



Caine's Reckoning (Hell's Eight)

By Sarah McCarty

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Caine Allen is definitely not the marrying kind. But when he rescues a kidnapped woman and returns her to town, his honor and his desire for Desi won't allow him to let her go.

From the moment he beds Desi, Caine knows turmoil will follow. Desi might have the face of a temptress, but she also has a will of iron. And while she needs his protection, she's determined that no man will control her again. They establish an uneasy bond, but it isn't enough for Caine. All he wants is to keep her in his bed. But with a bounty still on her head, first he must keep her alive.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Promises Prevail* is an outstanding western historical romance! From the moment readers meet Jenna and Clint, they will be enthralled in their love story. This book is a guaranteed page-turner." -- *The Romance Studio*

"Ms. McCarty has become a must read author." -- *Fallen Angels Reviews*

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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1858: Texas Territory

He hated the sound of a woman's scream. Caine pulled Chaser up short. The black Appa-loosa's hoofbeats ended in cadence with Tracker's and Sam's horses. After fifteen years together, there was no guesswork to the men's moves. They were a team.

The high-pitched scream came again, cutting through the cold morning air, hovering a desperate moment on the heavy mist before dropping off with eerie abruptness.

Tracker took the blade of grass he'd been chewing from between his teeth. "Looks like we've found them."

"Yup." Caine pulled his rifle from the scabbard, scouting the surrounding area. There weren't that many areas a man could hide here in the flatlands.

Sam tipped back his hat, his blue eyes glittering like cold ice. "About the only place that offers protection is that cluster of trees yonder."

Caine didn't need to hear the grim edge to the statement to know what that meant. If those were true Comancheros who'd stolen the women, they'd already been spotted. The women were as good as dead, and that scream had merely been a baited invitation to a trap. However, nothing in this whole kidnapping spoke of the snake-in-the-grass intelligence Comancheros were known for. Greed, yes. The women stolen had been the youngest and prettiest, but there was a certain lack of intelligence displayed in taking the sheriff's wife. Even if he had been out of town at the time. There were some things a smart man didn't do, and one of them was stealing a lawman's woman.

Tracker slid off his horse, stepped forward and squatted next to hoofprints in the mud. He flicked aside some

debris and touched the base of an indentation.

"Same notched shoe?" Caine asked.

"Yup." Beneath his hat, Tracker's long black hair blew back from his face as he followed the trajectory of the tracks to the cluster of trees, revealing the hard ridge of scar tissue puckering the dark skin of his cheek. A scar he'd earned at the age of fifteen when he'd extracted justice for his mother from the man who'd raped her. He pointed to the copse of trees halfway up the rise. "They're in there."

Another scream tore through the morning calm, this time rising and falling on a ruptured, barely recognizable "No!"

"Shit." Sam flipped the strap on his holster. "Stopping to fuck with a posse on their tail? I've a mind to complain to the padre. It's a waste of time sending us out to round up this bunch when any kid in knee pants could do the job."

Remnants of the scream echoed off the surrounding hills, raising the hairs on the back of Caine's neck. Right along with memories he'd rather have stayed buried. "Gotta admit that much stupidity fairly begs a man to put it out of its misery."

"That it does." Sam checked the cylinder of his pistol, the easy nonchalance of his attitude belied by the grim smile lifting the corner of his lips. Nothing irritated Sam more than a stupid outlaw. "But seeing as they chose to bring their law-breaking to our land, I suppose it won't overwork us none to teach them a lesson."

The same tug of cold intent in Sam's smile flowed through Caine's blood, sharpening his senses, giving a home to the anger that had festered without satisfaction for the last fifteen years. They'd fought long and hard for a place to call their own, carved two thousand acres out of these canyons with their sweat and blood. This was their home, and the only law that existed in it was the one they enforced. And on Hell's Eight land, a body could do a lot of things, but hurt a woman and live wasn't one of them. "I don't suppose it will."

Sam dropped his revolver back into his holster. "I'll head 'round."

"You want the sentries, Tracker?" Caine asked, as Sam loped off, circling to keep the slight rise between him and their quarry.

Tracker stood and put his hand on the worn leather-wrapped hilt of his knife. "My pleasure."

Silhouetted against the morning mist, he looked every bit of his reputation—a big, mean nightmare come to life. His dark gaze fixed on the copse of trees, his focus already on the battle to come. If Tracker ever allowed one of the sentries to see his expression, the implacable intent there, the man would piss his pants. Too bad Tracker never let them see his face. Caine levered a bullet into the chamber of his rifle with the snap of his wrist. He'd pay money to see that. "Then I guess that leaves the how-de-do's up to me."

The barest hint of a smile touched Tracker's lips. "Enjoy yourself."

Caine crept on his belly to the edge of the low ridge overhanging the small clearing. Tipping back his hat, he looked directly below to the small group in the hollowed-out bank in the curve of the stream. Stupid did not begin to describe this bunch.

One of the five men they were tracking held a gun loosely on three women who cowered in terror against the earthen bank. Three more outlaws were engrossed in trying to catch a blond-haired hellion knee-deep in the rushing stream, pitching curses and stones at their heads with assorted degrees of accuracy. If she'd once worn a dress, it was long gone. Her bloomers and camisole were plastered to her compact body, her small breasts and mound clearly delineated by the transparent material. The provocative display no doubt contributed to the idiocy of the men, one of whom chose that moment to rush the woman. She jerked to the side, her long hair obscuring her expression as he grabbed her arm and pulled. Instead of fighting, she went with him, planting her feet when he stumbled on the uneven stream bed, bringing her knee up hard enough to feed the guy his balls for breakfast. She should have run, but she was a fighter and clearly had a fighter's instinct to finish the job. As the guy sank to the ground, hands clamped over his balls, she kicked out again, catching him on the chin. He went over like a felled ox, water splashing high. Out cold.

Caine raised an eyebrow as she turned on the other two, feet braced, daring them to come after her. A smile tugged past his fury. Hell, if they delayed a bit, the little spitfire might just take care of this mess for them. A barely perceptible thud to his left deepened his smile. But it wouldn't be necessary. Tracker was nothing if not efficient and that thud was the first sentry. One down.

Two more to go. Caine inched closer as the outlaws on the edge of the stream shifted position. The bigger of the two said something to the other, his heavy beard obscuring the shape of the words. In response, the smaller man pulled off his hat, revealing a thin face scraggled with beard. He slapped the hat against his thigh. Whatever the suggestion had been, the smaller man wasn't cozying up to it.

"Just rush her for Christ sake," the redhead guarding the other women shouted impatiently, punctuating his point with a wave of his rifle that had the women he was guarding screaming and covering their heads with their hands.

"If you want her rushed, Red, do it yourself," Scraggle Beard hollered back. "I like my balls right where they are."

"Do I have to do everything myself?" Red aimed his revolver at the two men. They went absolutely still. With a flick of the muzzle, he ordered, "Get out of the way."

The two men stepped aside, relief seeping into the set of their shoulders as Red centered the muzzle on the blond woman. "Get out of the stream."

The blonde's response to that flat order was a flip of her head that had her hair whipping back over her shoulder, revealing a delicately shaped face devoid of color but full of determination.

She didn't move a foot, nor say a word, but if there was ever a combination of gestures that said *go to hell*, it was the lift of that small, pointed chin and the narrowing of those big eyes.

Over the rushing of the stream, Caine heard the faint click of the gun hammer locking into place. *Shit.*

"Now."

Caine had never seen a more stupidly brave woman.

Instead of obeying, she squared her shoulders. Courage was one thing but she was just about begging the man to pull the trigger, and for that she needed her cute little ass paddled. Caine notched the barrel of his

rifle between two stones and took aim as Red straightened his arm.

The blonde narrowed her eyes and stretched her defiance out to the last possible second before, with another toss of that wet mane, she sloshed out of the stream. Water dripped in a small river as she stomped up the bank. She came to a stop three steps from Red, chin still high, shaking like she had the ague. Goddamn, if she didn't drop with pneumonia before the day was out, they would all be lucky.

"See, boys, nothing to be afraid of," Red sneered, releasing the hammer and lowering the revolver to his side. "Just a pretty little whore displaying her goodies for our pleasure."

The "boys" converged on the woman, grabbing her arms. If looks could kill, Red would be dead and the "boys" not far behind. The bearded man grabbed the woman's hair, yanking her around as he ripped the chemise from her body. Her screech echoed around the clearing. With the speed of a rattler, she sank her teeth into his hand, hard enough that his holler followed hers. Scraggle Beard jerked her back. She didn't let go, just stretched out between the two men, hanging like a crazed coon, anchored by her teeth and the grip on her arm.

"Fucking shit! Stop yanking on her before she bites my thumb clear off!"

Scraggle Beard froze. The bearded man brought his hamlike fist down on the woman's back. Her knees buckled, but she held on. No matter how the man shook his hand, yanked and threatened, she didn't turn him loose. Son of a bitch, she was something.

Caine adjusted his aim. "That's right, hellcat. Keep them busy just a little bit more, just until Tracker gets those sentries." He tightened his finger on the trigger. "Just a little bit more, and I'll settle this for you once and for all."

As if she heard, the woman clung to the outlaw, flopping where he shook her, getting a bit of her own back the only way she could, clearly stuck on her course of action with no real way out. If she let go she'd be helpless, if she held on, she was an easy target for his fist. The man brought his fist up a second time. Caine sighted the gun. That was one blow that wasn't going to land.

Tracker's signal trilled through the clearing, sharp and sweet. Followed immediately by another. Caine fired in rapid succession. Simultaneously, three shots shattered the rain of curses streaming into the clearing, followed quickly by a fourth. The men dropped, the blond woman with them. Caine leapt over the ledge and slid down the muddy slope, sending loose rocks tumbling before him. He reached her side in a few rapid strides. No way had he hit her. He'd placed his bullets precisely where he'd wanted them. So had Sam and Tracker. He'd lay money on it. All of the Hell's Eight were known for their accuracy. That fifth shot had him worried, though. That shot hadn't come from any of their guns.

The closer he got, the smaller the woman got. Fine bones, fine build. He stepped over the outlaw at her side, the screams and cries of the other three women no more than the buzz of insects. Blood splattered on what he could see of the little blonde's arms, but he didn't think it was hers. The impression of fragility increased as he cupped her shoulders through the wet mass of hair. Shit, there wasn't anything to her beyond grit and determination. And temper, he decided as he tugged up and she snarled. She was still biting the man. "You can turn him loose now, ma'am."

There was a pause and the tension under his hand eased. He pulled. She sat back, wiped at her mouth with both hands before huddling into a ball, looking for all the world like she'd start plastering herself with mud to

cover up if he didn't present an alternative fast. Then she looked up at him and sucker-punched him with the eloquence of those big eyes. Everything she felt inside, everything left out of her remarkably composed expression, whirled in the deep blue depths—shame, anger, hope and fear.

"Who are you?" she asked, through the chattering of her teeth.

"Caine Allen, Texas Ranger." He'd tip his hat if he had a free hand. Though she was all but naked and covered in blood, she had an air about her that reminded a man of his manners. The introduction didn't ease any of the turbulence he read in her eyes.

"Father Gerard asked me to come fetch you home," he added, shrugging out of his wool-lined leather duster and wrapping it around her, drawing her into his body heat. She fit against him nicely.

"Is he dead?"

It was hard to acquaint the quavery whisper with the woman who'd faced down three grown men with nothing more than her temper and teeth. He took in the fallen man's blank stare, the hole dead-center between his eyes and the blood pooling beneath his head. "If not, he's doing a fair imitation."

"Oh."

If he hadn't been studying the blue tinge under her skin, he would have missed the subtle tremble that ran through her and just mistaken it for another of the cold chills shaking her from head to toe. Winter was wrapping up, but spring had yet to put in an appearance and the late March wind was cold. He helped her up and forward, moving her away from the blood toward the other women. She'd fought like hell, but as soon as reaction set in, she'd be wanting the company of her own sex.

To their right, there was a series of splashes. He looked up. Tracker stood over the man in the stream.

"That the last of them?"

"Yup." Tracker bent and grabbed the man's arms, hauling the body out of the water.

The cold damp of the woman's hair soaked through his shirt as she turned her head to stare at the gruesome sight. Another almost imperceptible shiver racked her frame. Caine turned his body, shielding her from the horror.

Her "Good riddance" caught him by surprise. He tipped her chin up, checking her expression. Her face was tight with strain, her pale lips drawn to a narrow, bloodless line, but she was still with him. "It is that, ma'am."

Users Review

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The knowledge that you get from Caine's Reckoning (Hell's Eight) is a more deep you rooting the information that hide inside the words the more you get serious about reading it. It doesn't mean that this

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