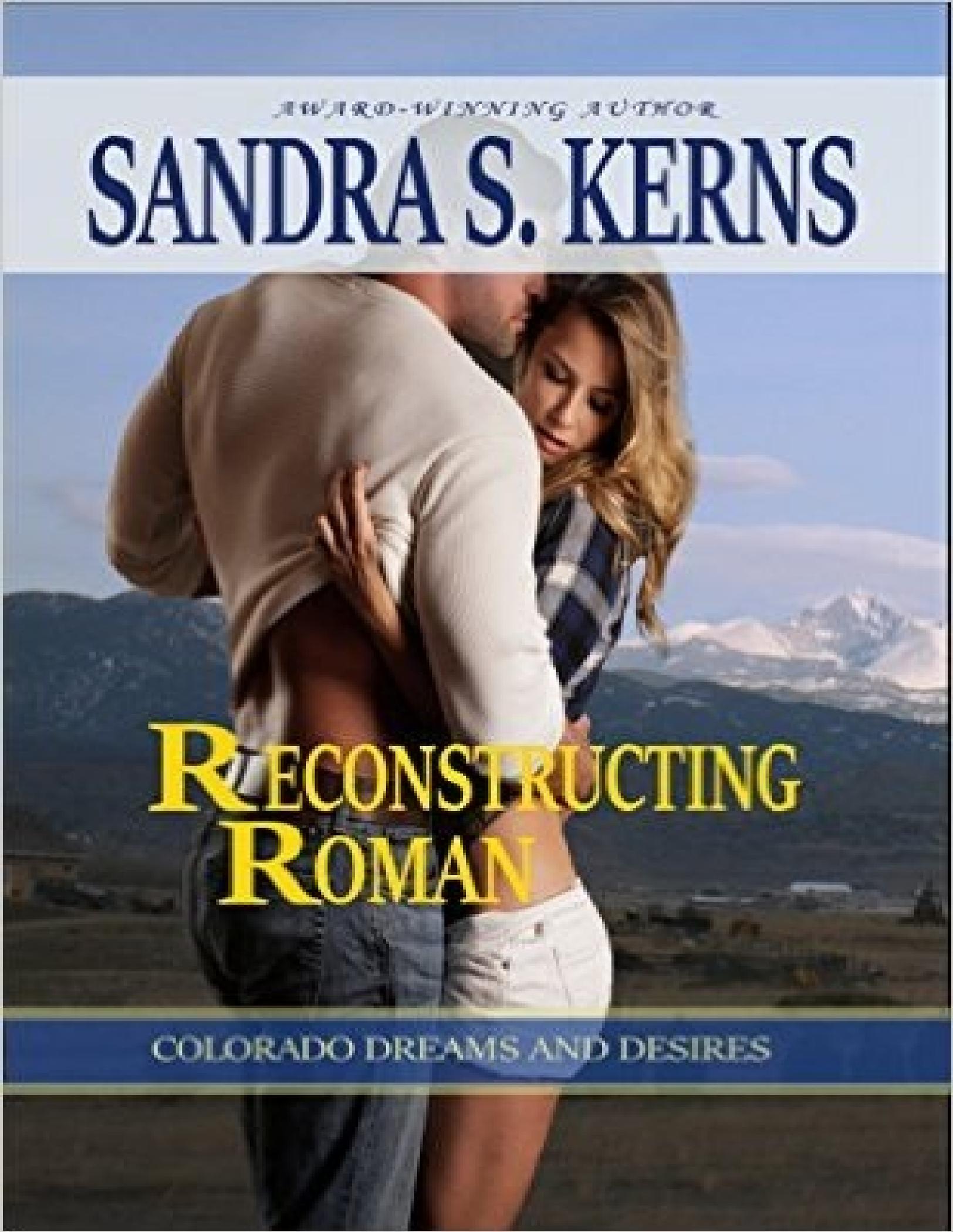


AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

SANDRA S. KERNS

A romantic couple embracing in a mountain landscape. The man is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt and white shorts. They are standing in front of a backdrop of snow-capped mountains under a clear blue sky.

**RECONSTRUCTING
ROMAN**

COLORADO DREAMS AND DESIRES

Chapter One

The Beecher place looked the same when he'd driven by on his way to the Bury Patch this morning as it had every other time since he'd returned to Beechbrook. Deserted. Abandoned. Lonely.

Now, standing in the cemetery with his brother under an umbrella, Roman half listened to the preacher, and looked toward the old farmhouse with a different perspective. The perspective of--

“We can take comfort in the fact that Sarah Smirnosky is at peace now.”

Roman's eyebrow rose. Peace? He tried to imagine his mother being at peace with having her throat slit. Or with the fear that whoever killed her would soon kill her beloved bastard of a husband. The thought pulled his gaze to the far side of the cemetery. That's where he'd buried their father earlier before picking Adam up for their mother's funeral. He'd known Adam didn't want anything to do with their father's burial. He'd gone as far as saying he didn't care if they threw Silas in a dumpster. While Roman agreed with the idea, he knew the authorities would never allow it so he'd arranged to take care of the burial himself.

Just thinking about the bastard sent his blood pressure skyrocketing. Roman admitted to himself that there were people he didn't care for. Some that he disliked, detested, and even some he abhorred. There was only one for whom he reserved the strongest emotion he knew, hate. That would be for the man who had taught him how to hate, Silas Smirnosky, his father. When the umbrella started to shake with his building anger, Roman forced his attention back to the grave he stood beside now.

His mother's.

Staring at the small coffin, he tried to summon the grief he should feel. Pity was as close as he could come. His gaze strayed to the two older graves beyond hers. The Beecher's, now there were two people he had grieved over. That pulled his gaze back across the plains to their property again.

When they'd driven to the cemetery for this funeral, he'd seen Kaia Beecher's SUV and a trailer in the driveway. There'd also been a dull light in the window. The house looked much happier with the light on. He remembered the house always filled with love and laughter, like its owners had been. The Beecher's were good people. They didn't deserve . . .

He forced himself not to curse out loud. He couldn't believe he hadn't put it together. The Beecher's had been killed exactly the same way as his parents. The murders may be almost twenty years apart, but otherwise the circumstances were the same.

Movement to his left pulled his attention to his brother. Adam stood with his head bowed. Roman's realization about the similarities between the murders told him what Adam had seen when he found their mother's body. *The exact same thing I saw at the Beecher's' house.*

Wrapping his arm around his brother's shoulders, he hugged him. What else could he do? He might not feel grief himself, but he loved his brother, and Adam was grieving. Adam was the only reason he was here. His brother was hurting. The emotions caused by that were too many and too strong for Roman to name.

"And so we dedicate Sarah Smirnosky to you, Lord. Amen," the preacher said and closed his bible.

"She's not going to like it. It'll be cold and damp," Adam whispered to Roman as the coffin was lowered into the hole.

Roman hugged him tighter.

"I put in that old afghan she liked before they closed the casket. She'll be okay." Okay? She was dead. An afghan wouldn't change that, but the nod and whispered thanks he got from Adam made Roman glad he'd followed through on the silly notion.

They both stepped forward and tossed daisies into the grave. *Mom loved daisies.* The memory caught him off guard. He hadn't thought about what his mother liked in years. As a rule, he avoided thinking about his parents at all. Doing so only brought him pain. Putting a stop to the self-pity, he watched the preacher step up to them. Once the preacher shook their hands and mumbled the appropriate words of sympathy, he rushed from the cemetery. Roman wondered why he'd pontificated so long if he didn't want to be here. Then again, who did want to be in a cemetery?

The rhetorical question pulled him back to the past. Some of the best times of his childhood had been here in the Bury Patch with his mother. They would come here and sit under the old tree and she would tell him stories about the people buried here. Having lived in Beechbrook all her life, she knew all the families and their histories. He'd loved listening to her tell him about all the hard-working people buried here. Yeah, he enjoyed her stories. They were a welcome respite from the pain of reality. His gaze again found his father's grave.

Pain, that was his father's area of expertise. Shaking off the memories, he returned his focus to the present.

The men he'd paid to take care of the burial started shoveling dirt on top of the casket. Adam raised his hand as if to tell them to stop, but Roman turned him away. He guided his brother down the path toward where he'd

parked and helped him climb into the truck. Shutting the door, he walked around to the driver's side, and closed the umbrella before climbing in the cab. Soaked after just a moment in the rain, he slicked his hair back then glanced at Adam.

His brother stared out the window toward the cemetery, his body shivering. Even though he knew that the chill in Adam's body had nothing to do with the temperature, Roman flipped the heater to full. Heat poured out of the vents. Heat wouldn't touch the cold in his brother's bones caused by the fear and undeserved guilt. No, that chill would only end when Roman proved to him that his presence at the house wouldn't have changed the outcome.

Okay, it would have changed it, but only for the worse. If Adam had been at the house that night, he would have died too. Roman shivered with the thought.

Driving toward his family's farm, he drove past the Beecher's again. He couldn't imagine why anyone would want to stay at that house knowing what had transpired there, but he was glad. It was as if the house itself knew that changes were coming. He thought the house looked happy. Dragging his hand over his jaw, he shook his head at the odd thought. It was a building not a living being. Then again, since he restored historical houses for a living, he knew how alive they could feel.

He started to say something about the Beecher farm to Adam, but glancing at him stopped the words before they formed. Houses filled with love were not going to mean anything to his brother right now. Neither one of them knew much about such things anyway.

"I think Miss Hattie brought over some of her potato soup this morning. That'll warm you up," he said, reaching over and squeezing Adam's shoulder.

Adam didn't respond. He continued to stare at the rain outside the passenger window. Roman knew that just as the warmth from the heater hadn't helped thaw Adam, it was going to take more than soup. Death not only chilled the person buried in the coffin, but those left behind as well. It wound through those left behind like a bone-chilling cancer. For Adam it was worse than most.

Not only had he found their mother's body, he'd fought with their father the night before. It was the first and last physical altercation between the two men.

Silas Smirnosky preferred psychological abuse for his wife and youngest son. He had always reserved his fists for Roman, the cause of all his problems. The mistake. The unwanted child. Roman only remembered meeting his grandfather on his mother's side a few times. It had been obvious

Silas was afraid of him. So afraid he never hit her. Mom was afraid of both of them and did what she was told. She never questioned anything either one of them said or did and her reward, on occasion, was Silas treating her well for a spell. It was during one of those times she'd conceived Adam. Silas had walked around as if he couldn't be happier. That was when Roman had understood that Adam was planned, he wasn't.

It had hurt at first, but then Roman realized it wasn't Adam's fault. Then, when his brother was born, he was too damned cute. There was no way Roman could blame him for their father's twisted mind. As Adam grew, it was obvious Silas treated them differently. It wasn't that he treated Adam better, though he never hit him, but he was raising him to be obedient. Except that he couldn't break the bond between the brothers, he'd been successful. That was why Roman had felt it was safe to leave. Silas had never raised a hand to their mother or Adam.

Until the night before they died.

For some reason, that night he had hit their mother. When Adam found out, he had gone straight to the bar, called their father out, and made the biggest mistake of his life. He hit Silas.

Roman's molars ground against each other hard, sending pain through his jaw.

From the accounts the sheriff and Miss Hattie had given him, Silas had made up for all the years of not hitting Adam. Like Roman before him, Adam managed to make his way to Miss Hattie's house rather than go to the hospital. The old woman was well versed in tending battered bodies, though this time she took Adam to the clinic. Adam had spent the night there. Now he believed that if he had been home instead, he could have stopped the murders. Roman told him it wouldn't have mattered. The only difference would be there would be three new graves instead of two.

He scrubbed a hand over his face again. Hell, he didn't even want to think about that. His brother was the only family that had ever believed in him. Besides, if anyone were to blame it would be him. If he had killed the bastard sixteen years ago, whatever their father had gotten himself tangled up in now wouldn't have happened. Adam and mom would be fine, and all would be well.

But it wasn't.

Hiding the anger that failure brought had sweat breaking out on Roman's forehead. He glanced over at Adam, glad to find him still staring out the window. Upsetting him more wouldn't help anything. What he needed to concentrate on was taking care of the farm, the financial mess their father left behind, and finding out who killed them. He sure as hell wasn't leaving it

up to the sheriff. The law had never done anything for a Smirnosky. Roman didn't expect that to change any time soon.