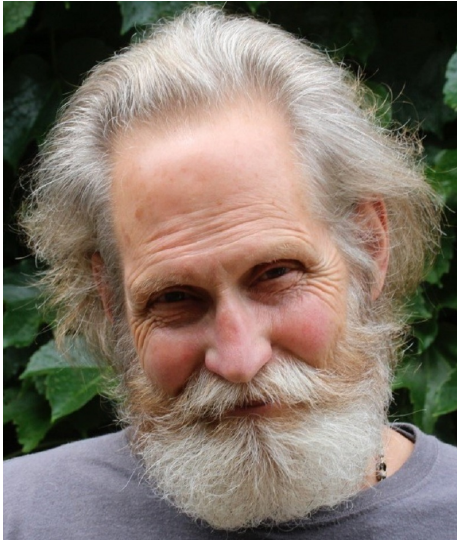


# Action/Suspense

*Becky Forever*

*By: Jim Bates*



**Jim Bates**

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The bartender set a beer and a shot in front of the big man slumped over the rail.  
 "That's it Big D. No more."  
 Darren looked up, his eyes blurred and rimmed with regret.  
 "Come on Billy my boy. Can't a guy have any fun anymore?"  
 Except it came out as drunken gibberish,  
 "ComonBilimabycnagyhanyfumamyor?"

The barman gave him a look that said no.  
 Darren wanted to say something but didn't. He couldn't even make his mouth move to speak.  
 He felt pretty good. Great, in fact. He'd been at the bar since 5. The usual reasons, the same old arguments had driven him here and he'd done exactly as she had predicted he would.  
 "Maybe this'll make her happy," he murmured to himself, his joke kept low as if she might hear. He'd accomplished exactly what he'd wanted to accomplish: got himself nice and wasted. To hell with his job, to hell with his wife. He deserved a night off to forget about it all and that's exactly what he'd done.  
 A minute later, with the whiskey finished and beer drained, he was making a move to stand up when he

leaned a little too far to the left and began to fall. From a table a few feet away a tall, skinny man stood quickly and reached out a hand to steady him.

"Easy there, buddy. I've got you." The man adjusted his thick-framed glasses, put his arm around Darren's shoulder, and called over to the barman. "He's a neighbor of mine. I'll make sure he gets home all right." The bartender waved goodbye and shook his head, glad to be rid of the problem.

The skinny man's name was Caleb Kline and he kept his arm tight on Darren's shoulder as he maneuvered him through the bar, out the front door, and into the soft warmth of an early June night. In the background frogs called from down near the lake. A moon was rising to the east, a scent of honeysuckle in the air. Most people would have considered it a beautiful evening. Caleb could have cared less. He propped Darren against his hip and led him past the white Ford F150 pickup with the smashed headlight that the larger man had arrived in, across the gravel parking lot, and out to the street where he'd parked his old RV. An anonymous-looking vehicle, with dented panels and dirty windows. An old faded sticker suggested it had seen better days. "Let's get you inside, pal," Caleb said, as he opened the door and pushed Darren up the two steps, into the tiny living space. It may have been the

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change of light, or perhaps the smell, but the bulky man started to come around. "It's okay, nothing to worry about," Caleb said in a gentle voice, laying the big man on a study table, a hand supporting his neck. Nimble fingers, familiar with the buckles and straps, had the sleeping man secured in seconds, wrists and ankles bound by leather. Then he plunged a hypodermic needle deep into the man's thigh. Done. Finally, he could relax, the hard part over. Next, Caleb set about getting ready. He laid a plastic sheet on the floor under the table, just in case there was too much blood. He went to the cabinet above his small sink, took out his tool kit, and set it on the table. He set his bright portable light next to the tool kit and affixed a miner's light around his head. When he was satisfied all was the way he wanted it, he opened the man's shirt, taking a moment to notice the smooth hairless chest. Caleb smiled to himself. Good. He wouldn't have to shave him. Then he opened his tool kit and set to work. It took about half an hour. There wasn't much blood, not that he cared, but it was less to clean up. That was always a good thing.

While he moved the needle gun back and forth across the man's chest Caleb thought about his daughter. Becky had been killed by a drunk driver when she was only seven years old. She'd been in the family's car when a drunk driver had run a red light and smashed into the passenger's side of the old Ford, killing Becky and injuring Caleb. Fortunately, his wife Samantha and four-year-old son Ethan had been at home at the time. Too vividly, sometimes, he can still remember the blood-smeared fragments of glass reflecting the blue lights of the

ambulance as the sun dropped in the sky. An old Ford 150 pickup, a policeman had said. That had been ten years ago. God, how he'd loved his daughter. Still did. The drunk driver was given just five years in prison and was now a free man. With the death of his daughter, something had happened to Caleb. Try as he might, he couldn't fill the void left behind by Becky's death. For months he was lost. Emotionally crippled. He'd been a high school science teacher, but he'd eventually had to take a leave of absence. He was given a year off, but he never went back. He couldn't shake the numbing angst; the overwhelming heartache that came with the loss of his beloved daughter. It was Samantha who had gotten him to finally do something.

She was an RN, she was still working, and she was a strong woman. "I miss her, too, Caleb," she told him, "But you've got me and Sam to think about. You've got to pull yourself together and find something to do." "Someone's got to pay for what happened to Becky. It's not fair." Samantha hugged him and held him tight, "Of course, it's not fair, but life goes on. Figure out what you need to do. No matter what, I'll support you. Just get off your ass and do something."

It took him only a day to come up with a plan. He told Samantha of his idea and she agreed that it was a good thing for him to do. "Anything," she told her friends later, "anything was better than him moping around doing nothing."

Caleb has been on the road ever since, over eight years, only coming home for Samantha's birthday, their wedding anniversary, and Sam's birthday. He works odd jobs when he

needs to for money. Otherwise, he travels. He's looking for drunks and when he finds one, he makes them pay for what they did to Becky. When he was finished working on Darren, he shined the light and looked closely. He dabbed some blood away with an antiseptic cloth and took a moment to admire his work. He'd used a tattoo needle to write, Becky Forever encircled by a heart. It took up a good portion of the man's chest. "Good," Caleb thought to himself, "That looks really good." He put his tools away and cleaned up. The sedative he gave Darren (supplied by Samantha) would last a little longer, long enough for Caleb to wait for bar closing and the streets to shut down. Then he'd drag the unconscious man out and hide him in the bushes by the side of the Black Crow. Then he'd get in the RV and leave town. By sunrise, he'd be far away.

It was around noon the next day when he called Samantha from Benson, a small town a hundred miles to the west. When he was finished telling her about his newest victim, she said, "Yeah, I've already heard. You were on the national news again, The Becky Forever Tattooist Strikes Again. You're getting to be famous. What's that make, forty-one?"

Caleb could see her smiling on the phone. "Forty-four, actually. You don't mind I'm gone so much?"

"Of course I do. But you do what you have to do, okay? Just always come home."

"I will, honey. I promise."

"Have you thought any more about what we talked about?"

"You mean about me opening my tattoo studio? Yeah, I have."

"And..."

"I really want to. I'm just not ready

yet,"

"So...when?"

Caleb paused. He'd been seriously thinking about getting off the road for the last year. He missed his wife and he missed his son. He really wanted to, he just needed to finish what he'd started. "Look, Becky was seven when she died. I think I'll quit after I've done seven times seven tattoos. You know, forty-nine."

Samantha breathed a sigh of relief. He was actually going to come home. She couldn't wait. "So you've done forty-four. That means you've got five more."

"Yeah. I should be done by the end of the year."

Tears of joy flowed through Samantha's eyes. "Oh, honey. I can't wait."

"Me either," said Caleb, meaning it.

They were both silent for a few moments. Finally, Samantha asked, "So, where to now?"

"I'm heading west. Maybe Aberdeen."

"Okay. You be careful. Call me in a few days."

"I will."

Caleb started the RV, turned back onto Highway 12, and continued heading west. He was happy now with his life.

There was another drunk driving a Ford F150 out there somewhere. It wouldn't take long to find him, and when he did, Caleb would have his tattoo needle handy. The guy would pay. It was the least he could do for Becky. It was the least he could do for his daughter.

In fact, Caleb had already forgotten about Darren, who had blurrily driven home and barely was able to park his truck at an awkward angle in front of the garage. He'd stumbled inside and made his way into the shower, hoping the hot water would clear his head. It didn't, but that was okay with him, he

was used to hangovers. As he dried himself off he looked at his chest and his pounding headache got worse as he wondered what the hell had happened last night. First off, where'd the tattoo come from and, more to the point, how was he going to explain it, and who Becky was, to his soon-to-be extremely pissed-off wife. There was no doubt she'd be furious. Still drunk, he chuckled to himself, thinking that maybe she could change her name, as a dark smile formed on his lips. Oh, to hell with her. He could care less what she thought. He was already looking forward to heading back to the Black Crow later that afternoon and have a few more drinks. Last night had been fun. Maybe he'd even meet this Becky woman and get another tattoo. Sounded good to him. Because there was one thing Darren knew for sure. As long as he was drinking, he was invincible, new tattoo or no new tattoo. He would definitely drink to that.

