

“Out of the Shadow”

The familiar warmth of the gun in Michael’s hand contrasted with the frosty air fogging his breath in the darkened alley behind the saloon. His frustration erupted with a kick to the body laying at his feet. Would this never end?

The creak of a door reached his ears. He wedged himself through a gap in a stack of barrels. A hand bearing a lantern emerged from the back door of a nearby building. The lantern was followed by a head poking out and turning in each direction before a figure stepped fully into the alley.

Schuster. That hot-headed fool.

Schuster beat a hasty path to the body. Light skittered across the brick walls, piles of crates, barrels, and other litter lining the alleyway as he approached. When the light reached the face of his victim, Michael’s gut clenched. Just a kid.

“No!” Schuster groaned with more remorse than Michael would have expected from the man, given his threats earlier this evening. He’d watched the kid’s pa confront Schuster over a bad investment no more than two hours ago in the saloon. They’d brawled. Schuster got the short end of it. Not taking kindly to the humiliation, Schuster had warned the kid’s pa to take his family and leave town “before something bad happened.”

Something bad had happened all right, but it had nothing to do with Schuster.

A low rumble down the alley grew into shouts and the grinding and slapping of dozens of feet against the hard-packed mud that had been turned slick by afternoon showers.

Michael pressed himself farther into the protective shadow of the barrels. He swallowed a curse. Why hadn’t he left immediately after the shooting as his well-honed instincts had urged him? One month home caring for his sick ma and already he’d lost his edge. Disgust mingled with relief. Fear mingled with pride. He didn’t regret his decision to give his life to the Lord and turn from his corrupt ways but his reputation as a gunslinger haunted him. Challengers sought him out.

He looked down at the kid whose blood was beginning to pool. He’d been no challenger. Just stupid enough to surprise a stranger in the dead of night.

The kid had lifted his hand—presumably to offer a shake—but he’d never uttered a word. Michael hadn’t let him get that far. In the dark, Michael hadn’t seen the kid’s hand was empty and premature growth had given the kid the height and build of a man. Michael hadn’t hesitated.

What if it had been Elias? Audry would never accept his pursuit if he’d killed her kid brother. He glanced at the body. Would she even accept him after this?

Schuster turned pale as the crowd approached.

Gamblers, drunks, and harlots surged around Schuster, examining the body.

Someone shouted. “It’s the Johnston boy!”

“He’s dead!” cried another.

Multiple voices started talking at once. The usual melee that follows death. Michael's heart sank with the familiarity of it all.

Schuster's voice cut through the buzz. "I don't know what happened!"

"You're gonna pay for this Schuster."

A cheer of agreement nearly drowned out Schuster's panicked defense.

"I didn't do it! He was here when I came out, I tell you."

"No use denying it, Schuster. We all heard what you said to Johnston."

The crowd shifted until they had Schuster pressed against the stack of barrels shielding Michael from their view.

"What kind of coward pulls a gun on a kid in an alley?"

"Who's got a rope?" Someone called out.

"Listen to me." Schuster's voice squeaked as one man took him by the neck. "I don't even have my gun."

Michael froze. He barely breathed as Schuster continued to argue his innocence. Without moving, Michael glanced down at the revolver in his hand. If anyone found him there, hiding with this gun, he was a dead man. He clenched his jaw. What a mess. He hadn't even wanted to carry the thing, worried that something like this would happen. Ma had insisted, knowing he was a target for every upstart gunslinger out to make a name for himself by outdrawing the infamous Mic Burns.

As one man searched Schuster for a hidden weapon and came up empty, a whiny voice rose above the crowd. "Ah, we can't hang him without a weapon. Sherriff Holtz 'll have us all locked up when he gets back in town."

The man holding Schuster by the throat spat in the mud. "That don't mean nothin' 'cept you tossed it afore we got here."

"I didn't! I swear!"

"Spread out!" The apparent leader of this mob called out. "Look around. He ain't had time to go nowhere. That gun's here somewheres. Let's find it!"

The man holding Schuster stood glaring as the group dispersed along the alley, lifting crate tops and kicking through piles of rubbish.

Michael glanced down at the gun again, noticing its nondescript appearance for the first time since his ma had handed it to him. Hesitant to carry any gun at all, he'd flat out refused to wear the custom belt and matching ivory-handled revolvers for which he was famous. The knowledge that a glance at those weapons would send wise men running and drew foolish men to their deaths had once filled him with pride. In the month since his conversion, it had filled him with remorse.

A man with red hair began snooping around the stacked barrels.

Fingering the plain wooden handle, Michael's grip relaxed. He could drop it. Nudge it out to be found.

His gaze shifted to Schuster. He was a vile wretch of a man, but he hadn't committed this crime. He didn't deserve to die for it.

Systematically searching each nook between the barrels, the red-haired man drew closer.

Michael's fingers flexed around the gun. Ma needed him. With his brothers and Pa all gone in the war, there was no one left to care for her but him. Without him, she could break a leg in the fields and die of thirst before anyone noticed. Few would care, thanks to his legacy.

The red-haired man neared the opening Michael had slipped through to gain his shelter. Only three nooks to go.

With as little movement as possible, Michael stretched his arm toward the ground and let the gun slip from his grasp with a quiet thud. Shutting his mind against the consequences, he nudged the weapon forward with his boot until he was sure the man would find it in the next nook.

Michael held his breath as the man withdrew his hand from one nook and jammed it into the next.

"I've got it!" The red-haired man cried as he waved the gun in the air.

Expecting relief, Michael was shocked by an overwhelming feeling of devastation.

"What? Imposs-!" Schuster's voice cut off with a strangled gurgle. His eyes bulged as he clawed at the tightening fingers around his throat.

Schuster's captor grinned. "Good work, Sam."

Managing to pry a finger loose, Schuster gasped, "It wasn't me!"

The angry crowd was no longer listening. Schuster's captor dragged him down the street. The innocent man dug his heels in, trying to slow their progress. It was no use. Another man clocked Schuster senseless. Three men lifted him from the ground and began carrying him away.

Schuster must have recovered from the blow because a moment later Michael heard his cries for mercy echoing down the alley. His stomach turned as he squeezed out from behind the barrels, unnoticed by the crowd hurrying away with their prize. What had he done?

He'd told his ma that he didn't want to wear his guns because he couldn't bear to take another life, even if it meant losing his own. Yet when the moment came, he hadn't hesitated to shoot. Now he stood idle with another man about to pay the ultimate price for a crime Michael had committed. His own evil overwhelmed him. He wretched into the mud.

Ma's words from that morning replayed in his mind as he wiped his mouth. *"You do what you got to do, son. Them men what come lookin' for you won't care 'bout your newfound faith. They's evil. And I need you."*

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The pastor's voice sounded as clear in Michael's mind as it had the day he'd answered Michael's questions about leaving his

past behind. He pictured Audry's sweet face. She'd want him to speak up, save Schuster. But if he did, he'd have no future to share with her. Determination straightened his spine as he wiped the filth from his lips. He watched the crowd round a corner, lost from sight. He took a step forward, then another. Then he was running.

This story is unusual for me for two reasons:

First, it's a bit darker than I *typically* lean toward in my writing. (Don't worry, the next one I send will have a stronger romance line and a happier ending.)

Second, I've deliberately left Michael's decision in the mind of the reader.

**What do you think he did? Did you enjoy this story?
Send me your thoughts at writeKathleenDenly@gmail.com !**

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