



BORN ON MONDAY

A Novel

RICHARD R. BECKER

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Richard R. Becker



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*For Sandy, and all trauma survivors.
You are not alone.*

CHAPTER 1

TIME CAPSULE

Billy resisted the urge to pull his wool jacket closed, walking between his truck and the front door of the Bear Paw. It was a chilly fall night with some brisk weather blowing off the Kennebec River, but the bar manager, Charlie, liked to run the local pub hot for out-of-towners even if most of his customers were Mainers. It had something to do with tips, he said. The farther away, the better the tips.

So instead of pulling his jacket tighter, Billy picked up the pace and took off his coat as he crashed through the front door. He tossed it on one of the coatracks and headed toward a small opening at the bar.

“Hey, Charlie, give me a Geary’s, will you?”

“Yeah, I’ll need a minute on the pour,” he said.

Placing an order at the Paw, as they called it, was an unofficial announcement that you’d arrived. It also allowed people an opportunity to finish part of their conversation before giving you a proper greeting as a newcomer. They welcomed him with a chorus of how-do-you-dos and raised highballs. He obliged them all, hugging a few and nodding to others. By the time they finished, Charlie was back with a glass of beer.

“Hey, um, let me be the one to tell you before someone else does,” Charlie said. “Look who’s set up at the table.”

Billy gave him a shrug, indicating he wouldn’t care. But then Charlie gave an insistent head bob. Billy would have never shrugged it off had he known. His eyes moved quickly past Ed Mailer and toward the woman who was readying a shot.

Her hair was shorter and framed her face, but there was no mistaking who it was. Jessica Michaud — the girl who gave him up for New York City five years ago — was shooting the seven ball in the corner pocket and lining up the nine. He fished two quarters out of his pocket as he walked over to them.

“Winner, if it’s open,” he said, slipping the quarters under the opposite bumper as she sunk the nine ball.

“Yeah, Billy, of course,” Ed said. “I need to eat something anyway.”

Jessica didn’t greet him right away. She leaned into the table with a sigh before turning around.

“Hey, Billy,” she said, brushing some stray hairs off her forehead and out of her eyes.

“Hey, Billy?” He echoed her observation as a question and asked one of his own. “What are you doing here?”

“Honestly, I didn’t bank on you being here,” she said. “I figured you’d be at Skeeters, if anywhere.”

“Preemptive avoidance,” he acknowledged. “Good one.”

“It’s not that,” she said. “I just ... what did you expect? That I would come back, unchanged, and call up Billy Stevens as if maybe time stood still?”

“Why are you back?”

“My mom needs my help,” she said. “She was diagnosed with small-cell lung cancer.”

“I’m sorry, Jess,” he said. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s surprising you don’t,” she said. “It’s a small town in a small state.”

Billy put the quarters in the slot and pushed. The balls tumbled down unseen chutes, punctuating the end of her statement.

“Anyway, I’m back for the duration, however long that is,” Jessica said. “I’ve been back for about a week and came out tonight to get some air, if you know what I mean. I needed to decompress and not think about it.”

“I get it,” Billy said. “I won’t push anymore. Let’s just play. You can tell me about big-city life.”

“Okay,” she said. “But that might not be my favorite subject, either. And New York City isn’t big. It’s only about three hundred square miles.”

As they played, she began to describe a world unlike any he had ever experienced. She talked about the boroughs and neighborhoods, how hard it is to set priorities in a city that wants to dictate them, how many pairs of walking shoes she blew out, and what it’s like to get stuck in the subway. She complained a bit about the noise, the smells, the less-than-friendly people. But he could tell she found some beauty in that concrete jungle.

When she started describing Grand Central Station, he was taken in by her love of it. To her, there was something magical about the dirt and grit. The same could be said about the bridges or the brownstones or the skyscrapers or the ferries or the dizzying amount of choices all stacked upon each other in a city that doesn’t think about sleep until the bars close at 4 a.m.

“I had every intention of scaling the big corporate ladder of New York City advertising and earning a corner office like everybody covets there,” she said. “But after my boyfriend — yeah, sorry ... I’ve had several — dumped me in a blaze of glory and left

me wondering how to pay for the apartment, all of the anxiety of New York finally got to me, and all I wanted to do was come home. So I called my mom, and instead of offering comfort or words of wisdom, she sent me screenshots of her X-rays.”

“Harsh,” he said, attempting to look like he was at least trying to focus on a shot.

“That’s me,” she said. “For better or worse, not the girl who left here five years ago. You?”

“Nothing so exotic,” he said. “I graduated like you, felt lost after we broke up, and took a job with Cutter’s Stoneworks, mining granite, so all those home chefs have something nice to cut their vegetables on. It’s not a bad gig. I’ve advanced to running the saw mostly.”

She smiled at him, and he could feel it cut all the way to his heart. When she smiled for real, her cheeks rose and lit up her eyes. For as long as they held you, he remembered, it felt like you were the only person in the world who mattered.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” she said. “But you look the same. I mean, aside from the scruff under your chin, I feel like I’ve unearthed the past.”

“I get it,” he said, shaking his head as the spell was broken.

“What about your stone carvings?” she asked. “Still do anything like that?”

“No, well, not really,” he said and then reconsidered and started pulling at a piece of rawhide around his neck. “I have this one piece.”

He took it off and handed it to her. Dangling from the leather was a granite dragonfly. While her collection of dragonflies was packed away somewhere, the meaning of this one wasn’t lost on her.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, tracing the wings before trying to hand it back.

“You can keep it,” he said. “I kind of made it for you anyway.”

She set it on the edge of the pool table.

“This is what I meant,” she said, still smiling but pressing her lips together. “Coming back is like opening a time capsule. Augusta is the same. The Paw is the same. Charlie is the same. You’re the same. Everything here is preserved like the granite that you dig up every day. But I’m not the same girl I was five years ago, and you know, maybe I better go.”

“Come on, Jess,” said Billy, looking over the unfinished game. “Give me a bone here, and let me welcome you home. There’s got to be something I can do, even if it’s as friends.”

“Yeah, you can walk me out,” she said, heading to the door. “Thanks for everything, Charlie. Have a good night.”

“Hey, he’s not running you out of here, is he?” Charlie mused.

“No, I just got to get home,” she said. “That’s why I came back, mostly.”

“Yeah, sorry about your mom,” Charlie said. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” she said.

When they reached the coatracks, Billy grabbed his jacket and started to size up which one might be hers. She pointed.

“The blue one from L.L.Bean,” she said.

“Really?” Billy raised an eyebrow. “You know they only make the boots and tote bags in Maine.”

“So?” she said, crinkling her face.

“So, the coats aren’t as good,” he said.

She slipped the coat on as they exited together. As soon as they were outside, she gulped in the clean air, then spun on her heels to face him.

“Maybe we can try again,” he said. “I don’t know, maybe some Sunday baked beans.”

“Billy, look.” She paused, putting a hand on his chest, partly to push him back and partly as a gesture of endearment. “I’m going to be too busy taking care of my mom, you know? And what we had was really special. I don’t want to change that, okay?”

“Ayuh, I hear you,” he said. “Like Charlie said. Your mom is a good person. Let me know if I can do anything.”

She didn’t say anything else. She patted his chest, gave him a downward-cast smile, and turned toward her Jeep Cherokee. He stood there and watched her drive away for the second time in his life. Only this time, he had an urge to let her go.



CHAPTER 2

FALLEN IDOLS

Jessica almost felt guilty dropping the granite dragonfly in the Jeep Cherokee's cup holder, but she didn't know what else to do with it. The carving was beautiful, a fossil from when her high school boyfriend stood with her in the doorway of opportunity but refused to walk through it.

"Come with me to New York City." She had pleaded with him. "This is our chance to escape together. You can get into an art program there. I know it."

"Nah, carving is just a hobby. Besides, I'm a Mainer through and through," he said, thumping his chest with exaggerated enthusiasm. "Whatever would I do in New York?"

She scoffed. "Whatever will you do here?"

He enrolled in classes at a community college. He only attended a few of them, picking up hours at the granite quarry during the day and picking fights at the same tired parties they used to attend together in high school at night. She fled to New York City, landed a receptionist job at an advertising agency, and took classes at a university until earning her spot as a junior account executive.

There was never any chance of a long-distance relationship. She broke it off with Billy a week after graduation. He never saw it coming, which only reinforced her resolve.

"You're like a loadstone to me," she said. "You know what a loadstone is, Billy?"

“Yeah. It’s a naturally magnetized mineral,” he said with a grin. “We’re connected. You and me.”

“No, not a lodestone. A loadstone, l-o-a-d. It’s a weighty object and hard to get rid of,” she said. “That’s you.”

“You’re serious?”

“So I’ve decided. If you won’t come with me, I can’t let you keep me here.”

“Keep you here? What are you even talking about?”

“I don’t want anything or anybody tying me to Augusta,” she said. “I’m leaving and not looking back.”

“Your mom lives here,” he said flatly.

“That’s different.”

“Your mom is here. Your home is here. Your history is here. Your friends are here.”

“I’m not the only one looking for a way out, you know,” she said. “Izzy has a scholarship. Justice is leaving. Dustin has a full ride.”

“Don’t talk to me about Dustin,” Billy said. “Who cares about him?”

“You used to,” she said.

“Now you’re just trying to start a fight.”

She was trying to start a fight. She had been working up to it for weeks, finding tiny fractures she could chip into fissures. What did he like that she didn’t like? What didn’t he like that she liked? How often did he call, and was that too much or not enough? What did he talk about when they were together? What did he talk about when they were apart? When was the last time he had taken her on an actual date instead of out with friends?

Everything, even his favorite flannel shirt, became another badge of contempt.

She didn't need a shrink to tell her that this kind of thinking wasn't good for a healthy relationship. She wasn't looking for one. She was looking to feel better about their imminent breakup, and quiet disdain seemed like the quickest, least painful way to do it.

She never shared what became a mountain of criticisms about him. She just filed them away like footnotes to her more extensive thesis. He loved her, but not enough to leave. And while he never asked her to stay, he did expect her to come back someday.

She wasn't planning on coming back, and somehow, that made the years they were together in high school a waste of time. She tried to make herself hate him for it, just enough to shake off how she felt a few hours before she dropped it on him.

The last thing she wanted was to leave him with a puffy face and runny mascara. She'd had enough of that alone, shuffling through old pictures. So she worked her tears into anger, justified because he didn't understand how she felt.

He didn't cry when she told him. He turned himself off too, looking more dazed than damaged. It wasn't much different from how he looked in the parking lot at the pub a few minutes ago. Billy hadn't changed, but she had.

She'd even lied to him in the bar. While everyone knew her mother had cancer, nobody knew the truth about her last boyfriend. He didn't dump her in a blaze of glory. She was running from him and didn't have any place to go but home. Had she told him the truth, the irony wouldn't have been lost on Billy. She had pretended he wanted to control her when they graduated from high school, only to fall for someone who literally tried to control her.

It was easy to do in a big city. There were so many people packed together that the urge to be anything but alone was addictive. It clouded her judgment. Instead of sticking with

immature college classmates or office romances with closet creatives after graduation, she hooked up with a corrections officer named Kyle on a dating app.

The warning signs should have been as bright as the glow of the taillights up ahead, but she didn't see them then. In less than six months, she climbed into a cage of comfort with more entrances than exits. Then she gradually eased into his abuse and didn't question much until she came home from work to find a bone saw on the kitchen table. Kyle didn't hunt, but he had asked if she could fit in a chest freezer.

Looking back, she couldn't fathom why it took so long to snap out of her trance. Her mom always told her to pay attention to the butterflies in her stomach. She didn't feel anything then, but she felt something now. She was gaining on the taillights ahead of her. They weren't moving.

It didn't take that long to see the car ahead of her had careened off the road and into a ditch. She slowed, surveying the accident as she passed. The driver-side door of a dark blue Challenger stood open; a figure slumped in the seat.

She put on her hazard lights and pulled over a few dozen feet in front of it. She popped the glove compartment to look for a flashlight but came up empty. Emergency kits aren't as top of mind in New York City as they are in Maine. She shook her head. She would have to use the flashlight on her phone right after she called 911.

When she opened her door, the rush of cold air reined in her wandering mind. She dialed as she walked toward the car.

"Nine one one. Where's your emergency?"

"Hello?"

"Yes, miss. Where's your emergency?"

“Granite Hill Road, north of Kerns fork,” she said. “There’s been an accident.”

“Do you know if anyone is injured?”

“Um, it looks like the driver tried to get out of the car. I think he’s hurt, maybe unconscious.”

“Are there any obvious broken bones or bleeding that you can see? What can you see without moving him?”

“I have to get closer,” she said. “I just drove past it and was walking back to the car when I called. It doesn’t look too bad, maybe.”

“What kind of car?”

“It’s a Challenger, dark blue.”

“And the other vehicle?”

“There’s just one. It looks like he drove off the road, hit a barrier, and went into the trees.”

She never understood why anyone would want a muscle car in Maine. There were too many snow days, which is why she drove a Jeep. This Challenger might have been one of the new all-wheel-drive models, but it still didn’t make sense to her. All it took was a light cold rain to make some of these roads dangerous, let alone the snowfall they expected in a few weeks.

“Let me know if the driver is the only one in the vehicle when you get a better look. What’s your name?”

“My name is Jessica Michaud.”

“I’m sending some help your way,” the dispatcher said. “Your vehicle is safely out of the way?”

“Yes, I pulled off to the side of the road and put on my hazards.”

“Good. If you see anyone else in the vehicle, call us back right away so we can send another ambulance. Thank you.”

“Okay, you want me to hold?”

“No, but please call back if something changes.”

“I will. Thank you.”

She almost called back as soon as she had a better view of the accident. The hood had buckled like a half-crushed beer can. The entire front of the car had wrapped itself around one of the trees on the other side of the ditch in a deadly embrace. Steam rose from the broken engine as its heat met the cold night air.

The man in the driver’s seat was slumped forward into the steering wheel and deflated airbag. His left arm hung limp by his side. He had apparently opened the door before losing consciousness.

“Heya,” she said. “Are you hurt?”

She bent down to get a better look at him, using her phone as a flashlight. He was dressed for the weather, and she guessed he was about her age based on his build and thick black hair.

“Heya,” she said again. “Can you hear me?”

She didn’t want to move him, not knowing if he had hurt his back or neck. So she tried to push the airbag away from his face without moving his head. As she did, recognition started to sink in. Despite his goatee, blood, and abrasions, she knew him.

“Oh my God, Dustin?”

The calm she had managed began to slip toward a growing panic. This wasn’t a stranger anymore but a classmate she never expected to see again and certainly not in Maine. He had gotten out, just like she had.

Dustin Fields was their high school’s star running back for all four years they attended high school together and one of Billy’s best friends until a falling out during their junior year. Before that, Dustin had felt like another brother to Jessica by default. Even after the fallout, she tracked his success — offers from Baylor,

Michigan State, and Connecticut College. He eventually picked Baylor after one of its mechanical engineering professors received a national award for building an area of research around polymer composites.

Dustin wanted to be an engineer and was especially interested in using alternative materials for construction. He loved football but always considered it a means to an end. He was the first to say success was about living in the moment while planning for the future. If there was anyone she would never expect to see here and now, it would be him. But then again, if their roles were reversed, he might think the same thing of her.

Seeing him now, in this state, was startling. She wanted to do something for him but didn't know what to do. She eventually took her coat off and draped it over him. The sting of the cold air hit her hard, but it felt like a do-or-die moment. He was losing too much body heat.

“Hang in there, Dustin,” she whispered, gently touching his cheek before pulling the coat around the exposed skin. “Just a little longer.”

She cupped her free hand and blew hot air into it, wishing she had left home with a pair of gloves or a hat. She hadn't, never expecting to be outside for more than a hundred paces from the parking lot to the pub or even less from the driveway to her home.

Now, every second felt like a punishment for her previous malevolence for Maine, and every minute, a compounded sentence drawn out even longer after she heard the first faint siren in the distance. She would die here along with Dustin if they didn't hurry, she thought, forgotten fossils like the trilobites they dug up in Maine instead of dinosaurs.

The first one on the scene wasn't the ambulance but a young police officer who exchanged her coat for a thick wool blanket

retrieved from his trunk. He was surprisingly amiable, as if they were meeting under more casual circumstances. She didn't understand why until after the paramedics arrived and safely extracted Dustin.

"You don't remember me, do you?" asked the officer.

She shook her head. "Should I?"

"Maybe not." He frowned. "I was a year behind, so we only had one class together."

She looked at him, straining to place him.

"Biology? Miss Allen?"

The words were meaningless to her, but she played along. "Oh, right."

"I know, right? Who would even imagine I'd be rescuing Dustin Fields, and Jessica Michaud would be the one to call it in? Ain't that something."

"It's something."

"Yeah, I wouldn't have taken odds on it," he mused. "Well, you better get on home and warm up. You look a little pale from the exposure."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

"I'll follow up with you tomorrow if I have any questions."

"Questions?"

"Well, yeah. A follow-up to your statement. You know, the usual stuff, like the smell of alcohol on the victim."

She hadn't smelled any alcohol on Dustin. Had she? She hadn't given it much thought in the moment and the cold, but the officer was right. The stink of it wasn't coming from her.

"I don't know if I can help you there," she lied.

"I'm sorry?"

“He wasn’t drinking and driving, if that’s what you mean,” she said. “At least, I wouldn’t know it if he was.”

“Ms. Michaud.” He looked puzzled. “We both know he was drinking. He reeked of it.”

She shrugged.

“Suit yourself. We’ll get it from the blood sample. Drive safe now.”

“Okay, thanks. Do you think they’ll take him to MaineGeneral?”

“It’s the only place open.”

“Some things never change.”

“Thank goodness for that,” he said, touching the brim of his hat before a second thought. “Oh, and sorry about your coat.”

“What?”

“Your coat.”

She looked down at the sleeve he was pointing to. Dustin’s blood was on it. The sight of it made her anxious, but she tried not to show it, even as the thought she had earlier crept into her mind. They were all going to get stuck in Augusta and die here.

She squinted at the name above his badge. “Goodnight ... Officer Ouellette.”

“Call me Danny,” he said with a cautious smile, realizing for the first time that she hadn’t remembered him. He pressed his lips together and turned toward the flashing red and blue lights of his squad car.

The smile unsettled her. It reminded her of an old quote by that French novelist she studied in school. When you stay too long in the same place, things and people go to pot on you; they rot and start stinking for your special benefit. Isn’t that what they were all doing? Her mom. Billy. Dustin. And now Danny.

She returned to the Jeep, picked the dragonfly out of the cup holder, and looked at it again. Maybe Billy was one of the few people who understood her back then after all. She had wings and wanted to fly away while the rest of them stayed behind to relive the same lessons over and over again. She had come back to Augusta, hoping the sameness would help settle her. Now she felt more unsettled than ever.

When she got home, she found her mom asleep on the couch and covered her with the afghan they kept draped over the back of it. She would wake her for bed in another hour. Her mom looked too peaceful to move right away.

The answering machine had four messages. Three hang-ups, probably solicitors, but she didn't know for sure because her mother's answering machine was ancient and didn't display caller ID. The fourth one was from the agency where she worked. She had given them her mom's landline if they couldn't reach her cell, service being what it was in parts of Maine and her mom living in a dead zone.

Her supervisor, Keiko, checked in to let her know how much the agency was behind her during this difficult time. Keiko didn't ask, but Jessica knew they wanted to know how long she would be gone. She would call her back on Monday after taking her mom to her next appointment at the hospital tomorrow.

She could check on Dustin when she was there. If he was conscious, they could catch up on lost time. Maybe he would tell her the truth too. Why had he come back to Maine, of all places? And why, more importantly, had he risked his life, let alone a DUI, by getting behind the wheel of his car? It didn't make sense. But that wasn't the only thing.

She didn't understand why she had lied for Dustin. Maybe that's what fallen idols do, she decided. They lie for one another to

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keep their myths alive. At least she hoped that's what they did. She and Dustin had gotten out. They were exempt from small-town gossip.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Richard R. Becker is the author of the best-selling and award-winning short-story collection *50 States* and the novel *Third Wheel*. Collectively, his first two books have earned eleven literary awards. He is also the author of *Ten Threads*, a companion to *50 States*, which was published as a digital exclusive. *Born on Monday* is his second novel in the *50 States* universe.

When Becker is not writing fiction, he works as the president of Copywrite, Ink., a strategic communication and writing services firm. He has many other interests, including travel, acting, and spending time with family. He is married and has two adult children.

To learn more about Richard R. Becker, visit him at bio.site/richardrbecker