

*It's a*  
**LOVE**  
**STORY**

*From Happily to Ever After*

Lincee Ray



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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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For Daddy—I love you

# Disclaimer

I share some rather embarrassing stuff in this book. Of course, I have changed the names because I would be mortified if any of these people knew what young, impressionable Lincee was thinking. *Can you die from hives?* My throat is thick just thinking about it, but I trust it will all be worth it if I can make you laugh and feel less losery about yourself.

Suffering for our craft is what we creative types do.

Now, if you're from Hallsville, Texas, try to be cool about certain details you're about to read. Don't try to puzzle any of the pieces together to figure out who I'm talking about. Just know that if the description sounds like someone who was in your physics class with Mr. Strickland or that guy who looked really good in his football jersey or the girl who was a class officer or the person who epitomized what it meant to be the most popular kid in school, it's not who you think it is and you should just move on to the next chapter.

If you ignore the request above and you do want to venture a guess, don't message me and ask me if you are correct. You don't want me to die from hives, do you?

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# Introduction

*That's the story of, that's the glory of* **LOVE**

I remember the first time I fell in love. His name was Logan, and he was super dreamy with sandy-blond hair and crystal-blue eyes. His family had moved from Kentucky, so his accent was Southern. Logan was smart, charming, and athletic, and I looked forward to spending time with him.

Logan was also a fictional character in The Baby-Sitters Club book series.

Bring on the judgment. I can handle it. I was a bibliophile with an active imagination, and I let it soar. I crushed hard when my boy showed up in book number ten, titled *Logan Likes Mary Anne!* and I don't believe it's one bit bizarre for a young girl approaching adolescence to imagine herself with a fake boyfriend.

You want bizarre? I was jealous of Mary Anne. That's bizarre. And here's another alarming fact: I didn't have to Google the book title of Logan's Baby-Sitters Club debut before I typed it. I can't remember why I walked into my bathroom three minutes ago, but I can pull thirty-year-old useless information from the recesses of my mind without even trying.

In short, Logan made an impact on my tender heart.

Why did he give me a squishy feeling on my insides? Was there a real Logan out there for me? Did I have a shot with him if I acted exactly like Mary Anne? And who taught me how to fall in love in the first place?

Walt Disney, of course.

Uncle Walt has been a signature staple in my life from the very beginning. My love of books came from his fairy tales. My love of Mickey Mouse came from his imagination. Without a doubt, my idea of true love came from his animated princess movies.

I figured I could take a job in the forest and be a maid for a bunch of dwarves. They could mine gemstones while I bided my time waiting for the prince.

How am I biding my time? Well, there was this apple-biting, sleeping-curse situation, and I've ended up in a coffin, but it's cool. I'll wake up when my prince finds me and kisses me so we can go ahead and start living our happily ever after.

I do appreciate it when a man pursues me.

I believe our obsession with love, love stories, romance, and relationships plays a big part in our own stories, for better or for worse. As we get older, we realize love is more than the romantic happily ever after. Love is bigger and broader and much better than that.

My mama loves Hawaii, thanks to Elvis Presley. Daddy is happiest when he's burning something. My friend Lara's closet is one-third maroon-colored clothing because she loves the Texas A&M Aggies. I often wonder if my sister would save me first or her pug from a burning building.

When we say "I love Dr Pepper," that really and truly is part of our love story as human beings who were made in the image of God. Because those feelings of love—for people or places or things—all reflect the very essence of who He is. The squishy feeling is for Him. I believe we were created with this specific

longing ingrained in our souls that can be fulfilled only by the One who loves us most. I wrote this book to encourage anyone reading to recognize that feeling. Although we'll never be wholly fulfilled this side of heaven, love lives in our hearts and souls to remind us that day is coming.

And it will be glorious.

This book is for the people who tear up when John Legend's "All of Me" is the background track for any movie. It's for everyone who's embarrassed to divulge how many times they've visited Disney World as an adult. It's for those who feel a twinge of nostalgia when they think of their youth or feel deeply humbled when someone in need whispers a grateful *thank you*.

This book is for the dog lover, the Broadway baby, the foodie, and the musician. It's for the girl who was crushed by that boy in high school or the wise individual who lives for Little Debbie Oatmeal Creme Pies. This person reveres the Dread Pirate Roberts, the people from Africa, Michael Jackson, and swing dancing.

The love stories you're about to read have made up the tapestry of my life. I hope you can see pieces of your own story in them and find comfort that you weren't the only one obsessed with *New Kids on the Block* as a collective unit. (FYI: The song "Please Don't Go Girl" is all about me. Deal with it.)

A quick note to those who happened to pick up this book and immediately rolled their eyes at the thought of a girl begging a guy with some form of "Pick me, choose me, love me." I have news for you, dear friend.

The love story is here to stay. That's why forty-seven million individuals got up at the crack of dawn to watch a bunch of fancy people in eccentric hats and dapper suits file into St. George's Chapel to witness the royal wedding of a ginger prince to an American actress on a basic cable network.

It's time to get on board.

# 1

## Fur and Feathers

*For those of us who **LOVE** four-legged friends  
alongside the human children on our Christmas cards*

My first love story includes a stack of books from the library and a doll. *Anne of Green Gables* and *Strawberry Shortcake* never let me down. Around this time, though, I also developed an ardent love for animals. Kudos to me for filling my emotional bucket with something that can love me back, am I right?

But there was one exception: Mama's poodle, named Babette.

Yes, that fact contradicts my aforementioned ardent love for animals, so I should warn you that this love is strong and reciprocated only about half the time.

Babette was pretentious and too dainty for my pet needs. I required something adorable, white, and furry. What I got was a Shetland pony named Trixie.

Now, I can acknowledge Trixie as a legitimate pet and appreciate my father procuring for me an animal so many children long for in the months leading up to their birthdays. The

problem? I wasn't one of those children. Neither was my sister. I wanted a cute puppy to push around in my doll carriage.

I tried with all my might to befriend the pony. I fed her carrots and tried to braid her mane. Sadly, Trixie didn't like to be ridden or walked around or petted. I'm saying she was a large version of Babette.

One day I decided to put a saddle on Trixie and ride her out to the pond. She was being a bit ornery when I hopped up onto her back, and with the first nudge of my heels, she took off as though she were a contender for the Preakness. My lethargic pony, who previously had little to no desire to move, had blown past trot and was full-on galloping toward my father, who couldn't hear me because he was mowing the pasture.

My life flashed before my eyes. I saw Logan, Strawberry Shortcake, and Anne bid me farewell as if they knew what was coming next. Before I could brace myself, Trixie bucked me off. As I went sailing through the air, my sweet mother rushed over to catch her daughter. I landed in a heap at her feet, but I gave her a solid *E* for effort.

After the Trixie incident, we switched back to canines.

## My People Are Dog People

We had sixteen different dogs while I was growing up. I know that sounds ludicrous, but my family made a list of their names one Easter, and that's how I know. I played hard with some, dressed the smaller puppies in Cabbage Patch Kids clothes, and loved each one with all my heart.

Except Babette.

The first day of second grade proved to be a pivotal time in both my real education and family pet education. I was in the Red Hot reading group, and I felt pretty good about how I'd flown through my summer book list. As the big yellow bus rolled up to the end of our driveway, I stood confident, looking

forward to being an upperclassman on the Hallsville elementary school campus.

I climbed the steps, found my seat, waved to my dad from the window, and watched the bus run over our dog Buford.

I'm so sorry to bum you out. You read that correctly. I chose to spare you the gory details, but suffice it to say, it was a traumatic event for any second grader to witness.

I approached family pets differently after that day. My mind warned me not to become attached, but my heart ditched that brazen thought with the first whiff of puppy breath.

Oh, the puppies. So many of them. All the time. That's what happens when you grow up on a significant piece of land out in the country. Our two German shepherds named CK and Sara were rock star dogs. CK was the male, named after Daddy's restaurant, Catfish King, and Sara would sit by the stereo speakers and tilt her head whenever the song "Sara" by Starship came on the radio.

She was a dog genius, and way into '80s hair bands, like me. How could I not love her?

In my adolescent brain, Sara and CK loved each other very much. You can imagine Little Lincee's joy when Sara gave birth to ten puppies in her first litter. I named them all, and I tied colorful bows around each neck so we could tell them apart.

Mama drew the short stick and had to explain to me that we couldn't keep them all. In her defense, ten is a lot to handle when dog breeding isn't your first, second, or third line of work. But still, the reality that I wouldn't see these little guys grow up dampened my every waking moment. My parents tried to make me feel better by reminding me that our dogs were going to a good home.

You're picturing a rough-and-tumble little boy with a backward baseball cap and dirty face hugging sweet little Gomer with the blue ribbon around his neck, aren't you? Or maybe a shy little girl smiling as squatty Pippy with the purple ribbon flops in her

direction, slipping on the hardwood floor with her soft puppy feet. What about the old, old man who lost his wife last year and his children and grandchildren pooled all their money to buy the runt of the litter, Boomer, to be Granddaddy's new companion?

Nope. The Ray German shepherds were headed to the Harrison County Sheriff's Department so they could train to be drug dogs.

Drug dogs. My beloved Sweetie and Heinz in their pink and rainbow ribbons would be sniffing out crack cocaine from common criminals and street youths for a living.

After my four-legged relatives left me to help kids say nope to dope, I kept a safe distance from the family pets. It's a good thing, too, because very few of our pets died of natural causes. Again, life in the country can be tricky.

Gizmo was our teeny-tiny yippy dog, which meant he not only was mobile and easily placed inside a doll carriage, but he didn't mind wearing hair clips. He was the first to reach an age when a decision had to be made to put him out of his misery because his quality of life was stretched so thin it was about to snap. That opened an untapped realm of sadness.

Here's another thing country folks do: we bury our animals in the backyard. Way over in one corner of my parents' property is a pet cemetery with all our dogs' collars buckled into the chain-link fence. It's a lovely reminder of their time here on earth with us, as well as a reality check for all the pets who have come and gone in the past three decades.

I never thought this was peculiar until last year. My niece has experienced one or two family pet deaths, and she understands our little cemetery back behind Daddy's barn. Addison picks flowers and lays them on the ground every now and again. We all think it's sweet. But when she asked me if we were going to bury my grandmother Mimi in the yard with Chewy and Creede, I gleaned that it was time to supplement our country way of living with tales from the big city.

## **I Held a Cat by Its Tail Once—Just Once**

I've been asked on more than one occasion why I don't have a pet since most single people do. I smile and make up stories about how I travel all the time and would never want to board a dog, or how I feel guilty that the dog wouldn't have a yard to run around and play ball in.

Lies. All lies. I don't have a pet to call my own because I can't handle the reality that my dog's collar will one day be affixed to that chain-link fence out back. When Buford died that fateful first-day-of-school morning, I experienced sadness like never before. When we made the decision to have Gizmo put to sleep, I was riddled with guilt and fought tears for months. With each German shepherd—those powerful narc dogs—that walked away with a police officer, a little piece of my heart went too.

Notice exactly zero of my personal pet stories involve felines. Give me a cat, and I swear to you I'll morph into the eccentric spinster at the end of the street. The next thing I know, my house will be the one you won't let your kids go to for trick-or-treating anymore, because that one time there was a fur ball stuck to a half-wrapped lemon saltwater taffy.

Look, I love cats.

The musical. I love *Cats* the musical. I have a considerable aversion to real ones.

This dislike was probably born out of medical necessity. You see, I'm allergic to cats. If I sit on a couch a cat has been on or near, my eyes become a watery, itchy mess and my air passages start to close.

Plus, most cats seem a bit snobby to me. That's my opinion, but it's still true.

The irony of it all is that I attract cats. I have friends who never see their cats until I come over. Then they sit directly on my lap and stare at me as though I'm invading their personal space.

I've been on the receiving end of a courtship with a cat named Drake. He was the resident apartment building cat named after the street where we lived. No one claimed him, but he considered the complex his home. He would sit outside my window and meow for hours. I had to turn up my TV volume to properly ignore him. Then Drake took matters into his own paws and decided to profess his love through a grand gesture.

Let's begin with the headless lizard. Sure, it was only the size of my finger, but nonetheless, it was both dead and without its head. It took a lot of courage for me to pick up the corner of my favorite Christmas doormat, showcasing whimsical nutcrackers, and fling the reptile into a nearby bush.

A few days later, Drake left me a mostly dead frog. That poor chubby thing probably never saw Drake coming. It took a little more chutzpah to fling its carcass into the bush.

But one day still torments me. It will forever be the reason I will never, ever fly out my front door in a rush without looking below to see what treats may have been bestowed upon me.

Winter isn't much more than a blip on the radar in my part of Texas, but when I opened the door, I felt a gush of cold air. I ran to find my gloves, and in my haste to get to work, I flung the door open again and started to step out to greet my day with a positive attitude. Praise be to the good Lord, I happened to look down.

It was like a St. Valentine's Day massacre.

I was in mid-step, and it took all the strength in my legs to catapult myself over the grisly mess. I turned around to find a headless rat. And, dear reader, when I say rat, I mean r-a-t. We're talking Charlotte's Templeton on vacation at the county fair. By the look of things, it had given Drake the fight of his life. Blood was splattered on my door, my window, and the carcass bush.

I started to sick myself out looking at the remains of this rodent. And that's when I noticed one of my gloves was among the perished.

I guess in my attempt to hoist myself up and over, I had lost my grip on one glove and it landed in the middle of the aftermath.

I loved those gloves.

Notice I said *loved*.

Even being used to dismantled frogs and lizards, I had to give myself a major pep talk just to try to strategically lean over far enough to lock my door. And all the free puppies in the world couldn't summon the courage it would take me to fling any entrails into the carcass bush. I somehow managed to lock the door and then run as if the mangled rat could chase me. I spotted Drake and yelled "Bad kitty!" as I sprinted for my life—with one cold hand.

Later I called the apartment people and told them a small horse had been murdered on my front porch and that someone needed to make sure it wasn't there when I returned home. I encouraged the guy to bring bleach as well.

"That cat must really love you," he said. "It's a sign of affection when they leave something like that at your door. It's like a peace offering."

Maybe a nice gift basket full of wine and cheese next time?

One weekend, a new neighbor moved in with her outdoor/indoor cat named Fifi. Later that week, I heard a noise that made me jump out of my skin. I ran to the window with my phone in my hand, ready to call nine-one-one to report a stabbing.

Drake and Fifi were fighting, and Fifi was the instigator! They were making the most awful noise you've ever heard in your life. I had to go out and break up the altercation. Drake, being a gentleman cat, wasn't going to get into it full-on with a girl feline. Fifi ran off. Drake went to sulk by the pool.

That night, Drake was sprawled by my door where my mat used to be. Feeling sorry for him, I scratched him three times with the tip of my shoe. Just three.

The next morning, I found a headless bird beside the carcass bush.

## Bye-Bye Blackbird

We've clearly established that cats adore me, and that I in turn enjoy them from a distance on most occasions. Other creatures that find me nonthreatening include mosquitos.

And woodpeckers.

Why is my example so specific to one species of bird? Am I an ornithological weirdo?

Perhaps. I did collect feathers as a child . . . until Mama told me I'd get mites.

My example is so specific because I had a personal experience with a woodpecker once. I remember it as though it were ten years ago, which it was.

I was asleep at my parents' house when I was abruptly jolted from my slumber by a woodpecker pecking on the bedroom windowpane. Obviously, this is unacceptable behavior, so I banged on the pane to make him stop, which he did.

The next morning, Woody's pecks returned, only this time they seemed distant and somewhat muffled. I searched and searched, and then finally discovered the bird had managed to magic his way into the attic where he was building a lovely summer home.

Mama was both calm and irrational at the news. She had no problem crawling up into the attic to shoo a rogue woodpecker, and her peaceful state of mind baffled me. On the other hand, the idea of Woody crapping all over her graduation announcements from 1964 annoyed her to no end.

When we have critters to catch, we Rays do what we have to do, at least in most cases. Mama asked me to fetch the swimming pool skimmer net thing. Its traditional purpose is to scoop up leaves from the deep end. Today it would scoop up a live bird. (The net has come in handy in multiple emergency situations.)

Mama pulled the string that lowers the folded stairs that go up to the attic. The springs creaked as she clambered up into the

abyss, making her way through boxes of my childhood memorabilia and every floral comforter and brightly colored duvet we've owned since we moved into the house in 1980. She effortlessly caught Woody as my head cheered from the opening in the floor. Mama released Woody outside, into the wild, and I praised her for being so brave.

Hours later, I heard Woody continuing his remodeling efforts, flipping our attic into something more amenable to his needs. Mama wasn't so peaceful this go-around. She retrieved the swimming pool net and repeated the same steps from before. This time she walked to the edge of the property and bid Woody adieu.

To her utter frustration, Woody came back for a third round.

*Oh, it's on, Woody. Prepare for the Thunderdome. We don't need another hero. You are going down.*

Woody's temper had swelled since our last engagement. When we attempted to daintily shove him into the net, he channeled his inner ancestors and dive-bombed us like a pterodactyl. All I could think about was Phoebe from *Friends* shouting, "My eyes! My eyes!" as she witnessed Monica and Chandler making out through the window. (Actually, Phoebe saw them making out up against the window.)

Mama tried to balance on skinny two-by-fours all over the attic floor without falling into the second-story bedrooms. She extended the pole and flailed about, figuratively crossing her fingers that one of these sporadic sweeps would end with a cheeky woodpecker miraculously enclosed in pool equipment.

Unwilling to lose an eye in a heroic bird rescue, I made the brilliant decision to don my hot-pink swimmer's goggles and some denim oven mitts as a precaution. I quickly put on my Bobcat letterman jacket, because, duh, it was hanging right there, and I hoped the worn leather arms hadn't been compromised by decades of stagnant attic heat. I needed the leather arms to guard me from pervasive pecks. And mites.

Mama started spouting unladylike words at both me and the bird, but we finally wrangled Woody into the net as he sat atop a gigantic ice-blue furry bunny my dad won at a fair in 1979. I'm happy to report that no one fell through the floor, and that only one piece of Occupied Japan pottery was destroyed during the emancipation.

Query: What to do with the bird? For some reason, we didn't have a car. I can't remember the specifics, but that's important to note for this next part of the narrative. Because we couldn't physically drive Woody out to the middle of nowhere and set him free far, far away from the house, we stuck him in the barbecue smoker for safekeeping until my dad got back with his truck.

Everyone calm down. You weren't there! You don't know! This made perfect sense to both me and my mother at the time, so we went with it.

Luckily, Daddy came home shortly after and laughed at my goggles and oven mitts, and we all headed to the smoker so he could carry Woody away to harass another family. He opened the smoker lid and we were all shocked.

I know you're thinking Woody left this world because of asphyxiation. Although that is a sad, sad thought, you're terribly wrong. This was the bird with massive determination. He was like the woodpecker version of Lloyd in *Say Anything*, holding up a boombox outside my window playing "In Your Eyes." He was like Romeo calling up to me, Juliet, on my balcony. He had perched before a crazed woman and her daughter, chirping, "Isn't She Lovely" like a feathered Stevie Wonder.

Woody was gone. He wasn't in the smoker, and my father couldn't control his laughter as he spit out, "You didn't consider that the bird would fly out of the smokestack?"

Uh, no we did not.

We all traipsed back into the house, up the stairs, and into the attic, ready to bow down to the great woodpecker. He was

there, chilling on a huge stack of important *Southern Living* magazines Mama is still convinced she'll make a vision board with someday. Mama caught Woody easily. It was a fun game to him now. He had no idea a man was about to drive him away to the city limits.

Mama and I watched as Daddy hauled our little almost-a-pet bird down the driveway. I must admit, it was like watching a child go off to college. Woody, Mama, and I had been through so much. He was a good bird. A good, extremely mischievous bird. I hope he found a nice fence post or barn to destroy.

That's what pets will do to a person. They wiggle their way into our lives and create unforgettable stories. They were always happy to see me and let me ride their backs and cuddle with them in the colder months. Memories of Shallie, White Dog, Bubba, and even Woody produce a mental slide show of smiles, giggles, freedom, and joy.

They were part of our family. All of them.