

Sandra S. Kerns

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

Fenie
meanie
minie

no!

COLORADO SKIES SERIES

Eenie, Meanie, Minie, No!

The Colorado Skies Series

by Sandra S. Kerns

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Even in thoroughly proofed and meticulously edited books, errors and typos can slip through. If you find an error in my book, please feel free to send a personal note to me at sandra@sandrakerns.com. I endeavor to give you the best book possible and am always interested in your comments.

Happy reading,
Sandra

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I would also like to send a heartfelt thank you to all of you who have purchased my books and helped make my dream come true.

CHAPTER ONE

Nikki smiled as she passed several girls from one of her classes whispering secrets in the hallway.

“Hey, Ms. Sterces,” they said in unison.

“Have a good night, girls. Don’t forget the practice AP test tomorrow.” As she continued walking, she tried not to smirk when she heard a couple of them groan quietly before they returned to their previous conversation. When they started giggling again, she figured they were sharing the silly little secrets of teenage girls. Unfortunately, the chill that raced over her skin reminded her how wrong she could be. The secrets she and her friends shared in high school had been anything but silly and innocent.

Pushing through the exit door to the wonderful Colorado sunshine her smile returned. The school year would soon be over. She would be able to enjoy her privacy and not think about anyone’s secrets. Besides, she wasn’t a teenager anymore. No one knew her secret, not even her friends from high school. She could walk with her head held high. Her private little pep talk renewed her confidence all the way home.

When she stepped into her kitchen and saw the message light flashing, her newfound confidence all but disappeared. Feeling like the girl people yell, ‘don’t do it,’ to in a scary movie, she forced herself to push the play button. As the voice she dreaded played from the machine, terror gripped her by the throat.

“Domonique, I know you’re still at school, but I couldn’t wait to tell you. I’ll be seeing you soon.” Laughter tinged with a hint of menace followed the message, continuing until the call ended.

Fear held her motionless, twelve years of rebuilding her self-esteem shattered around her. Only one person ever called her by her full name. She’d changed her number three times in the past month, but he always got the new one. Unlike the other calls, this was the first time he’d said anything about seeing her again. Why now? She’d been back in Pinecrest for two years.

Anger replaced the terror. She shook her fist at the machine. “Come see me. I’ll face you, you bastard. I’m not afraid anymore.”

Contrary to her words, she jumped when the phone rang again. He wouldn’t be calling again so soon, would he?

Answer it. You said you would face him. Do it.

She grabbed up the phone. Anger raged in every fiber of her body. “Darin?”

“No, dear, it’s Mrs. Crandall. Is everything all right?”

Easing her strangle hold on the phone, Nikki smiled. “Yes, yes, everything is fine. I’ve been waiting for a call, that’s all. What can I do for you?”

“I’m afraid I forgot to buy cat food for Stinker. He’s almost out. Could you pick some up for me on your way home tomorrow?”

“Of course.” A genuine smile broke on her face. The normalcy of chatting with her neighbor for several minutes settled her jangled nerves. Hanging up, she pushed the delete button on the answering machine. That simple act gave her strength.

While she felt better, she still wasn’t relaxed. She forced herself to cook a meal rather than pull something out of the freezer. Most of the time puttering in the kitchen helped her unwind. Unfortunately, today wasn’t a normal day and she burned the entire meal. Shaking her head, Nikki tossed the charred food down the garbage disposal. She popped a frozen lasagna dinner in the microwave, and managing to burn that too, she laughed and forced herself to eat the charred remains.

Finished with dinner she attempted to grade papers her creative writing students had turned in. She gave up when one particularly dark piece brought back the fear she’d felt earlier. Grading papers while in such an unsettled mood wasn’t fair. She pulled out her checkbook to pay bills instead. Unable to focus on the task she finally surrendered and started cleaning. Living alone and being a bit of a neat freak, her home didn’t get very messy but the mundane routine of cleaning always calmed her.

A few hours later, she put away the supplies and glanced at the clock. She was amazed to find she had worked her way through until after nine. If she was going to be any good in class tomorrow, she needed to get some rest; unfortunately, she was still too tense to fall asleep. Since none of her usual standby remedies had freed her of apprehension, she decided to try a shower. Standing in the shower, she let the water pound into her shoulders. Nikki closed her eyes and prayed the water would relieve the tension. As she washed her hair and then soaped her body, she watched the bubbles make their way over her skin and down the drain. She laughed wishing all of her troubles could disappear as easily.

The laughter sounded out of place in the echoing acoustics of the bathroom. Its odd resonance sent an uncomfortable shiver over her skin despite the hot water still raining down on her. Turning off the water, she grabbed her towel. Since she hated the noise of the exhaust fan, steam filled the bathroom. She should be warm, but she wasn’t. Rubbing the soft terrycloth towel over her skin with vigor to increase the circulation didn’t

help either.

Swiping her hand across the foggy mirror, wary eyes stared back at her. Droplets traveled in a gravity-induced race down the glass making the woman in the mirror appear to cry. Nikki didn't cry, she hadn't cried, not in a very long time. Crying only made your nose run, your face blotchy, and your eyes itch. It didn't solve problems, fix hurts, or wash away fear. Only time could do that.

"And sometimes even that doesn't work."

Almost thirteen years hadn't rid her of the hurt and fear Darin caused her and her family. Claustrophobia wrapped around her with a suffocating effect on her lungs. She yanked open the door and gulped in the cold air.

When her breathing settled into a normal rhythm, she closed the door before all the room's heat escaped. After pulling on sweats and socks, she rubbed her wet hair with the towel. Combing out the tangles, she picked up the blow dryer. She bent over to dry her hair upside down. A stylist had recommended she do so to give some lift to her stick straight hair. A minute after starting, she turned the dryer off thinking she heard a noise. She held the awkward position for several seconds. With her finger poised to turn the dryer back on, the sound came again.

The doorbell. She grabbed her watch from the vanity. Ten o'clock. Flipping her hair back, she stood upright.

"This can't be good," she mumbled as she reached for the doorknob.

Opening the bathroom door, steam followed her into the hallway hovering near the floor. Its presence gave an otherworldly atmosphere to the moment. A clammy fear crawled over her skin. Nikki shuffled through the steam as if drawn through the dark and scary fog of a nightmare.

Shake it off; you're not a kid anymore.

Reaching the door, she flipped the outside light on as she peered through the small window to see Detective Richard Stiles of Pinecrest PD standing on the stoop. He'd been the one to deliver the news of her mother's death when she was sixteen. Two and a half years ago, he'd searched her out and told her of her father's death as well. At that point, she'd dubbed him the angel of death. With both of her parents gone, what could he possibly want with her this time?

Well, you won't know what he wants until you open the door and ask him, she thought, breathing in slowly and deeply, she ran a hand through her damp disheveled hair. Turning off the security alarm, she twisted the deadbolt and pasting a smile on her face pulled the door open.

"Good evening, Detective Stiles," she said then glanced toward the man

with his back turned to her. The broad back looked oddly familiar, but she didn't know any of the other detectives.

"Evening, Ms. Sterces," Stiles said. He motioned toward the other man. "This is Detective Fitzpatrick."

The other man turned to face Nikki when Stiles said his name. Her eyes widened in shock, his narrowed slightly. Time stopped then rewound. He inclined his head and held out his hand to her. Nikki grasped it reflexively. Warmth flooded her body. "Joe, it's good to see you again."

"Nikki." He shook her hand then released it.

A war of sensations clashed inside her. She hadn't forgotten Joseph Fitzpatrick, not his dark blond hair that bleached to a ripe wheat color in the hot Colorado summer sun, or those warm whiskey eyes. Eyes that had held such hurt when, with no explanation, she'd broken up with him the last day of finals. From his professional attitude, she didn't think he'd forgiven her. Not even --

"You two know each other?" Stiles asked.

"Used to," Joe answered.

Well, that was true enough. They didn't know each other anymore. Best to keep it that way, she realized. She turned to Detective Stiles. Crossing her arms against the chill of the night air, she smiled. "What brings you here?"

"Could we come in for a minute?" Stiles asked. "You're shivering."

If they wanted to come in it couldn't be something routine. She opened the screen door further and stepped back. Closing the door, she ran shaking fingers through her hair again and faced her visitors. Joe's six-foot plus body filled her entryway and her thoughts. Trying to hide her discomfort, she met Stiles' gaze.