

# DUSTED BRITCHES

BACK COUNTRY ROMANCE TALES



JODI BELLA

BLUSHING BOOKS

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## TEXAS ROSE



*K*enny Conrad tossed two bales of fresh hay down from the bed of his truck and jumped out behind them. As he cut the twine around the bales and began to spread the hay with a pitchfork, he glanced up irritably at the pouting young woman sitting slumped inside the bed of the truck.

"You could help, you know," he informed her as the cows began to crowd in around him.

The glance she shot him could have frozen molten lava.

Kenny chose to ignore her cold glare and made quick work of spreading the rest of the hay. When he was finished, he set the pitchfork in the bed of the truck, careful not to come too close to her with the pointed end. As he approached the driver's side door, slapping his work gloves off his hands in agitation, he felt her angry, hard eyes on him the whole time.

At the door to the cab, he stopped and met her gaze straight on. "If you're so damn mad at me, Rose, why the hell are you doggin' my every step today?"

"I'm not about to make it easy on you, my last night in town!" Rose Kelly exploded. "After tomorrow, I won't be here anymore to make you feel bad, but you can bet the rest of the time I spend in

this god-forsaken town is going to be as productive as I can make it towards whatever guilt I can get you to feel after you abandon me to brave this trip myself!"

Kenny rolled his eyes. "God, you're melodramatic. When you finally get yourself to California, you ought to read for a soap opera. I bet they'd take you in a minute."

"If I get to California..." Rose amended pointedly.

Kenny sighed. "If you're so scared to go alone, then why don't you just stay here?"

The look on her face was so incredulous it was nearly comical. "I can't believe you would ask me that, Kenny Conrad! Ever since you and I were kids, we've planned to leave this dump of a town behind as soon as we got out of high school. That was over a year ago, in case you've forgotten, when you convinced me to wait longer so we could save up more money for the move..."

"Rose, you had a hundred and fifty dollars to get you from Texas to California."

"And now, here it is, over a year later, and now, you've suddenly got a case of responsibility fever, and you won't leave with me! Apparently, the blood oath we made to each other in fifth grade meant nothing to you!"

Kenny shook his head and yanked his door open. "You can heap on the guilt all you like, Rose. You're not going to change my mind. My family needs me right now."

Rose struck the back panel of the cab as he climbed inside. "Good riddance, then!" she shouted. "Let them keep you!"

When the truck lurched to a stop outside the barn at Kenny's house, he jumped out from the cab, still annoyed, though he did have the good grace to offer Rose a hand down from the bed. She simply glared at him with her arms crossed tight over her chest until he made a sound of disgust and stomped angrily away from her.

Yet, not five minutes later, she was at his side again, this time,

making a face when she walked in on the scene of him raking out one of the two horse stalls in the barn.

"Peeee Yuuuew!" Rose exclaimed, pinching the tip of her nose closed as she sidestepped a playful nudge from the huge black horse that Kenny favored. For some reason, the beast was always trying to touch her with its wet sloppy nose.

Kenny didn't even glance up from his work. "If the smell bothers you, don't hang around, Rose."

"You know, Kenny Case, you ought to be nicer to me. 'Cause, after tomorrow, who knows if you'll ever see me again?"

Rose watched the muscles bulging beneath Kenny's thin white tee shirt and waited for him to comment on her threat. When he just continued with his job in silence, she began to wonder if maybe he wasn't happy he was getting rid of her.

Maybe that had been his plan all along. Maybe, as they'd grown older, he'd longed to be rid of her but, being the nice guy that he was, he just didn't know how to go about shaking her without hurting her feelings. So, he'd played out the part of wanting to be a partner in her plans to ditch their small Texas town after high school, just so he could finally get her out of his life when he backed out at the last minute.

Except that scenario didn't make sense, considering that Kenny had been the one, last year, who convinced her to stay, at least long enough to save up more money towards her dream escape. And, he also hadn't backed out at the last minute, either. It had been months ago, after his mother had died suddenly in an auto accident and he had been left to either take guardianship of his two younger siblings or send them off to another state to live with an aunt and uncle they barely knew.

Kenny, being Kenny, had, of course, become their legal guardian. And, right from the very beginning, he had told her that it was no longer possible for him to join her in her escape. She just hadn't let herself believe him.

Because the dream of ditching Little Pointe Texas without Kenny Case by her side just wasn't the same. From the time Rose had been six-years-old, when she'd fallen on the playground at school and scraped her knee, and he'd suddenly appeared at her side and helped her inside to the nurse while everyone else laughed and pointed at the new kid, she'd loved him. Really loved him, not just liked him as a friend, though he was the best friend she'd ever known. No, Rose loved Kenny the way a woman loves a man; he just didn't have a clue that was how she felt—nor did he seem to have a clue that she was a woman.

As she watched him with large, watery doe eyes, now, realizing, for the first time, that what she'd just said to him about never seeing him again was likely true, and wondering how in the world she could survive that, not him, he finally answered her. "I'm bein' as nice to you as I can, considering the way you're behaving lately. I don't want to fight with you on your last night in town, but you seem bent on it."

Rose straightened her spine and sniffed her tears back. "Well, maybe if you'd just hang out with me a little, instead of running all over this ranch doin' this and that..."

Kenny's head shot up, and his eyes were dark, even in the dim sunlight of the barn. "This and that, as you put it, needs to get done. This is a working ranch, Rose. If the work doesn't get done, then we don't make any money, and we don't eat. Get it?"

She managed somehow not to flinch under his hard gaze. "Well, why don't you get Robbie and Katie to do some of this stuff when they get home from school?"

"Because by the time they get done with soccer practice and band lessons, it's dinnertime. And, after dinner, they have homework. And then, they do have their own chores to do. We have our own system, and it works." He glared at her again, his eyes glinting in the light. "Any more questions, or can I get finished here?"

Rose looked down at the floor of the barn and swallowed. She shook her head and jumped, a second later, when the horse nudged her again with his giant head. This time, he neighed softly at her.

"It wouldn't hurt you to pet him," Kenny told her as he went back to raking the dirty straw. "He likes you. That's why he does that."

Rose looked up at the warm, soulful eyes of the horse and tentatively reached out one hand. But when her fingertips came into contact with the tip of the horse's velvety nose and he snuffed her hand, smelling her scent, she squealed and whirled around. As she fled the barn, the sound of Kenny's soft chuckle followed after her.

An hour later, Kenny slumped wearily against the upper story service doorway of the barn, letting his feet hang down outside the opening. He propped his shoulder against the wall and sighed when he looked down across the land and the house, all his now, at the age of twenty. He'd never seen it coming, had never thought he'd be the legal guardian to his younger brother and sister before he was even legally able to drink.

So far, things were going along fairly smoothly, though he worried a lot about the future. What was he going to do when Katie starting liking boys, for example? And what about when Robby decided the time of mourning their mother was over and went back to his rebellion stage, the one he'd started a few months before she died? What then?

Kenny realized, suddenly, as he was staring across at the scene below him, thinking, that his truck was gone. He swore silently, though he knew immediately that it had to have been Rose who'd taken it. It wasn't really surprising; she 'borrowed' his stuff like that all the time, always had. And, really, he didn't mind. There was another car here that he could use if he needed it, and Rose didn't have transportation of her own. No, he cursed inwardly because, for the first time in all the years of her going on and on about leaving Small Pointe, it finally just now hit him that, after today, she really was going to be gone. No more turning around to find something of his missing, no more talking to her about his problems, no more unwanted 'world-according-to-Rose' advice, no more teasing and laughing with his best friend.



Kenny sighed. He wanted her to stay, he just didn't know what to say or do to make her change her stubborn mind.

Lately, the only thing he'd really wanted to do was wring her neck; she'd been so damned annoying! Well, actually, if he was really honest with himself, that wasn't entirely true. The true fantasy he'd had as of late had been a lot more specific than wringing her neck; he'd wanted nothing so much as to throw her bodily across his lap and pound her shapely backside till she screamed that she'd stay—and behave!

It was the most ludicrous idea he'd ever had, but it was certainly his most prevalent one lately. Whenever she got on his nerves, the image surfaced in his mind. At night, he had dreams about it. On occasion, he found his hands actually itching with the urge to paddle her. And, he seemed extremely distracted by the sight of her rounded bottom in cut-off shorts.

Even more ridiculous than the idea of spanking Rose, however, was what the concept did to Kenny. The simple thought of having her writhing over his knee while he smacked her bottom made his jeans tight and his body ache with wanting. It made him want to kiss away her tears when the spanking was over, then move his lips further down her body to cover her all over with those softer marks of love. It made him hot and hard and extremely unable to concentrate on anything else until the moment had passed.

And, that was what really had Kenny confused. Because, he and Rose, they were just friends. The best of friends. And that was all—wasn't it?



ROSE FROWNED at the open suitcase on her bed, then darted her dark blue eyes to the contents of the open closet before her. Deciding what to pack for her escape was proving more difficult than she'd imagined.

Of course, some things had been easy—the old ratty stuffed

bear that Kenny had given her on her sixteenth birthday was already carefully nestled in one corner of the case, as was the gray-blue zippered hoodie sweatshirt of his that she'd stolen from his house so many times now that he'd stopped asking for it back. Underneath the sweatshirt was the shoebox of photos and memories of their past as friends that she secretly kept.

But, so far, the only other items in the case were a couple of her favorite CDs and her toiletry bag.

Of course, she wanted to travel light, because she didn't know what adventures she might run into. She certainly didn't want to be too encumbered with luggage to fully participate in whatever life threw her way on the road. There were always laundromats, where she could clean what she did decide to bring along.

The problem was she couldn't seem to make herself put anything else in that suitcase. It just seemed too final, too once-and-for-all, to pack up her everyday clothes and close the lid on the case. Doing so meant that, tomorrow, she was leaving.

Mentally, Rose shook her head at herself. What was wrong with her? She wanted to leave! Had thought of nothing else but leaving for years now! She was just being ridiculous.

Angry with her sappy behavior, she reached blindly inside the closet now and pulled out a few pairs of worn jeans, a stack of underwear, a couple tee shirts and a flannel shirt. She threw them roughly on top of what already sat neatly in the suitcase, then flung a lightweight denim jacket on top of the mound. When she turned around, her vision swam, and she rushed to the bed to rearrange the new clothes to one side so that her bear could breathe and her box of memories and sweatshirt wouldn't get crushed.

As she picked up the sweatshirt to refold it and place it carefully on top of the other items, she suddenly drew it around herself, instead, and inhaled the scent of Kenny entwined in its fibers, even now, months after she'd claimed official ownership of it. A lump lodged itself in her throat, and no matter how hard she swallowed,

it wouldn't go away. And neither would the tears that made her vision swim and her nose run.



KENNY FELT bad about the way he'd spoken to Rose. He didn't want them to be on bad terms when she left town, tomorrow. So, he hurried through his afternoon work, leaving what he could for the next day, and left the ranch to pick his brother up from soccer practice. Sixteen-year-old Robbie was only too happy to drop Kenny off at Rose's house, so that he could have the car to himself for the afternoon.

"Afternoon, Mr. Kelly," Kenny greeted Rose's elderly grandfather as he mounted the three front porch steps. "How are you, sir?"

The old man narrowed his eyes at Kenny the way he always did. Kenny never had liked him, considering the way he treated his one and only granddaughter. Rose had been sent to live with him when she'd been a small child, after losing her parents, and Robert Kelly had taken her in out of sheer obligation and nothing else. Her childhood would have been completely loveless and miserable had she not found family and acceptance outside the walls of Robert Kelly's house. Seeing what she'd gone through under his roof had been a large part of Kenny's own decision to keep his siblings, himself, instead of sending them to stay with other family members.

When Mr. Kelly neglected to answer him, as usual, Kenny sighed and simply let himself inside the house. He felt the old man's eyes on his back the entire time as he passed by him, smelling the odor of his unwashed body and the tang of alcohol on his breath, already. He'd never been so bold as to let himself into the man's house before, but, then again, he supposed it didn't matter anymore. Not with Rose leaving in the morning.

"Rose!" he called out, standing at the base of the stairs.

A few minutes passed and then she appeared up at the top, a

suitcase in one hand and a deep frown marring her pretty features. "What are you doing here?"

He shrugged, wanting, for some reason, to seem nonchalant, when he really was anything but. "I cleared up my schedule for the rest of the day. And, Robbie's going to stop and get a pizza for him and Katie for dinner. I thought maybe you might want to go down to the pond for one last swim."

Rose was bumping the suitcase step by step down the stairs as he spoke. When she got within the last few steps, he reached out and took it from her.

"If you're worried about the truck, you can relax. I was going to return it, tomorrow morning, on my way to catch the bus out of town."

Kenny gave her a warning look. "I'm not here about the truck, Rose. Earlier, you wanted me to hang out with you, and now, I can. Wouldn't you like to go for one more swim, for old times' sake?"

She wrinkled her nose a minute, then shrugged. "Okay, just let me get changed into my suit."

Kenny grinned. "Okay. I'll meet you at the truck."

The pond sat on a secluded piece of land on the back of Kenny's family's property. He had to use the truck's four-wheel drive to get back there, and they grinned at each other in mutual enjoyment as the vehicle bounced and swayed over the land.

When they reached the water, he threw the truck into park, grabbed a couple towels he'd thought to bring along and raced her to be the first one in, shouting, "Last one in's a rotten egg!" just as he used to when they were kids.

Rose caught up to him quickly, and they both hit the water at the same time, coming up laughing and gasping. Kenny splashed Rose, and she retaliated, and soon, a war was on to see which could dunk or splash the other faster. The battle raged on until Kenny picked her up high over his head and abruptly released her. Rose screamed, squeezing her eyes shut as she anticipated impacting the water and sinking down. But, a second later, Kenny caught her and,

instead, eased her back onto her feet. For a moment, their eyes caught and a flash of electricity crossed between them; or, at least, it seemed to Rose that it did. Kenny, on the other hand, simply turned away from her and walked out of the pond to land on a towel on the shore, looking spent.

After taking a minute to collect herself, Rose followed him and let herself lay as close to him as she dared, even resting the back of her head on one of the arms he had folded behind his head. They were both breathing hard from their play and lay there in silence for a while, watching the clouds passing by overhead.

"So," Kenny was the first one to speak. "You still figuring on heading to California, or do you have another place in mind, now?"

Rose shrugged. "California, for starters. Then, who knows?"

He slanted her a sideways look. "Whatever happened to New York?"

She wrinkled her nose in answer.

"Too scary, huh?"

Rose felt her hackles rise. This was the second time today he'd accused her of being afraid of making this trip.

"I'm not afraid of anything," she boasted, sitting up and staring defiantly down at him. "You're the one who's afraid!"

"Me?" Kenny's eyebrows drew down over his hazel eyes as he, too, sat up. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You know what it means!" she hollered, starting to get to her feet. But he grabbed hold of her arm by the elbow and stayed her gently but forcefully.

"No, I don't, Rose. Why don't you explain it to me?"

"Fine!" she snapped, leaning toward him so that they were only inches apart. "It means that, if you really wanted to come with me, you'd find a way. You'd bring Robbie and Katie or something. But, the truth is, your responsibilities to them are just your convenient excuse! You're the one who's afraid to leave this town. You're scared of going out into the big bad world and testing the unknown. It's easier and safer to just stay right here."

Now, Kenny's eyes narrowed, and his face clouded over. Rose had never seen him look so angry before, not even at her, these last few days. She instantly regretted what she'd said to him. She wasn't even sure she really believed what she'd said; she'd just spoken rashly out of the pain and fear inside her of leaving him behind.

"You think I'm staying here because I want to? Do you think, for one second, that I wanted to lose my mother the way we did, that I want to have sole responsibility for Robbie and Katie, at my age? You think it's going to be easy for me, for one single second, to finish raising them on my own?" His eyes were hot and hard on her face as he spoke, and Rose swallowed back on the lump in her throat that burned there at the pain in his voice. "You have got to be the most self-centered, single-minded child on the face of the planet! I cannot believe that I killed myself this afternoon to clear up this evening so I could spend it with you! I must have been out of my freakin' mind!"

"Kenny, I—"

"No, save it, Rose. I don't want to hear anything from you." A light shone suddenly in his eyes, and she had a sudden foreboding sense of inexplicable dread. "Though, there is one thing I'd like to give you. Consider it a goodbye gift."

He grabbed her elbow again, this time, so fast she didn't even have time to think about getting away. But, instead of holding her still in front of him by her arm, he used it to pull her unerringly down over his outstretched thighs, until she was flat on her belly, her bikini bottom centered right in Kenny's lap.

"Let me up, Kenny!" she shouted, knowing where this was going, though she herself had never been in this position before, and most certainly not with Kenny Conrad. But, she'd seen enough spankings around this town to know the beginnings of one when she saw it.

"Not yet," he growled. "I haven't given you your present yet. And, God knows, you've earned it."

To her utter shock, she felt his thumb hook itself into the top

elastic of her bikini bottom, and a moment later, he was tugging the still damp material down to her knees.

"H-h-how dare you!" she shrieked, wriggling and struggling to no avail under his steel-like arm.

"You were pretty daring yourself, a few minutes ago, with all that you said to me. Now, it's my turn."

And, with that, he lifted his right hand up high over his head and brought it crashing down on her naked bottom with a loud, stinging *smack!*

"Ow!" Rose bellowed, immediately reaching one arm back to try to shield her behind. Kenny took the hand she presented at the wrist and imprisoned it in the small hollow of her back with the same hand that was holding her immobile over his legs. To Rose, it seemed like he had five arms back there, so little was she able to move.

He delivered another resounding swat and smiled at the muted scream it resulted in. Kenny didn't know who he thought he was, spanking his best friend this way; he'd never spanked anyone else before this. He'd gotten whipped a couple times with his dad's belt, himself, when he'd been younger and before the old man died, and he'd seen his sister and brother get smacked a few times by his mom. He'd even seen his mom get swatted a time or two when his dad had still been alive, though he'd been sure to keep his knowledge of the fact a secret. His mother had acted like it wasn't an out of the ordinary occurrence in her marriage, and so Kenny had never once thought of what he'd witnessed as abuse. It had simply been his dad laying down the law with his mother. Maybe that was where he'd gotten the idea to spank Rose, in the first place. She'd certainly been out of hand, lately, and he'd seen his own father deal with unruly woman in this manner. Maybe the spanking trait ran in the family?

Whatever it was that had finally snapped in him and drove him to put Rose over his knee was not fading; Kenny continued his barrage of smacks on her defenseless derriere until the creamy

white skin of her bottom had turned to pink, then cherry. She shrieked and cursed him the entire time, kicking and bucking and pounding the earth beneath them with her one free hand. And still, Kenny continued to wallop her, alternating her cheeks and covering them both from the top crest of her backside to just above her knees.

"Let me tell you something, Rose Kelly," he ground out between clenched teeth as he punctuated his words with rough cracks of his palm. "There is nothing, God help me, more that I would rather do than go running off with you on this little escape of yours. I would love to run away from my responsibilities here, if only my conscience would let me. But, I can't. I have to stay here and face the scariest damned task of my life, by keeping this ranch floating and seeing Katie and Robert grow up. If I could change the stars and bring my mother back, so I could just go off with you, I would! Hell, if I could do that, I'd bring my dad back, too, so I wouldn't be the only one in the family with memories of him left. And, I'd bring your parents back, so you wouldn't have had to grow up under your grandfather's roof. But, I can't do any of that stuff. I can only deal with what's been put on my plate, here and now. Do you get that, Rose?"

It was then, as he paused in his task as well as his lecture, that Kenny first realized Rose was crying. Sobbing, really.

"I'm sorry!" she sniveled, clutching his knee with her free hand. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean what I said to you. You're right. God, I'm so sorry, Kenny."

He let her up then, helping her stand with an arm under her elbow. She scrambled rapidly to pull up her bikini bottoms, her face as red as her bottom was. She stood in front of him, agape, holding both of her bottom cheeks, one in each of her hands. Tears continued to course down her face as she stood there, staring up at him with an indiscernible mixture of emotions on her face.

Kenny was suddenly glad that he'd gone for his swim in cutoff jeans instead of swim trunks. He felt the rigid erection bulging in



his pants and hoped that Rose didn't see it and hadn't felt it while she'd been over his lap.

He took a step closer to her, drawn by the look she was giving him, by his own emotions from the past few days, and by the simple fact that if he didn't kiss her now, he might never get the chance again.

He cupped one side of her face with the same hand that had delivered the fiercest swats to her backside, gentle now. His thumb traced her bottom lip just once and he would have sworn she trembled. Hesitantly, he lowered his head and sipped once, then twice, at her pouty pink lips, drawing in her sharply exhaled breath and tasting the sweetness of it.

The kiss deepened, and Kenny swallowed a moan when her small pink tongue met his in shy welcome. He threaded one hand through her long dark tresses and took her weight with a small smile when he felt her lean into him.

When they broke apart, she looked dazedly up at him. Then, as he watched, her eyes filled with tears, and she pulled away. He watched her back grow rigid and, slowly, the fire returned to her eyes.

He never even saw the punch coming. One second, he was standing there in front of her, wondering how long this tirade was going to last and trying to figure out if he should put her over his knee again, and the next, he was flat on his back with a split upper lip, staring up at her.

And, in the next instant, she was gone. From his spot on the ground, Kenny heard the sound of the truck being fired up and briefly wondered if she planned to finish him off. As he slowly sat up, fingering his lip and watching his truck bounce across the ranch, he had to smile; after all, he was the one who'd taught Rose to throw a good punch. He supposed he had no one to blame but himself.

The following morning dawned hot and humid, the air heavy. Kenny grimaced at his busted lip in the mirror and frowned, a few

minutes later, when he glanced outside his bedroom window to see that, sometime during the night, Rose had returned his truck. He was half surprised that she hadn't slit the tires on her way out.

He'd looked for her last night, at her grandfather's and around Little Pointe's hot spots—the pizza place, the movie theatre and Wal-Mart—but no sign of her. He'd gone to bed late, feeling exhausted, only to toss and turn for what seemed like forever before he finally nodded off.

She was leaving today. Hating him.

He showered quickly and looked in on the kids, both still sleeping off their own Friday night events. After penning a quick note to whoever happened to wake up first, he headed out in the truck.

Jimmy Sparks' cows had somehow gotten through his fence again and a dozen of them were in the middle of the highway when Kenny came across them, blocking traffic and making a general nuisance of themselves. He jumped out of the truck to help Jimmy corral them off the road, more out of the rising sense of panic in his chest than out of friendly neighborliness. As soon as they were back where they belonged, he jumped in his truck and took off.

His eyes darted to the clock in the truck's dash, praying he wasn't too late, that he hadn't missed her. But, just as he came squealing to a halt across the street from the town's one and only bus stop, his heart leaped into his throat as he heard the whoosh of the morning bus's brake release and watched as it began to pull away from the curb.

"Wait!" he called, surprised to hear the catch in his voice. "Wait!"

But the driver did not hear him, nor did she see him as he began to run across the road, waving his arms. He felt his heart pounding in his chest, and he thought he would pass out from the intensity of the blood pummeling through his veins. He was too late, the driver wasn't going to stop, he was never going to see Rose again, and he'd never told her...

And, then, a flash of summer white and the flutter of dark curls

caught his eye. And, when he looked up, there she was, still standing at the now empty bus station, her suitcase at her feet.

A grin broke out over his face, and he raced to her side, only stopping himself from embracing her when he saw that she was crying.

"I'm the coward," she told him miserably. "I'm the one who's too yellow bellied to go off by herself."

Kenny thumbed her tears away and then tipped her chin up with one crooked finger. "Nah," he said, shaking his head. "You're just now realizing you're not meant to go anywhere. By yourself or otherwise. You're a part of this Texas town, whether you want to see it or not. They named a song after you, remember? The Yellow Rose of Texas?"

A small smile broke out over Rose's sad face. Then it widened into a grin, and the next thing he knew, she was giggling. She all but fell into his arms then, and the laughter became mixed with tears again. Kenny had never heard a better sound, because it meant she was still here, that he wasn't imagining her presence here in his arms.

"Don't ever leave," he whispered in her ear, hugging her tighter. "Stay here. With me."

Her eyes were full of laughter and tears as she looked up at him. She ran one soft fingertip over his split lip and smiled. "Are you going to...you know...spank me again?" she whispered, coloring slightly.

Kenny shrugged. "Are you going to need me to again?"

Rose rolled her eyes. "This is me we're talking about here," she groused.

"I see your point. So, then, I suppose the answer would be yes."

Rose seemed to consider this a moment.

"What do you think about that?" Kenny prompted her when she said nothing after a little while.

"I think I must be crazy, but I don't care!" She threw her arms around his neck then and squeezed him with all her might. "Just

take me home, Kenny Conrad. And never let me try to escape again!"

"First thing's first," Kenny insisted. He pulled back from her just long enough to press his lips to her own and kiss the very breath out of her. Then he hoisted her up over his right shoulder and grabbed her suitcase with his left hand. He carried her back to the truck, delighting in the musical sound of her laughter all the way, and drove her home to his ranch.

From that day forward, they were never apart again.