

LOVE WITHOUT RESCUE

A NOVEL OF LOSS, FAITH,
AND CHOOSING LOVE AGAIN

B ALAN BOURGEOIS

Love Without Rescue: A Novel of Loss, Faith, and Choosing Love Again

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Authors Note

This story is rooted in real events and lived truth. Yes, it's a story of love—but not only the kind you find in another person. It's also about the love inside you that gets buried under survival, shame, and exhaustion.

It's about meeting yourself honestly—without pretending it's always pretty or easy. It's about finding what makes you feel alive again, remembering your purpose, and refusing to let go of it even when life feels like it's trying to swallow you whole.

Names and identifying details have been changed—not to protect anyone from accountability, but to give people the freedom to keep living their lives without my pain becoming their public burden.

I offer this book as a Valentine's gift to anyone still trying to find themselves, still trying to understand their worth, and still fighting to believe their life has meaning—especially when the world has done everything it can to convince them otherwise.

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Forty

The thing nobody tells you about surviving is that it doesn't end when you live.

It keeps going.

It shows up in the morning, before you've even opened your eyes, as a decision your body makes without asking you. It shows up in the way your mind counts the day before it begins—pain level, mobility, weather, risk. It shows up in the way you listen to your own house at night, measuring every creak and wind gust for meaning, because after a certain kind of trauma your nervous system stops believing in "nothing."

That night, the house was talking.

It was a small country place outside Dry Creek, Texas—boards that complained when the temperature dropped, a porch that groaned like an old man when you stepped wrong, a cheap ceiling fan that clicked once every turn, refusing to be oiled. We were seven miles from the stretch of road where everything had split, and I hated that geography as if it were a person. Seven miles shouldn't be able to haunt you. But it did.

I'd gone to bed early.

Not because I was tired. Because I didn't want to be awake for the moment I officially became forty.

Forty had sounded stable when I was younger. A number with a spine. A number that meant you'd figured something out. But I had spent the five months learning a new truth: numbers don't come with guarantees. Your body can be rebuilt out of metal, your life can be rebuilt out of lies, and the calendar keeps moving like it doesn't care.

Cole was in Houston for work. That was the story, anyway. That's what he'd said when he left: a job thing, a meeting thing, something grown-up and responsible. He kissed my forehead before he walked out the door—gentle, careful—like I was fragile.

He didn't kiss me like a man who needed me.

He kissed me like a man who expected me to stay where he put me.

I lay in the dark with my eyes open, listening to the house settle. The air smelled faintly of cedar and the expensive soap Cole insisted was "better." The kitchen still carried a trace of coffee, and the living room still carried a trace of whatever he'd sprayed earlier to "freshen things up," as if the air itself needed improvement.

My left leg ached in its deep, structural way, like the bone remembered being broken and refused to forget. The hip throbbed where the screws had been, even though the screws were gone now—removed later because my body didn't heal the way it was supposed to. The left foot pulsed with its own steady insistence. Six screws. Three plates in the heel. Two surgeries. A new shape that worked but didn't belong to me.

I tried to shift, careful, like I was negotiating with an animal.

That was the cruel joke: the more careful you became, the more your body taught you how little control you had.

I turned my head toward the nightstand. My phone sat face down like a refused invitation. I wanted to call Jonah—my best friend, my anchor, my witness—but I didn't. Not yet. I wasn't ready to admit how bad it felt in my chest. Not pain-bad. Something else.

A hush fell over the house, sudden and thick.

And then came the knock.

Not a neighbor knock. Not a "hey, your dog got out" knock. Not a "can I borrow a tool" knock.

A knock that assumes you will obey.

I sat up too fast and my left foot flared, white-hot, a lightning strike that took the breath right out of me. My hands grabbed the bedspread like I could hold myself down through it.

The knock came again—harder.

It wasn't just sound. It was command.

For a few seconds I stayed sitting there, breathing through my teeth, waiting for the pain to settle into its usual pattern: sharp at the heel, then climbing into the calf, then blooming into the hip, the whole left side declaring itself as if the body were reminding me of its authority.

Another knock.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood, careful, letting my weight settle in stages. The floorboards were cool under my right bare foot, while the plastic that wrapped my left landed with a thud. I took one step, then another, feeling the first-step pain sharpen with each movement. I grabbed for my cane to help steady me for when I stood up. Some nights the pressure of the boot felt like being punished for wanting to walk.

I pulled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, hands clumsy with adrenaline. I didn't bother looking in the mirror. I knew what I'd see: a man who still hadn't recovered his face from the past few months. A man whose eyes were too awake at the wrong times.

A third knock that was harder than the last echoed in the house. I yelled out from the bedroom "Coming," in hopes it would calm down whoever was there.

I moved down the hallway, steadying myself against the wall once, then hating myself for needing to. In the living room, I paused and listened. The house felt too quiet, as if it were holding its breath with me.

I reached the front door and rested my hand on the knob.

In a small town, your instincts get trained by other people's assumptions. You learn which sounds mean trouble. You learn the difference between a visitor and a warning.

This was a warning.

I opened the door.

The porch light snapped on and washed the night in harsh yellow. Two men stood in the glare, both in uniform. Sheriff Lyle Branton was closest, hat angled just right, posture set to "public." A younger deputy stood half a step behind him, face tight, eyes scanning past me into my house like he expected something to lunge out.

Branton looked at me the way men in power look at you when they've already decided what you are: not with hatred, exactly. With ownership.

"Evening, Alden," he said, like we were discussing weather.

My throat tightened. "Sheriff."

He held a folder. White paper inside it. My name was in there. I could feel it.

"Mr. Mercer," Branton said, and the formality made my stomach drop. "I'm serving you with an arrest warrant."

The sentence slid past my ears without landing. My brain refused it the way a body refuses poison.

"For what?" I heard myself ask.

Branton didn't hesitate. He didn't look sorry. He didn't look excited. He looked like a man reading a line he'd practiced.

"Intoxicated manslaughter," he said.

The porch tilted.

For a second the world went narrow and distant, like I was hearing him through water.

"No," I said. It came out quiet, almost polite. Like I was correcting a waiter. "No. That can't be right."

The younger deputy shifted his weight, impatience creeping into his stance.

Branton's voice didn't change. "Turn around."

My mind sprinted.

Hospital blood test. Under the legal limit. The numbers, clean and undeniable.

"It wasn't intoxicated," I said, my voice sharpening. "They took my blood at the hospital. I wasn't over the line. You know that."

Branton's eyes flickered—something passed through them, quick as a match striking. Discomfort? Annoyance? Not sympathy.

"That'll be handled in court," he said, and it wasn't reassurance. It was dismissal. "Turn around, Alden."

I stood in my own doorway barefoot, feeling forty years old and suddenly unrecognizable.

The night air carried the faint smell of damp earth. A cricket chirped somewhere like nothing mattered. Down the road, a truck passed, its headlights sweeping across the field and then disappearing.

I thought of the accident—not as a story, not as a headline, but as a series of moments my body still relived without permission.

Cole's hand hitting my shoulder while I drove. The force, not enough to knock me out, but enough to jerk the wheel. The shock of it—less the pain, more the betrayal, because even then some part of me believed he wouldn't willingly do it again. Not for a *third* time.

The third time. The one that mattered.

The flash of headlights in the other lane.

The sound of metal. The sudden weightlessness. Then impact like the world slamming shut.

Later: the dead person in the other car. A stranger with a name I didn't get to know. A life that ended because my life had become violent inside a moving vehicle.

And still later: waking up in a hospital bed, half-drugged, my left side rebuilt into something that hurt and would always hurt for the rest of my life.

I had wanted to tell the truth that night. I had wanted to say: **I wasn't drunk. I was being hit.**

But truth is messy, and messy truth doesn't fit into small-town morality.

"Turn around," Branton said again, as if my hesitation was inconvenience.

I looked at him, and a cold, clear thought took shape in my mind:

They weren't here because they were uncertain.

They were here because the decision had already been made somewhere else.

Because a story had already been chosen.

I turned.

The cuffs closed around my wrists with a hard click that sounded like it belonged in a different life. Cold metal bit my skin. My hands went numb, then hot.

Branton guided me down the porch steps like I was fragile or dangerous—either way, not fully human. The younger deputy opened the back door of the patrol car.

"Watch your head," he said automatically.

I got in slowly, careful with my foot, careful with my leg, careful with my pride. The plastic seat was hard. The car smelled like disinfectant and old sweat and the ghost of fear that never fully leaves a place like that. The door shut with a heavy final sound.

From inside the car, the world looked wrong—like my own home was a photograph, already becoming past tense.

Branton leaned in at the window. "You got somebody we can call?"

"Cole," I said automatically.

Reflex. Habit. The lie you tell yourself when you need one thing to still be true: *I'm not alone.*

Branton nodded once, satisfied. He closed the door and walked away.

The car rolled forward, gravel popping under the tires. The porch light pulled away from me. The house receded into darkness.

And that was the moment my birthday became something else.

Not a milestone.

A marker.

The day they officially named me.

The ride to jail was twenty miles, and the darkness along the road pressed in like a crowd. Fields. Fences. Occasional porch lights. The quiet of rural Texas at night has a way of feeling peaceful until you're the one being carried away.

My wrists ached in the cuffs. My left foot throbbed. My mind tried to do math again, frantic:

Under the limit. Blood test. No intoxication.

So why "intoxicated"?

Because "drunk driver" is a story that satisfies people who want to be satisfied.

Because "abuse inside a gay relationship" would require the town to admit something uglier than sin. It would require nuance. It would require shame.

And because there was a woman with MADD who wanted a conviction like a trophy, and a DA who wanted a higher office, and in a town this small tragedy becomes currency.

The jail lights were brutal. They took the only thing I had of any value, my cane, then my dignity in small procedural steps. They fingerprinted me. Photographed me. The camera flash captured a face that didn't look like mine—eyes too bright, mouth too controlled.

"Date of birth," the clerk said.

I told him.

He glanced up and gave a crooked half smile. "Happy birthday."

Somewhere behind me, a man laughed.

I didn't.

They put me in a cell.

The door clanged shut, and the sound echoed in my chest like a second heartbeat.

Alone, I sat on the thin mattress and listened to the hundred year old building's noises: distant voices, a cough, a metal door closing far away. My foot ached in a slow wave. My leg ached. My hip ached. My wrists stung where the cuffs had been.

But the sharpest pain wasn't physical.

It was the realization that my life had just been turned into a label—one the town could say out loud without feeling uncomfortable.

Intoxicated.

Manslaughter.

Gay.

Convenient.

When the guard finally let me make a call, my hands shook so hard I almost dropped the phone.

Cole answered on the third ring. His voice was a bit groggy from sleep, but calm, like he was receiving news about a delayed package, not the collapse of a human being.

"Alden," he said. "Baby. What's going on?"

"I'm in jail," I said. The words tasted unreal. "They arrested me. They're charging me with intoxicated manslaughter."

A pause.

Not shock. Not outrage.

A pause like he was selecting the right mask.

Then his voice softened into something that sounded like love if you wanted it badly enough.

"It's going to be fine," he said. "Don't panic. I know someone I can get in touch with, a lawyer to work with us on this."

Us.

That word hit me like warmth.

And then he said it—gentle, final, like a signature at the bottom of a letter.

“And I love you.”

My throat tightened. My eyes burned. For a moment I let myself believe the sentence could protect me.

Then another memory rose—his fist swining on my arm and shoulder while I drove, the third time, the one that killed someone else.

The guard knocked on the glass.

Time.

“I’ll bond you out in the morning,” Cole said. “Try to get some sleep.”

He hung up.

I sat with the dead phone in my hand and stared at the wall, listening to the jail breathe around me.

Forty years old.

A stranger dead.

My body rebuilt out of metal.

My name rebuilt into a story.

And the first day of my forties ending in a cell, with my wrists still aching and the town already sharpening its mouth around the version of me it wanted to repeat.

I lay back on the thin mattress and closed my eyes.

Somewhere in the dark, a birthday passed.

Somewhere in the dark, the rest of my life began.

Bond

Cole came alone.

That should have meant something—devotion, maybe. Loyalty. The kind of quiet showing up that says, *I'm here even when it's ugly.*

In a different life, with a different man, I might have read it that way.

But as I sat on the bench in the jail lobby, waiting for my name to be called, I understood something my heart didn't want to admit: when Cole came alone, it wasn't because he needed to protect me.

It was because he needed to control the story.

The lobby smelled like bleach, old coffee, and the stale warmth of bodies passing through. The fluorescent lights were too bright, turning everyone's skin into a sick color. My left foot was already awake, pulsing and sharp, the plates and screws reminding me they existed. Sitting too long made the first step worse; standing too long made everything worse. Pain didn't care what I needed.

A guard called my name.

I stood slowly, careful, transferring weight like I was moving through a minefield. There was no way to do it without revealing something—either weakness or anger. I chose neither. I kept my face steady and let my body do what it had learned to do: endure quietly.

Cole waited near the counter, leaning back like he belonged there. He wore a clean shirt and jeans that fit perfectly, the kind of casual that costs money. His hair was neat. His face held a soft expression meant for public consumption—concerned boyfriend, steady partner, the good man doing the right thing.

When he saw me, his eyes widened a fraction, as if he were performing shock at the sight of me behind glass and paperwork.

"Baby," he said, just loud enough for the clerk to hear. His arms opened.

I stepped into the hug because my body needed something human, and because refusing him in that moment would have felt like refusing the only rope thrown down into a pit.

He wrapped me up and kissed my temple. The gesture was tender. It almost worked.

Then his hand slid to my lower back and held there—not a caress, a placement. A reminder of where I was supposed to stand.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded, because telling the truth would have been messy. Because my throat felt packed with gravel. Because I had spent the night in a cell thinking about a stranger's death and my own life turning into a headline.

The clerk cleared his throat. "Bond's one hundred thousand."

The number hit like a physical blow.

A hundred thousand dollars isn't money in a place like Dry Creek. It's a wall. It's a statement. It's the town saying, *We don't want you walking around out here.*

My stomach rolled.

Cole didn't blink.

He didn't ask a question. He didn't swallow hard. He didn't even do the little inhale people do when they're bracing to pay a price.

He just nodded, polite, and stated that the lawyer already sent the forms in.

I stared at him while he signed, and the memory that rose wasn't romantic. It was practical and sharp: how he had always been good at money when it served him. How he moved through the world like consequences were just paperwork he could solve.

The clerk read out the conditions as if reciting scripture.

“Do not consume alcohol. Do not possess firearms. Do not leave Texas without approval. Do not get arrested again. Maintain employment.”

Maintain employment.

The phrase felt like a joke somebody else told, because the kind of employment that would accept me now—after the accident, after the charge, after the whispers—was going to be thin and temporary at best. But I didn’t laugh. Nobody laughed in that room except the law.

Cole’s hand squeezed my shoulder at just the right time, a perfect performance of support. Anyone watching would think, *He’s standing by his man*.

The clerk slid the papers over. Cole gathered them neatly, as if he’d done this before, as if this were an errand.

“We’re done?” Cole asked.

The clerk nodded.

Cole turned to me and smiled. “Let’s go home.”

Home.

The word made my chest tighten because it still carried meaning, even as it was being hollowed out.

Outside, sunlight hit my face hard, and I blinked like an animal released from a cage. The air smelled like dust and grass and gasoline. A bird chirped from somewhere near the parking lot as if it had never heard the word *manslaughter* in its life.

Cole led me to his car. He opened the passenger door and waited—watchful—while I eased myself in, careful of my leg, careful of my foot. The pain sharpened with the angle of the seat. I adjusted, grimacing despite myself.

Cole watched my face.

“You okay?” he asked again, softer this time.

It should have felt caring. It felt like an assessment.

He closed the door, walked around, and slid into the driver's seat. When he shut his door, the air inside the car changed instantly. The sound of the latch was subtle, but the feeling was not.

Cole started the engine.

For a moment he didn't speak. He just sat there, one hand on the wheel, eyes forward, as if he were waiting for me to say something that would confirm his preferred version of reality.

I stared at the dashboard, listening to my own breath.

"I wasn't drunk," I said finally. "You know that. They drew my blood at the hospital."

Cole exhaled like he was tired.

"Alden," he said gently, "I know."

The gentleness was a trap. It was the kind of soft tone you use when you're about to tell someone they're irrational.

"Then why are they—"

"Because it's a death," he interrupted, still gentle.

"Because it's a small town. Because people... need someone to blame."

Need.

The word was slippery. It placed responsibility everywhere and nowhere.

I turned my head and looked at him. "I was hit," I said, and the words came out sharper than I expected. "You hit me."

The car seemed to shrink.

Cole's eyes stayed on the road ahead, but his jaw tightened.

"Don't," he said quietly.

"Don't what? Don't say what happened?"

His mouth pulled into the smallest line. "You're emotional. You're traumatized. You don't remember things the way they actually were."

There it was.

The sentence that turned truth into a flaw in me.

My stomach went cold.

"You did it three times," I said, my voice almost a whisper now. "That night was the third time."

Cole's fingers flexed on the steering wheel. He didn't look at me. When he spoke, his voice was still calm—but the calm wasn't kindness anymore.

"People are going to destroy you if you start telling stories," he said. "Do you understand me?"

The word *stories* hit like a slap.

I stared at him. "It's not a story."

He finally looked at me, and in his eyes I saw something that didn't belong in love: impatience. Disgust, almost. Like my insistence on reality was an inconvenience.

"It's going to be fine," he said, and it sounded rehearsed. "I've already been in touch with a lawyer to work with us on this."

Us again.

He reached over and touched my thigh, the same place his hand had rested in the jail lobby hug. Possession dressed as comfort.

"And I love you," he added.

He said it like a seal. Like the words should close the argument.

For half a second, my chest loosened—because the human brain will reach for comfort even when it comes with poison.

Then I remembered the hospital ceiling. The nurse's careful voice. The moment I learned I would feel pain every morning for the rest of my life. The moment the story began.

I stared out the windshield and watched the road out of town unspool ahead of us.

Cole drove like nothing had changed, which was its own kind of cruelty.

We passed the courthouse. I saw a woman outside—Marlene Pike, the MADD woman everyone talked about

now like she was a saint. She stood with a folder in her hand, talking to a man in a sharp suit: Grant Holloway, the district attorney with clean teeth and higher ambitions.

Even from a moving car, I could see Marlene's energy—purpose like a blade.

She pointed with her pen toward the building, toward the air, toward the invisible audience she was already addressing.

Holloway nodded.

Cole noticed me watching. His hand tightened slightly on my thigh, then slid away as if he'd remembered I might call it what it was.

"Don't look at them," he murmured.

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't help," he said. "Because it's not about you and me. It's bigger."

Bigger.

The word tasted like surrender.

As we drove toward the country house, my thoughts began to rearrange themselves, slow and careful.

A hundred thousand bond.

A charge that didn't match my blood test.

A town that already knew the headline.

A boyfriend who said "I love you" while he erased my truth.

My left foot pulsed, relentless, a metronome of pain.

Cole turned onto our road and the fields opened up around us, wide and quiet and indifferent. The country house appeared ahead like a postcard—porch, roofline, the little life we'd built to feel safe.

Cole pulled into the driveway.

He got out first and walked to my side, opening the door with a practiced gesture. He offered his hand like a gentleman.

I almost took it.

Then I remembered his hand in the car during the accident—his fist landing while I drove—how quick it was, how decisive.

I slid out slowly on my own.

Pain shot up my leg. I caught myself on the door frame, breathed through it, stood.

Cole watched me, expression soft again, the good man. He tilted his head.

“You’re going to need to be careful,” he said.

“With what?”

“With everything,” he replied. “With your mouth. With your emotions. With... what you think you remember.”

I stared at him. My hands still carried the ghost ache of the cuffs. My body carried the new shape of survival.

Inside the house, the air was warm and familiar. It smelled like cedar and Cole’s soap. It should have been comfort.

Instead, it felt like a stage set—a place where I had once believed in something.

Cole walked into the kitchen, poured himself a glass of water, and drank it like nothing had happened.

Then he turned and leaned against the counter, studying me.

“This will pass,” he said.

“How?” My voice sounded strange to me—thin and sharp at the same time.

He shrugged lightly. “We do what the lawyer says. We keep our heads down. We don’t make it worse.”

We.

There it was again, the word that tried to tether me to him.

“I’m sorry,” he added, and I almost missed it because it was so small. A sprinkle of remorse, not a confession. Not a truth.

“I love you,” he said again, like he was tightening a knot.

I wanted to believe it.

I wanted a version of this where love meant safety,
where love meant someone standing beside you and
saying, *This isn't right, and I'll fight with you.*

Instead, I had a man who bonded me out of jail with
one hand and rewrote my memory with the other.

I sat down at the kitchen table because my leg was
shaking.

Cole crossed the room and placed his palm on the
back of my neck—gentle pressure, the touch of someone
who knows exactly how to appear affectionate while
reminding you who is in control.

“You’re safe now,” he whispered.

The words hit me like a lie so clean it almost shined.

Because even in that moment—back in my own
kitchen, morning light on the countertop, my body
shaking with pain and shock—I understood something
with terrifying clarity:

The jail hadn’t been the trap.

It had only been the announcement.

The trap was already inside my life, wearing a familiar
face and saying *I love you* like it was a lock.

And I didn’t know yet how to get out.