

COKE WITH A TWIST A MERCY WATTS SHORT

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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.

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