

A Medium's Birthday Surprise

Becky Tibbs: A North Carolina Medium's Mystery Series

By Chariss K. Walker

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Chapter 1

Becky Tibbs, wrapped snugly in a gently-worn pink terrycloth robe and with her feet clad in her favorite purple bunny slippers, ascended the stairs while attempting to rub the sleep from her eyes. She softly padded into her large, cheerful eat-in kitchen on the first floor level of the family home where she had lived for... forever.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee, thankfully set on a timer the night before, drew her like a magnet. If she'd ever needed the hot, caffeinated brew, she needed it on this bright, sunny morning. She hoped it would perk her up a little.

She hadn't slept well during the previous night. Truth be told, she felt as if she hadn't slept at all. Her night had been filled with foreboding and unsettling dreams.

Becky always drank her coffee black. Fancy coffee shops with their exotic flavors and steamed milk choices were lost on her. Give her a good cup of dark roast anytime and she was happy. She hoped the strong, fragrant coffee would clear the cobwebs from her mind.

She'd just filled a large mug, when suddenly she felt her long, unbrushed, coppery red hair lift at the back of her neck. A chill ran down her spine. Alarmed, she jerked around, sloshing her

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full cup in the process. The steaming-hot liquid scorched her hand.

"Ouch! Dang it!" Becky complained as she quickly set the steaming cup on the counter. "Look what you made me do! Didn't anyone ever tell you that it's not polite to sneak-up on folks?" She'd planned to give the unexpected guest a piece of her mind, but stopped mid-sentence when she recognized her visitor, "What the heck... Josh... is that re-really you?" she stammered.

"I'm sorry," Josh said as he reached out to stroke her arm. His touch sent a chill slithering down her warm flesh. Then, he leaned forward, took her hand, and kissed her damaged fingers. His icy breath soothed the hot, burned skin immediately, but Becky secretly wished he hadn't done that. She felt creeped-out enough already. She was shocked to see him. Josh looked at Becky with a lopsided grin, "I just wanted to surprise you for your birthday."

"You certainly did. I haven't seen you in ten years and you show up like this?" Becky was flabbergasted. Her heart raced erratically and pounded so loudly she wondered if Josh could hear its booming thwack in her chest. She certainly could. Tha-thump, tha-thump, tha-thump.

"Well, don't be mad at me, Becky. I love you," His reply was quick and indignant. His stringent voice caused the clean plates in the dish-drainer to rattle. Becky moved back and away from him.

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"Look, Josh, this is so inappropriate," Becky struggled to keep her voice calm. Her five-foot-five inch frame quaked with fear and trepidation as she looked up at him. She knew better than to rile him, "You've been gone a very long time and well...", her words hung in the air between them.

"That's not really my fault, Becky. I stopped by to see you last night, but you were sleeping. I waited in your room and I checked on you several times. You never woke up. I wanted to see you so badly that I came back this morning."

Becky shuddered. That explained a lot, especially the restless night. It's difficult to get any sleep when someone is watching you while you're in such a vulnerable state. She felt exposed and tried to shake off the uneasiness of that thought as well as seeing Josh again after such a long absence.

She certainly hadn't expected to wake up to the sight of her long, lost boyfriend today. His presence after such a long absence scared the bejesus out of her. And, to be honest, she wasn't easily surprised or frightened. Somehow, Josh had managed to do both.

Becky inhaled deeply in an attempt to calm her jittery nerves and then asked, "What happened to you anyway?"

Josh only shrugged his lean shoulders in response. He looked the same as he had all those years ago: tall, young, his blond hair slightly punked like a rock star. He'd always had an appealing sad-and-lonely-artist-thing going on. Those traits

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seemed to be essential to all artists whether painters, novelists, or musicians.

Josh was a budding musician back then. And, back then, she hadn't been able to resist his allure. Now that she was twenty-six years old, however, it just seemed unsettling and out of place.

"Where have you been all this time? I think you owe me an explanation." Becky softly said, trying to keep her tone even and pleasant, trying not to upset him.

"I don't know," he replied, looking away.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Becky asked, gently prodding Josh again.

"I remember dancing with you in the backyard under the sparkly lights your parents set up. We slow danced. Your folks were awesome. They were always so cool and thoughtful, making everything just right for you. Not like mine at all." The last sentence sounded bitter.

"My parents were great, Josh. They died five years ago," Becky said. Josh fell silent and looked at his feet. He couldn't seem to maintain eye contact with her. Becky carefully chose her next words, "What else do you remember?"

Flashes of lights and people... loud noises... filled Josh's mind. He shook his head back and forth several times as if trying to shake the images out of his skull. He felt pain... terrible pain in

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his head. Next, it seemed to center in his abdomen. He clasped his hands across his stomach and leaned over, gasping. Then, the pain traveled back to his head, ear-splitting anguish gripped him. Josh grabbed his head with both hands as if that would stop the onslaught of incomplete visions and torture, but he was still in agony.

Becky watched Josh struggle for several moments. She realized that he was scared. Not just scared, but terrified. Worried about his condition and the consequences more than she wanted to admit, she asked, "Josh? Are you all right?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Josh said, his voice suddenly high-pitched.

"I think we need to talk about it, Josh."

"Why? What good will it do?" he asked. His tone was icy and Becky knew what that meant. Trying to spark his memories had only succeeded in making him more agitated. It was evident from each clipped sentence he spoke next. "I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to think about it. I came here to wish you a happy birthday and to see you because I love you. You're my girl, Becky. You've always been my girl. Ever since second grade, you've been my Becky. Can't you just let the rest of it alone? Can't you just be happy to see me?"

"So wish me a 'happy birthday,' Josh," she whispered, trying to soothe the highly unstable friction.

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"Happy birthday, Becky," he repeated but his heart wasn't in it. He was already too far gone, too angry, and too volatile.

She'd pushed him to remember and he didn't want to remember anything about it. She didn't know the reason for that, but she knew she'd have to find out. She'd have to help him if she could.

As Josh's frustration grew, Becky noticed all the signs of instability. The lights in the kitchen flickered off and on as if they were also irritated. The electrical charge seemed to spur his anger on. Static filled the air emphasizing his raw emotions.

A harsh chilled air blew across Becky's face. She took a deep breath determined to face Josh head on. She didn't want to hurt him. She just needed him to see the truth.

"Josh, look at me," she calmly demanded. "What do you see?"

He looked at her and then looked away; his response a harsh, noncommittal grunt. This wasn't going to be easy, but Becky forged on. She'd been here before, she could handle it.

"Do I look like a sixteen year old girl to you?" she softly asked. Josh stubbornly ignored her question. He wouldn't even look at her for more than a few seconds. "Dang-it, Josh... I'm serious. Please, look at me. Do I look like I did the last time you saw me?"

"You might if you had on the same yellow dress," he said, mumbling so quietly she almost didn't catch it. Maybe his reply

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indicated he was calm again. Becky hoped he was, and wishing for that possibility, she kept going with an ultimate goal in mind.

"Josh, even that dress wouldn't make me sixteen again," she said, deliberately keeping her voice soft and gentle. "I'm not that skinny little girl any more. I've grown up. I live here alone in the family home because after my parents died I took over their family business. Look at me, Josh, please." Becky continued to use all her skills, gently pleading with him, but when Josh replied, the contrast was so severe, Becky jumped back away from him.

"Don't do this!" Josh screamed; his high-pitched voice reverberated around the kitchen bouncing off the tiled floors and countertops. Too late, Becky realized even her best efforts had failed. She'd pushed him too hard and too soon. His mood-swing had zoomed from one to ten in milliseconds.

Becky's coffee mug shattered into a hundred pieces of sharp porcelain shards. The now warm liquid splattered her face, hair, and upper body. A splinter of broken glass barely missed her left eye. Her ears rang... painfully, causing tears to sting her eyes. She trembled from the dampness that clung to her and the anger Josh had displayed.

She had to admit that Josh was dangerous, more dangerous than she'd imagined. Suddenly, Becky didn't feel equipped to deal with him. She questioned her position in this knowing that she was also in pain. Hadn't she suffered the loss just as much as Josh had?

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Becky shut her eyes and tried to calm herself again, but there was no calming this panic, this fear. Still, she knew in her heart that she was the only one who could help him. Didn't she know Josh better than anyone else? When she opened her eyes again, hoping to try once more, the room was empty.

And Josh... well, Josh was gone.

Chapter 2

Becky looked around the now deserted kitchen. Hot tears streamed down her freckled cheeks. Frustrated, she jerked a paper towel off its rack and haphazardly wiped at her face. The rough surface scratched her cheeks but she hardly noticed.

This just shouldn't have happened, she thought. I should've been able to help him. If not me, then who can do it? Who will do it?

After Josh left, a distinct calmness settled over the room. She looked around for clues, anything that might help her understand how it had gone so wrong. Even though the kitchen was a mess, it remained utterly silent. She didn't find any evidence that might show her how to fix this.

Becky was a mess too. The coffee mug only held twelve ounces, but she felt as if she'd been drenched by a gallon of the brown liquid. She felt dirty after the encounter with Josh and she

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couldn't wait to get a shower. She wanted to wash off the coffee stains and erase Josh's angry display from her person.

Just as she finished cleaning up the broken coffee cup pieces from the counter and floor, the phone rang. She hurriedly swept the pile of shards into the dustpan, dumped it into the trash can, and answered the call on the third ring, nabbing it just before the recorder could pick up.

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Becky, happy birthday to you!" her brother's deep baritone voice sang out the familiar tune. Becky laughed aloud. The last few terrifying minutes spent with Josh were happily pushed aside for the moment. Leave it to Bobby to call at the perfect moment to lift her sagging spirits.

"Aw, thank you, Bobby," she said with heartfelt sincerity.

"I thought you could use a pick-me-up this morning."

"You're very astute as always," Becky replied.

"I sensed you weren't having such a great morning. So what happened?" Bobby asked.

Although Becky suspected that her brother already knew most of it, she answered, "Josh showed up to wish me a happy birthday and it didn't go well."

"Josh?" Bobby asked in surprise. "Do you mean the Josh that ditched you on your sixteenth birthday?"

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"The one and only," Becky replied. Then, she recapped their brief, torrid exchange and conversation. By the time she'd repeated the story, the horror of it didn't seem as terrifying as it had while happening and Becky began to relax. She had regained faith in her abilities to figure out a way to help Josh.

"What are you going to do about him?" Bobby asked with genuine concern.

"Well, it's not like I can get a restraining order," Becky admitted with an ironic chuckle.

"Yeah, that won't work," Bobby agreed and then laughed with his sister. "Seriously, do you need any help? I mean, do you need me to help you handle him?" Bobby was concerned. She could hear it in his voice.

"No, I'll take care of it. Don't worry. His visit caught me unawares, but now that the shock is over and I know what to expect, I'm sure I can manage on my own."

"If you say so, Sis... but, you might be too close to it to handle it on your own. Still, that's a heck of a surprise for your birthday. Speaking of your birthday, what time is the big birthday bash anyway?" Bobby asked next.

"It's not big, just the three of us. But we'll get together this afternoon around five o'clock. Will you handle the grill for me?"

"You got it. What are we having? Barbeque, potato salad, baked beans, and the usual southern picnic fair?"

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"Yes, exactly."

"Mmm. I can't wait. I haven't eaten anything except burgers and fries for the last week. And, I do love your potato salad. You are making it, aren't you? I'm not coming if you aren't," Bobby threatened and then chuckled.

"You know I am, Bobby. I'm making the potato salad just for you."

"See you around five." He said and ended the call.

Chapter 3

Bobby was perceptive. In fact, all three of the Tibbs children had special talents and abilities. They just handled their gifts in different ways. While Bobby drank himself into a stupor so he wouldn't have to deal with his abilities, Barbara, the oldest sibling, regularly went to a psychiatrist for medication to ensure her gifts stayed firmly locked away. Neither Bobby nor Barb was happy about their special talents. But, Becky... well, Becky made a living from hers. She'd taken something that her siblings despised and turned it into a profitable business.

She'd made lemonade out of lemons.

Still, the Tibbs children were a tangled-up mess, a disaster.

Amazingly, the three siblings were unaware of their special bequests until the night their parents died. Justin and Joyce

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Tibbs had been on a hunting trip to Alabama. In the antiques business, they had regularly scouted several nearby southern estate sales and auctions to pick up new-to-them merchandise for their successful store located in the River Arts District of Asheville, North Carolina.

A close-knit family, the two older Tibbs had joined Becky at the family residence for the weekend and to await the return of their parents. Justin and Joyce were always home by Sunday evenings in time for a family meeting and dinner.

At the time, Becky still lived at home with her parents. Bobby had his own place in West Asheville not far from the family home. Barbara, a perpetual student at North Carolina State University, had lived just off campus in Raleigh.

Justin and Joyce had returned all right, but certainly not the way they were expected. Their parents had arrived only moments before the North Carolina State Police had shown up at the family home to deliver the bad news. It was terrible news.

Everything that happened that night felt like pandemonium to their three children.

"Kids, it's good to see you all here together. Boy-oh-boy!" Justin had vigorously exclaimed, "Am I glad to be home or what? It was a rough trip and the traffic was obscene, especially once we got back on I-40. The last twenty minutes were the worst. Traffic was like trying to crawl on your belly through quicksand."

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He'd prattled on for several minutes, oblivious to his children's shock.

"I don't know how we got here, Justin," Joyce had said. She looked around confused, noticing that her children seemed stunned to see them, but her husband was still unaware of that.

"What do you mean, Joyce? We're home. We know where 'home' is, for goodness sakes!" Justin had snarkily remarked. "I tell you, Joyce, the older you get the less sense you make at times."

"No, now hold on, Justin," Joyce had shot back. "We were just on the highway... in that awful bottleneck on I-40, remember? We were watching all the craziness. Some poor fools were..." her voice had trailed off, just as a fist loudly hammered on the front door.

In shock, Bobby went to answer the door; Becky and Barbara crowded close behind him all-the-while staring at their parents in disbelief and alarm. Something was terribly wrong and they knew it. They simply didn't know what to say or do about it.

"Are you next of kin for Justin and Joyce Tibbs?" the tall uniformed officer had asked.

"Yes," Bobby had replied, holding his breath. He looked at Barbara and Becky, shaking his head in sadness and then he pulled both of his sisters close, holding onto them securely in his strong arms.

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In the meantime, although, she hadn't known it was fatal, Joyce had excitedly tried to explain their traffic accident to her husband. She talked nonstop while the Trooper had given the death notification to their children. Becky was twenty-one at the time. Bobby was twenty-three, and Barbara was twenty-five.

When Justin and Joyce had heard the officer's bad news they began to realize they were no longer among the living, but Justin didn't take the news very well. He stood toe-to-toe with the man in uniform arguing that they were very much alive. The officer was unaware that a six foot man was shouting in his face and continued to give his rehearsed speech. It was the only way he could do it without crying too. It always broke him up to have to give the death notification.

Joyce finally pulled Justin away and they sat at the dining room table for a while as they accepted the truth of their situation. They were dead. They considered their fate and the future of their children. They were rattled and confused, but nonetheless very dead, and the acceptance of that was difficult and shocking. Their biggest surprise, however, was that their children could see them even though the police officer could not.

"What the hell is going on?" Justin had demanded. "How come the kids can see us but no one else can?"

"Wait just a minute," Joyce had interjected, talking loudly over everyone else. "It skips a generation. My mother had the gift

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just like her grandmother before her. It missed me, but I suppose it's genetic."

"What?" Justin had argued. "What the heck are you talking about, Joyce?"

"I'm talking about the gift of sight. Our children, all three of them have the gift now. It was passed down to them from my side of the family," Joyce said.

"You're talking crazy, Joyce. Absolute craziness! Something like this isn't inherited... it can't be. It has to be learned. What are these kids going to do without someone to teach them?"

"Oh shut it, Justin. They'll manage. We reared good, strong children. And, they'll handle it. They always do," Joyce had retorted. Her voice softened as she looked at her children, "Bobby darling, the will is in your father's desk, bottom drawer on the left. You three take care of each other and never forget how much we love you," she'd said as a final remark before escaping the insanity of the moment.

Shouting a goodbye to his three children, Justin had quickly followed his wife's example.

The State Trooper had hemmed and hawed for a few more minutes and then he left as soon as he could. He'd felt awful. Notifications were the hardest part of the job. He hated telling folks their loved ones were dead.

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