

WHEN A CITY GIRL *goes country*

By Annette Bridges

Unexpected Loves

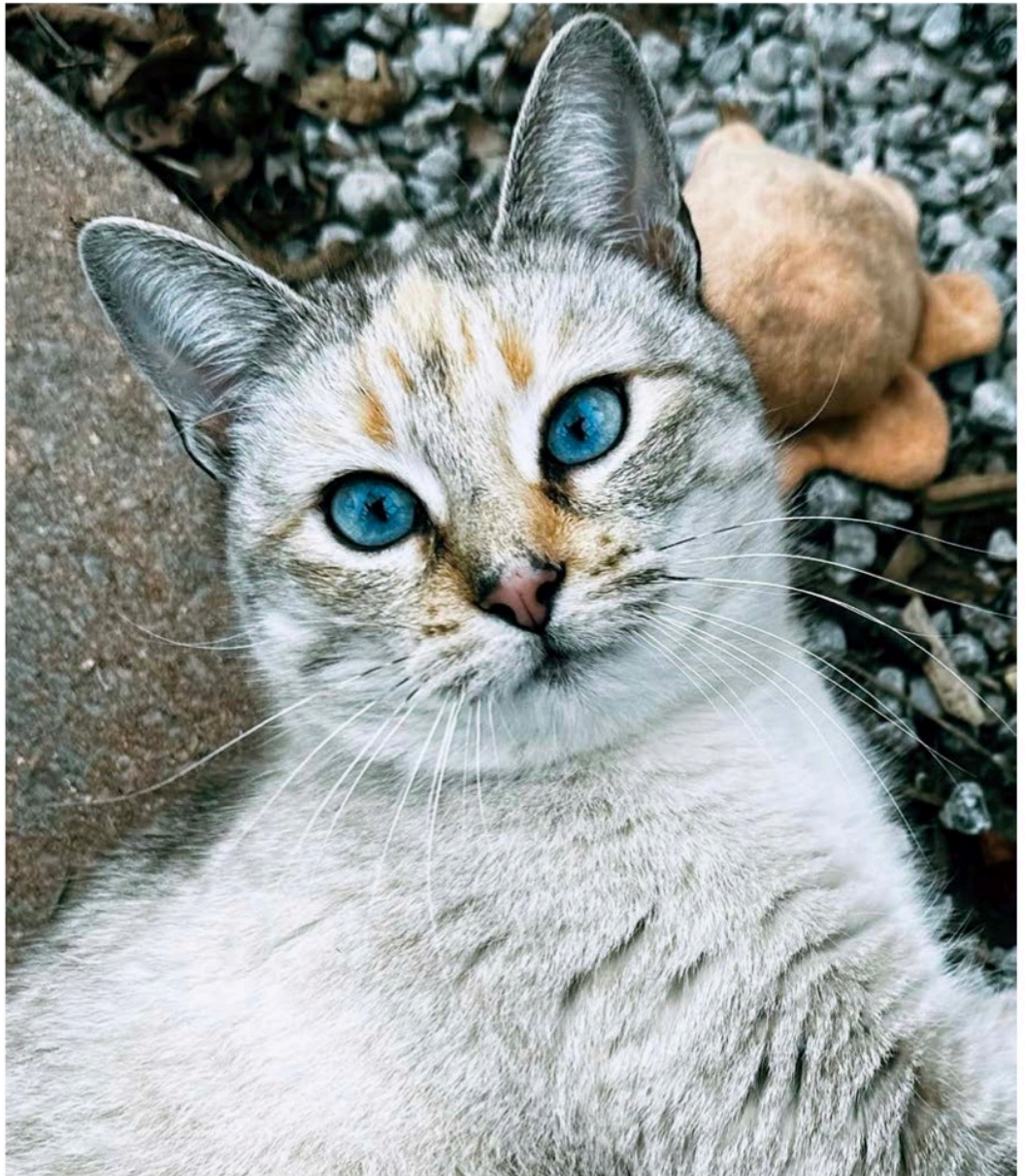
When I first came to the country, I had no idea how many unexpected loves would find me here. Over the years — decades, really — they arrived without fanfare, often without asking. Some were small and fleeting. Others settled in and stayed. Together, they shaped a life I never could have imagined when I first said yes to the ranch.

I learned to love the smell of freshly cut hay drifting through the air. The simple joy of climbing onto my favorite old red tractor. The feel of a calf carefully taking a cube from my hand, its warm breath brushing my palm. The endearing trust of a cow that lowers her head and allows me to rub her forehead. Even the quiet itself — deep, steady, and honest — became something I didn't know I needed until it wrapped itself around me.

Looking back now, after forty-five years of marriage and a lifetime of country living, I've come to believe that love has a sense of timing all its own. It doesn't knock politely or wait for an invitation. It makes itself known without warning, often when we are certain we are done letting anything steal our hearts. When it does, it rarely looks the way we expect it to.

Sometimes it has blue eyes and lives in a tree. Sometimes it arrives gently in a porcelain cup on a southern veranda.

Even now, love still surprises me. Some of its most surprising arrivals came long after



Some of love's most surprising arrivals come long after you think you know all the ways your heart can stretch. (Photo courtesy of Annette Bridges)



I thought I knew all the ways my heart could stretch. Two of those — very different from one another — reminded me that love doesn't ask permission. It simply offers itself and waits to see what we will do next.

One of those loves began just a couple of years ago, in the hollow of an old mulberry tree in our backyard. A barn mama cat had hidden her kittens there for safety, but when she moved the rest to the barn, one tiny white kitten was left behind. She was feral, fragile, and fiercely determined to survive. We named her Snowbaby.

At first, Snowbaby wanted nothing to do with us. She lived above the ground, clinging to the tree that had been her first and only shelter. On a place where animals come and go, where nature doesn't always wait, Snowbaby stayed. We provided food and water, then an

insulated house on a platform my husband built just for her. When storms damaged the tree, he rebuilt what he could, eventually enclosing her space in a catio so she could remain safe while staying where she felt most secure.

Trust came slowly. For the longest time, Snowbaby would not let her feet touch the ground. Then one day, she did. Later, she allowed gentle rubs. Eventually, she rolled onto her back, inviting affection on her own terms. Somewhere along the way, I realized I had done the very thing I once swore I would never do again — I had opened my heart to another animal. Snowbaby didn't ask to be loved. She simply showed up and waited.

Another love I never planned on arrived much earlier, on our seventh wedding anniversary. I lived half my life without drink-

ing coffee. Since I didn't marry a coffee drinker, it was never part of my world. That changed one anniversary morning on the veranda of a southern plantation house, when coffee was served in delicate vintage porcelain cups.

The aroma alone transported me back to my grandmother's kitchen — warm, familiar, comforting in a way I hadn't realized I missed. That first sip surprised me. Smooth, soothing, and perfectly balanced, it made me wonder how I had gone so long without it. Just like that, something I never planned to love became part of my daily ritual.

What Snowbaby and coffee taught me is this: love rarely arrives when we think we are ready. It often shows up after

we've drawn lines, declared absolutes, and convinced ourselves our hearts are full enough. Love waits patiently for us to soften, to notice, to make room.

Paul Harvey used to remind listeners that there was always more to the story. I've found that to be especially true when it comes to love — especially here, on the ranch. There is often more ahead than we expect: more connection, more joy, more tenderness, if we're willing to stop saying never and start paying attention.

Maybe love isn't something we go looking for. Maybe it's something that finds us — quietly, unexpectedly, and right on time — out here, where the land has a way of reshaping us if we let it. ☺

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