

# Ten For The Devil

*by* Deborah Mitton

The Great Fire of the City of St John

June 20, 1877

The Hunter Becomes the Hunted

Chapter 1

It could very well be the greatest day in Michael McLaughlin's life or it might be his last.

With the first whiff of smoke in the air, Michael's mind dropped into a deep daydream so real that he would reach out and touch his grandfather's hand in the parsonage's parlor. The fireplace that warmed them on a damp English evening gave the room an unnatural hue of gold and amber. His mother was young and beautiful, busy on her needlework. Her eyes often lifted from her work to watch him read. His grandfather deep in thought as he prepared his Sunday sermon, stopped to answer his grandchild's questions. He would sometimes lean over his armchair, pat him on the head, and tell him that he was proud of him.

Michael felt safe and loved. Fond childhood memories were few for shortly after their lives changed and Seth Shaw was the cause. Michael's life was a total obsession to bring him to justice. Everyone Michael held near and dear to him Seth's evil deeds touched and destroyed. At thirty-one years of age, he had no family of his own and could count his friends on the fingers of one hand with digits to spare. Today was the day Michael was to take back his life.

Michael was in a pub on Prince William Street for what seemed to be hours for his informant to let him know the Seth's whereabouts of his man. He paid little attention to the conversations around him but he did hear word of a fire starting in the Late Joseph Fairweather's building, in York Point that afternoon. He watched the door from the security of his seat at the back of the pub. Many citizens passed at the fire's alarm. The accounts by those that ventured into the pub that it would not amount to much.

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The patrons of the pub were deep in discussions of previous fires that plagued the city. No one seemed to be concerned and Michael was preoccupied with his own thoughts and feelings.

In Michael's profession, he was accustomed to dealing with unsavory characters. He met many in the back alleys of London and quite a few better dressed ones in the parlors of England's elite but the man he was about to meet would fall into the worse of these.

Shawn McBride entered the tavern shifting his eyes from one patron to another with hostile suspicion until eyes that found his turned away in fear. He was a cautious man by nature and today was no exception. After sizing up the room, he began to look around for his benefactor.

Michael stood up, waved his hand directing Shawn to the back table hidden from view. Heads turned as Shawn proceeded to the back booth; he was a very peculiar, rough character even for this pub.

The bartender arrived at Michael's side and asked if he could bring him anything else. Shawn looked up at the bartender and then at Michael.

"I like a pint of your finest governor," and he winked at Michael who nodded to the bartender who quickly returned with a pint for his visitor the whole time thinking the two of them the most unlikely of characters he ever did see. One was evidently a highborn gentleman if his clothes and manners were evidence and the other vermin from the gutter itself. Shaking his head, worried enough to close up shop, go home to his wife and children. His thoughts focused on the pound or two to be had this day and in answer to his prayers, more of the curious entered the pub. Soon fully engaged with his new customers he left the two in the corner to be about their business.

"Were you followed?" The question was more of a command needing an honest reply. Michael was more acutely aware of his surroundings than normal and who may overhear their conversation.

“No, sir. No sir. I was careful I was to be sure, I remembered your instructions to a “ t” I did. No one has anything to worry when old Shawn McBride is on the job, no sir. As silent as a mouse I was, sir.”

Michael pushed the pint of ale to his guest's awaiting dirty hands, who nodded his thanks and after lifting it to his lips proceeded to down the contains in a few gulps. Wiping his lips with the back of his gloved hand, whose fingers were long gone exposing ragged dirty nails he placed his empty pint back on the table. Michael turned and signaled the bartender for another of the same.

“Thank you kind sir, you are a true gentlemen, you are, yes sir. Never let it be said that Shawn didn't know a gentlemen when he met one.” The bartender delivered the pint and after taking the coins, Michael laid out on the table left shaking his head.

What Michael's quiet countenance did not betray his eyes did. Shawn sitting across from him was in no hurry to get on with business hoping to prolong the conversation long enough for another pint or two.

“McBride I'm very quickly losing my patience! Tell me that which I wish to know and quickly man.”

Michael sat as far from his guest as it could, a white handkerchief over his nose, as the smell that came from the man was almost unbearable. Michael remembered seeing a picture of one of the wee people from the old country and Shawn was a twisted version of one. He stood about 5 foot 3 inches. . His greasy rusty-red hair poked out of a makeshift ponytail. His eyebrows were fuzzy red caterpillars over beady black eyes. His beard was ragged and black with drink and grease. His torn jacket had a few poorly sewn patches. His complexion was sallow. His pants were at one time green and tied around his waist with a rope to hold them up. His jacket was torn and it was obvious that McBride and soap were not acquainted, as his guest was accustomed to his odor and not offended by the manners of his benefactor. He did not care as long as Michael had his money. He extended his hand out for same rubbing his fingers together, in the universal sign for money.

Michael brought out his purse, which contain a small ransom in gold coins and placed it on the table pulling it back as quickly as Shawn moved to take it.

“Your information man, spill it now.”

Shawn replied never once taking his eyes off the leather purse,

“I was careful, just like you said. I listened and I heard the captain tell the first mate that he would be back before the sun went down, that he was going to the offices of William Thomson & Company on Smyth St. if anything should go wrong with the fire at dock side.”

“Why would Seth go there?”

Michael's gloved hand held the wrist of his companion and applied pressure to his bones. Shawn squirmed but did not pull away, only smiled with a toothless grin, and continued.

“I wouldn't call the captain by his Christian name sir, no sir. Fear him I do. He would go there sir as he has a longtime acquaintance with Mr. Thomson, himself sir.”

“Who is this Mr. Thomson, and what would the Captain want with him?”

“Why sir, everyone knows that Mr. Thomson is the finest Shipbroker in the City and a fine gentlemen he is too sir, always giving to the widows and orphans and the like; a fine gentlemen sir, just like yourself.”

The complimented did not soften Michael and he tightened his grip on Shawn's wrist.

“Answer my questions, hurry man I'm tiring of this game.”

His eyes were dark and Shawn knew when a storm was brewing and turned his own eyes back to the prize.

“It's like I told you yesterday, sir. The Captain's fortunes have fallen on hard times. He lost a ship around the Horn and another to a wicked storm that I'm sure that the devil himself stirred up for the cargo was opium, sir. Drugs he hoped to sell in the Americas sir. All hands and cargo were lost sir and along with it his fortune.”

This last part Shawn spoke in a whisper as if he could call up the devil by speaking of the evil deeds of his old Captain.

Michael was disgusted but not surprised that Seth would deal in human weaknesses.

“Did others know that he was an opium runner?”

“No sir, he kept that a secret sir and the crew all sworn to secrecy and the like. Captain likes to play the gentleman sir, keep nice company and anyone that puts that at risk knows sir ...well they might not be seen of again.”

Shawn eyes were wandering up and down the pub's aisle and it did not take a genius to know that he was wondering now if he might pay too big a price for his tale. He was quickly becoming eager to leave, what good was a purse of gold if you were not alive to spend it.

For the first time, Michael smiled, letting go of Shawn arm and leading back against his sit, tossing the leather purse to him. Lifting his body up quickly leaning across the table, face to face, he gave Shawn a final warning.

“If anyone finds out that you and I spoke this day, it wouldn't be the Captain you should fear. Do you get my point, Shawn?”

Looking directly into Michael's eyes he nodded believing him, grabbed his loot, and slipped off the chair and quietly out the door.

Shawn left the pub thinking that the devil could take them both and spat upon the ground to seal the curse.

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That was hours ago and Michael ran up King Street rushing to reach the top of King & Charlotte, facing King Square, to the St. John Hotel where his lodgings were. The Bell Tower in the Square rang out the alarm, but he did not care. He could not keep the smile off his face and his heart pounded in his chest. Pedestrians that saw him might have thought him strange indeed, for a fire ran rampant throughout the city. The wind carried the flames quickly from one wooden home to another, and two-fifths of the city was in flames.[1]

There was a strong north-west wind that carried the fire quickly from one wooden structure to another, sparks carried from

roof- top to roof-top, and by late afternoon the fire spread widely throughout the city. The dryness of the wooden buildings and their odd assortment of contents ignited into flames as easily as hair to a match. Word was spreading, the city was in flames, and panic ran through the hearts and minds of all, with the expectation one.

Horses pulled carts loaded with valuables at backbreaking speed. King Street was one of the steepest in the city making the steeds' task most difficult in deed. Their chest covered in foam and their eyes wild with fear. Their clattering hoofs gripped the cobbler stone streets. The air rang with their sounds of coming danger but Michael he did not notice. Nor did he see that it did not take long for human vultures to come out of hiding. There was a woman with children offering to help an old woman with her belongings only to take advantage of the situation and run off with their arms full. In his normal state of mind, he would have been outraged but not today. He did not notice. He did not stop to assist as he had a bigger prize to catch. Michael was almost insane with the thought of being so close to the end of his life-long hunt.

Michael pushed through the large hotel doors, entered the foyer and took the stairs two at a time. He dodged patrons who tried to leave with luggage with panic in their voices and upon their countenance. He quickly entered his room on the third floor he quickly gathered his papers. Yes, everything that he needed to convict his nemesis was here. Years of investigations were soon coming to fruition - he would finally see Seth hang.

Was it only a fortnight ago, he, his mother, Lady Dorothy Williams and his half-sister Rose had arrived in St. John? They were in the City to attend the ceremony of his half-brother into the Church of England. A week into the visit out of professional courtesy he dropped by the young police force and made his introductions. Little did he know that he would soon need their services? After Shawn left he contacted the local police, they were going to send a man or two to assist in Seth's arrest, based on this evidence Michael held in his hand and upon the position that Chief Inspector, Michael McLaughlin held with London's Scotland Yard. In

a normal time, he would have been ashamed to use his position to get his way but not this day.

A demanding knock on the door, Michael turned to see whom it was but before he could say, enter his half-brother Daniel burst into the room, his priestly brown robe covered in ash and smelling of smoke.

Daniel smiled thrilled to see his older brother,  
``Thank God, you are here! ``

Daniel grabbed his brother's arm and pulled him forcefully towards the door,

“Michael you have to help us! The schools were let out and the poor children are running back home into the fire to find their families!”

Michael pulled his sleeve out of Daniel's hands and continued packing. Daniel was stunned and thought for a moment that he did not hear him. Again, Daniel grabbed his brother and gasped with what little energy he had left and spat out,

“They'll die, Michael, unless we stop them. Come we have to move quickly!”

He turned expecting his brother to follow him but when he did not Daniel turned back and again,

“Man, are you deaf?” We have to save the children!”

“I heard you Daniel! I'll join you later when I'm done and not before.”

Daniel's face instantly turned red,

“For the love of God why not now? Where is there a greater need?”

It was one if not the only time that Michael saw his little brother angry.

They faced each other; one a blond fair skin giant and the other delicate, dark and shorter in comparison; one seemed in appearance a mere boy, the other a worn out man, nevertheless brothers for their eyes would give them away. Their voices spilled out into the hotel hallways for the curious few to hear.

“I don’t have the time to explain my actions to you now Daniel! You go ahead and I will find you when I’m finished! I found Seth!”

Daniel looked at this brother blankly; Seth actions meant nothing to him.

“Whoever he is, he can wait Michael; let God be his judge and jury?”

“I cannot Daniel!”

Michael said as he drew his carpetbags and papers from the bed and started for the door.

“I’m too close and I’ve waited too long!”

He looked sharply at his brother and Daniel though he saw hatred visible on his brother's face and mistakenly mistook it aimed at him.

Daniel had always known that his brother was torn between love and hate for him but he never understood why. Daniel had hero-worshipped his older brother. Only Michael had the power to bring him to tears as a child, one word, and one look would crush him.

Mr. Gray, one of the family's servants, knocked on the door and entered, embarrassed that he had done so.

“Lord Williams, we must go if we are going to do any good at all sir!”

Daniel was not a priest yet and the servant called him by his formal title out of respect.

“Yes, Gray, I’m coming, go ahead I’ll be right behind you!”

Mr. Gray bowed and quickly left the brothers to their argument.

Turning back to his brother, Daniel's young red face showed the sorrow in his heart he said,

“Why, Michael, why do you hate me so?”

He did not wait for the response but left the room and uncharacteristically slammed the door behind him and the room echoed with the slam. He did not wait to hear his brother whisper, with more venom he himself thought possible,



“You were bloody conceived!”

[1] The Story of the Great Fire in St. John, NB, by George Stewart; first published in Toronto, Ont, by Belford Brothers Publishers in 1877. Reprinted in 1980 by Non Entity Press Box 1274, Woodstock, NB E0J 2B0 ISBN 0-969215-4-2; In 1877 it was common practice to refer to Saint John as St. John.

