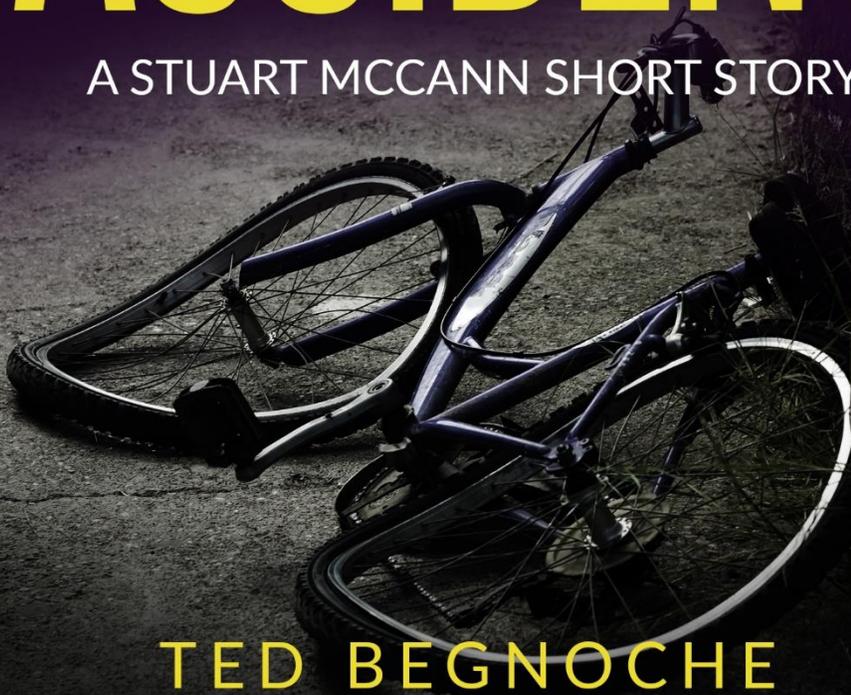


POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

THE
ACCIDENT

A STUART MCCANN SHORT STORY



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The Accident

I sat in my Fairshore police SUV and watched the last of rush hour traffic roll by on Quincy Avenue while the radio crackled with static. The late afternoon sun was sinking fast, casting shadows on my vehicle and glinting off the windshields of cars stuck at a red light. Summer was in full swing, and the July days held both heat and humidity well into most evenings.

I slid the window down and was greeted with honking horns and the steady, thumping bass of a rap beat. I stifled a yawn and was beginning to think that my 3-11 shift was going to be boring and uneventful.

A few seconds later, my radio came to life and I slid the window shut and turned up the volume. The dispatcher was calling for all cars in my area, and I responded and was rolling in just a few seconds.

A liquor store armed robbery in Quincy, 2 suspects in a red Ford Mustang headed south on Quincy Avenue toward Weymouth Landing. I flipped my lights on just as a red blur went speeding by, weaving in and out of oncoming traffic and sending cars screeching and pulling up on the sidewalks.

I made a right turn out of the parking lot and was in close pursuit, but the Mustang's driver was pretty good and he quickly put some distance between me and him.

I was joined by a Quincy cruiser, and when the Mustang felt trapped, he hit the gas harder and fishtailed around cars at a red light by the car dealership. I barreled through as the light was turning green and almost got broadsided by an oil company truck.

The Quincy cruiser wasn't so lucky.

I heard the screeching tires and crunch of metal and took a second to look in the rearview mirror. The oil truck had pushed the cruiser into a couple of other cars, but nothing was flipped over and I hoped everyone was alright.

The Mustang was really moving now. My speedometer said 60 and he was pulling away from me, so I stomped the gas pedal and tried to close the gap. He disappeared over a little rise in the road and I goosed it a little more.

I was closer now, and I could tell he didn't like it all. We sped down the hill that leads into Weymouth Landing, traveling way too fast for the congestion that was waiting for us.

Luckily, law-abiding citizens were giving us plenty of room, but at the lights near the train station the Mustang bounced off a van that had panicked and stopped in the middle of the road.

I had to weave my way around cars and motorcycles while the Mustang driver made a right turn on Union Street and laid down a long strip of rubber, leaving clouds of white smoke hanging in the air. I cut through a parking lot and up over some curbing, somehow ending up right behind him.

I grabbed at my mic and tried to radio my position, but I knocked it to the floor and didn't bother trying to retrieve it. I gave it more gas and was right on his tail, trying to stay as close as possible. I was certain he was heading for the highway, but the bastard surprised me and made a screeching left turn onto Broadmore Avenue.

I cut the steering wheel and bounced my back tire off a piece of granite curb, then caromed like a pinball into the middle of Broadmore, heading toward the elementary school. The Mustang was way ahead of me now, and I stomped on the accelerator, trying to close the distance.

I caught a glimpse of his taillights but then lost him again going around another corner. I gave it more gas again, determined to bring the chase to a stop before someone got hurt.

Except it was too damned late.

I rounded a sharp corner and passed through a cloud of dust the Mustang had raised. Sand and pebbles pinged off my windshield as I fought the cruiser for control, but I was losing the battle.

I saw the boy and the bike, but it was too late for me to react. He had just started to walk his bike across the street, and the back of my fishtailing SUV grazed his bike, sending both of them careening onto the sidewalk.

I stomped on the brakes and the SUV went into a roll, crashing through a wooden fence and coming to a rest upside down on the front lawn of a sprawling ranch home.

The airbag went off, but my seatbelt held me in place. Despite having my bell rung pretty good, all I could think of was getting to the boy to see if he was badly hurt.

That's the last thing I remember until I woke up in the back of an ambulance on my way to South Shore Hospital.

I opened my eyes and blinked a few times to bring my vision into focus. My partner on the Fairshore police department, Dillon Caullie, was peering down into my face, shaking his huge head back and forth slowly.

"What?"

"You look like hell, McCann," said Caullie. He pulled a chair over and sat next to my gurney in the hallway of the emergency room at South Shore hospital and grimaced when someone down the hall let out a long shriek. "And you picked a hell of a night to visit the ER."

"What time is it," I asked.

"8:30. You've been in and out of it since you got here. How's your head?"

"It feels like I look, I guess. Did someone tell Heather?"

"Yeah, she's on her way, she was on the other side of the State at a conference today. Should be here anytime."

"The boy," I said. "Is he here too?"

"We got the suspect before he got to the highway," said Caullie. "He ran out of luck right before the Union Street rotary."

I looked over Caullie's shoulder and saw Heather come around the corner, still in her State Police uniform. She threw up her hands weaved her way around nurses and doctors until she was standing beside us.

"There you are, Stuart. Holy crap."

"That seems to be the general consensus," I said. "That bad?" "Well, yes. But nothing that a little time won't fix, right?"

"I think so," I said. "I had some X-rays, waiting for the results. The doctor is pretty sure I have a concussion." I tried to raise my head up off the pillow to give Heather a kiss, but bright flashes of light behind my eyes and a jolt of pain in my neck and shoulders caused me to groan and lay still. She bent and kissed my cheek instead.

A nurse came by with a pain pill and a doctor. Caullie got to his feet and led Heather by the arm while the doctor explained that I had acquired 3 broken ribs, definitely a concussion, perhaps whiplash, and thought a stay overnight for observation was the best course of action.

He wouldn't listen to my protests and quickly moved on to his next patient while the nurse wrote on some paperwork fastened to a clipboard. She used a barcode reader to scan my admission bracelet.

"Name?" she asked.

"Stuart McCann."

"Date of birth, please?"

"May 23, 1978," I said. "Who got hit on the head, anyway?"

"Excuse me?"

"Well, I'm the one with the concussion, but you just asked me these same questions 5 minutes ago."

"It's the procedure, hon," she said. "At least you didn't break your sense of humor." She entered some data into a computer that was sitting on a rolling cart and then disappeared behind a curtain into one of the rooms and I was left alone in the hallway with the shrieking lady.

I was certain they were hacking her leg off without anesthesia.

After about 5 minutes Heather reappeared, without my partner. She sat down in the chair and reached out for my hand. I placed my hand in hers and she smiled, then looked away quickly.

"Thanks," I said. "I didn't think you'd come."

"Don't be crazy," she said. "Just because we're having our problems right now doesn't mean I'd abandon you." She patted my hand and looked away.

"I should've called it off, I said. "It was way too fast for that road. It's my own fault."

"That's crazy. You were just doing your job, and you're pretty damned good at it, remember?" She swiveled her head back and looked into my eyes. Hers were moist, and she swiped at her nose with the back of her free hand.

"What?" I said.

"You scared me, she said. "I got Dillon's message saying you were okay, but I didn't know what to expect when I got here. I guess I'm relieved."

"I'll be fine," I said. "I'm worried about the boy. The last thing I remember is seeing his face, and how surprised he looked. Is he here? I'd like to visit him if I could."

Heather looked away again and a cold chill spread over me.

"Heather? Talk to me."

She turned back and I saw a tear fall from the end of her nose. "Stuart," she began, her voice just above a whisper. "I'm afraid he's not doing very well. They put him into a medically-induced coma. They think he may have hit his head on the sidewalk, after the impact."

"Oh my God," I said.

"I'm so sorry, Stuart."

I turned my face to the wall and listened to the woman who was still shrieking while Heather squeezed my hand even tighter. I felt a cold ball in the pit of my stomach and hot tears flowing down my cheeks, splashing onto my pillow.

"How the hell could this happen?"

"I don't know, Stuart. I just think..."

"What about his parents?" I said. "I need to talk to them."

"Not yet, Stuart. I know how you feel, but..."

"How the hell could you know how I feel, Heather? I mean, it looks like I hurt an innocent child." My voice had risen to a yell, and the nurse came out of one of the exam rooms to check on things.

Heather reassured her and she disappeared again. I tried to sit up but my ribs screamed in protest and I laid down again and closed my eyes. Tears leaked from the corners and I could feel Heather's hand stroking my cheek. I kissed her fingers but I couldn't look into her face.

An hour later an orderly came by and wheeled me to a room in one of the new wings while Heather followed behind us. When I was settled in, she sat on the edge of my bed and put her hands in her lap.

"Can I get you anything, Stuart? Are you hungry?"

"Thanks. I don't feel like eating anything," I said.

"Okay," she said. "I'm going to get going, but call or text if I can bring you something tomorrow."

"I will. They'll probably let me go in the morning. I'm being observed tonight."

"Right. Ok, then. Let me know and I'll come to get you. Sleep tight. Love you."

"Love you too, I said. "I doubt I'll sleep at all."

Turns out I was right and wrong. Right about the sleep, I tossed and turned until dawn, and then gave up.

They weren't ready to release me, even though I told them I was ready to go. They didn't like the look of my spleen and decided they should remove it. I could think of better ways to lose a little weight.

I finally got discharged 4 days later and was glad to get back home. Heather waited on me when her schedule allowed, but she was pretty busy with her State Police duties. To be honest, even though I appreciated her efforts, I hated being a pain in her ass and wanted to be self-sufficient.

After about a week I was making progress, and one day as I was sweltering on the porch of our half of the two-family Heather and I rented in Fairshore, Dillon Caullie stopped by to see how I was doing. I'd had little contact with the department after I was placed on administrative leave, so it was good to

see him. He unfolded himself from his police SUV and worked the gate in the chain-link fence.

"How are you doing, Stuart?" He stuck his hand out and we shook. He smelled like fancy hair oil and the peppermints he always had stuck in one cheek.

"Not bad. Starting to feel human again. Getting a bit stronger every day."

"You must be going nuts just sitting around," he said.

"It's not easy to sit still, but I've been weak as a kitten. Heather's taking pretty good care of me, though. What's going on back at the station?"

"Nothing new, really. Dunphord is retiring, but you probably knew that."

"He's been talking about it for months," I said.

"Well, it's a reality. Two weeks is all he has left."

"Nice. Any chit-chat about me?"

"As a matter of fact, I did hear something through the grapevine." Caullie used a meaty forearm to wipe some sweat beads from his forehead. He moved into the shade of the porch and propped one foot up on the steps.

I reached into the cooler beside my chair and pulled out two bottles of beer, holding one out for him. He waved it off and I opened both of them, holding one in each hand.

"Are you crazy? I'm halfway through my shift here."

"Sorry, man," I said. "So what did you hear?"

"There's an investigation about to open regarding the accident. Pretty standard when something like this happens, although it's before my time since Fairshore has had to deal with this sort of thing. I was wondering what took so long. You'll probably be contacted soon."

"Yeah, I guess I was expecting it," I said. I took a long pull at one beer, almost draining the bottle. Caullie raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

"Is that a good idea?" he said.

"I'll get back to you on that. Anything new on the kid? I haven't heard any news in a while."

"Not that I'm aware of."

"I called the hospital, but they wouldn't give out any info," I said. "I drove over there yesterday. I was going to try to see him, but I chickened out. Couldn't bring myself to do it."

"Listen, Stuart. That might not be a good idea right now."

"Ya, well, I haven't had a good idea in I don't know how long."

"I'd stay away for now," said Caullie. "I gotta hit it. Give me a call if you want to get out sometime, or just shoot the shit. I'm always around."

"Thanks," I said.

Caullie slid behind the wheel of his SUV and gave a salute before driving off. I tilted my beer bottle at him and drained it in one gulp, then reached for another.

And another.

"Stuart! What the hell are you doing out here?" cried Heather.

I grunted and blinked a few times, unsure of exactly where I was. Heather's pretty face was hovering a few inches above mine, and that made me feel a little better, but the cobwebs were slow to clear. Finally, I remembered I was talking with Dillon Caullie, but that was the last thing until Heather jolted me out of my flip-flops.

"I guess I fell asleep," I said. "What time is it?"

"Almost 8:15," she said. "Let's get you inside." Heather pulled me to my feet and held me steady, but the world was slowly revolving and I leaned heavily on her. She guided me through the front door of our side of the 2-family and into our living room, then deposited me on the couch.

"How long have you been out there?" She sat at the kitchen table and began removing her boots. I slumped on the couch and closed my eyes.

"I think I went out there around 4:30. Dillon Caullie came by, maybe around 6."

"Really, Stuart. This is getting old. That's three days in a row, and three 30-packs gone. Do you really think that's going to help anything?"

"I meant to take it easy today," I said, "but seeing Dillon didn't do me any good. And he had some news."

"What news?"

"They're opening an investigation."

"It's standard," she said. "Frankly, I wondered what was taking so long."

"Yeah, I guess. I don't know, Heather."

"Don't know what?"

"Lots of things. I don't know lots of things. I can't turn it off. Every time I close my eyes, I see that poor kid. It's just not right. He was an innocent bystander."

"I can only imagine how you feel," said Heather. "But let's see what the investigation turns up. I think you'll be..."

"Does it really matter what the investigation finds, Heather? I mean, either way it goes, if I can't move past it up here?" I tapped my temple with a shaky index finger. "If I can't get my head right, it doesn't matter."

"Did you think about what I said yesterday?"

"A shrink? I spent all afternoon with a psychiatrist."

"Not funny, Stuart. I'm serious. Every department has one, or access to one. They can really help out."

"I don't think it's right for me. How can they help when they've never been in my position? How can anyone possibly know what I'm feeling?"

"That's the idea, Einstein. You gotta tell somebody what you're feeling, and you don't seem to want to talk to me."

"Einstein?"

"Okay, that was uncalled for. I'm a bit frustrated."

"Look, I know you're only trying to help, Heather. And I do appreciate it. I need some time to work it out on my own." I pushed up from the couch and swayed to the fridge. "Did you eat something?"

"Ya, pizza before I left the office. You?"

"Not yet." I yanked open the refrigerator door and rummaged around until I found some cold cuts. I made a sandwich, Heather took a shower, and I discovered we were out of beer again.

But not whiskey. And that turned out to be a big mistake.

I slept on the couch again, three weeks running now, and drank myself to sleep so I didn't have to think about the accident anymore.

I knew it wasn't the right thing to do, but I was powerless to stop it. I felt like someone else was in control, and I was merely an observer.

When I woke up the next morning, Heather was already gone. There was a bottle of bourbon on the coffee table; three-quarters of it was missing. From the way my head was pounding, I knew right where it went.

By the time I got out of the shower, it was 9:30. Things were beginning to come into focus, and my headache was actually dissipating.

My cellphone chirped and I answered, putting the caller on speaker. It was the Fairshore chief of police, and I can't say I was surprised.

"Stuart," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"Not bad, chief," I said. "I'm getting by. Keeping busy."

"That's good to hear. Listen, I just thought I'd let you

know, we opened an investigation into what happened the night of the accident. A complaint was filed, but to be honest, we're investigating internal procedures as well."

"I understand. So this is administrative? Or criminal?"

"Just admin at this point, Stuart."

"Okay." I blew out a sigh and was silent for a few seconds. I could hear the chief breathing on the other end. "What do you need from me?"

"We'll need to ask you questions and take statements at some point. You can come here if you're up to it, or someone can come around and interview you if that's better. I'll be in touch. Take care, Stuart."

She broke the connection and I stared at my phone, then tossed it on the table. I felt like having a drink, but 10 AM was probably a bit too early to start in for the day. And Heather's patience was already stretched thin.

I decided to get some breakfast, and the best place in Fairshore just happened to be owned by my good friend and fishing partner, Whitey Millis. I sifted through the pile of papers on the kitchen table until my truck keys turned up, then found my wallet and locked up the apartment.

The late-morning traffic was thin and I lucked into a spot right in front of Whitey's Diner. I was in between the breakfast and lunch crowd but I had my heart set on a big pile of Whitey's famous hash.

There was room at the counter, and Doris, Whitey's wife, spied me and dropped off a menu and some silverware before taking an order from a table of town employees. I waved at Whitey through the kitchen window and he waved back with an oversized spatula. When he had a spare minute, he pushed through the swinging door and leaned both elbows on the faded countertop.

"Hey Stu, holy crap. Have you looked in the mirror?"

"What?" I said.

"You look awful. What have you been into?"

"A little beer is all." I grabbed the chrome napkin holder and stared at my distorted reflection.

"That's no good," said Whitey. He held up his cellphone in front of me after he put it in selfie mode. "See?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "I look pretty good."

"Yup," said Whitey. "For a homeless wino."

"Ok, can we talk about breakfast? A ham and cheese omelet and a mountain of hash. Wheat toast. And a gallon of coffee. Please?"

"We can do that, said Whitey. "Come back to the kitchen." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder and I followed him through the swinging door and into the heat and delicious smells of his

workplace, watching from a stool in the corner while he made short order cooking look easy. Doris came and went and verbally sparred with Whitey and me while she served all her regular customers with a smile and a kind word.

Finally, Whitey slid a plate loaded with breakfast goodies in front of me and smiled.

"Thank you," I said. "I was beginning to wonder."

"Listen, Stuart. I'm not much on doling out advice, but I think I need to say something here. We've been friends for a long time, right?"

I nodded and grunted, shoveling hash.

"It looks to me like your drinking may be getting out of control. You look like hell, and you also smell like a Dumpster.

"It's kind of you to notice," I said. I kept eating while he stared at the side of my face. "What now?"

"Look, we don't get serious that often, but this might be one of those times. I'm a little worried, is all. It seems to me like you're going down the wrong road."

"I appreciate it, Whitey. I'm just trying to sort some things out in my head, you know? It's been a horrible couple weeks."

"I can only imagine," he said. Doris barked a string of orders at him and he shuffled to the grill, cracking eggs and pushing around a mound of home fries. "But," he called over his shoulder, "I think you may be going about it the wrong way. You can't drink your problems away. Believe me, I've tried, but when I wake up in the morning, she's still laying there right beside me." He barked laughter at the ceiling and for the first time in recent memory, I had a good laugh, too.

"Everything's under control," I said. I picked up my coffee mug and noticed my hand quivering. I set it down and black coffee splashed all over the table. I found a rag and mopped it up before Whitey turned around.

"You know, it probably wouldn't hurt to get another opinion on that," said Whitey. He arranged a platter with potatoes and scrambled eggs, added a couple of slices of toast, and pushed it through the open countertop window at Doris. She scooped it and disappeared into the buzzing crowd of the diner.

"What are you suggesting?" I said.

"Talk to someone," said Whitey. "If you're not comfortable talking to someone close to you, for some ungodly reason, then maybe a total stranger would be worth a try."

I blew a sigh at the floor and pushed my half-empty plate away, suddenly not hungry anymore. Whitey filled a few more orders and I watched until I got restless, then slid a ten-dollar bill under my plate and stood up.

"Seriously, Stu," he said. "Don't do this to yourself."

"Look, Whitey. I know you're just trying to be helpful. I gotta work this out on my own, at least for now. I can't come to terms with it."

"It was an accident," he said.

"I hurt an innocent child!" I shouted, loud enough to silence the crowd and turn heads in the diner. I headed for the back door of the kitchen with Whitey following behind.

"I'm here if you need me," he called after me.

I waved without turning around, scurrying down the alley like a thief. I got in my truck and put my head in my hands and sobbed like a baby, my body wracked with spasms.

When I gained enough strength to drive, I pointed the truck towards the apartment, but it had a mind of its own and I ended up walking the aisles of Bud's Liquors, loading a cart with another 30-pack and 2 liters of bourbon.

The cashier recognized me, a bad sign.

"Wow, another party at your place?"

"Yeah," I said. "It never ends." I gathered up my purchase and headed for home.

I waited until the bells in the Square announced noontime, then open a beer and drained it in two gulps. I knew it wasn't prudent, but I was powerless to stop myself.

Every time I closed my eyes, Josh Bellingham's face popped into view, and no matter what I did, I couldn't stop the accident from playing over and over in my mind. I knew I was headed for a bad place, and the distance Heather and I were feeling at the moment was only increasing since the crash.

I spun the cap off a bottle of bourbon and poured a glassful, then took a few big gulps. My stomach burned and I felt my face get hot.

My cellphone rang and I plucked it from the table. It was Heather, and I debated the merits of answering. Finally, I did what I thought was the right thing.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey. Listen, I just wanted to let you know I'll be working late again. I need to get some reports done, and a bunch of other things that have been stacking up. Just so you're not waiting on me for dinner."

"No sweat," I said.

"What have you been up to today?"

"I got breakfast at Whitey's this morning. Since then, not much. To tell you the truth, I feel kinda lost at the moment."

"I guess that's understandable," said Heather. "Look, I can kick this down the road and come home early, Stu."

"No, don't do that. I'll get by. Really."

"You sure?" she said.

"Yup. No worries."

"Okay. Someone's beeping in. I'll talk to you soon."

We hung up and I opened another beer, but my phone wouldn't stop ringing.

"Stuart, it's Chief Ellis. We're gonna need to ask you some questions. Can you come to the station tomorrow morning? Ten o'clock?"

"Sure, chief. Do I need to bring anything?"

"I don't think so, at this point."

"Okay," I said. "I'll see you tomorrow." I broke the connection and turned off my phone. I would receive no more interruptions on my road to nowhere.

The beers were going down way too smoothly, and even though I sensed danger, sound judgment was once again just out of my reach.

I woke up a 9:07 the next morning, vaguely aware of a nagging thought that I was forgetting something. The top of my head felt like it was coming off, and my stomach was flip-flopping and gurgling with neglect. I sat up and realized I was on the couch again, then had a memory of Heather yelling at me and me yelling back, but I couldn't decide if it was a dream or something that really happened.

I got to my feet and the room began spinning, so I sat down heavily and leaned my head back until things stopped revolving. When I felt like I could walk, I headed for the bathroom and wretched violently. It seemed like everything I had consumed within the last week was intent on leaving my body the hard way, and I shook and trembled until it was over.

I brushed my teeth and stumbled into the shower, driven by the thought that I had to be somewhere, but for the life of me, I could not remember. I shaved and brushed my teeth again, found some clean clothes, and sat down at the kitchen table to gather myself together.

I needed food, but all I could find was half a loaf of bread and some peanut butter. I did the best I could and made a sloppy sandwich, waiting for the coffee machine to finish gurgling.

I didn't find a note from Heather and wasn't really surprised. We'd been in a rough patch even before the accident, and since then things had only turned worse. My unrelenting thirst was not helping my case at all.

I took my sandwich and coffee to the front porch. The sun

was strong and the day was already hot and humid. I balanced my coffee on the railing and it teetered momentarily before falling into the flower bed below.

I sat down in the rocking chair and wiped sweat from my brow. I wasn't hungry anymore and placed the sandwich on the table beside me. I heard a siren in the distance and closed my eyes, and then it hit me.

Damn! I was supposed to be at the station this morning, answering questions. I couldn't remember the time, but I was certain I was late. I got to my feet and went to find my truck keys.

Five minutes later, I was heading towards the Fairshore police station. Traffic was pretty thick and it took me almost 20 minutes to get across town. The digital clock in the lobby announced 10:21 when I asked the on-duty officer to see Chief Ellis.

She collected me five minutes later and brought me back to one of our meeting rooms. I recognized everyone, but there were no handshakes all around, and the general mood was somber.

I was glad I shaved, but I still felt like a pile of dog crap. My head was splitting and I felt a bit tipsy. I sensed that I had alcohol on my breath, and was trying to fool myself into thinking the trained professionals in the room with me weren't going to notice.

I answered questions for the better part of two hours. The officers involved were courteous, professional, and solemn. During a ten-minute break, I used the bathroom and vomited again, sending two police officers scurrying for the door.

I felt like an outsider in a place where I once was more at home than anywhere else, and I had a hard time looking these guys in the face.

After the questioning, I shook hands with the chief in the lobby while other officers went about their business. I felt like a ghost and probably looked like one too.

"So, I'll be in touch, Stuart," she said. "We'll take a look at all the evidence and make a determination. Dashcam footage is very good, and the whole thing is recorded. We may need additional answers or clarification, too."

"I appreciate it, chief. Thank you."

"No problem," said Chief Ellis. "Oh, and one more thing."

"Ma'am?"

"Keep the cork in the bottle, Stuart. It's a temporary solution and doesn't help in the long run. I am speaking from experience here."

I shifted from one foot to the other and looked away, blew a sigh at the ceiling, and felt tears welling up in my eyes.

"If you need to talk to someone," she said, "I know the

perfect person."

"I'll keep that in mind, chief. Thank you."

She shook my hand again and disappeared into the station.

On the way out I met Dillon Caullie. We chatted on the steaming asphalt parking lot.

"Any better?" he asked.

"No. I'm a bit out of control," I said.

"Only a bit?"

"Alright. I'm going downhill and the wheels are coming off. Are you happy, Dillon?"

"Listen, Stuart. We go back a long way, and I'm just concerned, like everyone else."

"Well, you and everyone else can back off. Please. I'm trying to get a grasp on things." I rubbed at the back of my neck and started towards my truck. Caullie grabbed my arm and spun me around.

"Look," he said. "You don't have to go it alone. People all around you are reaching out and trying to help. Pick someone and take a load off, will you?"

I shook my arm free and looked him in the eyes.

"I'm trying," I said. "I need time. I'm going places I've never been to before." I grabbed my head with both hands to stop them from shaking. "I'm losing it, Dillon."

"I'll put you in touch with someone. I'll text you her number. Just promise me you'll reach out to her."

"Send it," I said. I turned away from him and weaved toward my truck, but it took five minutes before I thought I could drive safely.

Dillon Caullie was still watching me when I pulled out of the parking lot.

When I got home, I was surprised to see that Heather was already there. I found her in the kitchen, opening what was left of the beer and dumping it down the drain. I sat at the kitchen table and watched her start in on the bourbon when the beer was gone.

I could understand her point.

"Any questions?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I..."

"We need to talk, Stuart. Now's a good time, right?"

"Yes," I said. I reached out and she took my hand. I led her to the couch and we both sat down, our knees touching.

"I'll start," she said, looking down at the floor. "Last night was ugly, and I can't stand to see you like this. To see

us like this. I know you're in a bad place right now, but the drinking isn't helping. In fact, it's hurting. You're driving people away, including me."

I could see tears welling up in her beautiful green eyes, and I felt a ball of ice in my stomach. Heather took a deep breath and continued.

"What's been going on with us, even before the accident, has got me thinking. I'm not so sure we're a good fit anymore. Things have changed, I guess."

She struggled valiantly, but the tears that she'd been holding back overflowed her eyes and slid slowly down her face. She swiped at them with her knuckles and sniffled, then looked over at me.

I took a deep breath and tried to hold back my own tears.

"I'm sorry," I said, barely a whisper. "I just don't know what to do. I'm not sure how to handle what's going on. It's easier to stay numb."

"You can't do that forever, Stuart. You have to face things eventually. Actually, not eventually. Like, pretty damned quick. This is out of control, and I can't take much more."

"I get your point," I said. "It's like I'm watching from a distance, and I have no control over what's going on. I'm scared as hell right now, Heather." I ran a shaky hand over my forehead and brushed at some of my own tears.

"Someone can help," she said. "If you can't talk to me, maybe a total stranger would be better, I don't know. What I do know is that you can't carry this around forever. Everyone, including you, can see that this burden is way too heavy. It'll bury you if you let it."

I got up from the couch and looked out the front window, hands on my hips, and shook my head back and forth. My phone was on the coffee table, and it buzzed with a text message. Heather held it out to me.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Dillon Caullie," she said. "Oh shit! I forgot all about your meeting today. How did that go?"

"Everyone was professional. It was tough, but halfway through I realized they have a job to do and it calmed me down a bit. They're not out to get me, just to get the true picture of what happened."

I took the phone from Heather and checked the message. Dillon was true to his word.

*Hey Stuart, here's the woman who I think can help.
Tori Pierce 781.555.0152 Give it some serious thought.
Good luck, call if you need anything.*

"Well," I said. "I guess I'll take this as a sign."

"What?"

"Dillon sent along the name of someone he highly recommends."

"Might be a good first step," said Heather.

I gave her a hug and she hugged me back. I could feel her shaking in my arms. She pulled away after a few seconds and sat at the kitchen table.

I fixed us sandwiches and opened a bag of potato chips, and we ate and made small talk, even smiling at each other now and then, but the tension in the air was as thick as molasses.

I was exhausted. Too little sleep, too much monkey mind, and constant stress were all taking their toll. After lunch, I laid down in the bedroom and fell fast asleep. When I woke up, it was dark, and Heather was lying beside me. I used the bathroom and returned to the bed, falling immediately back to sleep, but sleep was not my friend.

I dreamed of the accident in incredible detail, even down to the sounds and smells. I could see the red Mustang clearly, but I just couldn't catch up with it. Every time I closed the gap between us he would pull away, and I was frustrated and angry.

Dillon Caullie was in the back seat, and Heather was sitting beside me. I caromed around the same corners, fighting the SUV for control.

In the dream, the vehicle rolled at least a hundred times and finally fell into a black chasm that had no end.

I woke with a scream, slicked with sweat and sitting upright in bed. Heather had her hands on my shoulders, holding me in place while I struggled to get up. Finally, I realized where I was and what was happening. I laid down again and felt my heart thumping hard against my ribs. Heather found a T-shirt and wiped the sweat from my face, then used the bathroom and came back with a bottle of water.

"Thanks," I croaked.

"Bad, huh?"

"Horrible," I said. "Almost as horrible as real life."

"I'm sorry," she said. She laid down beside me let out a huge sigh. In a few minutes, I could hear her snoring lightly.

I stared at the ceiling until dawn and then crept silently from the bed, exhausted and shaking.

Heather left for work around 7 AM. I never felt so alone. I thought about hitting Whitey's, just for the noise and companionship, but decided against it at the last minute. I looked up the tide chart on my phone and noticed I had lucked into a low tide at 8 AM, setting me up perfectly for a trip to Hull Gut.

I found a surfcasting rod and grabbed a tackle box and bucket to sit on, then locked up the apartment and headed for the bait shop, deliberately leaving my phone on the kitchen table. Never in love with technology anyway, this seemed like a perfect day to put some distance between me and the rest of the world, if only for a little while.

My truck seemed to find the Gut on autopilot while my mind drifted this way and that. I had no agenda other than to feel the sun on my shoulders and gather up my scattered thoughts. By the time I arrived, the tide was at dead low and there were only a couple of other fishermen with whom I had to share the beach. I set up in my favorite spot, fastened a good-sized chunk of mackerel onto a shiny new hook, and tossed it into the rolling waves.

I worked my rod holder into the sand and placed the rod in it, set the drag just right, then sat on my bucket and waited for a bite.

I changed my bait every ten minutes or so, but all I seemed to be attracting were some pesky crabs. Around 10 o'clock, an old-timer that I sometimes shared the beach with pulled up in his ancient Cadillac. I waved and he waved back with his cane, and I went back up the rock-strewn beach to help him bring his tackle down.

When we had him all set up, he sat down heavily in a worn-out lawn chair and tapped me on the knee with his cane.

"Haven't seen you in a while, my friend," he said. "What's so important that you can't come fishing?"

"Been pretty busy, Larry," I said. "You know?"

"I guess," he said. "But it don't sound right to me."

"Ya, not much is right lately."

"Woman troubles?" he said. "Because it don't surprise me. Most of 'em are nothing but trouble." He laughed and opened a beer from his cooler and pointed it in my direction.

"No, thanks," I said. "That's part of the problem."

"Oh, I get ya," said Larry. "Been there, done that. Got the scars to prove it."

"Isn't it all or nothing, Larry? I mean, how do you control the drinking?"

"I got help, buddy. Simple as that. I couldn't control it, so I got help. And you know what? It saved my life, I guarantee you."

"What drove you to get help, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I don't mind. It's painful, but I tell anyone who asks because you never know who it could help. I always hit it pretty hard anyway, but after my wife died, it was ridiculous. I figured what the hell, my kids are all grown and they got a pretty good start, you know? Let me just drink myself into the ground and I won't be so damned lonely all the time."

I nodded and reeled in my line, added another piece of bait, and heaved it back into the ocean. The late morning sun was out in full force, and I squinted into the glare off the water. Larry cleared his throat and continued.

"But my kids, God bless them, wouldn't let that happen. Just when I figured I didn't have much to live for, they proved that wasn't true."

"How'd they do that, Larry?"

"They started having kids, buddy. Grandkids are the greatest gift on earth and really got me to open my eyes. I have five of them now, and I see them all the time. I'll make fishermen out of two or three of them, that's for sure."

Larry reeled in his line and set his rod in the holder, worked at his beer, and put the empty can back in the cooler. I stared at the ocean and let his words bounce around in my head.

"You probably don't want my advice," said Larry, "but I'm going to give it out anyway, free of charge." Before I could reply, he continued. "You're a young man, and as bad as I know life can get, there's light at the end of every tunnel. If drinking is taking over your life, get some help. If it's something else that's driving you to drink, get help with that. Either way, the bottom line is, get help. Because life is worth it, you know, buddy?"

I considered his words as tears began to form in the corners of my eyes. I looked away while Larry stood and began gathering his things and heading back to his car, his cane probing hesitantly at the rocky ground. I picked up his cooler and lawn chair and followed him up the beach.

"Too damned hot for me today."

"Thanks," I said.

"For what, pal?"

"The advice. I'll let you know how things turn out." I knocked on the hood of his car as he backed out, and he beat out a tune on his horn.

I headed back down the beach, reeled in my line, and gathered up my stuff. Larry's words played over and over in my head while I drove back to Fairshore.

Lunch was two slices of pizza and a diet soda from a takeout spot near the apartment. I wanted a beer so badly I was actually drooling, just barely managing to beat back the urge.

When I got home, I checked my phone for messages. Heather, checking to see how I was doing. Bless her heart. Chief Ellis, asking if I could come to the station once again to answer a few more questions. That didn't help my anxiety, and I felt the urge to guzzle gallons of alcohol.

Instead, I thumbed through my text messages until I found Dillon Caullie's thread, then wrote down the number of the lady he thought I should talk to.

I took a seat in the shade on the front porch and stared at the number, twirling my cellphone in my hands. I could hear Mrs. Ferrel's Chihuahua, Buster, chattering through one of the open windows.

I put my phone down and tore the paper in half, then placed the two halves back together again and laid them on the wicker table next to me.

What the hell, I thought. I trusted Dillon Caullie with my life on plenty of occasions.

I reached for my phone and punched in my security code, then dialed the number slowly, painfully pecking in one digit after the other. I hit the little phone icon with my thumb just as a gusty breeze plucked the two halves of paper and sent them spinning onto the front lawn.

"Hello," said a pleasant female voice, "I'm glad you called, but I'm away from my phone at the moment. Please leave a message and I'll get back to you as quickly as I can. If this is a medical emergency, please hang up and dial 911 immediately. Thank you."

Beep.

Click.

Damn, McCann.

I tossed the phone on the table and rehearsed a message I could leave that wouldn't sound desperate or whiny. After ten minutes, I thought I had something and dialed the number again. This time when the message played, I was ready.

"Hello, my name is Stuart McCann, and I need help. I mean, I need to talk to someone. I... Please call me back." I recited my number and broke the connection, shaking my head at how silly I would sound when this poor lady checked her messages.

Nice work, McCann.

Both Heather and I were surprised when she came home early.

Me, because she actually shut down her workaholic tendencies for a few hours, and her, because she actually found me sober and sensible.

She changed into shorts and a tank top, and I found a nice pair of khakis and a shirt with a collar attached to it. She smelled nice, and for once, so did I. We decided on a fancy place near the water in Scituate and sat down to an early dinner.

"So," she said after the waiter had taken our order, "what kept you busy today?"

"I went fishing down in Hull," I said. "Figured I couldn't get in too much trouble down there. Chatted with an old pal of mine. A wise old pal, it turns out."

"What do you mean?"

"I took a step today, Heather. In the right direction this time, I think."

I told her about my call to the therapist that Caullie had recommended and she started crying. It's tough for me to figure out women sometimes, but I had to assume these were good tears. Heather confirmed my suspicion.

"Great, Stuart," she said. "That's awesome. I knew you could do it."

"I haven't done anything yet," I said. "Just a baby step so far."

"It's something," she said.

The waiter brought our food and then scurried away. I clinked my water glass against Heather's wineglass and chuckled a little.

We ate and made small talk, and for the first time in a long while we seemed to be enjoying each other's company. I wanted the night to never end.

After dinner, we walked along the harbor and then stopped for an ice cream cone before heading back to Fairshore.

We got home before it got dark, but we were both exhausted and decided to turn in early. Heather cuddled next to me and was asleep almost immediately. It took me a while to drift off, but once I did, I slept dreamlessly and never woke up until dawn.

Turns out it was the last good night of sleep I'd get for a long, long time.

I was drinking coffee at the kitchen table the next morning when my cellphone chirped.

"Hello, chief," I said. I rubbed at my eyes with the back of one wrist.

"Good morning, Stuart. Have you talked to anyone today?"

"Just myself, chief."

"Listen, I have some bad news. I wanted to get to you before you found out some other way."

"What is it?" I asked.

"The boy, Stuart. He died last night. The last few days have been rough. No brain activity. The family took him off life support. I'm so sorry. Are you there, Stuart?"

"I'm here," I whispered.

"Why don't you come down to the station? We need to talk anyway."

"When?"

"This morning. Now, if you want."

"Ok, chief. I need to gather myself."

"Understandable. See you soon." She broke the connection.

I shut my phone off and stared at the ceiling until the tears came. My throat hurt, and I felt empty inside. I thought about calling Heather but didn't really know what to say at the moment.

I paced around the apartment with my head in my hands, unsure about what to do next. I turned on the television, then snapped it off again, fearing I'd see something about the boy and lose the rest of my mind.

At 10 AM, Bud's Liquors opened for business, and I was their first customer of the day.

By 10:30, it was off to the races.

The next week or so was pretty much a blur. I remember Heather drifting in and out like a wraith, and driving to the liquor store almost every day, but everything else was pretty fuzzy. I knew I was in a bad place, but I felt like I was walking in waist-deep cement, with no way out.

I never made it down to the station. I only turned my phone on once or twice, but as soon as I did it started ringing so I turned it off again. I thought I remembered having visitors but wasn't quite sure.

One sunny and humid afternoon I was on the front porch when Dillon Caullie pulled up in his own car. I had no idea what time it was, but judging by the shadows it must've been late in the day, and I'd been at it quite a while. My head was spinning and I was seeing double of Caullie.

"McCann," he said. "Why the hell don't you return my calls?"

"Nice to see you, too," I said.

Dillion lifted the lid on my cooler and shook his head.

"Are you trying to kill yourself, Stuart?"

"Maybe," I said. "I never thought of it that way."

"Where's Heather? I need to talk to somebody sensible."

"I think she's gone, Dillon. I guess I don't blame her. We were having trouble before the accident. We were heading in that direction anyway." I chugged some beer and wiped my mouth with the back of one wrist, squinting at Caullie. The late afternoon sun looked like a ball of fire sitting on his shoulder.

"Stuart, you gotta get help. This is getting ridiculous. You're out of control here."

"I think I'm beyond help," I said.

"Bullshit. I'm not giving up. And you're not either."

"I appreciate all the support, Dillon. You've always been great to me. I went to the funeral."

"Oh, man," said Caullie. "I was there too, but I didn't see you."

"I didn't want to be seen. Not the church, but the cemetery. I stood way out back." I finished another beer and reached in the cooler.

"Slow down, cowboy," he said.

"I haven't been able to. Not since I got out of the hospital." A tiny hiss escaped from the bottle top when I cracked the seal. It sounded like a seductive siren whispering in my ear.

Caullie looked out at his vehicle, then back at me. He stretched and I heard his shoulder pop.

"I couldn't leave," I said. "I waited until everyone else left, and I still couldn't leave. I had to go to the grave."

Caullie cleared his throat and shuffled from one foot to the other. I drank more beer.

"They had a family photo on a pedestal. It pulled my heart out."

"I'm sorry," said Caullie. "I really am. But try not to beat yourself up so badly, Stuart. You were just doing your job."

"Yeah," I said. "Helping people, that's my job. Not..."

"Don't do it, Stuart."

I looked at Caullie and then out at the traffic in the street. Two teenagers went by on their bikes, laughing and swearing, and a crow on the front lawn cawed after them. I drank more beer, emptying my bottle and opening another one without thinking.

"Stuart, I'd go easy if I were you."

"I know. Easy does it. Thanks for stopping by, Dillon, I appreciate it."

"Turn your phone on and keep in touch," said Dillon. "You're kinda scaring me. I'll be back, Stuart. We're gonna get through this."

"I'll be here," I said. "Bring beer."

"Lay off the damn beer, will you?" Dillon climbed back in his vehicle and drove away.

I woke up on the couch when dawn was breaking. My head was pounding, as usual, and it felt like I had a wool sock stuck in my mouth all night.

I was exhausted. I was shaking. I felt sick.

And I was tired of all of it. I knew I needed to change the way I was living, or I wouldn't be living long.

I took a shower and made a pot of coffee, but food was what I really needed. Unfortunately, it was non-existent in the apartment, so when I thought I could drive, I made my way to Whitey's for some breakfast.

Doris greeted me with a hug, and Whitey came out of the kitchen to shake my hand, but other than that they gave me a wide berth. I ate my omelet and read the newspaper, drank another two cups of coffee, and waved at Whitey when I was leaving.

He caught up with me out on the sidewalk, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Stu, any time you want to talk, just let me know. Let's fish sometime."

I thanked him and we shook hands again. I climbed into my truck and drove back to the apartment.

When I got there, I found my phone and turned it on. Seventeen voicemails awaited me, but they could wait a bit longer. I had just enough charge to complete a short phone call, so I found Chief Ellis's phone number in my contacts and dialed her up. She answered on the second ring.

"Chief," I said. "I've been doing some thinking. Soul searching type of thinking."

"And?" she said.

"And I'm thinking I'm resigning."

"Stuart. Are you sure? It doesn't have to end like this."

"I'm pretty damned sure, chief. I don't see another avenue for me."

"If you want to talk, I'd be happy to stop by."

"Thanks," I said, "but I think I've made my decision."

"Well, okay," she said. "There's paperwork involved. I can get that started, but call me if you change your mind or want to chat. You're a damned fine officer and I hate to lose you."

"Thanks, chief. Your support has always meant a lot." I heard my phone beep and then the battery died.

I didn't blame Heather for leaving. If I was in her shoes, I'd probably do the same thing.

I'd miss the Fairshore Police Department much more than they'd miss me. I truly loved being a police officer, but I was questioning everything in my life at the moment, including my career choice.

Maybe my decision to leave the force was made in haste. Some would say I wasn't in my right mind, but I couldn't wrap my brain around being in uniform after the accident, so I did what I thought was the right thing.

When one door closes, another one opens.

It was time for me to move forward, into the unknown and unfamiliar.

TO BE CONTINUED...

The first novel in the Stuart McCann Mystery Series is out now. Stuart left the police force, but cannot turn his back on his real calling; helping others who have nowhere else to turn, and nobody else to listen.

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