



Shadow's Stand (Hell's Eight Book 5)

By Sarah McCarty

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Shadow Ochoa is lying low in the western Kansas Territory, waiting for his fellow Texas Rangers—the Hell's Eight brotherhood—to clear his name. That is, until he's unjustly strung up for horse thieving...and pretty Fei Yen intervenes. Invoking a seldom-used law, the exotic lady prospector claims Shadow as her husband and rides off with the bridegroom shackled to her buckboard.

Savvy, fearless Fei is single-mindedly devoted to her hidden claim and all it promises: wealth, security and freedom. A husband is just a necessary inconvenience and a name on paper to hold the claim she cannot.

Shadow isn't a man to take orders from anyone, especially from lovely Fei—except that the daily friction between them ignites into nightly blazes of all-consuming passion. Soon Shadow is dreaming a little himself: of the life they could have if only Fei could see past the lure of independence. If only bounty hunters weren't closing in on him. If only he's left standing when the impending showdown has ended....

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Editorial Review

Review

"Intense, edgy and passionate, this is old-school historical romance at its finest."

-RT Book Reviews

"Caine's Reckoning is a can't-put-it-down adventure story...This exceptional first-in-series book has this reader eagerly anticipating future stories. A hands-down winning tale that is not to be missed."

-Named Best Historical Romance by Romance Reviews Today

"Sarah McCarty leaves no doubt that dangerous men can be potent aphrodisiacs." -Romance Junkies

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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July 1859, West Kansas Territory

It had to be done. Fei Yen Tseng stood in the doorway and stared through the gloom at her father sitting at the table, his head down, his back bent by years of manual labor. His long queue draped listlessly over his shoulder, the end dangling in his untouched bowl of porridge. The silk overcoat he insisted on wearing morning, noon and night was stained and torn. It was hard to believe he was once the commanding head of the family. Always well dressed. Always scheming. In charge of a hidden empire he'd built out of nothing. The man who'd taught her so much, good and bad. He looked up then and, for a moment, she saw the man Jian Tseng used to be before the blankness came over his eyes and the scowl settled between his brows. A scowl that would have sent everyone running just two years before.

"You! What do you do there in the doorway?" he rapped out in Chinese. The force of the words couldn't cover the fear behind the question. But the shoe was on the other foot, as the Americans said. Now, it was he who lived in fear. But the fear was not contained in this room.

"Nothing. I am just leaving," Fei Yen whispered, slowly pushing closed the heavy door that last inch before dropping the wooden bar across it. So many things needed to be done. So many wrongs needed to be righted. She was but a female, it was not her place to make decisions or take action. In China, she never would have. But she was no longer in China and there was no large family to take over, to tie up loose ends left by her father's illness. It was just her and the dragon that stalked her luck. She could feel the fire of its breath on the back of her neck; feel the weight of its claws on her shoulders. It wanted her to fail. Expected her to fail. She was not even a son. Just a worthless girl child of mixed ancestry. Or so it thought.

Beyond the door, she heard her father begin his ritual of pacing and prayer. Soon it would switch to ranting and threats. Nighttime was always the worst. She touched the bar. Rough slivers bit at her fingertip. The shouts were heavily muffled by the thick dirt walls of the cellar and the solid planks of the wooden door, but the anger and sense of injustice swelled through the barrier and wrapped around her, joining the dragon on her back. Once, she'd been the prisoner. Now, she was the guard. Life went in circles. The debts her father had gathered in his life were now hers to pay. His path was now hers.

Turning, she climbed the ladder out of the storm cellar to the barn floor. Lowering the trapdoor carefully, she pushed dirt back around it to disguise the opening and sprinkled hay across the surface. No one could discover this secret. Discovery meant the end of everything. The dragon's paw got heavier.

Their old horse, Grandfather, nickered a greeting. Fei's pockets were empty. She had no carrots for him, so she gave him a pat and a promise. "Later."

She sighed. She was always saying later. Always making promises. Always doing the impossible, hoping to make the dragon surrender, but it was the way of dragons to accept challenges and she was no closer to succeeding than she had been eight months ago when she'd started on this path. Eight months during which her ancestors frowned and her beliefs died.

But she was stronger than they thought. Stronger than even *she* thought, and this time she prayed to her American ancestors for help. They were brash and fearless, without centuries of culture to honor. So maybe this time help would come. The sun slanted through the open window in the loft. Squinting against the late-afternoon light, she tucked her hands into the wide sleeves of her flowing robe and hurried across the yard toward the house. She needed to change. Some things were better done in Western clothing, though it was heavy and cumbersome. Getting married was one of them.

For a moment, Fei Yen thought she'd arrived too late. Such shouting usually indicated the end of a hanging, not the beginning. Then the crowd of men parted and she could see what caused the excitement. The thief was fighting, and well, despite the fact that his hands were tied behind his back. Excitement flared. He even looked as though he was winning. With a speed that made her blink, the thief spun around and his moccasined foot caught the sheriff on his jaw. Blood and spit flew as the heavysset man stumbled to the side. His friends caught him, tossing him back into the fray with a laugh. And he went. The thief was ready, balanced on his toes, his dark eyes narrowed, watchful. Seeing all. Fei bit her lip. He didn't look as though he needed rescuing.

The men laughed with a force not warranted by the situation. They were drunk. Not surprising. Every time the residents of the railroad camp got together, they got drunk. And fought. And, sometimes, killed. The thief stood straight amidst the rabble, daring them to accept his challenge. He was big, much bigger than she'd anticipated, with broad shoulders that were barely contained by the torn cotton of his black shirt. The muscles in his thighs bulged against his broadcloth pants. Everything about the man shouted challenge, from his lean hips to his strong features, which appeared to be precision carved by a well-honed knife.

Dragon.

For a moment her resolve wavered. She had enough dragons on her back. She didn't need another one, but she definitely could use one guarding her claim. For herself, for her father, for her cousin, Lin. And unlike someone she could hire—assuming she could find someone of honor—this one would owe her the debt of his life. No small thing. And it would also be no small thing that his continued life would depend on her goodwill, for the law said if he did not please her he would be hung immediately.

The thief slammed his head back into the face of a man who'd grabbed his arms from behind and, as they stumbled, leveraged their grip to bring his legs up and wrap them around the neck of the man who held the noose. She had no doubt he would have snapped the man's neck with the same ease with which he'd kicked the sheriff if one of the crew, Damon, she thought his name was, hadn't chosen that moment to smash the butt of a pistol against the side of the thief's head. The thief slumped to the ground, his long hair falling across his face.

Maybe not so much a dragon.

"Hell, Damon, if you went and killed him, I'm going to fire a load of buckshot in your ass," the sheriff said, spitting out a brown stream of tobacco juice. "We haven't had a good hanging around here in a month."

Fei shuddered. There was never a good hanging in her opinion. Suffocating the life from a person was ugly and horrendous.

"That man's head is too thick to be dented by a pistol," Damon sneered. "Somebody get a bucket of water and wake him up."

Fei sat on the fringes, watching. Folding her hands sedately in front of her, she focused on calming her urge to run in and interfere. Frustrated, drunken men would not see a half American, half Chinese girl as someone to be respected. She stood very still, hoping her tan dress blended with the tall grass in the shadows. Not for the first time, she debated her decision. The law on the books was not necessarily one that would be respected, either, but there were very few men in the camp not under the sheriff's thumb. If word got out about her find, claim jumpers would come like ants swarming sugar. The new law making it illegal for a Chinese to own a claim tied her hands. There was too much at stake to lose her gold. Too much at stake for her to lose her life. She wasn't a foolish woman. She understood the risks, but she also understood her responsibilities. In her father's country this would never be required of her, but here she was a woman with no country and ancestors who straddled two worlds. Her mixed blood was either going to weaken her or strengthen her. Her mother had predicted the latter. She wanted to believe her mother. Her too-soft mother who'd often whispered foolishness, who had died when fever had swept the camp. Fei had been only eight, but time had not diluted the memory. It lived in her mind as clearly as if it were yesterday.

She had sat beside her mother's body that night long after she'd passed, watching for the rise of her chest, listening for the gasp that signaled the return of life. Praying for it. In the small hours after the moon had set, Fei had accepted reality and begun the process of lighting the candles for her ancestors. When her father had come into the tent, he'd looked at her mother's freshly washed body with tears in his eyes. Then he'd looked at her with disappointment. It was then, amidst death and despair, that she'd felt the first touch of the dragon. Maybe her father's disappointment was because, unlike her cousin, her features were more American than Chinese. Her skin was too white. Her eyes not so almond shaped. Her nose was too pointed and her face too long. Or maybe the disappointment was because she hadn't been able to keep her mother alive. She'd never known what she'd done to lose her father's love, but she'd done her best to be the dutiful daughter she'd promised her mother she would be.

After her mother's death, her father had taken her back to China. There, she'd taken care of her father's house and his business. Fei had taken care of her cousin, Lin. She'd done everything she could for as long as she could, but nothing she'd done had stopped the plummet of their lives. A few years ago, he had brought them back to America and his flagging business. Lin had stayed in San Francisco. This last visit was the first time Fei had seen her in three years.

Last week, when she'd come home and found her cousin gone, taken as payment on a debt her father owed, she'd done the one thing she had never thought she would. She'd revoked her father's heritage.

Water sloshed and splashed as it hit the man who lay unconscious, bringing her back to the present. They'd fetched the bucket.

"He's awake," Damon called.

The thief spat and sat up. He was more than awake.

He was furious. His glance collided with hers. His lips twisted in a sneer. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her stomach, as if the gesture could ward off the stranger's disgust. The thief stood, shaking his head. Water dripped down his face. His blue-black hair flared around his shoulders. With his eyes narrowed and his lips drawn back in a grim smile, he had the look of a lion about to pounce. The men guarding him took instinctive steps back before catching themselves.

Fei had no trouble understanding the reason. The thief had a personality as big as his size and he wielded intimidation well. This was not a man who would be easily controlled. He would not be easily intimidated, either. And that ranked high on her list of requirements. Gratitude and greed were powerful motivators. If she saved his life, hopefully that would motivate him to do her this favor. And it was not as if he would not have a reward. She stood and straightened her skirt, then pushed her way in just as the deputy put the noose around the thief's neck.

"Any last words, injun?"

With a smile cold enough to freeze water, he answered, "Yeah. You're a dead man."

Damon wasn't impressed. "I'm not the one with the noose around my neck."

The thief's smile held. "Not yet."

The smile sent shivers down Fei's back. Even the men with weapons looked uneasy.

"Get him up on the horse," the sheriff snapped.

Fei took another breath. It was now or never. "Wait."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mora Miller:

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