



RAW

DEAL

MELANIE JACKSON

A MIDWAY MYSTERY

AFTER SHOT

Saturday, October 19, 10:02 a.m.

She aims the gun at my heart. “Go on, Colin. Jump.”

We’re on the Capilano Suspension Bridge. Far below, Capilano River swirls and foams over the jagged canyon rocks. I step sideways to glance down. The bridge sways. My guts twist.

Ray steps sideways, too. In her white-knuckle grip, the gun follows me like a homing device.

“You’re going to jump,” she says. “If you don’t, I’ll shoot you.”

She can’t mean it, not with those picnickers back there, in the park. She can’t take the chance they’ll look up. She’s bluffing. She has to be.

I think of that rushing current, those sharp, pointy rocks.

“Forget it,” I tell her.

Ray shrugs, and fires.

BEFORE SHOT

CHAPTER ONE

Friday, October 18, 12:05 p.m.

He claps an arm around my shoulders. His voice is easy, friendly. His eyes are laughing.

“C’mon, buddy. It’ll be easy. You fill in for me, and I make it worth your while.”

He’s holding out two — no, three fifties.

I’m new to this school, but I already know who he is. Jace Turpin, of the Turpin’s burger chain. Turpin’s started here in North Vancouver, and new outlets are sprouting up all over British Columbia like grease bubbles on a grill. The Turpin’s jingle, about its fat, juicy burgers, blitzes out of every local AM station: *sizzlin’ and spicy!*

I can guess why Jace has zeroed in on me to sub for him as cashier/server at a nearby outlet. We’re the same height. We have the same sandy hair and blue eyes.

Other kids are passing us in the hall. They stare at Jace. Several girls drool. He’s the popular guy, the all-star, the charmer.

Jace turns his back on them. He murmurs, “At home, Dad has a security-camera feed into

all our outlets. It's a black-and-white feed, though, and kind of hazy. He'll think you're me. See, every time I have a shift, Dad checks on me. That's the kind of controlling dude he is."

Poor little rich kid, I think. I start to pull away. I like the look of those fifties, but not of the deception they involve.

Jace doesn't let go of my shoulder. "Just this once. You get there at three a.m., open the joint. When your relief comes in at six, just turn and scam out the back. They'll think you're me. They won't question the behaviour of the boss's son."

He pulls two more fifties from his wallet. "Puh-leeze. I got a hot date, and I don't want to end it early. Know what I mean?" He flips his eyebrows up and down.

Sure I know. Don't we all have girls climbing over us at all hours?

Jace confides, "Dad's determined to make me work regular shifts like any other employee. He says it builds character."

"Yeah, well, I kind of have plans, too." I'm planning to install a new — well, new used — transmission in Mom's and my old Volvo. For a car buff, that's a hot date.

"Aw, c'mon, Colin. That's your name, right?"

"Yeah. Colin Wirt." I brace myself for the inevitable joke: *Wirt? Or maybe, Wart?*

That's the nickname I land with, no matter what school I go to. It started in kindergarten.

I had vague plans of smashing noses in. Then Mom pointed something out to me:

“Wart was the nickname they gave to King Arthur before he was crowned. The snobs looked down on him because he was just a servant. But it wasn’t the snobs who pulled the sword from the stone. It was Wart.”

Maybe it’s hokey, but that story made me feel better. It calmed me down, at any rate, from plowing my stubby five-year-old fist into any schnozzes.

Jace surprises me. “Colin,” he nods. “Well, Colin, this date I have Friday night. Rachel Manetas. Rachel’s not just hot, she’s ... ”

He pauses, unable to come up with a comparison. He just gives me that charming grin.

I have a feeling Jace coasts on that grin quite a lot.

“She’s sizzlin’ like a Turpin’s burger?” I fill in.

“Uh ... ” Jace stares, puzzled. “Oh, I get it. Ha ha, funny guy. Good one.”

He’s pressing the fifties into my hand. “Be a sport, okay? Honestly, Colin. The plan is seamless. Help me out. I’ll help you out.”

He glances round. Right away, like a backup group, other kids passing by coo out greetings to him. I get the message. I’m new to the school. Jace as good as owns it. He’ll smooth the way for me.

And I think: It’d be nice to have an in.

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