



LOVE ★ HONOR

# HONOR'S REFUGE



HALLEE BRIDGEMAN

*USA TODAY* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LOVE  HONOR  
BOOK 3

# HONOR'S REFUGE



HALLEE BRIDGEMAN

  
Revell

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Hallee Bridgeman, Honor's Refuge  
Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2022. Used by permission.

© 2022 by Hallee Bridgeman

Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bridgeman, Hallee, author.

Title: Honor's refuge / Hallee Bridgeman.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022] | Series: Love and Honor ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2022001731 | ISBN 9780800740221 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800742300 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493438907 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3602.R531375 H667 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022001731>

Scripture quotations, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, are from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*This book is dedicated to the EMTs and paramedics who are on our streets every day—first responders who go into unknown and at times dangerous situations with the single mission to help those in need. Thank you for your dedication to your calling.*

# PROLOGUE

Missy huddled with three-year-old Lola between the nightstand and the bed, praying her little sister would stay asleep. Her father's fist hit her mother's face with a sickening thud, and Missy's stomach rolled. She really shouldn't have let the macaroni and cheese burn. This was all her fault.

Her mom landed on the floor, clutching her big round belly with the new baby. Her father yelled and kicked her with his boots. Her mom reached forward, and for a moment, Missy was terrified that she was grabbing for her. Instead, she grasped the cord of the telephone. It landed next to Missy as her father stomped on her mom's arm.

She stared at the phone. 911. She'd learned that on *Sesame Street* yesterday. In case of a fire, call 911. Even though this wasn't a fire, maybe a fireman would help her mom. She reached out, pressing the buttons very carefully.

"911, what's your emergency?" a woman said.

Missy trembled, afraid her father would hear her speak, so she said nothing. Pulling Lola closer, she kissed her curly black hair. Her sister started to struggle against her, and she

worried she would start crying. Just as Lola broke free, her father stormed away and slammed the bedroom door.

Eyes closed, Missy waited for him to come back. Her mom gave a long cry, and Missy cracked open one eye to make sure the door was still shut. She shifted out from her hiding place. Her mom lay with her arms around her stomach, panting. Lola walked over to her and knelt down, patting her on the head. Her mom let out another long moan.

With a loud bang, the door slammed open. Missy's whole body froze in fear. Her hands tingled and her breath wouldn't move past her chest. Her father filled the doorway. He looked at Missy, then at Lola, and walked toward the bed. Missy ducked out of the way, grabbed Lola's hand, and ran to the door.

Her father picked the phone up and stared at it. "What did you do?" he shouted at her mom. He bent and grabbed her by her hair, putting his face close to hers. "What did you do?"

Her breath ended on a hiccup, and she panted, "You better run. They're coming and they'll find it all."

Missy clung to Lola's hand and crouched in the hall, trying to decide what to do while her father hung up the phone and then dialed a number. He turned his back on them and spoke in Spanish. "Cops are coming." After a pause he said, "Whatever you think is best." He looked over his shoulder at Missy and narrowed his eyes at her. "Yes, sir."

Missy's heart leapt into her throat. She kept a firm grip on Lola's hand and ran down the hall and through the living room. In the kitchen, she could still smell the burned macaroni and cheese.

"Come on, Lola," she whispered, pushing open the dog door.

Lola hesitated, giant tears sliding down her face. “Mommy said no,” she said, pushing her hand against the door.

“You have to go!” Missy looked over her shoulder. Her father must still be on the phone. Thinking that Lola would follow her if she went first, she pushed her hands and head through the small door. Little pebbles on the patio dug into her palms, and the front of her leg scraped against the metal frame, but she didn’t cry.

Outside, she lifted the flap and motioned for Lola to follow her. Her sister’s lip trembled, but she crawled through.

On the back porch, Missy looked around. Where to hide? He’d look in the fort by the swing set. She took Lola’s hand and ran around to the front of the house, to the big bush by the mailbox. If they sat on the curb, he probably couldn’t see them. The bush would hide them.

Lola covered her ears with her hands and closed her eyes. “Mommy,” she said.

Missy put her arm around her. Her leg stung where she’d hit the dog door. She poked at the bloody scrape as tears fell down her face. “Be quiet, Lola. Let’s wait for the firemen.”

Instead of a fire truck, though, a police car came. Missy didn’t know what she’d done to make the police come instead of the firemen, but she was so happy to see two officers get out of the car that she couldn’t even speak.

The woman spotted them and knelt next to them by the mailbox. She had nice eyes and smelled like peppermint. “It’s not safe out here by the road,” she said, putting a hand on Lola’s head. “Where are your parents?”

“Mommy,” Lola cried, then looked over her shoulder toward the house.

Missy’s lower lip trembled. “Mommy’s hurt.”

“Is your dad here?” the policewoman asked.

“Daddy’s bad,” Lola said. She covered her ears again.

As the policewoman stood up, she talked into the radio on her shoulder, using words and numbers that Missy didn’t understand.

“It’s okay, Lola,” Missy said as the officers walked toward the house. “We’ll be okay now.”



# CHAPTER



# ONE

## **25 YEARS LATER** **OCTOBER 20**

When Melissa Braxton eyed Phil Osbourne's black truck turning into the parking lot, she snatched up her book and opened it. She settled back into the booth to give a false appearance of relaxation. She didn't want him to think she'd sat here just anticipating his arrival, watching every car that drove by. He didn't need or want that kind of attention.

She didn't put the book down until she felt him slide into the booth across from her. She intentionally looked startled at his arrival. "Oh, hi," she said with a grin. "Glad you made it."

Phil had dark blond hair, gray-green eyes set on a square face, and a mouth that didn't smile often enough. Normally, he wore his EMT uniform to their Thursday morning breakfasts, but today he had on a light-blue T-shirt that stretched across his broad chest and emphasized his healthy tan.

"You ever going to finish that book?" he asked as he settled into the booth.

She found the gumption to blink in innocence. "I beg your pardon?"

"You've been reading that same book for a couple of weeks now."

She should have given his observation skills a little more credit. She kept the book in her car for the "reading, not waiting" ruse. She shrugged. "I only read it here."

The diner owner, Delilah Pérez, arrived with a pot of coffee. She was Phil's mom's best friend, and Phil had grown up around her. She usually waited on them instead of one of the waitresses.

"Morning, Phil," she said as she set a container of cinnamon next to his coffee cup.

He smiled up at her. "Delilah. Good to see you."

"Regular?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Delilah looked at Melissa. "What about you, hon? What's this morning's story?"

The Cuban diner had all the flavors she remembered from her grandparents' kitchen. "Hmm, how about plantain and corned beef hash?" she asked.

"You want spice?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am." Melissa pulled her braid over her shoulder and toyed with the end of it while she redirected her attention to Phil. "I don't see how you can eat oatmeal day after day. This place could bring so much flavor to your life."

"I like flavor. Just not at eight in the morning." He rested his forearms on the table, linking his fingers. "How are you?"

How was she? She didn't think "desperately in love with you and wishing you'd notice me" was the answer he sought. So she went to where he would follow. "Rough night. A woman with three kids called at two. The police took her husband, but she was afraid he'd come back before morning, so she wanted to get out of there as fast as possible."

Melissa operated a domestic abuse shelter. Everyone kept the location mostly a secret. She and her partner had spread the contact information to doctors' offices, hospitals, therapists, schools, and emergency services. She gave the victims a safe home, provided family and individual counseling, and helped them start new lives—usually away from Miami. Phil provided medical care whenever she couldn't convince someone to go to the hospital.

"How old?" He sprinkled cinnamon into his coffee.

"Four, five, and seven."

He shook his head as he stirred the rich brew. "Poor kids."

"I know. They're shell-shocked right now."

He held up the cinnamon as if asking if she wanted some, but she shook her head.

"I didn't get a lot of time to speak with her," she said. "I have a meeting with her during lunch to start the initial counseling."

As Phil took a sip of his coffee, she studied his face. Normally at breakfast, he had a hint of a beard and tired eyes from working the night shift. This morning, he looked rested and groomed, and she could smell the hint of his aftershave. "Big plans today?"

He put his cup down and smiled. "Actually, I have a couple of friends coming to town."

"Friends?" She knew his parents and brother from church,

but she had never met any of his friends. "Where are they coming from?"

"Alaska and Virginia."

"From the service?"

He nodded.

"That will be nice. You going to play tour guide?"

Another smile. Wow, two in one morning! "Nah. Drumstick is helping me with a project. Pot Pie is his business partner."

With raised eyebrows, Melissa repeated, "Drumstick and Pot Pie?"

"That's what we call them. Those were their nicknames on our team."

He sounded animated, almost happy. She loved that his friends generated this kind of energy in him. "Let me guess, your nickname was Ozzy Osbourne."

"No. Close, though." He took another sip of coffee. "Doc Oz."

"Right! Of course. Because you're a doctor."

"I was the medic. When they first named me, they didn't know I was actually a doctor. Eventually they did, but I thought Doc Oz fit perfectly. Though, in tight situations, Ozzy took less energy to say, and they often just reverted to that."

She stared at him in awe. Those had to be the most words he'd strung together in all the time she'd known him. Before she could reply, Delilah arrived with the food. Melissa smiled as the woman slid her hash onto the table. The spicy smell of the peppers wafted up with the steam. Phil glanced at his oatmeal and thanked Delilah, then looked at Melissa. She bowed her head and listened to his voice soften as he spoke to God.

“Father, we thank You for the way You constantly bless us. Thank You for this meal, and we ask that You bless it to the nourishment of our bodies and bless our bodies to Your service. Amen.”

Delilah set a hot sauce bottle on the table before Melissa could ask for it, then winked at her as she walked away. Melissa doused her hash liberally while Phil sprinkled sliced almonds and raisins over his oatmeal.

“So, I’m going to guess Pot Pie’s name is probably Swanson,” she said, “hearing how it works.”

He looked surprised. “Well done.”

“I’m stuck on Drumstick, though. Let me think about it some more.”

“I have no doubt you’ll be able to deduce it.”

They ate in silence for several minutes before she asked, “How long are they here for?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Until they’re done.”

“What’s this project?”

He paused, looking at her for several heartbeats. “Something for a friend.”

“Another elusive friend? Well, you’re just building a village, aren’t you?”

He ignored her like she knew he would. Disappointment tried to cloud her contentment at spending the morning with him. She wanted more, and she wanted him to want more. She’d made the initial step in asking him to breakfast the first time. He’d suggested lunch the next Sunday. That was where it all began and exactly where it all ended.

She’d made up her mind today to just ask him about it. Did he want to see her beyond this? Was he attracted to her? Should she give up?

Not when he had friends coming to town today, though. Seeing how animated he'd become filled her heart. She didn't want to risk infringing on that.

She took a sip of her coffee and washed down a bite of plantain. "My abuelita used to make this," she said to fill the silence. "My uncle has always corned his own beef for his deli, and whenever he had some left over, she'd make big batches of hash. She said potatoes made her sneeze, so she made it the way her mom made it in Cuba, with plantains."

"Oh, right. Your family owns that deli. I still haven't been there. Work seems to keep me on this side of Miami."

"Yep. My great-grandfather opened that deli in the late sixties. It's been handed down from son to son since."

He chewed on a raisin. "What will happen if there's not a son?"

"You take that back," she said with a laugh.

"Did you ever work in the deli?"

Images of customers lined up out the door and meat slicers and giant vats of pickles ran across her mind. "Yes."

"I'd like to have seen that."

She couldn't stop the little tug on her lips in response to his interest. "I worked there all through high school and college." Her smile faded as memories from her childhood filtered through her mind and her thoughts turned to her sister. Would she ever find her? Her smile faltered as the memories assailed her, but she pushed them aside and said, "So, friends in town today. Will I see you Sunday?"

He ripped a piece of toast in half and spread orange marmalade on it. "I will see you Sunday." He reclined against the bench while he ate. "I may have my friends with me, but I'll be there, regardless."

“Good. I’m speaking.” She finished the last of her hash and took a final sip of her coffee. “I have to run. I have a mom who needs a ride to the bus station at ten.”

As she slid out of the booth, he reached out and touched her forearm. She immediately stilled. “I’m sorry I was late. It’s good to see you.”

Unsure of what brought on the intenseness emanating from him, she stared into his eyes for probably a second too long. Finally, she said, “Drumstick is Sanders, right? For Kentucky Fried Chicken?”

A slow grin covered his face. It made her heart flutter. “Impressive,” he said.

Heat filled her face, but she couldn’t help smiling as she left the diner.



With Melissa gone, the room felt so much emptier. Phil stirred his oatmeal, then dropped his spoon and let it clatter against the bowl. He kicked himself for being late. He’d gone to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting first thing, then hit traffic getting to the diner.

He looked forward to every single moment he could snatch with Melissa. The first time she’d smiled at him, her brown eyes shone with a light that had stripped his ability to speak. When she’d asked him out to breakfast, he couldn’t believe she could possibly have an interest in him. The next Sunday he found her in church, where she wore a yellow sundress that glowed against her dark tan skin. Her black hair fell in thick curls down her back, and she smelled like summer peaches. Somehow, the invitation to lunch had rolled off his tongue before he could talk himself out of it. And now, for over a

year, he'd tortured himself by snatching a couple of meals a week with her. Every time he asked her how she was, he tensed up, waiting to hear that she'd met some really great guy and was desperately happy and couldn't meet him for breakfast or lunch anymore.

Even though she deserved to meet some really great guy who made her desperately happy.

He tossed his napkin over his bowl and pulled his wallet out of his shorts pocket. He'd worn shorts this morning, displaying the prosthetic leg he always kept hidden, but she'd had her nose buried in a book when he got there. It wasn't like she didn't know about his injury, but he wanted to see her reaction anyway because she'd never actually seen it.

Why? Why continue to put himself through this?

*Because you're in love, you idiot.*

He just needed to stop. If Melissa deserved anything, it was a whole man. Not someone who'd gotten addicted to narcotics in medical school, walked out on a career because he couldn't stand to have all sorts of access to drugs in his office, and joined the Army to run away from everything Miami could offer him. And that was just the beginning of the end of him.

Delilah slid into the booth across from him. "Why do you put yourself through this?"

He stared into the rich brown eyes of his mother's best friend, who had eerily echoed his own thoughts. "She needs someone who is whole."

"You're a whole lotta something, but it ain't smarts." She tapped the table. "She pines for you. I watch her. As soon as she sees you coming, she snatches up her book and pretends to be reading, but she'll watch for you the whole time."



Something inside of him started to bloom with hope, but he quickly doused it. “No. Look, Dee, I love you, but you need to stay out of this. I’m in as deep as I’m able. End of story.” He took a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet and set it on the table. He had quit trying to make her give him a check for breakfast and just figured what it should be every week.

She ignored the money and pointed at him. “If it’s the end of that story, then it’s time to start a new page. Brand-new.” She slid out of the booth and stood over him. “Just to warn you, there’s a mom with three kids behind you.”

He let out a deep sigh and steeled himself for the stares. Adults pretended not to see, but children didn’t know how to be subtle. As he slid out of the booth, the metal on his prosthetic leg caught the red lights shining behind the counter. Finding his balance and getting to his feet, he turned and made eye contact with the kid in the booth behind him.

The little boy’s eyes widened, and he whispered, “Mom!” more loudly than some people shout.

Knowing the attention his leg—well, his lack of leg—received, he kept his head up and his eyes forward as the kids in that booth whisper-screamed among themselves. Relieved to get to the door, he pushed it open and stepped out into the heat of the late October morning.

The farther he walked away from the diner, the lighter he felt. Aunt Dee needed to mind her own business.

His phone chirped. He scanned the incoming call. “Well, if it ain’t Drumstick Sanders. How are you, my brother?”

“Finer than a frog hair split three ways,” Bill Sanders said. His Alabama twang made Phil grin. “We’re on the tarmac headed for the terminal.”

Phil glanced at his watch. They'd arrived much earlier than expected.

As if reading his mind, Bill said, "My flight from Alaska changed, so we were able to push up travel all the way across the board."

"With the traffic, I'm about twenty minutes away."

"Ain't no thing. I'm sure by the time we get to the gate and then to baggage claim, we'll be twenty minutes."

"Sounds good."

Even though he'd never admit it out loud, he was a little nervous about Bill and Daniel coming. In the almost two years since he'd gotten medically released from the Army, he'd had plenty of phone conversations, group messages, video conferences, and the like with the men he'd served with in the military. He'd seen them at an awards ceremony in Washington, DC, but he'd not been in a good mental state. Since then, he'd attended two weddings. However, both times he'd made his travel arrangements super tight so that he'd have an excuse to leave as soon as possible, limiting his exposure.

He'd needed to distance himself from the warriors in his life. Being with them did nothing but remind him of everything he'd lost the day that a bullet from a Chukwureije soldier in the jungles of Katangela, Africa, had pierced the femoral artery in his left leg.

Still, while he battled nerves, he also felt very anticipatory. These were his brothers-in-arms, closer to him than his actual brother only because they'd served together in a Special Forces A-Team for five years. The things they'd seen, the things they'd done, the way they'd watched each other's backs for years, had burned into his heart and soul in a way

that made them family in his mind, despite the close core family he himself had.

As if on cue, his phone rang, and his brother's name appeared across the screen. "Yo, Winston," he said as he unlocked his truck.

"Hey. I have those tickets you wanted." His older brother was an attorney in the state attorney's office. He could always get his hands on Dolphins tickets.

"That's great, man. Thanks."

"I forwarded you the email confirmation."

"You're still planning on going to the game with us, right?"

"I wanted to, but I have a last-minute conflict. I do want to meet your friends. I'll be by in the morning with the keys to my boat if you still want to borrow it."

"I do."

Winston's voice was muffled, then he said, "I have another call. Love you."

"Love you too." Before Phil pulled into traffic, he put a reminder on his phone for next Friday to have dinner with Winston. That would give him a week to take care of the business with Daniel and Bill.

As he pulled up to the loading zone at the airport, Daniel came out the door. The tall Black man carried an air of authority around him that made him stand out in a crowd. Right behind him was Bill. He had a closely trimmed dark beard and a red baseball cap covering his black hair. The last time Phil had seen him, he'd had a dark tan, but clearly, the Alaskan autumn had faded that away.

Phil pulled up right next to them and rolled his window down. "Looking for a ride, soldier?"

Daniel rested his forearm against the truck's frame and

leaned into the open window. "Ozzy, my man. Good to see you."

Bill tossed their suitcases into the back. Daniel opened the cab door. "I'm calling shotgun so I don't have to fold myself up to get into the back seat."

"Fair enough," Bill said in a drawl. "No judgment." As he slid into the back seat, he leaned forward and slapped Phil on the shoulder. "Good to see you."

"Thanks for coming."

As Phil pulled out into the airport traffic, contentment he hadn't felt in a long time settled into his soul. He needed these men in his life. He needed to know people who had been there and done that, people who understood without requiring an explanation.

He glanced over at Daniel. "How's civilian life?"

His friend grinned as he pointed to the back seat. "Well, other than starting a company with that jackal, it's perfect. Food's good, mornings are relaxed." He paused. "How are you?"

Phil smiled as he merged onto the interstate. "Better now, man. Better now."