



Tracker's Sin (Hell's Eight)

By Sarah McCarty

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He must rescue kidnapped heiress Ari Blake and deliver her safely to the Hell's Eight compound—by any means necessary. Turns out that includes marrying her, if he means to escort her and her infant daughter across the Texas territory. Tracker hadn't bargained on a wife—especially such a fair, blue-eyed beauty. But the pleasures of the marriage bed more than make up for the surprise.

Tracker's well-muscled body and dark, dangerous eyes are far more exciting than any of Ari's former debutante dreams. In the light of day, though, his deep scars and brooding intensity terrify her. But with the frontier against them and mercenary bandits at their heels, her fearsome husband may be the only protection she's got.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Before becoming a full-time writer, Sarah McCarty traveled extensively. She would bring a pencil and paper with her to sketch out her stories and, in the process, discovered the joy of writing. Today, Sarah is the New York Times bestselling author of more than a dozen novels, including the award-winning Hell's Eight series, and is best known for her historical and paranormal romance novels. You can contact Sarah through her website at www.SarahMcCarty.net.

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April 5, 1858

Dear Ari,

I don't know how to start this letter, except to say thank God you're alive.

So much has happened in the last year. Not all of it good, but some of it so special, there aren't words to describe it. I'm married. Happily so, to a man of whom Papa would never have approved. He doesn't have money, doesn't have social position, and doesn't care a fig about mine, but he is everything I never dreamed big enough to desire when we used to sit under the apple tree imagining the perfect husband. A heart that knows no limits, a sense of honor that can't be compromised, and a love for me so rich, I'll never be poor. He's Hell's Eight, and if you're still living in the Texas territory when this letter finds you, you know what that means. If not, you're in for a treat. The men of Hell's Eight are a breed apart. A standard on which to build legends, for all they'll scoff at you if you tell them so.

My husband's name is Caine Allen, and he's the one insisting I write this letter. He believes in family and in my intuition, and though everyone says you're dead, he says my gut feeling is good enough for him, and he's promised finding you will be Hell's Eight's number one priority. He can be high-handed at times, but in the best ways.

I'm sorry I can't introduce you to the man handing you this letter, but you see, I've made seven copies and entrusted them to seven different men: Tucker, Sam, Tracker, Shadow, Luke, Caden and Ace. Like my husband, they're Hell's Eight and I'm asking you to put yourself in their care because each one of them has made a promise to me, one they've sworn to uphold.

They've promised to bring you home, Ari. Home to Hell's Eight, where there's no past, no recriminations, no judgment, just peace and a place where you can breathe easily. After what we've been through, I know it sounds like a preacher's description of heaven, elusive and unreal. But I promise you there is a way out of hell and if you haven't already found it, I'll help you.

Trust no one but them, Ari, because Father's solicitor, Harold Amboy, is the one who arranged for us to be ambushed initially, and he has men hunting for you, too. He intends to control Father's money through one of us. But you can trust any of these men. Absolutely and completely, with everything you hold dear.

I'm crying as I write this. I can't imagine what you've been through. I can't forget how we parted. My nightmares, which must have been your reality. The sense of helplessness as I stare at the night sky, wondering if you can see the same stars, wondering if you're healthy, happy, and most of all safe.

Do you remember the game we used to play as children when things didn't go our way? How we'd find a patch of daisies dappled in sunlight, link our hands in our special way and then just spin until we didn't care about anything else? I so want to see you again, Ari, find a patch of daisies, grab hands and spin until laughter takes over and all the bad falls away. Though it's irrational, because I have no idea how long it will take the men to find you—days, months, years—I have to say this.

Hurry home, Ari. I've planted a patch of daisies and it's waiting.

"So you're going after her?"

Tracker nodded in response to his twin brother's question, then yanked the square knot tight on the rawhide, securing his bedroll to the back of the saddle. Desi's letter to Ari rustled in his pocket, a subtle prod.

Tin rattled against tin as Shadow stuffed his plate and cup into his saddlebags. "We've got a better lead," he said, pointing out the obvious for the second time since they'd set up camp the night before. "The Saransens down Cavato way actually have a blond woman confirmed, living in town."

Tracker looked at Shadow. It was like gazing in the mirror. His twin had the same height, same broad shoulders, the same sharp planes to his face that lent a cruel edge to his expression. The latter came from their father. The only softness in his face was that full mouth, a gift from their Mexican mother. The same deep brown eyes with the cynical edge that came from knowing everything had a price.

Tracker and Shadow had learned young how to blend into the world around them so they'd be invisible to the "marks" their father wanted them to rob. A pity they'd never been able to hide from him. Tracker jerked the knot again, remembering the spew of bile that had rained down in insults and beatings if their father's standards weren't met.

As the older brother by twenty minutes, he'd tried his whole life to protect Shadow from the harshness of their world. He hadn't been successful. Shadow had suffered at the hands of their father. He'd suffered at the hands of the Mexican army that had wiped out their town when they were just boys. He'd suffered in the days after the massacre as he and the seven other orphaned boys had almost starved to death, searching for a place to belong. In the end, they'd made their home together, found acceptance in each other. And in the years since, those eight boys had grown into the most feared men of the Texas plains. Tracker and Shadow had family in Hell's Eight, but any respect they garnered outside the confines of Hell's Eight land they'd earned with their blood. In this country, the only respect a man held was that which he took. And he and Shadow had taken more than their fair share. "Deep thoughts, brother?"

Tracker shook off the melancholy and smiled as he slid his rifle into the scabbard. "I was thinking that Caine would be pleased with where Hell's Eight has landed."

Caine was the leader of the group that those eight starving boys had become. He'd taken them from outlaws to lawmen, and Caine's wife was the reason Tracker was on the hunt now.

"He always said we'd get strong first and then we'd get even, and damned if he didn't make that come true."

"Hard to believe we're now the ones people call on when they have trouble." Tracker still wasn't comfortable with that. He'd rather stay in the background with no ties, no expectations, handling what needed to be handled calmly and efficiently, without any notoriety.

Shadow chuckled and shook his head. "Yeah, especially since we were so good at being trouble."

They had been that. Tracker had never felt so free as in those early years when they'd ridden outside the law, taking justice into their own hands, slipping in and out of the shadows, doing what needed to be done with an efficiency that would have pleased his father. But things had a way of changing, and now Hell's Eight was the law, bound somewhat by the rules of society. He grimaced. Hell, they'd gotten so damn respectable that it chafed. The bounty they'd just settled being a case in point.

He pictured again the smarmy smirk of John Kettle as he stood before the judge, hearing his not guilty verdict. The man was as guilty as sin. Tracker and Shadow had buried the bodies of the woman and child he'd killed, before they'd tracked him down. In the old days they would have just killed the son of a bitch in a quick dispensation of justice. Instead, they'd followed the law and brought him to the county seat. But while the woman and little girl were still dead, their killer was walking free, because justice had caved beneath the money and influence of John Kettle's family.

Tracker spat. "Things are changing, brother."

Shadow grunted, knowing exactly what he was talking about. "We should have just gut shot the bastard."

"Next time we will." He wasn't a man naturally given to playing by the rules, especially when they weren't working. Things might be changing, but he wasn't. He liked things clean and neat, with no messy loose ends. John Kettle was a loose end, and sooner or later Tracker would have to clean it up. The bastard killed for the pleasure it gave him. That kind of sickness inside a man only got worse, not better. He would kill again. And again. And again. Until someone stopped him.

"Amen," Shadow muttered.

A warm breeze blew up, lifting Tracker's long hair off his neck in a subtle warning. Goose bumps rose along his skin. His senses sharpened and that inner voice that so often saved his ass issued an alert. He traced the breeze's path backward. South. The sense of inevitability that had been haunting him since the day he'd met Caine's wife, Desi, increased. The woman who might be Ari was south. So was his destiny. He gripped the stock of the rifle, letting the familiar feel of the sun-warmed wood anchor him. The letter rustled. Damn, he wasn't sure he was that eager to meet what was coming.

It was too much to hope Shadow hadn't sensed the tension flowing through him. "What is it?"

Tracker didn't know what to make of the inner prodding, the overwhelming sense of destiny crashing in on him. "A feeling."

Shadow swore. Their whole lives they'd had a strange connection, strange feelings. What happened to one often was felt by the other. It had kept them alive more than once. Shadow finished tying on his saddlebags. "I'm going with you."

Tracker didn't want his twin anywhere near the disaster that had to be his destiny.

"No."

Glancing from beneath the wide brim of his black hat, Shadow said, "You may be twenty minutes older, but you don't tell me what to do."

The hell he didn't. "We made Desi a promise to find her sister."

"Yeah, so? We'll give the Cavato lead to someone else."

"Who would you suggest? Cavato is in Indian territory. It would be suicide for most men to get within ten miles of there."

"I'd say Zacharias and his men, if he weren't still stove up from that run-in with Comanches."

"They could do it."

Zacharias and his vaqueros were from Sam and Bella's ranch. Tougher men had never been bred, unless it was Hell's Eight themselves. Hells' Eight owed them a debt that could never be repaid. Zach and his men had volunteered to sacrifice themselves in a near-suicide mission, standing against Comanches to buy Tucker the time he needed to get his pregnant wife to safety. Everyone thought they'd been killed. It'd been quite a shock to have them ride up, bloody and near death, at their own funeral.

"I'll be glad when Sam's connections get us what we need to put an end to the attempts on Desi's life."

Tracker nodded. "And Ari's."

"Yeah. Amazing what men will do for money."

And Ari and Desi were worth a lot of money to someone back east. From what Sam and the rest of them had deduced, the whole family had been slated to be murdered on their trip west, but the killers had gotten greedy when they'd seen the girls. Instead of killing them, the attackers had sold them to *Comanche-ros*. Both girls had suffered horribly. Desi's suffering had ended when Caine had found her standing all but naked in a creek, fighting four men with that hellion spirit. But Ari's suffering probably continued.

No one knew if Ari had survived, but Desi's gut said she had, and that was enough for Hell's Eight. They each carried a letter that contained a promise to bring Ari home to her sister. And no member of Hell's Eight ever went back on a promise. None of the men really expected to find Ari breathing, except maybe Tracker. Perhaps it was because he was a twin himself and understood that strange connection between close siblings that surpassed logic. Or maybe, he admitted only to himself, it was because of something else, something deeper. But he knew Ari was alive, and he knew he would find her. The only thing in question was whether he would find her in time. Inside him a clock ticked, and lately the tick was becoming louder, as if time was running out.

He glanced south again. Ari was waiting and she needed him. He wouldn't listen to anything inside that said more than that. But he still didn't want Shadow anywhere around what his gut said was going to be his end.

"We can't afford to wait for Luke, Caden and Ace to hit the rendezvous points and pick up their messages. If the woman in Cavato is Ari, you need to get there before she's sold or stolen again."

"Yeah." Shadow's face set in that blank way that said he was accepting what he couldn't change. "And if she's not Ari?"

Tracker patted Buster's flank. "I'll do what I think best."

"Tia said if we bring home another mouth to feed who can't cook, we're not getting another biscuit for the rest of our lives."

Tracker grunted. "Then we teach them to cook on the way to Hell's Eight."

Shadow snorted and picked up his horse's reins from where they dangled to the ground. "Says the man who's always ducking the women trailing behind him."

Tracker looped the reins of his roan around the horn of his saddle. Buster lost a bit of his lazy slump. There was nothing the horse loved more than covering ground, and since he had a stride as smooth as butter, there was nothing Tracker loved more than riding him. "I don't want their gratitude."

It made him uncomfortable, made him feel like a liar. He wasn't a hero. There just wasn't much else a man could do when a woman looked at him with hope fading from her eyes as she realized he was there to save someone else, not just give her something on which to hang that hope. A ride to a safe place. A chance to start over. Not all took it, but some did. And those who did he brought home to Hell's Eight. From there they did what they wanted. Went home to family, went off to new beginnings or stayed under the group's protection. Something Shadow knew, because he'd brought just as many women to Hell's Eight as Tracker had. The difference was that the women didn't imagine themselves in love with Shadow. Tracker wished he knew the secret of keeping them at arm's length. He was getting damn tired of being the butt of jokes.

Leather creaked as Shadow swung up into the saddle. "You might as well enjoy it, since you can't escape it."

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