



Blood Trails (The Searchers)

By Sharon Sala

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In search of her past, Holly leaves both her home and Bud Tate, the handsome ranch foreman she's afraid to love, horrified by the knowledge that the blood of a depraved killer might run through her veins. Haunted, driven, she searches for The Hunter and hopes her mother was wrong.

But her search leads to a terrible truth no one could have imagined, and even Bud's determination to follow and protect the woman he loves may not be enough to save Holly from the terrors of a past become present.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Vivid, gripping...this thriller keeps the pages turning."

-Library Journal on *Torn Apart*

"Sala's characters are vivid and engaging."

-Publishers Weekly on *Cut Throat*

"Sharon Sala is not only a top romance novelist, she is an inspiration for people everywhere who wish to live their dreams."

-John St. Augustine, host, Power!Talk Radio WDBC-AM, Michigan

"Veteran romance writer Sala lives up to her reputation with this well-crafted thriller."

-Publishers Weekly on *Remember Me*

"[A] well-written, fast-paced ride."

-Publishers Weekly on *Nine Lives*

"Perfect entertainment for those looking for a suspense novel with emotional intensity."

-Publishers Weekly on *Out of the Dark*

About the Author

Sharon Sala is a native of Oklahoma and a member of Romance Writers of America. She is a NYT, USA Today, Publisher's Weekly, WaldenBooks mass market, Bestselling author of 85 plus books written as Sharon Sala and Dinah McCall. She's a 7 time RITA finalist, Janet Dailey Award winner, 5 time National Reader's Choice Award winner, 4 time Career Achievement Award from RT Magazine, 4 time winner of Colorado Romance Writers Award of Excellence.

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Missoula, Montana

The ranch house was quiet—too quiet. It should have been filled with energy and activity—voices, snippets of conversation and laughter, the scent of something good baking in the oven.

But Andrew Slade's death had been the beginning of the end of what had been. There was nothing to be done now but look toward what was—or, in the case of his three daughters, what *could* be. The revelation he'd dropped on them at the reading of his will had torn the family apart.

His oldest daughter, Holly, was the only one of them left at the ranch now, along with Robert Tate, Andrew's best friend and ranch foreman—and the love of Holly's life.

But Robert—Bud to his friends—didn't know about Holly's feelings, and she was so used to keeping them a secret that revealing them now in the midst of so much turmoil didn't seem possible.

Her sisters, Maria and Savannah, were already gone. They'd jumped into the search for answers to their pasts without hesitation, while Holly had lingered. She couldn't wrap her head around what she'd learned without getting sick to her stomach. Even now, when she should have been making travel plans, she was still at the Triple S—still wavering as to what she should do and replaying the video that had ripped their world apart when they'd gathered in the office of their lawyer, Cole-man Rice, and seen it for the first time.

She sat now within the quiet of the family den while a log burned and popped in the fireplace behind her, her gaze fixed on the television, and re-watched the video. As soon as it ended, she played it again. Andrew's image and voice were a source of comfort, but at the same time they fed her grief.

"Hello, my daughters. Obviously, if you 're seeing this, I have passed on. Know that, while I am sorry to be leaving you behind, my faith in God and the knowledge that I will be with my beloved Hannah again is, for me, a cause to rejoice. However, what I have to say to you is something I've dreaded your entire lives, and I'm ashamed to say I chose the easy way out and left it for you to hear after my passing."

Holly held her breath. This time she knew what was coming, but the words were still impossible to absorb.

"My darling daughters...you need to know that I am not really your father, Hannah was not really your mother, nor were any of you ever legally adopted."

Holly jumped when she felt a hand slide across her shoulder, then swallowed past the lump in her throat to keep from crying when she realized it was Bud. Somehow he'd come in and she hadn't even heard him.

"There is more. You are not sisters."

Holly hit Pause, then clasped Bud's hand as she turned around. "Did you need me?"

A dozen thoughts of what he might say slid through Bud's mind, but the one that mattered most was one he'd never said. Yes, he needed her: in his heart, in his life, in his bed...forever. "Not really, honey. I just came in to see if you were okay."

Holly's shoulders slumped. "Obviously I'm not, or I wouldn't still be wallowing in this."

Bud slid onto the couch beside her and took her hand.

"Let it play out and then we'll talk." Holly hit Play. Andrew's voice filled the silence between them.

"By now, I suspect your grief at my passing has turned to shock...even anger. I understand. But what you three need to understand is...I believed with every fiber of my being that, as I was following my calling as an evangelical preacher, God led me to each of you at a time when you needed me most. There are journals that I've left with Coleman, one for each of you. Everything I know about your past is in there, along with why your mothers put you in my care."

"Maria, you were the first one. You were born Mary Blake, in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Your mother had a hard life. She was, for lack of a better word, an escort at the time of her death. You were four years old when you witnessed her murder. As she lay dying, she begged me to take you and hide you. The details as to how it all

happened are in your journal. To my knowledge, her murder was never solved.

"Savannah, you are actually Sarah Stewart, from Miami, Florida, and the second child to be given to me. Your mother was dying of cancer and had come to my tent meetings to pray for healing. By then Maria had been with me for nearly six months. You were barely two. You and Maria hit it off immediately when your mother came to hear me preach, and she saw the bond between you two. On the last night of the revival, she came to me in a panic. She and your father were not married, but he had never denied you, and he played an important role in your life. According to her, he was also a member of a very rich, powerful local family, and he had informed them of his plans to marry her. The night she came to me, she was sobbing uncontrollably. Your father had been killed in a car accident early that morning, and already she had received a threat on your life. Aware that she had only weeks to live and no one else to whom she could turn, she begged me to take you and raise you with Maria. So I did. It was then that I began to understand I was being led down this path by a power greater than my own.

"Holly, you are my oldest, but you came to me last."

Holly started to cry. Bud let go of her hand and put his arm around her shoulders, holding her close as the video continued.

"You were born Harriet Mackey and were five when you and your mother showed up at a revival I was holding in St. Louis, Missouri. She seemed troubled, but I thought nothing of it. At one time or another we are all troubled by something or someone. On the fourth and last night of the revival, I thought everyone was gone from the church. Maria and Savannah had gone to sleep in the pastor's office, and I was on my way to get them when your mother showed up at the door with you and a suitcase. Her story was staggering, but at that point, I didn't question God's plan. What you need to know is that she did not give you away. She was convinced that her husband, your father, was a serial killer the Missouri police had been hunting for nearly a year. She feared what the notoriety would do to your life when all was revealed, and that you would be branded as a killer's daughter. She was going to turn him in, and then come and get you and start over in a new place. Only she never came after you, and no one was ever arrested for the murders. I fear she paid for her bravery with her life.

"As I said before, Coleman has journals for each of you. I've written down everything I know. As to whether you go back to find your roots or not, that is your choice, but I caution each of you to remember, your lives were in danger then. They could be again."

The video ended. This time Holly turned off the TV, then covered her face.

Bud took her in his arms and began patting her back as he'd done countless times before when she'd been a child.

"I'm sorry, Holly, so sorry this is happening."

She didn't answer. The only thing she was capable of at the moment was tears, and Bud knew enough to let her cry it out.

He'd been a young man, barely out of his teens, when he'd come to work for Andrew Slade, but over the years he and Andrew had become best friends. He'd adored Andrew's girls from the start, and they'd returned the feeling. He wasn't sure when he realized his fondness for Holly had turned into something more.

Holly was twenty-five now, finally old enough for his thirty-nine years. But there were too many years of familial friendship between them for him to hope their relationship could become anything more.

Finally Holly pulled out of his embrace and reached for a handful of tissues.

"Sorry. You'd think I'd be past this by now."

"It's okay. Indecision is troubling enough on its own, without all this other crap to deal with."

Holly laughed through tears. "That's what I love about you, Bud. You always cut to the chase."

Bud's gaze was fixed on her mouth. Her lips were slightly swollen from crying and begging to be kissed. It was all he could do to back away.

"That's me—To-the-Point Tate. And speaking of getting to the point, I came to tell you not to bother making lunch for me. I've got to take some of the hands over to the high country, and find the rest of the cows and new calves."

All of a sudden Holly had found a task that she could handle.

"There's no need going without anything to eat until night. There's a full platter of fried chicken in the refrigerator, and at least a dozen leftover biscuits. You can at least take that for you and the boys."

Bud grinned and then kissed the side of her cheek. "You're the best."

Holly's pulse surged. If she'd turned her mouth just the tiniest bit to the left, that kiss would have landed squarely on her lips.

"Give me a couple of minutes to pack it up for you."

"I'll grab a couple of six-packs of Mountain Dew, and we'll be good to go. The boys and I thank you."

Holly flew to her task, feeling a brief moment of respite from all her confusion. This home was where her heart was, and its heart was the kitchen—Holly's favorite room.

Within minutes Bud and the food were gone, and Holly was once again alone, only this time with a better attitude.

She got a couple of cookies and a can of Pepsi, and went back into the den to get her journal—the one Andrew had left for her alone.

She'd read it through a dozen times over in the past three days since learning the truth, and it still hadn't gotten any better. How did one go from being the oldest daughter of a respected Montana rancher to the only child of a suspected serial killer? The knot in her stomach drew tighter as she picked up the journal and took it to her room. She crawled up onto her bed with the Pepsi and cookies, and once again read the words that had officially ended her happy world.

You were born in St. Louis, Missouri, as Harriet Mackey, the only child of Harold and Twila Mackey. It was while I was preaching at a week-long revival that I first met your mother. She came every night and sat in

the front row with you close by her side. I remember thinking her expression seemed sad, even haunted. It wasn't until later that I fully understood why. As for you, you were a very quiet child who played with Maria and Savannah during the services every night, and often fell asleep with them, tumbled up on top of each other like a bunch of worn-out puppies who'd played too hard.

The last night of the revival, your mother was back, but this time she was also carrying a suitcase, along with you. It wasn't until the services were over that I fully understood her intentions, but by then I'd already accepted that God was leading me to these desperate women who had nowhere else to turn. Your eyes were red and swollen and you kept clinging to your mother's arm. When she explained what she wanted of me, you didn't flinch or weep...as if you already understood the need.

What you must understand is that, unlike Maria's and Savannah's mothers, yours had no intention of giving you away. She was desperate to get you out of the public eye. She claimed that she had recently come to believe that her husband was a serial killer the police were searching for, and who had been leaving women's bodies all over St. Louis for months. The police didn't have a single clue on which to act, but your mother was convinced that her husband, your father, was the man. She said she had evidence. She was going to turn him in, wait for his arrest, and then, after everything died down, she would come and get you. She had plans for the two of you to start life over under another name and in another state. But she never came. And no one was ever arrested. I could only draw one conclusion: that she'd been murdered for her intentions.

Unable to read any more, Holly laid the journal and her food aside, and curled up in the fetal position. She was still shocked that she had no memories of her parents, or of living anywhere other than the Triple S Ranch. According to the journal, she was five when her mother sent her away with Andrew Slade. So what happened? What had she seen that had been so horrible she'd been willing to block out everything, including a mother who loved her that much?

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Nancy Reese:

The publication untitled Blood Trails (The Searchers) is the reserve that recommended to you to learn. You can see the quality of the reserve content that will be shown to an individual. The language that author use to explained their way of doing something is easily to understand. The writer was did a lot of exploration when write the book, and so the information that they share for your requirements is absolutely accurate. You also might get the e-book of Blood Trails (The Searchers) from the publisher to make you a lot more enjoy free time.

Roland Hall:

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information from the condition of this world now. This particular book was represented just how can the world has grown up. The terminology styles that writer value to explain it is easy to understand. Often the writer made some analysis when he makes this book. That is why this book suitable all of you.

Susan Brooks:

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