

Tough Times

by

Sheri McGuinn

Durare Publishing

Needles, California

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons is entirely coincidental. Real locales are used fictitiously.

Copyright ©2021 by Sheri McGuinn

Previous version published as *Michael Dolan McCarthy* ©2012

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations attributed to the author.

Cover image used under license from Shutterstock.com.

978-1-942069-089 pbk

978-1-942069-096 epub

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021906280

Table of Contents

Wednesday: Tough Times

Wednesday Evening: Change of Plans

Thursday: On the Run

Friday: Too Much

Saturday: A New World

Sunday: What!?

Monday: More Surprises

Tuesday: Ups and Downs

Wednesday: Saying Goodbye

Thursday: Beginnings & Endings

Going Forward

Wednesday: Tough Times

-1-

I should have been the first one home. Not Missy. She was only seven. It was my job to protect her and Jimmy. I'd walked by their school to get them and then I took Jimmy to practice and brought Missy home, but not all the way. Right before we got to the apartments, Shenia Brown was out front of her house, almost like she was waiting for me. She smiled and said hey.

I just had to stop.

I'd been trying to get up the nerve to ask her to go out with me since the beginning of the year, when we both started tenth grade. Shenia is the prettiest girl I know. She has milk chocolate skin without a zit, shiny black ringlets kept short and natural, and the best smile in the world.

So when she said hey, I told Missy to head on home and show Mama her new paintings. I gave her my key because Mama always kept the doors locked.

Shenia and I had been talking on the phone about school stuff off and on for a month, so I was thinking she might like me a little, maybe enough to go out with me. I'd been practicing how I'd ask her for the last week. I meant for it to come out all smooth in the course of conversation, but instead I just blurted it out soon as I saw Missy go into the apartment.

"You wanna go walk in Old Town with me Saturday?"

"Maybe." Shenia smiled.

I grinned back at her, too stupid happy to say anything. Shenia could go out with anyone she wanted. Her boyfriend last summer was her big brother's Army buddy. He could treat her right. Any money I earned, I gave to Mama to help pay bills. So a Saturday walk in the old part of town was the best I could offer.

Shenia was saying how she liked the old boardwalks by the river when her cell jingled its pretty little tune. She checked to see who was calling, then gave it to me. "It's your phone."

Embarrassed, I explained. "We only have the one. I don't need it during the day."

I took her cell, "Mama?"

"Michael?"

It was Missy. That little girl's timing was lousy. Besides, Mama should be taking care of her now. I got her home. "What do you want, Missy?"

"Michael, Mama's gone."

She sounded scared, so I let go of my irritation and tried to make her feel better. "She probably went out for groceries. Or maybe she got a job interview. I'll be home in a few minutes. You're a big girl, just get a snack and turn on the TV."

"No, Michael. She's gone, like Betsy."

In the minute it took to get to Missy, my whole lousy life flashed through me, just like they say happens when you die.

Daddy was tall. I was four when he got knifed in a bar. He looked like a big waxy doll in the coffin. Mama couldn't stop crying. When we got home, our neighbor brought over some macaroni and cheese on a plate. She put it on the table and told me to sit.

"Your mama won't feel like cooking tonight. You eat this."

She went into the other room and sat down with Mama. I never have liked macaroni and cheese. I snuck close to where they were talking.

"I don't know what to do," Mama told her.

"What about your folks?"

"They never approved of Mike. They've barely spoken to me since Michael was born. They've never even seen him."

Mike McCarthy wasn't black Irish; he was just plain black as night. I came out the color of coffee with lots of cream in it and my kinky hair is auburn like Mama's. My grandfather, Michael Dolan, never saw me, but I got saddled with Michael Dolan McCarthy for my name.

"Families pull together in bad times. They'll help you out," said the neighbor.

Mama called her parents. Then she cried even harder. "They don't want anything to do with us."

"Because of a little color in your child? That's cold."

So I always knew it was my fault Mama's family wasn't there.

Lucky for us, Daddy's friend, Swede Johnson, loved kids.

He started coming by to spend time with me, and he fixed things around the house. He joked with Mama to cheer her up and he made her come along when he took me to the movies. When Swede got a job in Sacramento, we moved west with him.

He was as blonde as Daddy was dark, so Missy and Jimmy are both fair-skinned with white-blond hair. But Swede always treated me like his oldest child. He taught me to play soccer and came to all my games, taught me how to work on cars and fix stuff around the house, taught me 'most everything I know. Summers

we'd tube down the American River whenever it wasn't too wild for the little kids.

Mama laughed a lot when we were all together like that.

Then one day, Swede took me to a big gravel lot and taught me how to handle the car when it was skidding around. I couldn't believe he was letting me drive; I was only thirteen.

Then he told me how he'd waited too long to get that ugly old mole taken off the back of his neck. It was cancer, and it had already spread. He only had a few weeks.

"It's not fair!" I cried.

"Tough times make you stronger, Michael, as long as you don't lie around feeling sorry for yourself."

That's what he told me.

They'd been saving to buy a house, but medical bills took all of it. Swede was upset to be leaving things that way. But he helped Mama get herself a job, first one I remembered her having.

Swede died August sixth, my fourteenth birthday. He thought we'd be okay, and we were, for a little while.

I was going to play sports in high school—I'm an awesome soccer goalie and not too bad at basketball—but Mama worked until six every night. Jimmy was nine and too hyper to be on his own, let alone responsible for Missy, and Mama wasn't making enough for a sitter. We set it up for me to get out early every day so I could take care of the kids. Sometimes I'd take them over to the high school to watch soccer games, but the goalie was lousy and they kept losing. And Missy would complain she was tired and Jimmy never sat still.

Then in October, Mama got downsized. She called me into the kitchen and had me sit while she paced back and forth.

"I don't know what we're going to do, Michael."

"You'll get another job."

It didn't turn out that way. She got out there every day, putting in applications. I didn't try out for basketball—thought I'd have to quit when she started working again. But by spring unemployment ran out and we had to move into this ghetto apartment with two tiny bedrooms.

At first Missy slept in with Mama. Then Mama started going out at night. The next thing we knew, Missy was in our room on a cot and Lester was in with Mama. He helped with the bills, but I never liked him. I hoped he'd be gone once she got work again.

Then when summer came, I realized Mama still hadn't found a job because Lester worked nights and wanted her in bed with him during the day.

I only came home to eat and sleep. If she wanted someone to watch her kids, she could get up and do it herself.

On the Fourth of July, Lester worked for the holiday pay. When he finally left the apartment, I started helping Mama clear the table.

"I've got people five blocks around paying me to help with yard work," I bragged. "Soccer tryouts are in August. If I need to pay for anything, I'll be able to take care of it myself."

"I'm so proud of you," she said, and she pushed up her sleeves to wash the dishes.

I didn't say a word. I just stared at the purple finger marks on her forearms and clenched my jaw. My growth had started coming on and I probably would have killed that man if he'd been there at that moment. Mama didn't say anything, just pushed down her sleeves. She must've seen it in my eyes, though, 'cause she got his things together and put them by the back door before we left for the fireworks.

There were fireworks the next morning, too.

We were all still in bed when Lester used his key to come in and started screaming at Mama. I threw on my pants. Jimmy started to follow me.

"You stay with Missy," I told him.

Jimmy looked over and saw how tight our little sister was holding her stuffed dog. "Holler if you need help."

I ran down the hall to Mama's room. She was sitting on her bed in her nightgown. Lester had hold of her arm. I crossed that room in two steps and grabbed his wrist, hard.

"Get out!" The words came out of me in a growl.

"This is between your mama and me. Get back to your room."

I squeezed tighter and leaned into him. My other hand was in a fist, ready to fly. It was hard to hold back, but I knew it would mean

more trouble if I didn't. Finally, he let go of Mama and broke away from my glare. I let him shake off my hand and stepped back.

He turned to her and said, "If I can't have you, nobody can."

"Don't you threaten her." I crowded his space again.

"You better watch your kids," he sneered on his way out.

That was back in July. Mama started looking for work again, but it seems like confident people get most jobs. Those bruises weren't the worst harm he did.

Then last week, our old calico cat got hit by a car.

Mama said animal control picked her up before I brought Jimmy home from soccer. Missy had seen the body, though, and cried until she fell asleep that night.

Mama kept telling her that Betsy had gone on to a better place.

Now Missy was telling me Mama was gone like Betsy.