



*Twelfth Night:  
Wherever You Are*

*By Amie Stuart*

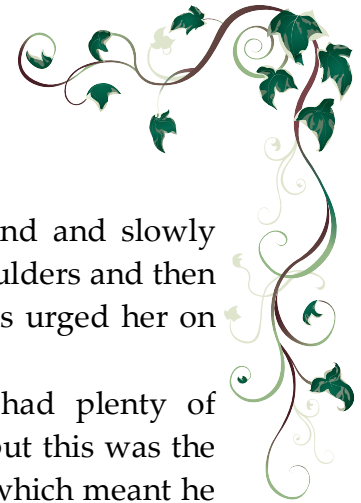


# *Twelfth Night: Wherever You Are*

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Twelfth Night: Wherever You Are  
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*Ft. Worth, Texas: May, 2010*

Smiling at the man on the bed, Lyn reached around and slowly unzipped her short white dress. She let it fall from her shoulders and then nudged it over her hips. The heat in his brilliant blue eyes urged her on despite her nerves.

She reminded herself it was just Rick. They'd had plenty of opportunities to fool around over the last seven months, but this was the first chance they'd had to consummate their relationship, which meant he was just as nervous as her.

As she unhooked her bra, she reminded herself that he loved her, so much he'd arranged their semi-getaway in a beautiful hotel a mere fifteen minutes from their kids. And she loved him. Loved him so much she'd proposed at dinner. So what if it wasn't...conventional. It'd be a great story for the grandkids—someday.

Their eyes locked, and they smiled at one another, as if he could read her mind.

"You're thinking too hard."

She shrugged and said, "I know."

Shaking his head, he crooked a finger at her. "No more thinking."

She slipped out of her panties and climbed on the bed, gingerly straddling his lap.

"Relax," he whispered. "I won't break."

"Sorry."

His hand glided lazily up her spine. "Don't be sorry. Don't apologize."

"I just—" Lyn crossed her hands over her breasts, suddenly self-conscious.

"I know." They both wanted tonight to be perfect.

Rick pulled her closer until they were skin to skin and their lips met. Lyn sighed against his mouth and kissed him, teasing his tongue while he continued to caress her back and hips as if he had all the time in the world, as if they had no checkout time tomorrow and could stay like

they were forever. She nibbled at his lips, then worked her way to his neck, until she found that tender spot on his shoulder and his hands slid lower, kneading her bottom. He teased the cheeks of her ass with his fingertips, tracing the contours until her hips arched, urging him lower, deeper, harder.

He ignored her, and she sank her teeth a little deeper into the tender, nerve-filled muscle of his shoulder. Rick groaned and shuddered and whispered something about how mean she was. Lyn ran her hands through his thick dark hair, nibbling at his earlobe and purring in his ear until he laughed, but making love with Rick was serious business and no amount of lighthearted teasing would ease the ache between her thighs.

It had been *so* long.

She reached between them and wrapped her hand around his cock, then leaned back, uncertain of her next move.

"No worries." He tucked some stray hairs behind her ear. "Just do what feels right."

"I want you."

"Not yet." He leaned in and pressed his lips to her neck. The scrape of his five o'clock shadow on her skin pulled a moan from the back of her throat.

She was hot and shivery by turns as he slowly worked his way down her chest, finally latching onto her aching breast. Willing herself to be patient, she released his cock. He'd warned her beforehand it might take longer until he was ready. *Really* ready. So she settled back, happy to let Rick lead, and to give as much as she got until he finally—finally reached between them and positioned her over his cock. By then, there wasn't an inch of her he hadn't touched. Their eyes locked again as she slowly slid home, giving herself time to adjust to the feel of him inside her. Lyn wet her lips and swallowed the sudden lump in her throat.

Rick's eyes were fiery hot as he tweaked her nipples, rolling the stiff tips between his fingers, and they continued to watch one another, searching for clues, gauging each other's reactions. Lyn kissed him hard and quick, a part of her worried she'd miss something. But it wasn't just the curiosity or the newness. She loved the way he looked at her, the way he watched her while she rode him, and she wanted him to watch her

come. She rode him until they were both slick with sweat and struggling for air, until she couldn't hold back any longer.

She cried out as her orgasm rocketed through her, her fingers digging into Rick's shoulders. His hands gripped her hips, refusing to let it end until he pulled her to him, his face buried in her chest. Lyn held on tight and even when it was over, they stayed like that, slowly rocking back and forth as if they were fused together. She would have given anything to stay like that forever.

Finally, he eased his grip on her and leaned against the pillows with a deep sigh. She followed, planting soft kisses on one side of his neck while her fingers caressed the other side, teasing the edges of his hair until his lost erection forced her to move.

"Be right back," she whispered, then slid from the bed and made a dash for the bathroom. She closed the door, heeded mother nature's call, then slowly washed her hands. Did she ask him if he'd come or would he tell her? Had she done okay?

Rick had tried to prepare her for sex with a paraplegic—Lord love him, it was one of the most difficult conversations she'd ever had with a member of the opposite sex. She'd assured him that she was ready, more than ready but...a knock at the door interrupted her train of thought. She dried her hands as she crossed the chilly tile and cracked the door open to find Rick in his wheelchair looking a little worried.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," she said shyly.

"Then get out of the way," he said with a grin. "I gotta go."

Lyn tossed down the hand towel and leaned over, planting a soft kiss on his lips. Once he'd backed up enough to let her slip past, she did so...and got a smack on her bottom for her trouble.

Judging from the smile in his eyes, maybe it didn't matter?

*North Texas: December, 2009*

The last time Lyn Coates had spoken with Joe Kendall she'd informed him, in no uncertain terms that if he ever stepped foot on her property again, she'd shove her pistol down his throat and feed him the clip. More than once in the eight weeks since, she'd daydreamed about all the painful, drawn out ways she could kill him.

Which begged the question, why was she speeding through the dismal, wintery countryside straight toward him?

As if to make a point, she eased up on the gas and set the cruise control. The answer was simple: the honorable and—here she rolled her eyes—oh-so-revered Sheriff Joe Kendall hadn't become a Texas legend because he was cute. That son of a bitch was wily as a possum and ornery as a rabid Chihuahua. He'd honed in on Lyn's one fatal flaw—a child in need—and was apparently ruthless enough to use it against her.

Child in need or no, it changed *nothing* between them, and she'd told him so on the phone. Her number one rule of parenting was to kill the hyena that got between you and your cubs and then feed it to your cubs for dinner. And if the Sheriff tried anything funny, she'd do just that.

Lyn snorted under her breath as her Lexus sped past the 'Welcome to Waite, Texas' sign. She slowed her compact SUV and eased past the gaily decorated downtown area. She wasn't ready for what she knew would be a grueling afternoon both mentally *and* emotionally.

After just a few more turns, she was on Elm Street cruising past a row of post-WWII houses until she spotted the Sheriff's Suburban. She parked behind him and shoved her cell phone and keys into her purse before grabbing it and the tote bag she'd hurriedly packed from the passenger seat.

The sun was hidden by thick gray clouds, and as she made her way up the leaf-strewn sidewalk, the rattle of bare branches overhead reminded her Christmas was just a few short weeks away. Thank God, they'd be in New Mexico then, skiing, snowboarding and reveling in the sight of her youngest son seeing his first real snow. She couldn't wait.

The Sheriff stepped onto the deep porch, hands stuffed into the

pockets of his jeans. He was tall, barrel-chested and despite his age, still a handsome man—at least, on the outside.

“Thank you for coming.” The arrogance that had radiated from him at their first meeting, in their subsequent phone calls over the last eight weeks, and in every photo she’d ever found of him, was nowhere to be seen. Only something sad and quiet, but was that sadness for the child inside the house whose father had disappeared or the child Joe and Lyn shared?

*No, not shared*, she reminded herself. Joe had thrown Jessie away, solely to cover his ass—and cover up an illicit affair by leaving her to foster care to deal with after her mother’s death. She’d been four. Seven years later, Lyn and Jessie had sort of stumbled over one another and six weeks later she’d filed the adoption papers.

“I’m not doing this for you,” Lyn said as she climbed the steps. She had no clue why the Sherriff had called her (of *all* people).

He leveled a pale blue gaze at her, his dark brows drawn together. “I know.”

“So why did you call?”

“Because my daughter, Gretchen, was out searching and her—” He shook his head, a little of the old Joe peeking through, “—*significant other* has the flu.”

“You could have just called your local social worker.” She hefted the bag higher on her shoulder.

“It’s more complicated than that.” He glanced over his shoulder, then back at her. “They found her daddy’s body about twenty minutes ago.”

“Jesus,” she muttered, the bottom falling out of her stomach. “What’ll happen to her?”

“Rick.” The Sheriff nodded. “That’s what her daddy wanted.” He held open the screen door, and deciding it would be best to keep silent for now, Lyn stepped inside. Of course she’d done her homework—from the minute Joe told her who he was. While she knew a lot about Joe and his daughter, who was also in law enforcement, Lyn knew little about Rick beyond he was a widower and wheelchair-bound.

“*This is Maisey*,” the Sheriff said.

The three of them sized one another up, and in Rick Kendall's eyes, Lyn saw the same distress she'd seen in his father's, the same distress he probably saw mirrored in her own eyes. But for completely different reasons. Getting involved in Maisey Kennedy's life complicated an already difficult situation. Damn Joe for calling her! Had Joe told his son who Lyn was? She voted no—for now.

Rick was a younger version of Joe, an older, more masculine version of Jessie, and Lyn found it impossible to not compare the two siblings. He wore his dark hair long and barely layered. The back brushed the collar of his t-shirt while the front curved around the contour of his face. On some men, it would have looked silly or unkempt, but on Rick it helped to soften those distinctive Kendall cheekbones and pale blue eyes.

Wheelchair or no, Rick Kendall was a man who probably drew a lot of second and third looks. At his quirked eyebrow, Lyn realized she was staring. Cheeks burning, she crossed the hardwood floor to the easy chair where Maisey sat on Rick's lap. She set down her bag and offered her hand to Rick while the Sheriff stumbled over the introductions. She hoped Rick didn't think she'd been staring because of the nearby wheelchair, but now wasn't the time or place to address her bad manners.

"Thank you so much for this."

She knelt in front of them, nothing the shadows under the child's eyes. "How are you, Maisey?"

The child buried her face in Rick's worn T-shirt and cried a little as if she could hide from her problems. They should all be so lucky.

He hugged Maisey tightly and rubbed her back. "She hasn't had a nap, and she won't eat."

"Won't drink much either," the Sheriff added from behind her.

Nodding, Lyn smoothed a hand across the child's forehead, swallowing her anger at the selfishness of her fellow adults, then unzipped her bag to get the thermometer. "She feels a little warm, but I don't think she's running a fever. Maisey, can I take a look at you?"

"It's okay, baby." Rick gently nudged the child off his lap but leaned forward, his arms around her. Their eyes met, and she nodded; she appreciated his protective instinct.

A cursory exam revealed thrush in her mouth but no bruises, no

indication of old, out of the ordinary injuries, and she was relatively clean. Her hair could use a good brushing but if that qualified as a sin, Lyn herself would be in deep shit. She had toddlers; she knew how it was.

As much as it pained her to think it, the child was lucky if a little neglect was all she'd suffered. She kept her voice low and forced herself to smile at Maisey. "She needs to see a doctor for the thrush, and I'd bet money she's got a yeast infection to go with it." She turned to look at the Sheriff. "Unless you know a doctor who makes house calls."

Nodding, he stepped outside.

Lyn shook her head. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Dad knows everybody...and they all owe him a favor or three."

"I can imagine."

"I don't know how to tell..." He glanced pointedly at Maisey who stood firmly planted between his legs.

"I can do it. Not now, though. Maybe after the doctor." After nearly five years as a foster mom, there wasn't much Lyn hadn't seen or heard...or had to say to a child.

By the time the doctor had come, checked Maisey over, and left them some medication samples, Rick's sister Gretchen had arrived. She was a very tall, attractive redhead whose photos didn't do her justice.

"How is she?" Gretchen asked as they shook hands.

"She'll be okay," Rick said as Lyn fished out a packet of Kool-Aid and a can of chicken-and-stars soup and stood.

"How about we try to get something in her tummy?"

Gretchen offered to help, and Lyn quietly followed her into the kitchen, leaving Rick alone with Maisey. Lyn washed out Maisey's sippy cup while Gretchen mixed the Kool-Aid.

"I really appreciate you coming all the way out here."

"It's no trouble." What else could she say? Fearing the other woman might start asking questions, Lyn took the now-full cup and left Gretchen to handle the soup. Lyn hated Kool-Aid but knew that it would be easy on the child's tender mouth.

Back in the living room, Rick had moved to his wheelchair. And from out on the porch came the sound of raised voices.

"We were just getting ready to check on that soup."

“Good idea.” She handed Maisey her cup and watched Rick wheel her down the hall toward the kitchen. She shook her head, thinking they made a cute pair. And the last thing Maisey needed to hear was an argument that apparently had to do with her (and her father).

Out on the porch things grew more heated as a very angry woman informed Joe that Rick had no business taking charge of a small child, and worse, she thought they should make up some bullshit about Maisey’s daddy going away on ‘business’. For Lyn, that was the final straw. She pushed open the screen door, thinking to herself that she couldn’t imagine a *worse* idea.

The conversation stopped as abruptly as if someone had pushed the pause button on a TV remote. Joe and the woman, who appeared to be about his age, trim and well dressed, turned to stare at Lyn.

She’d dashed out of the house fresh from the shower, with only minimal makeup on. Her T-shirt and jeans were clean but had seen more than a few dozen washings, and her flannel shirt had been a church rummage sale find—three years ago. Or maybe the old lady just didn’t like her nose ring.

“Did you need something?” the woman asked, eyebrows arched as she judged Lyn and found her wanting.

“As a matter of fact—” While she spoke, Lyn pulled both doors shut. That poor child inside had been through enough for one day. “Do you have children, ma’am?”

“No.” Her lips thinned and if anything, her posture stiffened.

“Well, I do. Six of them...and two grandchildren, and I can tell you, from first-hand experience—” Lyn forced herself to not glance at the Sheriff, “—that *not* telling Maisey about her father’s death is the cruelest thing imaginable. “

The other woman’s eyes flickered over Lyn again, landing somewhere near her bare left hand. Smiling, Lyn held up her ringless fingers, a part of her debating whether to explain where four of those six kids had come from.

“I’m sure you have plenty of...experience to back up your opinion—”

“Helen.” Joe shifted, attempting to wedge himself between them.

Brave man. "I have to agree with Lyn on this one. She needs to be told."

"In the kindest, gentlest way possible," Lyn added.

After Helen left, and Maisey's tummy was full, she reluctantly agreed to stay with "Aunt Gretchen" while Lyn and Rick trekked out to the front porch to talk. Up and down the street interior lights had been turned on against the late afternoon gloom.

"Thank you for whatever you said to Helen. I've known her all my life, and she means well, but..." He shook his head and his eyes conveyed what he couldn't say.

"Meaning well and doing well aren't the same thing." Lyn took a seat, hugging her flannel shirt to her. "And while I don't mind telling Maisey about her father...I think it might be best to play it by ear. If we see an opportunity fine; otherwise, wait until tomorrow. One more day won't make a huge difference. She has nobody? No family anywhere?"

"Chris was it, and I know he wasn't the best dad in the world, but he loved her." Rick leaned back in his wheelchair and ran a hand through his hair, briefly revealing a few gray strands.

Lyn slowly shook her head, unable to hold back a scowl. *Chris* had taken himself out of the picture and left his child an orphan. "You do realize that, at some point, CPS is going to have to be involved. Whether you take legal custody of her or not."

Now it was his turn to frown. "I thought you had some sort of connection or something with them."

"Is *that* why your dad called me?" She had connections but not *those* kinds of connections.

He shrugged and grinned a little and said, "Who knows why my dad does anything?"

"Indeed." So Joe hadn't told...and she'd be damned if she would. If Joe was man enough to commit such a complete and utter FUBAR, he'd just have to be man enough to tell his children.

"Do you think I'll lose her?" Rick asked, his deep voice rough with emotion.

She reminded herself he wasn't just taking on the care of a small child but dealing with the death of a good friend. "Because of the wheelchair?" At his concerned nod, she continued, "I can't say; I'm no

social worker, but from what I do know, it shouldn't be an issue— unless you have other health problems?"

"No, none."

"Good. I can make a few calls. See what I can find out, but—" His direct gaze and close proximity left Lyn feeling unsettled. She focused on what she knew, which was helping him keep Maisey. She waved a hand, indicating the porch that needed a coat of paint and a thorough cleaning, "—you're gonna have to make some changes. If...*when* Protective Services comes in, they'll want to know that Maisey is safe *and* well cared for. Not just loved. If you don't feel up to it--"

"He'll be fine," the Sheriff boomed as he pushed open the screen door to join them. His tone didn't leave an inch for arguing, and Lyn shivered underneath her flannel shirt, feeling a moment of pity for the social worker who had to tangle with Joe Kendall.

"You didn't seem to think so four years ago." Fire flashed in Rick's eyes as he turned his wheelchair to face his father.

"You were in a coma." With those five words, the old Sheriff returned, his defensive tone and rigid posture leaving no room for argument, because of course, the Sheriff was always right.

"And, what? You just *forgot* to return my son?"

*Well if that just didn't thicken the proverbial plot.* Lyn's hands clenched into fists and the rest of her followed suit, tensing in anticipation of the Sheriff's next volley.

"It was for the best; you couldn't have handled him."

"And what makes you think I can handle Maisey any better? Or are you planning on taking her, too?" Rick pushed his bangs from his eyes while a tic began to pulsate in his jaw.

Wincing inwardly, Lyn stood, deciding to leave them to hash it out in private. She walked the length of the porch and descended the wheelchair ramp. It sat underneath the carport and left just enough room for the front of Rick's truck—providing protection from the elements as he got in or out of the vehicle.

She tried to imagine him getting Maisey to school or loading her up to go grab a gallon of milk for breakfast, or heaven forbid, a midnight trek to the ER to deal with an ear infection, and suddenly understood his

concern a little better. Certainly, it would be challenging, but his sister lived across the street, and if he was serious about keeping Maisey, he'd make it work. But she didn't envy him.

She kept moving to fight off the chilly temperatures, walking the length of the carport. It opened onto a backyard full of leaves. There was no handicap ramp off the back porch. Lyn stepped back a few paces, glanced at Rick's truck and the expanse of unused carport, then at the back porch. She was still mulling over the tentative plan forming in her head when Rick rejoined her, an apology spilling from his lips.

The only relationship more complicated than parent and child had to be marriage, and she told him so, assuring him it was no big deal. "Matter of fact, when my granddaughter was born—my son was seventeen—anyway, my dad showed up that evening and the first words out of his mouth were 'I hope you grounded him.'"

They were both still laughing as the Sheriff joined them once again. She'd bet her last hidden Hershey bar he was afraid she'd spill the beans about Jessie.

"I looked him square in the eye and said, 'Yeah, Dad. For the next eighteen years!'"

Rick laughed again while the Sheriff just shook his head. "Now, are you two done fussing at each other? Because we have work to do."

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Rick sat listening in amazement as the quiet woman who'd been so gentle and kind with Maisey turned into a general. Even more amazing...his father. The old man didn't argue, didn't fuss, and didn't scoff or roll his eyes at Lyn's plan to extend his porch around the side of the house, connect it with the back and add that ramp he and Chris had never gotten around to.

"It'll mean moving a section of the chain link fence out back but in the long run, I think it'll save you a few gray hairs."

"Sounds good." He wondered what she'd do if he said no, but of course, he'd said yes. He appreciated Lyn's presence, her help, the way she'd been so good with Maisey, and her quiet strength. Most importantly

of all, he appreciated how she hadn't questioned his desire to keep Maisey but pitched in, ready to help make it happen.

"Are you sure?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

"Positive."

As she continued talking, he listened with half an ear and half an eye on his father. Lyn exuded the confidence of a woman old enough to be comfortable in her own skin, and he pegged her as somewhere near Gretchen who was forty-three—three years older than Rick. Lyn had probably never been called *beautiful*, but her big eyes were filled with kindness and...wisdom maybe, he wasn't sure. Coupled with a mouth that seemed naturally inclined to smile, long reddish brown hair, and graceful feminine curves, well, there was plenty to appreciate about her. That train of thought led to wondering how she knew his dad, and if they were sleeping together. Just as quickly, Rick dismissed the notion. The old man was, in his own weird way, devoted to Helen.

"Let's head inside, and I'll make you a list of things we'll need." Lyn and the Sheriff nodded at one another.

As he turned his wheelchair around and pushed it toward the ramp, Rick bit back a smile at the mental picture of the old man at Wally World buying child-proofing supplies.

Somewhere down in Hell, the Devil was laughing his ass off.

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It wasn't that late, barely six, but Maisey's eyes were drooping. Lyn shooed the Sheriff off to do her bidding, gave the child a bath and another dose of her medicine, then led her to Rick's spare bedroom. The house was quiet, and she assumed Rick was in the kitchen because she hadn't seen him in the living room after Maisey's bath.

The sports posters on the walls said it had, at one time, been his son's. A blue bedspread covered the double bed, and an old nineteen inch television and a DVD player sat on the dresser—both covered with a fine film of dust. Men just didn't clean like women did, and after raising three boys, she felt certain it was a simple matter of genetics. More specifically, a broken X gene.

Maisey let loose with a jaw-cracking yawn as Lyn fished some PJ's from her bag. Poor baby. She'd had a grueling day. "Pink polka dots or Dora the Explorer?"

Finally, she spoke. "Dora." Not much but it was progress. She barely spoke a dozen words as Lyn brushed her hair and gathered it into a ponytail. Lyn settled on the floor with her legs crossed, replaced the brush and fished out two DVD's for the child's inspection. "*Horton* or *Cars*?"

Her curiosity obviously aroused, Maisey glanced from Lyn's bag of tricks to the movies and back, then pointed at *Horton Hears a Who*. Rick had assured her that Maisey had always been a quiet child, but it still concerned Lyn who was used to the chatter and laughter of a crowded dinner table.

"My daughter, Etta, loves this movie!"

Once Lyn got the DVD going, she kicked off her shoes and stretched out on the bed, taking comfort in the feel of the small body nestled next to hers. She'd been up since before the sun and almost dozed off while waiting on Maisey to fall asleep.

Lyn gently slid from the bed and called home to check in on her own children. Jessie quickly assured her everyone was fine, then proceeded to ask a ton of questions about Rick *and* Maisey. She insisted on driving up with Ty in the morning to help out.

"You do realize what that means, Jess?" Lyn quietly asked.

"I know, Mom." Her own voice was equally quiet. At some point tomorrow she'd meet Joe, and where he was concerned, Jessie had a truckload of issues. But she also knew her own mind and if this was what she wanted, then Lyn would support her.

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At the sound of footsteps, Rick rubbed a hand across his tired eyes and sat up straighter on the couch. He hadn't expected his father to return tonight with the supplies Lyn had sent him for. Hadn't expected his father to want to talk. And sure as hell hadn't expected him to shamefacedly confess to a fifteen-year-old affair—*not* with Lyn, but with Gretchen's best friend—*and* a fifteen-year-old daughter, whom Lyn had apparently

adopted.

Coupled with the slew of gargantuan lies his father had told in order to keep Jessie's existence a secret, it was all Rick could do to not yell as he'd ordered his father from his house.

Yes, he knew he'd need his father's help with Maisey, but it'd be a while before he could look the old man square in the eye again. *Jesus, what a day.*

Lyn appeared in the archway that divided the hallway from the living area, her hazel brown eyes flitting to the overflowing shopping bags. "He told you, didn't he?"

Rick nodded, taking comfort in the fact she didn't gloat. On the contrary, she seemed as upset as him. "He's telling Gretchen now."

"Oh, Lord." She crossed the room, set her cell phone on the coffee table and took a seat next to him. Her gaze was direct and steady and filled with worry.

"Does *she* know? About my dad?" Sure the old man had acted humble and contrite, but the lengths he'd gone to to hide the affair still had Rick's head reeling.

Chuckling softly, Lyn nodded. "Oh yeah. Jessie's not a child...well, she's *not* a child and hasn't been for a very long time. So she's not someone you can keep secrets from. Especially when they have to do with her."

He silently turned it all over, his eyes on Lyn. She was sweet and pretty...and his sister's adoptive mother. So much for asking her out, which he'd actually considered after she'd been sweet enough to offer to stay over. Where the hell did he even begin asking questions?

"Rick, I know this is a lot to take in. It's why I was so surprised your father called me."

Her words sparked something, but he couldn't quite grasp it. He sighed and threw up his hands, giving in to laughter that had nothing to do with humor. "What happens now?"

"We all go on with our lives. Legally, Jessie is mine, and I'll fight your daddy to the death, though he doesn't have a legal leg to stand on. I've told Jessie I'll go along with whatever she decides regarding Joe and what she wants is to come up here tomorrow. Help out. Meet you.

"I shouldn't feel happy about that, but I do."

"We feel what we feel. Apologies aren't necessary."

She was right, but how she managed to not lose her cool was a mystery. He would have; hell, he did every time the subject of his son came up. "Damn," he said softly.

"I want to show you something." Lyn retrieved her cell phone from the coffee table, punched a few buttons and flipped it over. "Now you know why I was staring when I first walked in."

"Holy Houdini." He did the math, quickly figuring his own son had been three when Jessie was born. "She could have been mine." Rick swallowed the thick lump clogging his throat. "If I had known, I'da taken her in a heartbeat and kept his damn secret. I guess that makes me as bad as him."

"Not necessarily. I think if you had taken Jessie, you would have done right by her, but for what it's worth, I'm glad you didn't, and I'm not the only one."

He got it but...he didn't, and when she spoke again, her tone was a bit sheepish, "I've been doing a lot of thinking. I know Jessie hasn't had an easy life, and what your father did to her *and* her mother was...despicable, but I'm very thankful to have her in mine.

In some weird way, he supposed it made sense, but the rest of Kendall and Waite counties wouldn't see it that way. There was a storm coming, and it smelled like cow chips. "When word gets out, and it will, I have a feeling hell'll freeze over before the old man lives this down. So why are you here...helping him?"

She laughed again and flicked her hair over her shoulder. "I'm not. I'm here for Maisey...and you. Because I really do want to help. I fostered for about four years after Jessie came to live with me, *and* if I had said no, Jessie would never have let me live it down."

Rick relaxed at her words, allowing some of the tension to leave his shoulders, letting his hands unfist as her words sank in. He had a feeling his baby sister was a force to be reckoned with...and in her own way, so was Lyn. She shifted, settling closer and showing him more photos. He forced his eyes away from where their legs touched and listened while she talked. He knew she was warm; he could feel the heat radiating from her

flannel shirt. The warmth didn't register against his leg, but touch did.

"I don't think your father has a clue what he's in for when they meet, 'cause Miss Jessie isn't one to pull punches." She pushed her hair out of her face, and it brushed against Rick's shoulder.

"I want to know everything, but I have to ask you something and I want you to think long and hard about it because my father has a reason for *everything* he does." He waited for Lyn's nod, glanced down at Jessie's photo then verbalized what had been nagging at him, "Why the hell would he tell on himself?"

"The Sheriff? I honestly don't know, but he's been calling and writing ever since we tripped over one another a couple months back. Maybe he's gone off the deep end?"

"So he wasn't looking?"

"No, I was speaking somewhere about adopting older kids, and—" She tilted her head back and flashed him a rueful grin, "—I don't tell my kids' business but I guess I gave too much away."

As Lyn continued to talk about Jessie, Rick fell in love with his little sister, and even though he knew he shouldn't, a little in love with Lyn.

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The following morning, Lyn woke with a start at the feel of very masculine, calloused fingers smoothing her hair away from her face and tucking it behind her ear. She couldn't recall the last time she'd woken up in bed with a male over two feet tall who didn't kick or shove his feet in her chest while she tried to sleep.

She opened her eyes as a soft masculine rumble was punctuated by equally soft childish giggles. Rick and Maisey were definitely up to something. Deciding to play along, she lay perfectly still. A few giggles later, she found herself the recipient of a Wet Willie -- compliments of Maisey. Shrieking, Lyn bolted up in the bed and spun around. Maisey was pressed against Rick's chest, her laughing mouth covered with both hands.

"Ya'll are as bad as my kids." She wasn't mad. On the contrary, she was relieved to see Maisey laughing and teasing.

Rick lay on top of the covers dressed in sweats and a different T-shirt, his wheelchair positioned next to the bed, his wet hair tucked behind his ears. He'd obviously been up a while, but it still felt early. "She was just asking when her daddy would be back."

"I'll be right back." Lyn dashed to the bathroom, emptied her poor bladder, and splashed cold water on her face.

Back in the bed, she scooted as close to the duo as possible, taking comfort in the feel of Rick's arms around the both of them as she gently broke Maisey's heart.

Rick tightened his grip and Lyn slipped an arm around his waist, unable to hold back her own tears. Once Maisey's sobs subsided a little, Lyn dabbed at her face and said, "You're gonna live here with your Uncle Rick now, and he's going to take *good* care of you." She looked up at Rick, whose eyes were also red, and added, "Everything's going to be fine."

Outside, a lawnmower started up, reminding them that the world hadn't stopped turning, but neither Lyn nor Rick moved. Instead, they laid there staring at one another, Rick's fingers gently teasing the hair at Lyn's temples while they waited for a sign from Maisey that she was ready to get up and go greet her new life.

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The lawnmower finally stopped, and Rick kept his eyes on Lyn, unable to look at the sobbing Maisey cradled against him. Rick didn't have the heart to move her and no way could he have told her as gracefully as Lyn had done.

He mouthed a silent thank you and continued to stroke her hair while he rubbed Maisey's back with his hand. He knew he shouldn't be touching Lyn, but he could get used to this.

Finally, the sound of car doors slamming and teenagers snarking at each other got Lyn up. "That's Jessie and Ty."

He watched her go, immediately regretting the loss of her. "Maisey, honey. You feel like getting up?"

She shook her head, so Rick stayed put until he heard footsteps. He turned, expecting to see Lyn returning, but it was Jessie, her pale blue eyes

flicking from him to Maisey and back again. With a shake of her head, she dropped the bags she was carrying, circled the bed, and took her mother's place.

Despite the fact Jessie's hair was currently a very unnatural shade of raspberry, there was no denying the family connection. He debated for all of three seconds whether to hug her or not, then gave in to the urge. She didn't fight him but the distance between them was almost physical. Again, they stayed put until the smell of frying sausage and a little voice announcing breakfast forced Rick to glance over his shoulder one more time.

The little girl standing near his feet was no bigger than Maisey, and as dusky as his goddaughter was fair, her straightish hair cut to her chin, and laughing, almond shaped brown eyes.

"That's Etta. She's mixed."

"Biracial," Etta gently corrected, her eyes on her big sister.

Rick bit back a laugh as he took the two of them in. "Maisey, you want to get up?"

She shook her head and shrugged, burrowing deeper in the bed.

"We ate before we left this morning." Jessie watched him intently, her poker-face firmly in place. "I'll keep an eye on her. You go eat." When he hesitated, she added, "I'm good with kids."

Rick eased away from Maisey and sat up, preparing to make the shift to his chair.

"Etta, don't stare," Jessie said.

Curiosity from children wasn't new. Rick smiled at her and said, "It's okay." He shifted his right leg off the bed, a fistful of sweatpants gripped in one hand so his foot didn't bang the floor, then repeated the process with the other leg.

"How long have you been like that?" Jessie asked from behind him.

"About three years now." He glanced over his shoulder, his worry over leaving Maisey dissipating at the sight of Jessie's hand on her back.

"Must suck."

He couldn't contain a grin at her bluntness. "Some days, but I guess it could be worse."

"Could be a quadriplegic."

"Could be dead," he countered, "and I might not be able to walk, but I do have some feeling." At her questioning look, he said, "It's complicated, but if you really want to know, then someday I'll explain it to you."

"I want to know."

"Duly noted." He repositioned his feet, grasped the armrests of his chair, tightened his abdomen and pushed himself upright. He gave himself a few moments to get his balance, then turned and lowered himself into the seat, repositioning his feet so he could get into his chair easier. Leaning forward, he grasped the armrests one at a time, his shoulder muscles tightening as he lowered himself into the seat. He leaned over set each foot on the footrest, and at that point, Etta apparently decided she'd seen enough. She gave a little wave just as he sat up, and then took off. Her small feet echoed off the hardwood floor, followed by the smack of the screen door. "Did she just go outside?"

"Yeah. Ty's out there. He'll watch her. Does it bother you?" Obviously, Jessie wasn't going to be deterred from her train of thought—namely him and his chair. Not that he minded.

"Of course. Sometimes," he amended, "but I do okay and I don't have to rely on anyone to take care of me." Much as he appreciated her forthrightness, she really knew how to put someone on the spot.

"Do you date?" Jessie now had her head propped on her hand, her crystal blue eyes inscrutable.

"Not much." Most of the women he knew, he'd known all his life, and they tended to treat him like a child or an oddity. It was a rare woman who just saw *him*.

In the kitchen Rick found Lyn standing at the stove scrambling eggs.

"Hope you don't mind me just moving in," she tossed over her shoulder.

"Not at all." Actually, it was kinda nice.

She dished up two plates and set them on the table beside two steaming cups of coffee while Rick grabbed some flatware and then joined her.

"How's Gretchen?"

"She's been better, but she'll be okay." She'd come by last night about the time Lyn had tried to stifle her third yawn.

"Just takes time."

While Rick had been lying down with Maisey, Lyn had changed, put on a little makeup, and gathered her hair into a ponytail. Just above the collar of her baby blue thermal shirt was the outline of a tattoo.

"You're staring." She dumped some sugar into her coffee then glanced at him from the corner of her eye, a wicked grin at the corner of her lips.

"How many tattoos do you have?"

"I've lost count."

On her, the nose ring seemed more a matter of whimsy than rebellion. Had it been the same for the tattoos? He wondered what had spurred her to get one in the first place, but didn't ask. It seemed too personal somehow.

"Are you not hungry?"

"I was staring again, wasn't I?" he asked as he picked up his fork and dug in.

"Just a little, but that's okay." For the first time in a long time, Rick felt self-conscious about being around a woman—and it wasn't just the chair.

Despite—or maybe because of—the ease he'd felt in her presence yesterday, today he felt more like a high school kid trying to make time with a cute girl and failing miserably. As he added creamer to a second cup of coffee, he reminded himself that she was his sister's mother, then wished he hadn't. A relationship with Lyn would be ten thousand kinds of complicated. He rolled across the kitchen floor, retrieved his plate, and set it in the sink as a lawnmower started up out back.

"That reminds me, the leaves out front are gone."

Outside the kitchen window, his son walked past, pushing a mower. Before he could even process Jordan's sudden appearance, Gretchen's son, Walt, strode through the leaves to his cousin, the lawnmower stopped, and the two of them started yelling. Rick had hoped for more time alone with Lyn before he went to check on Maisey again. He yanked open the back door, shifted his chair, and descended the slight

ramp to the back porch.

Lyn came up behind him and rested a hand on his shoulder, giving a little squeeze. "This whole family resemblance thing is getting downright creepy."

Laughing, he said, "I know." Jessie, Jordan, and Walt were all Kendalls through and through.

"Especially after meeting Gretchen. I expected her to look like you and your dad."

"You want to know real irony?"

"Hmmm." Her fingers gently kneaded his shoulders while out in the yard, the fight continued.

"Jessie's the first female Kendall in about four generations to have black hair and blue eyes." The unflappable, always right and *never* wrong, Joe Kendall—the man with the plan had gotten screwed by his own genetics.

Lyn laughed softly. "I think that's what my kids called gettin' powned."

"Speaking of which, I'm thinking I better break that up before one of 'em throws down on the other." He stuck two fingers in his mouth, and his shrill whistle cut the chilly morning like glass.

A tall young black man appeared near the fence with Etta on his hip and shouted a thank you.

"That's Ty," Lyn said from behind him.

Jordan and Walt scowled at Rick and Ty, then Jordan gave Walt a shove in the middle of his chest.

"Boys," Lyn muttered as the two cousins approached them.

By the time Rick settled the argument of just who was going to do the lawn—Jordan had been sent over by the Sheriff while Walt had been sent over by Gretchen—Lyn was gone.

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Shortly before lunch the Sheriff's suburban pulled up out front. Lyn ducked into the bedroom and gave Jessie a head's up. While Lyn, Ty, and Rick had been cleaning, Jessie had apparently convinced Maisey to get her

hair braided so it was out of her eyes. Despite her red eyes and nose, she now looked like someone cared enough about her to at least wash her face.

"Baby, you need to eat something so I can give you your medicine," Lyn said. She helped Maisey off the bed while Jessie sat up on the other side and walked to the window. Lyn would have given anything to know what was going through her daughter's head. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," Jessie said softly.

"You can stay in here if you want," she offered, though she knew Jessie wasn't the type to hide from a problem—or a confrontation.

"I'll be fine." She spun around and followed Lyn from the room, but as Lyn led Maisey to the kitchen, Jessie headed out the front door.

She couldn't follow; no way did she want Maisey to witness whatever was about to happen. Hopefully, Ty or Rick was nearby. Her gut in knots, Lyn sat at the kitchen table coaxing scrambled eggs into Maisey, until Rick rolled through the front door and straight for the kitchen, a huge grin on his face.

Lyn was too old and jaded to believe in love at first sight, but she'd had almost twenty-four hours with Rick. The grin and the sparkle in his eye coupled with the dimple in his chin did a number on her heart.

"Dad needs a bag of ice for his nose."

"Oh, geeze." She stood but Rick immediately waved her back into her seat.

"I got it." He wheeled around her to the fridge.

"Frozen vegetables work well, too." At his arched eyebrow, she added, "Three teenage boys?"

Nodding, he opened the far door and pulled out a bag of frozen peas.

"How bad was it?"

Rick snorted and said, "She just walked up to him and popped him in the nose."

"Good," was the best she could do with Maisey right there, but they nodded to one another. It had nothing to do with gloating—well, maybe a little—but mostly it was about Jessie putting Joe in his place. Unfortunately, she didn't get a chance to speak to Jessie about it until after

the sun set. For that matter, she didn't get to speak with Joe, and warn him off yet again, just in case Jessie's message wasn't clear.

And to her disappointment, she didn't get to speak with Rick, either, because the church ladies arrived and shooed him outside. At the sound of loud female voices, Lyn scooped Maisey up and made a dash for the front door. She shook her head at the sight that greeted her. Eight women piled out of two Suburbans while Reverend Franks led their husbands to the side of the house, lost in talks of two-by-fours and measuring tapes and heaven knew what else.

"Lord, girl, what have you gotten yourself into now?" Maryetta asked as she climbed up the porch and leaned closer to Maisey. "And aren't you the prettiest thing God ever made."

Lyn pressed a kiss to the older woman's cheek. "I'm sure you all had better things to do with your Saturday."

"Huh!" She smirked, her face creasing into a sly smile. "When Jessie calls, honey, we *all* come running. And that young man out there—" she nodded her head to the driveway where Rick sat bundled in a down coat, laughing with a few of the men, "—he's family. Her, too. Now get out of my way."

If she was alone with her kids, they teased freely, but *gently*, about the Church Ladies, who were in church every Sunday wearing the most outrageous hats, and at your side with food and laughter and wisdom when you needed help. So they came, they saw, they brought good food and cleaned. They'd even found a Christmas tree and ornaments, and Maisey watched wide-eyed, thrilled when she got to help decorate.

The sun had decided to come out, and Ty and the reverend's two sons washed windows while Jordan and Walt hung Christmas lights and the men spent the day working on Rick's new wrap-around porch. Inside, Jessie somehow managed to avoid her, or Lyn would get close to Jessie only to have to go chase after Maisey and Etta, who ducked out as often as possible to watch the men work.

Every once in a while, she'd catch Jessie or Maisey watching her, but Lyn supposed Jessie wasn't ready to talk, and when she was, she would. Maisey was another matter, but Lyn and Etta both stayed close. And every time she noticed a cloud in her new friend's eyes, she'd hug

her. That was Etta, sweet to the core and a hugger from the time she'd been old enough to wrap her arms around Lyn's neck.

By the time everyone left and Lyn had somehow managed to get Etta and Maisey bathed and into bed, she was ready to collapse, but she figured as far as the house was concerned, Rick would have no trouble passing a home study now. Not with as much vinegar and Lysol and paper towels as they'd gone through. The rest was up to him.

She found Jessie on the front porch with her guitar, sitting next to Rick. "Everything okay?"

"You worry too much, Mom."

Lyn gave her daughter's ear a little tug and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "That's my job. Now, where's your brother?" She wanted to ask about Jordan and the Sheriff but didn't.

"Around the side, sweeping up those nails so the girls don't get into them."

Lyn nodded and took a seat across from the two of them, a part of her wondering if she should leave them alone. They probably hadn't had a chance to talk much.

Jessie strummed her guitar then stopped to tune it. "I met Gretchen."

"And?"

"Stop teasing your mother," Rick said.

She gave him a dirty look as she set the guitar aside and fished a photo from inside her jacket. She handed it to Lyn, picked up the guitar and played the opening notes to an old Patty Griffin song.

Lyn bit back her tears, glanced at Rick, who nodded, and then back at the photo. Two redheaded teenage girls stood in front of some bleachers, dressed in matching red shorts and black t-shirts, their hair in long pigtails they were way too old for. Both of them were a little sunburned, and grinning from ear to ear. The taller one was obviously Gretchen while the slender girl at her side could only be Jessie's birthmother. "My God."

"She said she'd dig up some more." Rick maneuvered his chair so he could sit next to her.

They listened to Jessie sing and before she knew it, Lyn had her

head on Rick's shoulder, her eyes slowly driving closed. She didn't care. She wasn't moving until someone made her. And besides, it was just a shoulder. At least, that's what she told herself.

It was Ty who woke her up, tickling her ear until she jabbed an elbow in his hip. "You two staying over?" She sat up, shaking off her sleepiness and gently grabbed his fingers.

"Naw, I'm not, but Jessie can."

"I think I'm gonna go with Ty."

"Etta's out. I'll bring her home in the morning before church."

Once they were gone, Lyn followed Rick inside, locking the door behind her.

"You think she'll be okay?"

"I suppose." She followed him through the dining room to the kitchen and watched him flip the lock. "I think she just needs time to process it all. Jessie's like that. What happened with Joe?"

"He...said he'd be gone a while and took off." Rick glanced at the floor then back at her. "Jordan called and said some of his stuff was gone."

"You think he's okay?"

"He's a grown man."

"I meant Jordan."

Rick chuckled and rolled closer, the tension between them suddenly thick. "He'll be fine. Said he'd be over tomorrow and wanted to know if he could stay here. So ... we talked."

"I'm glad." Her heart was hammering against her ribs as she jabbed a thumb over her shoulder. "I'm gonna get ready for bed."

Before she could move, he'd grabbed her hand. "I don't know how to thank you for today."

Laughing, she knelt at his feet, her hand still in his. "It wasn't me, honey. That was *all* Jessie."

His eyebrows shot up, and Lyn bit her lip to stifle a giggle. "I tried to tell you, honey. Those church ladies *love* her."

Grinning, Rick closed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

"I'm gonna go take a quick shower. I can't sleep in all this grime."

"I'll make up the couch."

Only when she exited the hall bath thirty minutes later, all the

lights were out, and there wasn't a blanket or pillow to be seen from where she stood just outside the bathroom door. Lyn stood still, listening for the sound of running water, in case Rick had decided to shower also.

"Lyn?"

She turned and followed the sound of his voice to his bedroom door, then stood there clutching her shampoo and body wash, her heart hammering against her ribs again.

A shirtless Rick sat propped up on the far side of the bed; the bedside lamp cast a warm glow around him. "This bed's big enough for the both of us."

It was, but she still didn't move.

"And I know I shouldn't, but I'd really liked to sleep with you."

She shouldn't. She really, *really* shouldn't, but she did. Lyn set her stuff down just inside the door and crossed the sparsely furnished room to the bed.

As if he sensed her nervousness, Rick gently added, "I promise I'll be a perfect gentleman."

And he was...for the most part.

The End

And Merry Christmas from Texas, Y'all

### Author Bio

Growing up, I wanted to be a lawyer and a psychologist and after reading this story, I'm sure neither of those occupations comes as a surprise to you! Obviously, I've seen the error of my ways and I'm pretty sure being a writer is much more fun!

I'm the last of a dying breed, a native Texan who's just city enough to hate the country and just country enough to hate the city, and still make my home here where cowboys and music (my other two loves) abound. Just not in my suburban neighborhood.