER



ONE

KATANGELA, AFRICA

Captain Rick Norton crouched near the edge of the dirt road. Ears still ringing from the intense firefight, the smell of gunpowder burning his nose, he looked around, counting team members. Gerald “Jerry Maguire” McBride and Daniel “Pot Pie” Swanson came out of their hidden and elevated sniper-spotter positions. They both threw him a silent thumbs-up.

Travis “Trout” Fisher crouched nearby with his carbine pointed downrange and his radio rig tucked away. He also offered a thumbs-up. Jorge Peña “Colada” and Bill “Drumstick” Sanders glided backward toward his position with rifles at the ready. “Up!” they said in unison.

Rick scanned the jungle around him. “Ozzy, position?”

No response.

His gut tightened, and he motioned for the men to regroup. Tension flowed through the team like electricity, then came a measure of relief when they found their combat

medic, Phil “Doctor Oz” Osbourne, lying under a banana tree. He was trying to patch up his own thigh with a surgical clamp and a threaded needle below his hastily applied field tourniquet. Rick slid on his knees toward him and took the clamp from him.

“Caught one, Cap,” Ozzy said, his voice hesitating as shock started to overtake his body. “No way I’m getting out of this jungle on my own two feet.”

Wordlessly, Rick clamped Ozzy’s artery despite its best efforts to worm up and out of sight, then wrapped a fresh field dressing bandage around his thigh, securing the clamp and protecting the wound.

“You don’t know that, Doc,” Sanders said. “I’d want Daddy patching me up if you were otherwise occupied.”

Despite his tension, Rick internally rolled his eyes at the “Daddy” nickname. Sanders had drawled the words in an Alabama accent just to make them sound sweeter. Rick would address his mockery in a more appropriate manner, maybe with a bucket of ice water in some idyllic moment of downtime. For now, he let it slide and listened to Fisher calling headquarters for their extraction. He looked up expectantly as Fisher ended the radio call.

“They can pick us up twenty clicks from here, azimuth 26.”

Twenty kilometers? With a quick calculation, Rick translated that distance to just over twelve miles. He scratched his red beard, estimated the amount of blood already lost, observed the rate it continued to soak into the field dressing, and concluded that Ozzy wouldn’t make it two miles, much less twelve. He would lapse into hypovolemic shock before they could get halfway there, and he would undoubtedly expire soon after.

The team's military intelligence asset, First Lieutenant Peña, retrieved and studied the laminated map that hung from a snap ring on his pack. In his fascinating mind, Peña carried all their mission details. He had an olive-green bandanna tied close around his head but kept his curly black hair uncovered, and his heavy black beard was shaved close to his face. "There's a village two clicks east. Near the river. They have an American doctor, Cynthia Myers, in residence."

Rick pressed his lips together. He knew all about the American doctor. At least, he knew all about her father. "Any other options?"

"Drop packs," Peña said. "Four-man carry to the exfil LZ. Bounding overwatch. Rotate out every five to ten mikes."

Rick considered how long it would take for them to carry Ozzy through the jungle. Even after dropping their heavy packs and rotating in shifts, they would move too slowly. "It would take too long."

"Have them move up the exfil time or relocate the LZ. This is a PR, after all," Sanders said. Personnel recovery missions merited an elevated priority over routine combat operations and could require a more accessible landing zone.

"No-go on that one, Daddy," Fisher said. "Limited resources. Politically sensitive area and such. Azimuth 26 is the best we got."

Rick glanced at the blood-soaked bandage and nodded. Making his hand into a blade, he gestured toward the tree line. "Village it is. Maguire, Colada—fashion a stretcher. Trout, tell HQ to save their fuel for now. Pie, go collect some visibility on the AO until we're ready." He turned to Sanders. "You're on point with me, Drum. First leg."

“Check,” Sanders said.

“Go get yourself a little recon while we partake of this incredible good fortune.”

“Medals, Cap,” Ozzy interjected, his tone dry. “Thanks of a grateful nation, for sure.”

“You concentrate on stopping yourself from bleeding so much, Doc. I will take this time to plan our exfil, secure in the knowledge that this mission will doubtless earn us all legendary chest candy and fruit salad.”

His team snickered. They did not do their jobs for recognition. Green Berets had a reputation as the “quiet professionals” for a reason.

Using a nylon-poncho liner and some cut-down saplings, they fashioned a makeshift stretcher and carefully lifted Ozzy onto it. Sanders returned with a nod, indicating a clear path.

“Trout, toss your rig and Doc’s pack on there too,” Rick said. “You and Jerry Maguire make like Sherpas for Doc Oz. Pie, take overwatch for the first klik. Drumstick and I got point out of the gate.” He focused on the tall Black man with the thick black beard and shaved head slicing an apple with his razor-sharp K-BAR knife. With the name Daniel Swanson, everyone called him Pot Pie. “Pie, when we arrive, stand to. You and Colada establish a home base close to the village. Bring silence to bear if the situation screams for it.”

“Roger, wilco, Cap,” Swanson said with a nod.

“Any questions or suggestions?” Rick searched his men’s faces in the ensuing silence. “Right. Let us know if your little arms get tired, ladies. Let’s roll.”



Doctor Cynthia Myers had made her way to a remote village in Katangela to run an OB clinic and was the only doctor within several kilometers. Women came from villages all around for care. In the five months she'd been here, Cynthia had witnessed people dying of everything from infection to sickness to mortal wounds sustained in a hippopotamus attack.

As she stood in the dirt courtyard in front of the clinic, she watched a chicken with a fat grub clutched in its beak strut from the edge of the jungle. "You're going to get in trouble, Amelia," she said. The hen had become known as Amelia Egghart because she tended to explore the outside world as often as possible. "Tadeas doesn't like it when you escape from the coop."

Suddenly, ominous sounds interrupted her. From somewhere in the distance came the faint but unmistakable sound of automatic gunfire. Despite the isolation of the remote village in the wild of the African jungle, she had heard that sound all too often since her arrival.

The sounds escalated, a set of low, thunderous cracks alternating with short but sharp high-pitched bursts, like a distant percussion section warming up for a marching band concert at halftime. Something about these cracking reports sounded very different and threatening.

Her nurse, Tadeas, came out of the hospital building. "Apparently, there are more than just Kalashnikovs in the jungle today," he said.

"Pistols?" Cynthia asked.

He shook his head. "ARs. American rifles. Western mercenaries love expensive black rifles. The locals favor AKs. Those are cheap, and so are the bullets."

She felt her eyebrows knitting together as she listened to the now-sporadic gunfire. “That sounds close.”

Tadeas turned his eyes toward the tree line. “Actually, that sounds very close.”

Though they were nearly always fatal, the American-made 5.56 caliber rounds—much like the Kalashnikov 7.62 caliber rounds—created overwhelming trauma whenever patients survived the gunshots.

Meeting Tadeas’s eyes, Cynthia saw her own worry reflected. “I’m going to go find something to eat,” she said. “See if you can relieve Ayo. She may not want to leave Gamila yet, but she needs to eat something.”

Gamila had gone into labor at four that morning. For six hours, Cynthia and Ayo, her midwife-in-training, had ministered to the teenager as she progressed through the labor. Having witnessed the growing infatuation blossoming between Tadeas and Ayo, Cynthia had no doubt that he would see to her trainee’s needs now.

“One of the villagers brought your dinner, Doctor. I covered it and put it in your pantry,” Tadeas replied.

He ducked into the doorway of the clinic, and she walked across the dirt courtyard into her own simple one-room home. She poured some water into the washbasin and wet a clean rag, then scrubbed her face, neck, and arms with the soap. As she rinsed with the cool water, inhaling the lavender scent, she felt ready for another five or six hours of work before she could safely call it a day.

Cynthia rebraided her hair, put a fresh bandanna around her neck, and unbuttoned her shirt, then slipped it off her shoulders. Wearing just her tank top and jeans, she sat on her cot and bowed her head. “God? Thank You for bringing me

here, even amid the circumstances that perpetuated my decision. And thank You for the life You brought into the world today. Be with Gamila and give her wisdom in parenting.”

As she lifted her head, her stomach gave an audible growl. Remembering Tadeas’s words, she opened the cupboard above her sink and found some fried bread and a mango beneath a napkin of cheesecloth. She bit into the bread and closed her eyes, enjoying every flavor. Just as she put her knife to the skin of the mango, she heard the unmistakable sound of a truck engine revving high, followed by gunshots and a woman’s fearful cry.

Stomach twisting, Cynthia jumped to her feet, slipped the knife into her pocket, and threw her shirt back over her shoulders. Stepping out into the courtyard just as a truck came to an abrupt halt directly in front of the clinic, she shielded her eyes and nose. Dust thrown up by the truck tires swirled around the vehicle, momentarily obscuring it in a powdery reddish-brown cloud.

As the dust settled, a man yelled out, “Where is the doctor?” He stood in the bed of the truck, wearing an unbuttoned olive-green uniform shirt with brass ammunition belts crisscrossed over his chest like bandoliers. In his hand he clutched a nasty-looking rifle with a drum-sized ammunition magazine. Out of the corner of her eye, Cynthia saw villagers ducking into the nearest buildings.

Angry at the violence that had once again permeated her peaceful home, she pushed back any fear she might have felt, stepped forward, and lifted her chin. “Hey, you! I’m the doctor.”

Using the side of the truck as a brace, he vaulted to the ground and approached her, looking her over from the top

of her braided hair to the toes of her size 4 brown leather boots. “You? You are the doctor?” he asked with a snarl.

“Yes. I am.” Despite the fear that made her stomach clench, she held his gaze and waited.

Finally, he stepped back and gestured toward the truck as the driver got out and walked to the back. He opened the tailgate, reached in, and pulled something forward. “Save this man’s life.”

“Tadeas!” she yelled, walking toward the back of the truck. “I need gloves!”

As her nurse emerged from the clinic, the two men leveled their weapons in his direction. Rounding on the apparent leader, Cynthia said, “You want my help? I need my nurse.”

Speaking in French, he granted Tadeas passage. Tadeas handed her two pairs of gloves and her stethoscope. His eyes screamed at her to use caution with these men. She didn’t know how to reassure him or if she even should, so she thanked him.

Without warning, the driver kicked Tadeas in the back of his knees, bringing him to the ground. Before she could even gasp, he put the muzzle of his rifle against the back of Tadeas’s head. Knowing that the man would not hesitate to kill him, she decided not to react as she slipped one pair of gloves into her pocket and put the other pair on.

When she approached the rear of the truck, she saw a young man lying atop a pallet on the open tailgate. Spent shell casings littered the truck bed. The smell of gunpowder mixed with blood filled her mouth with a metallic taste and almost overwhelmed her. Inspecting the patient, she saw his olive-green shirt soaked with blood. When she pulled the knife out of her pocket, the warlord put a hand on her wrist.

Cynthia looked into his wild brown eyes. “You can hinder me or stay out of my way. The choice is yours.”

“Be very careful, Doctor. I have the power to kill everyone here. Their lives are in your hands.” He released her.

She stripped the gloves off and dropped them to the dirt. She retrieved the second pair and carefully put them on. “Please don’t touch me again. I have no intention of hurting your man here. But by interfering, you have just delayed my examination and put his life in further danger.”

The man snorted but took a step back. She turned to the patient and ignored the fact that the man watched with bald suspicion as she cut the bloody shirt away. When she set the knife down, he picked it up and closed the blade, setting it far enough away that she couldn’t easily grab it, and of course contaminating it. Cynthia shook her head in frustration at the man’s stubborn stupidity.

Trying to put him out of her mind, she examined her patient. Two bullets had penetrated his right lower abdomen. She suspected the rounds were 5.56 caliber based on the size of the entry wounds and the trauma. Even in a stocked hospital with trained emergency staff, she couldn’t see saving this man. He bore a brand on his inner wrist—the bull’s-eye mark of Chukuwereije, a warlord who had grown in strength over the last five years. If she did not give the appearance of trying to save him, Tadeas would die. And likely Ayo. Maybe even her.

Heart pounding, she put her stethoscope to his chest. Shallow breaths, thready heartbeat. Moving the stethoscope down, she listened. No bowel sounds. He was so close to death. Without God’s hand, nothing would change the inevitable.

Even as that thought crossed her mind, he took his last rattling breath. Had they noticed? Pushing her fingers against his neck, she searched for a pulse but found nothing.

Could she pretend he was still alive for a few minutes, stall them until she figured out a way to get Tadeas out of this mess? Probably not. These men had likely seen more death in their young lives than she would in her entire life. She had no options. Just as she took her stethoscope out of her ears and prepared to tell these warlords that their friend had died, she heard a commotion.

From out of the woods on the edge of the village, two soldiers emerged wearing camouflaged uniforms. They held their weapons at the ready and walked in a surprisingly fast crouch, though their upper bodies remained perfectly stable and the muzzles of their rifles perfectly vertical. They moved with practiced skill, looking like little tanks rolling across a smooth countryside.

The Chukuwereije soldiers started screaming orders. The driver lifted his weapon and fired twice. One of the oncoming soldiers fired a single shot, and the man fell at Cynthia's feet. Before she could react, the leader grabbed her and put a pistol to her temple. The hot gunmetal pressed painfully against her skin.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tadeas dash into the clinic. He likely went in to protect Ayo and Gamila. Once he was out of the way of any danger, she felt a sense of calm replace her rising panic.