

COKE WITH A TWIST A MERCY WATTS SHORT

A.W. Hartoin

Published by A.W. Hartoin
Smashwords Edition
Copyright © A.W. Hartoin, 2012

Edited by Alan Rinzler
Cover art and design by Matt Campbell
Font by Karri Klawiter

Smashwords Edition License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Also By A.W. Hartoin

It Started with a Whisper

A Fairy's Guide to Disaster (Away From Whipplethorn Book One)
Fierce Creatures (Away From Whipplethorn Book Two) *December 2012*

Mercy Watts Mysteries

Coke With A Twist
Touch And Go
Nowhere Fast

For Shanna
The Mercy in my life.

I lifted a tray loaded with empty plastic pitchers high above my head and worked my way through the Monday night crowd. My hips nudged people out of the way, which guys took as an invitation to grope me. I made it to the bar, put in yet another order for Bud Light pitchers, when I felt a big hand on my ass. It was the fifth one to make a landing in the last hour. I smacked it, but it stayed, heavy and insistent. I spun around and stuck a finger in the chest of a guy roughly the size of my pickup. My finger sunk in to the first knuckle.

“I’m going to kick your ass, if you don’t knock it off,” I said.

The guy reached out and grabbed my finger. His hand was slow and assured; not the usual drunken frat boy action I was used to. Still, he was definitely on something. He looked at my finger like he was considering breaking it. Instead, he tried to put it in his mouth.

I whipped my finger away, grabbed an empty tray, and whacked him on the top of the head. No reaction. Then a couple of slow blinks and he melted like lard in a skillet. I don’t think I hit him all that hard; maybe it was just his time to pass out.

“Well now, Mercy. That’s a first.” Tom leaned over the bar to get a better look at my handiwork and smiled. Tom was the owner and chief bartender of the American Ball Club or the ABC, as he liked to call it. The name made the place sound classy, which it wasn’t. Tom decorated it in early American plywood and dirt. How it managed to pass health inspection was a mystery. Tom must’ve known a guy. The kind of guy that thinks breaking knees is educational. Health inspectors, beware.

“Had to be done,” I said.

“No doubt,” he said, still smiling.

Lard Butt lay on the floor making snuffling sounds like a hog at a feed trough. His friends came over, apologized, and pulled him out the door by his feet.

“The ABC’s lucky to have you,” Tom said.

“Don’t get used to it.”

I wasn’t waitressing a minute longer than necessary. My dad was a PI and he asked me to fill in on a case while he was off testifying in Chicago. Actually, Dad doesn’t ask, he orders. I agreed because it was easier than arguing about it and the case looked like a no-brainer. All I had to do was waitress at the ABC in case a university student, Josh Byers, showed up. Dad said Byers was a witness, which translates to “guilty of something,” but the bar was a waste of time in my opinion. Anybody who’d go to their favorite hangout while being hunted by the cops and a PI was an idiot. None of what I’d seen on Josh Byers said he was an idiot. But Dad

insisted I spend a week waitressing, no matter how much grabass I had to deal with. He must've known something I didn't. He usually did.

"Seriously, Mercy. I didn't think you'd last a shift," said Tom. "Even our ugly waitresses get hassled."

"Thanks," I said with a sneer.

"I meant that as a compliment."

Saying I looked like I couldn't handle a bunch of drunken frat boys was not a compliment. People tended to make certain assumptions about me. For the record, pretty doesn't equal weak. It doesn't equal drug-addicted dingbat either. I'm just saying.

Tom filled some more pitchers for me and put them on a tray. I delivered them, returned to the bar, and plunked down on a convenient stool. My waitressing days were over.

"You heading out?" Tom asked.

"In a minute." My feet were killing me. Waiting tables was worse than nursing. I'd rather give an enema than get felt up for eight hours. Tom leaned over the bar and looked at my swollen feet in the peep-toe pumps I once thought were comfortable. Then he told his customers he was done serving and to come back tomorrow. Undoubtedly they would.

"What can I get you? On the house," he said.

"I'm too tired to care," I said. "Knock yourself out."

Tom poured several ingredients in a cocktail shaker, shook it with gusto, and then poured the concoction into a dusty martini glass.

I cocked an eyebrow at him. "Really? A vodka gimlet?"

"I don't have any Dom Perignon '53."

"Are you serious?"

"Come on," said Tom with a sheepish grin. "I just want to see you drink it."

"My dad would smack you in the mouth and you wouldn't be the first."

"With a wife like that, who can blame him?" A blush bloomed across Tom's red-veined cheeks. "Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

"You've seen my mother, I take it."

"She dropped off your paperwork. She's something, ain't she?"

"That's one way to put it," I said.

"She looks as much like Marilyn Monroe as you do. I guess you get that a lot," said Tom.

"You know it." I tried to be nice, but I was irritated. One of these days, someone would notice a difference between me and Marilyn, but I wasn't holding my breath. I look like my mother, who's the spitting image of Marilyn. Together, we look like two versions of the same famous person. I'm Marilyn in *Bus Stop* and Mom's

Marilyn singing “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” to JFK. I’ve tried to fight it, but there it is.

I sighed and sipped the gimlet. Tom looked so happy, I batted my eyelashes for him and gave him my best surprised look.

“Holy crap,” he said. “That’s kind of freaky.”

“I know and please don’t ask me to do it again.”

“I won’t, but I have to ask this. Your dad calls you Mercy, but it says Carolina on your W-2. What’s the story?”

I had half a drink left and nowhere to be, except bed. My boyfriend, Pete, was supposed to come by and he was late as usual. I gulped half my gimlet down and gave Tom the story I’d been telling since I was eight. Sometimes I embellished, but that night I gave him the straight dope.

“My father claims that he called me Mercy because it’s the first thing that came into his head when he laid eyes on my mother. My mother says I’m called Mercy because the night they brought me home from the hospital, I screamed for twelve hours straight. All my father could say during those hours was, ‘Have mercy.’ It stuck and I’ve been called Mercy since I was three days old. Mom also says that night and every day after is the reason I’m an only child.”

“Who do you believe?” Tom asked.

“Mom. Dad’s a romantic.”

“The famous Tommy Watts a romantic. I never would’ve guessed it.”

I smiled and finished my drink as Pete walked in. He sat down next to me and tried to look contrite for being late. He failed. Pete was a surgical intern at the University Medical Center and terminally busy. Lucky for me it was a ten minute walk to the ABC or I probably wouldn’t have seen him for a couple of weeks. He was MIA most of the time and when he did show, he was late. He did love his work and it was hard to stay mad at such enthusiasm.

He spent the next ten minutes telling me, in detail, about a perforated bowel. I was a nurse, but bowel talk I could do without. My eyes glazed over and I put my head on the bar, but he ran the bowel full to the end.

“Are you looking for Josh Byers?” he asked just as my eyes started to close.

“Who told you that?” I lifted my head and finished off my drink.

“Nobody had to tell me. That case is huge, it happened in my old frat, and all the sudden you’re looking for a guy at the ABC,” said Pete, frowning. “I practically lived here during undergrad.”

“Oh, really. Do you want to get something to eat?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“What’s the subject?” I batted my eyes and tried to look clueless.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re looking for a rapist?”

“Well...,” I said.

Technically, Byers wasn't a rapist. Dad suspected him of drugging the victim, Lara Haven, with GHB, the date rape drug. Before he could get to her, she was raped and sodomized by a couple of happy opportunists, but they weren't the smartest criminals in town. They managed to tell everyone they knew about the great sex they had, and were arrested two days after the attack. The GHB was the only complication. They denied giving it to Lara. After two polygraphs and hours of interrogation, the cops were persuaded to believe them. That left the question of who drugged Lara and why he didn't rape her. Byers was seen scoping out Lara an hour before the attack and a week later he was missing. The Haven family felt the cops weren't being aggressive enough and hired Dad to find Byers.

“He didn't rape her,” I said.

“If he gave her GHB, he wanted to.”

“GHB can be used for recreational purposes.”

“A guy doesn't slip it into an eighteen-year-old girl's soda at a party for recreation and you know it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said.

Pete brushed his dark blond hair out of his face. “We should get you home.”

We weren't going anywhere. At least, we weren't going together. Pete had to go back to the hospital and I'd go home alone, again. We walked out to my truck and Pete asked, “So when do I get to see you again?”

“Whenever you can fit me into your busy schedule.”

“That's not very encouraging, is it?”

“No, it isn't,” I said with a sigh.

A cold October wind came off the Mississippi and Pete's cheeks looked raw beneath his tired eyes. “I'm going,” I said, but he pulled me to him. He placed my hands on his chest under his jacket and I felt a surge of warmth when he kissed me. It was slow and sweet at first, then deep, and finished with my lower lip in his mouth. He added some kisses down my neck for effect. Pete had lots of effects.

“Are you going to be here tomorrow?” Pete said between kisses.

“Yes. A couple more nights couldn't hurt, especially if you'll be by.”

“I'll come over if the ER's slow. Have you talked to the guys in the frat?”

“Dad has,” I said.

“How about the little sisters?”

“The what?” I asked.

“Frats are matched up with sororities and they're called little sisters.”

“Dad didn't mention it.”

“I have a friend. You can talk to her,” he said.

“And why would you do that? I thought you didn’t like me working on this,” I said.

“I don’t, but the sooner you find him, the better. It’s not like you’re going to stop because I don’t like it.”

“True.”

“Thanks for backing me up on that.”

We said good-bye and Tom smiled at me from beside the dumpster as I got into my truck. He called out that he’d see me tomorrow and raced inside the bar. I clunked my forehead on the steering wheel. More time at the ABC. That was the last thing I wanted. I drove home determined to soak my feet and maybe my head.

The next morning, the phone wouldn't stop ringing. Dad wanted a progress report, every floor in my hospital wanted me to work a double shift, and Mom called for no reason. Typical Mom. Lastly, Pete texted his friend's number to me.

After a couple of hours of stalling, I got up the nerve to cold call her. Pete had already asked her to arrange a meeting with the sorority president. I gave her my e-mail address and she promised to send me the entire list of current little sisters. She asked no questions, expressed interest in meeting me, and we hung up. She'd made my meeting with the president at four.

I spent the rest of the afternoon rifling through my closet trying to find something suitably college. Something that said, "I'm one of you." I put on a Gap long-sleeve tee and low-rise khakis. I pulled my blonde hair back and installed a bow. The look was pretty generic, but I wanted to resemble Marilyn as little as possible.

I needn't have bothered. The sorority house wasn't what I expected. Whatever happened to columns and class? It looked like a turn-of-the-century apartment house with rusting gutters and peeling paint. Once inside, a freshman doing the doorman thing greeted me. She had a bow, too. I told her about my appointment with Jennifer Kestler. I signed in and she went to get Kestler. After five minutes, she came back and told me Jen would be out in a minute. I sat, uninvited, on one of the flowery wing backs. The freshman eyed me as she fiddled with some pens in a cup. She looked at my boobs with a disapproving frown. I wanted to inform her that they weren't implants, just nature's way of giving me a permanent backache. Instead I asked, "Why are you watching the door?"

"It's for security. Freaks try to get in sometimes."

Apparently, no freaks were expected during her five-minute absence, so it was okay to leave the door unguarded.

"What a pain," I said with a sigh. "Everybody has to sign in?"

"Only from eight till ten. We use our keys after hours." She rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders.

Then I noticed she had homework in front of her. "Sorry to bother you, but do you know Josh Byers?"

"No." That was it. No explanation this time.

"He's in your brother frat."

"Is he?" She opened her book and picked up a highlighter. Interview over.

Jennifer Kestler came out wearing a lacrosse uniform and a sleek ponytail. She shook my hand and led me into what she called the audio-visual room. It was the TV room.

“What can I help you with?”

“I’m looking for information on Josh Byers and Lara Haven.” No use beating around the bush. If the front desk denied knowing Byers, the wagons were already circled.

“I don’t know how I can help you,” she said.

“How well do you know them?”

“He’s in our brother frat. I don’t know her at all.”

“You heard about what happened to her?”

“Yes.”

“And?” I was getting impatient.

“And nothing.”

“You’re not concerned.”

“She wasn’t one of our girls,” she said.

“So it’s okay?” Breathe, I thought. Don’t get pissy.

“No. It’s not okay.” Her face was stone. Her lips set into a thin line.

“But you know him,” I said.

“Vaguely.” She shrugged her shoulders and looked away.

“Has anyone else talked to you about him?”

“No. Why would they?”

“You’re connected.”

“We’re not connected.”

“All right. You’re socially connected,” I said.

“Not even that.”

“Are you saying you’ve never spoken to him?”

“No. I might have.”

I took a leap. “You were at the frat the night it happened. Did you speak to Byers?”

“No.” She sounded sure and, for once, honest.

“How about the rapists?”

“You don’t know they’re rapists.” She showed her first flash of anger on that one.

“They confessed.”

“It was a plea bargain.” Jennifer jutted her chin out at me and looked pleased with herself.

“So they lied.”

“They wouldn’t lie,” she said.

“So they wouldn’t lie and they’re not rapists.” I was irritating her. It felt good because she was sure irritating me.

“I don’t know anything about it,” she said.

“Which of your girls has dated Byers?”

“None,” she said.

So much for honesty.

“None? In three years, none of you has dated him? Did he ever have a girlfriend?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

What would you know? I had to take a deep breath not to say that out loud.

“Can I talk to some of the other girls?”

“I don’t think so. I have to go now. I have a date.” She tried to lead me to the front door, but I said, “Don’t bother. I can make it out.”

I felt her eyes on me as I walked down the hall. I didn’t want to leave, but I couldn’t think of a reason to stay. When in doubt, stall.

I paused at the front desk. “I’m not feeling so good. Do you mind if I sit for a moment? Cramps. You know how it is.”

The desk girl looked like she had no idea what I was talking about. Yeah, right. After five long minutes spent bent over in my chair, I still hadn’t thought of a way to talk to anyone, but sometimes waiting does the work for you. A couple guys came in and asked to see DeeDee and Loni. They signed in and asked to be taken straight back. Desk Girl took them without hesitation. Their security sucked.

They went around the corner and I had a miraculous recovery. If everyone had to sign in, excepting those that had the brains to avoid the so-called security, then Byers’s name would probably be in the book if he was going out with somebody. I scanned the book and came up empty.

Luckily, the books for the last couple years were in the second drawer down. Six months before, Byers had signed in for Becky Stratman. I was running out of time, but a quick scan of previous pages revealed that he’d visited Becky a lot. She had to be a girlfriend. I heard footsteps, shoved the books back and jumped into my seat.

I stretched and smiled at the desk girl. “Tylenol is finally kicking in.”

She couldn’t have cared less. During my stretch, I noticed the pictures of the girls on the wall neatly categorized by year. I walked over still stretching and tried to find that year’s pictures. They weren’t up yet, but the previous year’s were. They even put the names of the girls under their pictures. How nice of them. Especially since they couldn’t seem to remember anyone. Now I would recognize Becky when I saw her.

I left, drove a couple of blocks away and parked. I got out the binoculars Dad gave me for my fifteenth birthday. I liked them until I discovered he expected me to use them on his cases. I could see the front door of the house and the cars pulling into

the lot. Most of the girls were walking since it was close to the main campus. Quite a few blondes came and went, some real, most not. Becky wasn't one of them.

I waited an hour and started getting antsy. I never was good at surveillance. Invariably, I had to go to the bathroom, fell asleep, or get so bored I wanted to attack the person under surveillance. For the love of God, do something. Most people were boring, but they probably think they're interesting as all get out.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I broke down and called Morty. Dad does a huge business in divorce/infidelity and Morty is his go-to guy for surveillance. Morty doesn't get bored. He is a dungeon master for his Dungeons and Dragons cronies. He sits and works on the latest plan of attack. Eventually curtains would be drawn back or there'd be a covert kiss in the doorway and Morty would be ready.

If he's at home and awake, he's doing checks and talking to contacts. Morty loves the work. He was a wedding photographer, but he quit when he started fantasizing about beating the brides to death with his camera.

"Mort, it's me. I need a favor."

"Is it billable?" he asked.

I pictured Morty sitting at his desk with his belly hanging over the keyboard. He'd be smiling his twisted smile while he calculated how much he could charge me. Great, not only was I not getting paid, now I had to pay Morty.

"Sure, why not." It would take two minutes. I could afford two minutes.

"Be quick. I've got three other lines going."

"I need you to call a sorority and find out where Becky Stratman is. You can say you're her English professor or something."

"Does she have an English professor?"

"Probably."

"You're tired of sitting in the car, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm bored stiff," I said. "You want the number or not?"

Ten minutes later, I got a call back. Becky had a late lab and got out at six. Morty had taken the liberty of finding the building and the most likely exit. More billing. Great.

I headed over to the science building, bought a mocha breve, and plunked myself down on the steps to accost her when she came out. There was a homeless guy opposite me with a large cardboard box. He looked as bad as a person could look and that wasn't helping him get rid of whatever was in the box. People would look in and practically run in the other direction. After a half hour, I couldn't stand it and decided to take a look. I prepared for the worst, his underwear or something, but it was a kitten. The nastiest, most pathetic cat I'd ever seen and that was being generous. It sneezed, spraying phlegm on the side of the box, and looked up at me with crusty orange eyes.

“Want a kitty?” he asked.

“Not really. Just curious.”

“You sure? He’s a nice kitty.”

I gave him a wave and sat back down with a bucketful of guilt. I wanted a cat, not that cat, but a clean, purring animal would be nice. I needed something to come home to. Something that didn’t care when I came home just as long as I did.

Quarter after six, Becky came out with a group and headed down the stairs toward me. They separated at the second flight and I took my shot.

“Becky Stratman?”

She turned to me and said, “Yes.”

I was taken aback for a moment. She was much prettier than her picture. She was almost luminous. She looked like JonBenet Ramsey if she’d been allowed to grow up. The beauty pageant JonBenet, that is, not the little girl in pigtails.

“Hi.” I extended my hand and she gave my fingertips a shake. “I’m Mercy Watts. I talked to Jennifer Kestler earlier and she said you might be here.”

“What do you want?” The words rushed out of her mouth. She caught herself and gave me an apologetic smile to make up for her rudeness. It always amazed me how well name-dropping worked at getting people to talk. Becky never imagined I might be lying and I felt a little bit guilty about it. Not guilty enough to stop lying, of course.

“I wanted to ask you some questions about Josh Byers.” Her face knotted and I’m sure her stomach did too. He broke up with her. No doubt about it.

“Why?” she asked. “Who are you?”

“Private detective. I was hired to find him.”

“His family hired you?”

“Yes. They’re very concerned.” More lies. Shame on me. “They said you know him rather well.”

Becky flushed and said, “Can we go somewhere?”

I agreed and we went to a coffee bar down the street. It was filled with students done with a hard day of mind expansion. They were happy. Becky wasn’t. We ordered at the counter and sat.

“How well do you know Josh?” I said.

“We dated for over a year. We broke up last May.”

“Have you talked to him lately?”

“No. You’re really a detective?” She looked suspicious, but not worried.

I nodded. Please don’t ask for ID.

Becky looked into her hands and I thought she might start crying.

“Do you know Lara Haven?” I asked. “The girl that got raped at his frat.”

“No, but I read about the case. It’s totally awful what happened to her.” She seemed genuinely affected, but she was thinking fast, too. Those hands were mighty interesting.

“Have you heard anything that might help? Anything about the GHB?”

“Why are you asking about that?” she said, looking back at me.

“Because that’s what she was given and we need to find out why.”

“And how.”

“We know how. It was slipped into her Coke. She was trying to sober up before she went home,” I said.

“Oh.”

“What do you know about GHB?”

“Not one damn thing,” she said.

We sat silently for a few minutes, listening to the myriad of conversations around us. I wondered if anyone else could feel what was coming from Becky. She knew plenty about GHB.

“I have to go,” she said so quietly I nearly didn’t hear her.

“Can I talk to you again? It might be a great help.”

Becky stood up. “Sure.”

I sat there for a moment with my second mocha, feeling bloated and sick. I didn’t want to know these private things about Lara or Becky. I didn’t want to know anything about anybody. I got up and headed back to my truck. The homeless guy was still there with his box. No surprise.

“How much for the cat?” I asked.

“He’s free to a good home. I wouldn’t mind a donation though,” he said.

Of course, a donation.

“Here’s a twenty.” I reached for the kitten, but he stopped me.

“Take the box. Easier to carry,” he said, eyeing my mocha.

I handed it to him and took the box.

On the way home, I stopped at Target and bought cat supplies. The kitten started hacking and spewed more phlegm all over his box. He smelled horrible too, but there was nothing I could do about it. I had the ABC at eight and no vets were open anyway. I set up his stuff in the bathroom, showed him the litter pan a dozen times and said a prayer that he’d use it. From the look of him, he’d be in rigor by the time I got home.

The bar was a study in boredom that night. Byers didn’t show and neither did Pete. When I got home, the kitten, skanky as ever, was alive and sleeping on my bed. I thought the comforter might have to be burned. On the upside, he’d used the pan. After much debate I decided to sleep in my bed. The beer and cigarette smell in my hair blocked out most of his stench and I slept well.

The next morning I made a vet appointment and cleaned my bathroom in an effort to avoid calling my cousin Chuck. He was the detective in charge on Lara Haven's case and I needed an update. Chuck was my cousin by marriage. His mom married my Uncle Rupert. Since we're not blood related, he thinks we should date. The thought makes me want to scrub my skin raw with a loofah. He wasn't above blackmail and dealing with him was better left to Dad or Morty. Since neither of them were answering my texts, I was out of options. I had to call. First, I cleaned the kitchen and vacuumed. It was 11:30 and if I called then he would ask for lunch. Not going to happen. It was either that or clean the fridge. I had half the condiments on my counter when the phone rang. It was Chuck. Just my luck.

"Hey Mercy. It's been a long time," he said.

"Not long enough,"

"Don't be like that. I hear you're helping out with the Haven case. Got anything for me?"

"Nothing you don't already know. I am curious about Byers though. Have you shown Lara Haven a photo of him yet?" I asked.

"No need. She knows him," he told me.

"What? Dad didn't tell me that."

"He doesn't know. We interviewed her again yesterday. Couldn't get much out of her before. And now the Havens are getting nervous."

"About what?" I asked.

"About how we don't have a suspect in custody yet. I'm surprised they haven't been crawling up your dad's tailpipe."

"You could've told me this earlier."

"Yeah, I always try to keep you up to date," he said.

"How does she know Byers?"

"Forget it."

"You'd tell Dad." I hated using the Dad card, but sometimes it was a necessity.

"Maybe and maybe not."

"Come on."

"Well, it depends," he said.

"On what?"

"Dinner tonight?" Chuck asked with his smoothest voice.

"Does Dad date you for information?"

"Not lately. So?"

"Just tell me. You know you want to," I said.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I don’t care whether you know or not.” He’d lost the smooth voice.

“Then it won’t hurt to tell me.”

He paused and thought about it. I could hear him cracking his knuckles in the background. “Byers dumped his girl for Lara, but she wasn’t interested. Been chasing her for a few months.”

“Are you telling me that you didn’t know this until this last interview? What happened to interviewing friends and family? You asleep at the wheel?”

“Of course we knew. Couldn’t get Lara to confirm until yesterday though. Doctors had her pretty doped up. Byers is a strong possibility for the GHB.”

I gave the phone a couple of quick raps on the breakfast bar.

“Ow. That hurt my ear.”

“He’s not a possible. He’s the one,” I said.

“Could be,” Chuck said.

“Who’s the girlfriend?”

He rustled some papers and mumbled, “I have it here someplace.”

“Becky Stratman?” I suggested.

“How’d you know?”

“We had a talk.”

“Anything I should know?” It was Chuck’s turn to squirm.

“Forget it.”

“Mercy!”

I gave a quick “catch you later” and hung up. Becky Stratman, little miss I-don’t-know-anything-about-Lara-Haven, my ass. If Byers dumped her to go after Haven there was no way she didn’t know it. They moved in the same circles and people talk. Maybe she was embarrassed to be dumped in favor of a girl who wouldn’t give Byers the time of day. I would be.

I thumbed through the file Dad gave me and came up with the witness list from the party. Becky wasn’t on it. I called Becky a couple of times and left messages. Next I called Pete’s contact. I quizzed her about the sorority house. She told me Saturday was the fall formal. Since the house would be empty, that’d be an excellent time to go rifling through underwear drawers. If Becky knew where Byers was, the evidence would be in her room.

I told Pete’s friend that I needed to get into the sorority house. I don’t know if it was my charm, Pete’s, or the thrill of doing something bad, but she agreed to help. She’d turn off the alarm and let me in through the back fire escape. We planned for seven o’clock, when the girls would be at the formal dinner. By the time we got off the phone, she was breathless.

The rest of the week was a slow go. I had three twelve-hour shifts in St. James ER serving up cough medicine and painkillers. Why couldn't things be as exciting as they were on TV? Compared to work, my new cat was scintillating. I took the skanky cat to the vet and he had everything, an upper respiratory tract infection, ear mites, an ear infection, kennel cough, and worms. I came home with a huge bill, an armload of medications, and no good method of giving them. Skanky cat had energy when it came to avoiding pills and I had the scratches to prove it. I did get to see Pete at the bar a couple of times. He was dead on his feet. He suggested Betadine for my scratches and maybe a mercy killing.

I battled with Skanky a couple of times on Saturday morning. He still hadn't cleaned himself and wouldn't let me near him with water. I fielded calls from Mom, Dad, and worst of all, Chuck. He didn't have anything new and just wanted to bother me. At five, I put on my good girl duds and headed out.

The sorority exit was propped open as promised. A brunette leaned against the hall wall trying to look casual. She was pretty and sleek with limbs too long for her body. She was my opposite. I didn't know if that was bad or good. Hopefully, Pete wasn't trying something new on for size. She gave me a wave, whispered "2B," and went around the corner. I found 2B unlocked, courtesy of the brunette, I supposed. Good thing. I hadn't thought how I'd get in without a key. It was a nice room, no flounces or pastels, instead studious and sincere. It was a single with a bathroom attached. I started in there and found nothing but tons of makeup and every painkiller on the over-the-counter market. Stuck in the back behind the Tylenol was a prescription bottle with the label peeled off. The pills looked like Zoloft, but meds often look alike. I'd served enough to know.

I slipped one in my pocket. Then I went through her drawers, easing my hands under her neatly folded undies and sweaters categorized by color. Becky would've made Martha Stewart proud. I found nothing there or in her desk. She was an English major with no written material of her own, other than research papers and comparative essays. She didn't have a diary or journal that I could find. Her laptop was missing. She did have a collection of photo albums from childhood to college, all labeled with dates and names. Byers made up one entire album.

After her drawers and desk, I started on her bed. She had rolling storage bins under there. More sweaters. She kept her shoes in rows under the foot of her bed. They were probably alphabetized, so I was careful not to move them. I felt through two dozen pairs of pumps and loafers and found nothing in the toes. I was lying on my stomach with my head under Becky's bed when a voice came through the door. "Dinner's over."

I bonked my head on the frame and started scooting back out when I noticed one more pair I hadn't checked. Stripper heels, not Becky's style, and they were out of my reach. I scooted from under the bed and straightened up her coverlet. I could hear cars pulling up into the parking lot. I didn't have much time, but I hated to leave without going through everything. I pulled Becky's bed out from the wall and grabbed the shoes. Right one clear. Left one had a baggy stuffed in the toe. There were half a dozen white pills dotted with blue inside. I took one and replaced the shoes and bed.

I listened at the door before I opened it. I heard voices, but they weren't on the same floor. I peeked out and saw the brunette call to someone down the main staircase. The brunette heard the door and glanced back at me. I must have looked panicked because she pointed to a door marked emergency stairs and made a chopping motion with her left hand. Heels tap-danced up the main stairs. I ran to the door, jerked it open, and closed myself in.

It was black as my bra in there. I searched for the light switch. Before I found it, I realized I shouldn't turn it on. I felt around, found the stairs, and went down one flight to the second floor. Plenty of people there, so I kept going until I got to the basement. No voices. The door was stiff, but I got it open with a couple hard shoves. Light came in through small windows level with the parking lot. I picked my way through trunks and luggage. At the back was a door with a rusty-hinged lock. I found a length of metal next to the ancient furnace and used it to pry off the hinge in seconds. You got to love that security.

At home, I called Pete and left a message. Then I e-mailed his friend and told her that she might want to check out the basement door. It was convenient, but I didn't want any Ted Bundy wannabe's getting in. That left me with little to do until Pete called back. I gave the skanky cat his meds and went to bed.

Pete called at eight in the morning and woke me up. I was incoherent for the first ten minutes of our conversation, but Pete didn't notice. He told me about his night's best catch in the ER, multiple stab wounds to the abdomen. Then I asked him if he knew anybody who could analyze some drugs discreetly. He said he'd ask around.

Two hours later, Pete called and told me to meet a guy named Paul outside the university biological sciences building. Paul showed up ten minutes late and he looked more likely to swallow my pills than analyze them, but what did I have to lose? I couldn't give them to Chuck and face questions about where they came from.

Paul was better than he looked and called with results that night. "They're Zoloft and GHB. Both good quality. You want 'em back?"

"I guess so. Can you give them to Pete?"

"Sure thing. Pete said you might be able to do me a favor if I came back quick with this."

"Yeah. What is it?" I wished Pete had mentioned this earlier.

"I was wondering if you could check out my girl for me. She says she's never done time but you never know."

I gave him Morty's number and instructions to tell Morty that I would pay.

"You're absolutely sure about the GHB?" I asked.

"No doubt at all. I'm going to be a pharmacist."

I thanked him and walked away feeling nervous about having my next prescription filled. If Paul could be a pharmacist, where was the cutoff? He did sound sure about the GHB though. If Becky admitted that she used it with Byers, it would be some nice circumstantial evidence against him. I had to give Chuck the information, but I decided to try to get an admission out of Becky myself first. I left a message for her saying that I knew about her and the GHB. Becky didn't call back before my next shift at the ABC. I left home with some new scratches from the skanky cat.

That night the Monday night crowd was back and it was a rowdy one. Some athletic team won something and the celebration was on. I was half-soaked in Bud by ten when Pete called to say he'd try to be there at twelve. He said to wait. I hated to stay at the ABC any longer than necessary, but who knew when I'd see Pete again. He was the only reason I stayed. I figured Byers was long gone, maybe skiing in Europe as rapists have done before him.

I texted Morty for what could loosely be termed entertainment. He had a line on Josh's parents' finances and nothing was going on there. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles were the same. Morty thought a family friend was giving him funds and that'd be harder to trace.

At eleven, I spotted Becky standing in the back exit in oversized sweats and mud-caked tennis shoes. A drizzle started behind her, making her hunch and wince at the drops hitting her face and shoulders. Her black eyeliner was smudged beyond the limits of fashion, and she wore no other makeup under a curtain of stringy, unwashed hair.

I walked over, balancing a couple pitchers on my tray and set them on an unoccupied table near her. "How are you doing?"

She tucked a stray lock behind her ear and shifted her weight from foot to foot.

"Becky?" I said.

She bit her lip, looking past my shoulder. "Have you seen him?"

"Byers?"

"Yes. I think I saw him come in here. He texted me earlier."

"I haven't seen him. Why did he text you?"

"He was really mad. I left him a message on his cell phone about the GHB. How did you know?"

"A pharmacist told me," I said. "Why'd you have it?"

"I used to take it sometimes when we were ... together."

"Why?" I tried to keep my expression neutral, but some cracks were forming. I wanted to kick Byers's ass.

"Josh liked it. He said it loosened me up." Becky looked at everything in the bar, except me.

Yeah, we wouldn't want to be uptight for Josh.

“Why did you keep the pills?”

Her eyes went to those fascinating hands again and she sniffed. “He might come back.”

“And you wanted to be ready just in case.”

“I know it sounds stupid, but I love him a lot,” she said.

“You’re not stupid.”

Becky crossed her arms and looked at the ceiling. I started thinking about all the things I’d done for guys who weren’t worth the trouble. If I didn’t nip it in the bud, we’d be having a sobfest before long. I wasn’t in the mood, and most guys are great, excepting the Joshes of the world.

“I guess I should go.” Becky blew her nose and her eyes started leaking.

“Not yet. Come have a drink,” I said.

“I’m not twenty-one yet.”

“A Coke then.” I sat her at the bar, got more pitchers, and delivered them to an irate table. They ordered two more, yelled at me that I wasn’t getting a tip, like there was hope of that anyway. I didn’t spot Byers in the crowd, but I didn’t try too hard. Let the cops deal with him. I checked on Becky. She was at the bar sipping her Coke and chatting with Tom. I went to the ladies’ room and pulled out my cell phone. I left messages for Chuck on his cell and at the station. Then I went back in. Becky was still talking with Tom and he motioned me to the end of the bar.

“She says that guy you’ve been looking for came in here,” Tom said.

“I know.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I already called the detective on the case and I’ll have a look around. Give me a couple more pitchers,” I said.

“Bud?”

“What do you think?” I smiled at Tom and he filled my pitchers.

I delivered the pitchers while looking for Byers, and then I walked the perimeter. No luck. I told Tom and Becky to watch the doors and I went outside to check the parking lot for his Charger. If he was dumb enough to show up at the ABC, he was dumb enough to drive his own car. The Charger wasn’t in the lot, but I didn’t bother with the side streets. Back inside, I served more pitchers and kept an eye out.

My shift ended and Pete was late as expected. I went to the bar and sat on the cracked vinyl seat next to Becky. She’d wiped off her smeared eyeliner and gave me a wan smile.

“How are you feeling?” I said.

“Totally stupid, but I’ll get over it.”

“I have to tell the police about the GHB.”

“I know. Will I get in trouble?” she asked.

“Probably not, but it would be better if you told them,” I said.

“If you say so, I guess I will. I’m tired of thinking about him all the time.”

“That’s one thing I know you’ll get over.” I patted her back and watched the last customers file out the door.

Becky blew her nose into a well-used tissue and Tom brought me a vodka gimlet, served with a bad-boy grin. I took a long, cool sip, and propped my elbows on the bar. We didn’t speak for a while. I couldn’t think of anything positive to say. She was in for it. No doubt about that.

Tom yelled from the back room that I had a call. I checked and sure enough my cell phone was dead. I went into the back, and took the call. It was Pete begging off. I wasn’t mad, but managed to sound like I was. I liked to keep him on his toes.

I walked back to the bar. My footsteps echoed off the scarred walls and startled Becky. She searched in her bag for a new, less disgusting tissue, and wiped her cheeks. She started to deflate. Probably thinking about the trouble to come. I asked her about her family, classes, anything I could think of to take her mind off it. Once I got her going she took off, talking about everything from Picasso to hem lengths.

As she talked, I looked down at my drink, and the edges fuzzed out. After one drink? Please. There it went again. I looked at the remaining gimlet in the glass and it looked different, murky and dark. Pete had told me something about drinks being murky. Murky. Murky. The edges got fuzzy again and stayed that way. I felt like I was looking through a paper towel roll, like when I played pirates as a kid. The feeling was weird, but it didn’t worry me. I felt pretty damn good. What did Pete say about murky? What a funny word. Wait. Pete said drinks got murky when GHB was in them. I looked at my glass. Was it different? I turned to Becky. She was smiling into her Coke. It was the first genuine smile I’d seen on her face and I got a chill at the sight of it. I told her I had to pee and went to the bathroom.

I knelt by the stall and stuck my finger down my throat. It all came up, the gimlet, fries from earlier, and I kept going. I had to get it all out. I dry-heaved for a couple minutes and then lurched to the sink. I put my face under the tap and drank as much as I could. The icy water gave my brain some focus, but things were still soft and flowing. My arms felt loose and light at my sides as if they might float off my body. I couldn’t drink any more water and there was no point in vomiting again. I needed to find Tom, if I could get to the door. I rubbed my hands across the rough plaster walls until I felt the door’s wood grain under my fingertips. The wood fascinated me. I wanted to keep touching each subtle variation in texture. I touched and touched until the edges became dark instead of fuzzy. I tried to refocus and remember what I was trying to do when the door swung open and smacked me in the face. I flew backwards and landed in a slimy puddle.

“What’s wrong? Can’t handle your liquor?” Becky looked down at me from the doorway. She moved in and out of focus, but her smile didn’t waver. Her smile was solid.

She pulled me up and steered me out the door. We headed outside, not back into the bar. I tried to say that Tom would miss me, that he would know, but she was way ahead of me.

“Don’t worry. He’ll think it’s Josh,” she said.

“You drugged Lara,” I slurred.

“I thought if he had her once, he’d get over it.”

I tried to answer. Becky ignored my attempt.

“Now he’s worried about her. She got raped and he’s still into her.”

I blubbered and drool slipped down my chin.

“Yuck. We’ll have to take you somewhere and clean you up. How about the north side? Only two murders there last night.”

Becky pinned my arm behind my back and forced me into the cold, empty parking lot. Tents of warm light came down from street lamps, but we avoided them. My legs kept moving. I couldn’t make myself stop walking. I saw a brick in my path as we headed out of the lot. The more I concentrated on the brick the better I felt. I wanted to hit it and I did. My left foot tagged it; I tripped, Becky released me and I landed face first in a puddle. The ice-ringed water brought me back to most of my senses. I rolled to my left with a fake moan.

“Oh, look what you did.” Becky averted her face from a group of guys headed towards the ABC as she knelt by my side. “She’s really, really drunk.”

No one calls me a drunk. I reached up and grabbed her collar. I yanked as hard as I could. She came at me like a brick over an overpass and our foreheads collided with a thud. She shrieked as I rolled over on top of her.

The guys yelled, “Cat fight! Cat fight!”

I couldn’t lift my torso, so I started bashing her nose with my forehead. I knew it was good for something. A spray of blood filled my eyes, but I kept bashing. Someone pulled me off. Becky kept shrieking and through that block of noise, I heard a familiar voice.

“Mercy! For Christ’s sake, knock it off! Shit!”

Chuck held me tight by the shoulders. I tried bashing him, but my head wouldn’t make contact. I gave it up and realized my butt was freezing. The asshole set me in a puddle. There were two puddles in the entire area and my face landed in one and my ass the other.

Once Chuck thought it was safe, he wiped my eyes off and started asking questions. I understood none of them.

“I want to go to sleep,” I said. It must’ve come out differently because I ended up in an ambulance.

The next morning I woke up lying on the kind of concrete block hospitals like to call mattresses. A lumpy mass pressed on the bridge of my nose and a line of burning pain shot from my jaw to the back of my head. Someone must have taken out my contacts because the room was blurry while my head was clear. A shape walked in and sat beside my bed. I was hoping for Pete or at least a doctor, but it was Chuck. I sensed a smile emanating from him. Something about me and bandages made him jolly.

“Hey babe. Lookin' good,” he said.

Grrr.

“You want to know what the damage is or what?”

“I’ll wait for Pete or someone I respect.” I rubbed my jaw. It felt like a dentist was drilling up into my brain.

“Ouch. You really know how to hurt a guy,” Chuck said, laughing.

“Come here,” I said.

“I’ll pass. Besides, you’re in no condition to tangle with me.”

“Ya think ...” I tried to sit up and a hot, red throb passed through my head.

“Told you so.”

Grrr.

“Well babe, you’re a friggin mess, but maybe I’ll help spring you anyway.”

Behind him Pete said hello. He put a tray on my rolling table, tucked my hair behind my ears and put my glasses on.

“I’m OK,” I said.

“I’ll be the judge of that, or Dr. Levitt will be.” Pete kissed my cheek. His tone was jovial, but his face didn’t match it.

“Well, let me have it,” I said.

“You broke your nose. You have a concussion, a crack in your upper mandible and two sprained wrists. We set the nose. It should heal nicely. There’s nothing to do for the other three but rest. And I mean serious rest.”

“When did I break my nose?” I asked.

“If you don’t know, I can’t help you,” said Pete.

Chuck cackled. “You broke your jaw, too.”

“Yeah, hilarious,” I said.

“Seriously now. We have to talk. Do you mind, Pete?”

Pete kissed me again, said Levitt would be in soon, and went back to his rounds.

Chuck sat on the edge of my bed and looked at me for a second. For once, it wasn't a leer. He looked like a nice guy. The image was disconcerting and I could almost understand what my friends saw in him. He was kind of attractive when he wasn't picturing me naked.

Chuck patted my hand and pulled out a pad. He proceeded to write down what I remembered. I was in a painkiller fuzz, so it wasn't much. For once, he told me what he knew. Becky had been telling the truth about Byers texting her. He'd taken a spur-of-the-moment camping trip down at Meramac State Park and returned the day of my run-in with Becky. He'd seen the papers and freaked when he saw he was a rape suspect. The Zolof was his. He'd had problems with depression for years. When he got in a funk it wasn't unusual for him to disappear for a couple of weeks. His parents omitted that info because apparently it was better to be a rape suspect than to have psychiatric problems.

"Becky pretty much told me she drugged Lara. Did she confess?" I asked.

"Hell no, she didn't confess. They never confess. It'd probably work out better for her if she did," said Chuck.

"Why?"

"Because I don't think rape was what she had in mind when she drugged Lara Haven."

"She wanted Lara out of Byers's system."

"Yes, but I doubt she thought a couple of nice frat boys would come along and rape Lara."

"She didn't seem to mind it though," I said. "And why'd she want to kill me anyway? I had no idea she put the GHB in Lara's Coke until she put it in my gimlet."

"You found out about her GHB stash and you were going to give me the information. Then Byers told her that he had an alibi and to go screw herself because he loves Lara. Idiot."

"He's an idiot because he loves Lara?"

"He's an idiot because he told Becky. You never tell your ex you love someone else. It's like asking to get framed for rape. Fucking moron."

"She's the moron. She underestimated me," I said.

"Oh yeah, you're Billy Badass."

"Hey, I took her down."

Chuck put the straw in my juice box for me. "I guess you did."

"I can't believe I felt sorry for her. What a bitch," I said.

"You should see her in the interview room. She's pretty damn cold."

Chuck described his interview with Becky. Then I fell into a black hole of sleep. He was gone when I woke up. It's nice to know something gets rid of him.

From my deluxe accommodations, I called my dad and gave him the rundown. He gave me a verbal pat on the head and said that he'd be back in town in a couple of days. I could practically hear him salivating over the Havens' hefty bill. If I was lucky, I might get a lunch out of it.

I tried calling my mother at the spa in Tucson, but Pete had called her already and she was on her way back. She'd stay with me whether I wanted her to or not. I deserved some cuddly days sitting on the sofa watching *Pride and Prejudice* and eating butter pecan ice cream. Mom's always good for ice cream and six-hour girly flicks.

Dr. Levitt released me late in the afternoon, just in time for rush hour. Pete pled family illness and swapped a shift in my honor. Once at home and firmly placed on the couch, he dosed me with more narcotics. When I woke up, he was sitting next to me eating BBQ potato chips and watching basketball on the tube. I was horribly injured, and B-ball is my second least favorite sport. I once lost an argument with Pete about bowling. I said that it wasn't a sport at all. Pete won, so basketball remains at number two.

I begged for tea and a girly movie. I got the tea and Pete won the movie debate. He thought I would feel better watching someone else walk on broken glass and *Die Hard* was just what I needed.

Pete was right. I did feel better. Better, but woozy. He changed my nose dressing and combed my hair. I figured if a man changes your nose dressing, he had to be good people. I'd keep him as long as he wanted to be kept.

He cuddled to my side, eyeing my split lip and puffy eyes. "I guess you know you look like Marilyn Monroe."

"I've heard it once or twice. You should see my mother."

"Except your eyes are green," he said.

"You just said the magic words."

"Great. Which ones? I'll say them again." Pete stroked my cheek.

"Figure it out." The skanky cat sauntered in and jumped up on the sofa between us.

Pete recoiled. "When did you get this kitten? He stinks."

"He's not that bad. I kind of like him," I said. "I call him Skanky."

"I can see why."

The little cat looked at us and trampled over both our laps searching for the perfect spot. Finding nothing suitable for his aims, he sat between us. He gave a huge, curly-tongued yawn and stuck a hind leg in the air. Then Skanky began an intense cleaning session. Pete and I looked at each other.

"You'll have to change his name," he said.

"Don't count on it."

THE END