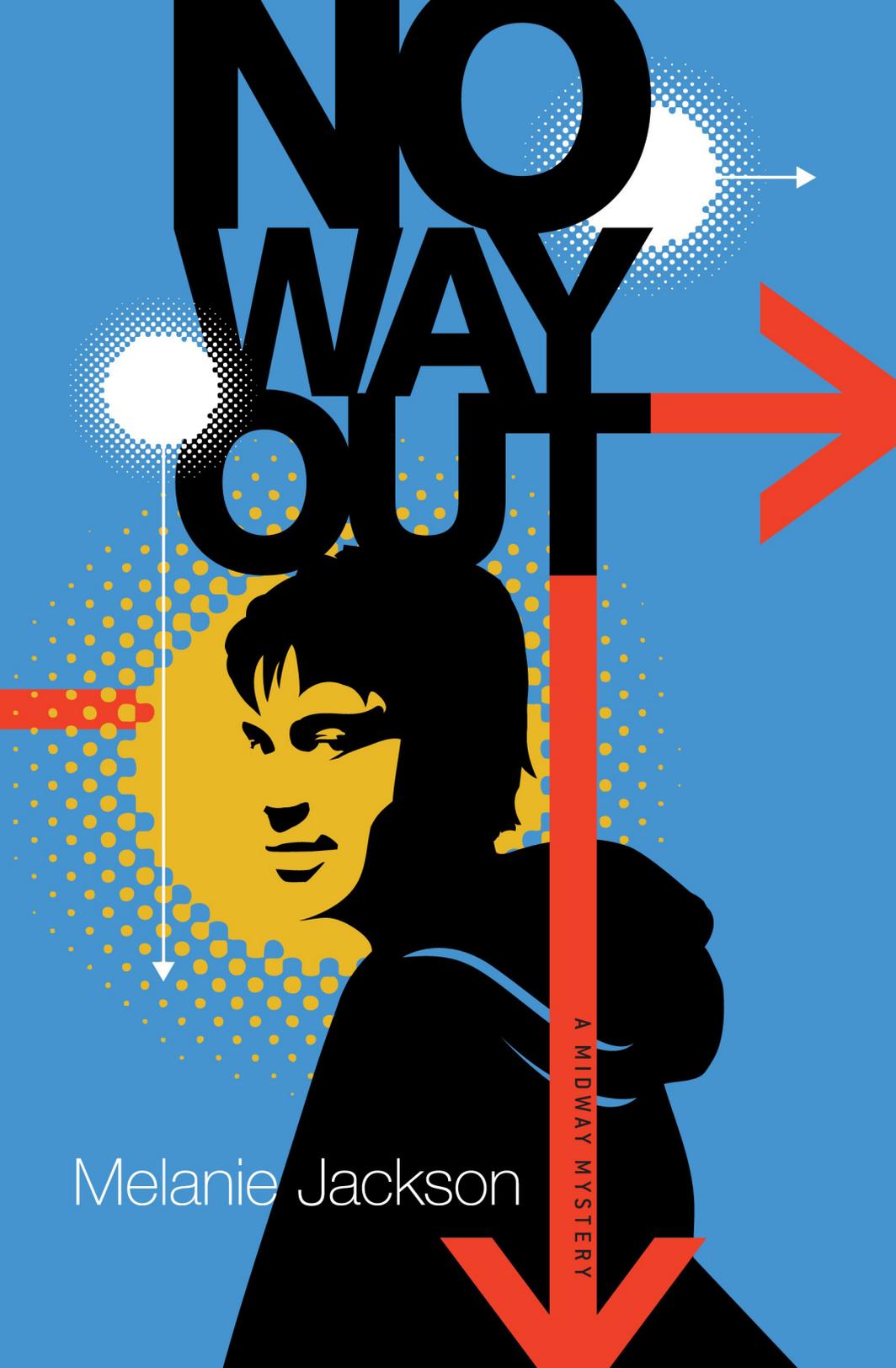


NO WAY OUT



Melanie Jackson

A MIDWAY MYSTERY

CHAPTER THREE

He hoisted the rifle, cocked it, and aimed squarely at Mr. Rafferty's head.

My mind went into a panicky loop: *Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.*

I stumbled over to Mr. Rafferty's phone console. Grabbing the receiver, I punched one of the many buttons for a line out. I jabbed nine-one-one.

Nothing. Maybe I had to dial nine first. Okay, *nine-nine-one-one.*

Nothing. The outside-line button I'd pushed hadn't even lit up. The phones were out. When Jon had talked to his dad, he'd been using an intercom system. The intercom was still working, but that was it.

I looked down the aisle. The gunman yelled something at Jon, who then locked the last front door and went back to join his dad.

The gunman waved his rifle in downward motions, a signal for Mr. Rafferty, Jon, Rick the custodian and Gina to drop to the floor, out of sight of the street. Crouching with them, the gunman took a round metal object from one of his pockets. He fastened it to the end of his rifle.

A silencer.

The gunman spoke to Mr. Rafferty. The storeowner shook his head.

The gunman raised the rifle. He glanced around. His gaze settled on one of the big, red, helium-filled balloons floating over each cash register. White letters on the balloons proclaimed, *The savings are heating up!*

The gunman fired at the nearest balloon.

Red balloon shreds flew down. Gina screamed. Mr. Rafferty started crying.

The gunman yelled at Mr. Rafferty. His message was plain: cooperate with him, or his next target would be a human one. I didn't have to hear him to understand that.

Wait.

I didn't have to hear him – *but I could if I wanted to*. I could use the intercom.

I sank into Mr. Rafferty's plush, black leather chair. Which button had Jon pushed? I ran my eyes over the console.

Bingo. A whole row of buttons was labelled with cashier numbers. Usually, I guessed, the cashiers would be calling Mr. Rafferty rather than vice-versa. They'd lean toward their speakerphones and ask for a price check, or approval on a return, or whatever. Having speakerphones kept their hands free: they could keep right on ringing stuff up and packing it. Very efficient.

Too bad Rafferty's wasn't so efficient in security. I thought of my stepdad. In bragging about his

security business, Alvin was fond of saying, “You gotta think of everything. You gotta cross the i’s and dot the t’s.” Alvin’s idea of wit.

Alvin could teach Mr. Rafferty a thing or two about security – like not putting a sulky, conceited teenager in charge of it, just because the teenager happened to be your son.

I stood up to check what number cashier the gunman was closest to. Five. I sat down out of sight again fast, not wanting to provide him with another target to practise on.

I punched in the button for cash register five.

“ ... you’re gonna open the office safe for me, Rafferty.”

The gunman had a mumbly voice, like he was talking through a mouthful of pebbles. In any other circumstance I would’ve practised imitating his voice till I got it down cold. I stored voices the way squirrels store acorns. As an actor, you need to be able to draw on a mental bank of voices, not to mention facial expressions, at a second’s notice.

The storeowner, not as close to cash register five, was harder to hear. “B-but who are you?”

The gunman chuckled. “The name’s Heck, old man. Short for Hell.”

The guy was a regular walking Yuk Yuk’s.

“Look, son, I’m sure we can sit down and ... ”

Mr. Rafferty’s voice faded. To shut him up, Heck was loudly humming some off-key tune. In other words, he wasn’t interested in what the

storeowner had to say.

Jon snapped at the custodian, “This is your fault. How stupid can you get, not checking the power? Did you *want* us to get robbed?”

Really productive, Jon, I thought. You’re in Heck’s crosshairs – and you take time out to play the blame game.

Rick began protesting, but Jon was on a roll.

“Kind of a coincidence that this Heck dude shows up as soon as the power goes off, huh, Rick? Maybe you’re in this with him.

“As for you,” Jon told Heck, “when you get to the office, you’re gonna find one of your own kind there. Another thief.”

Amazing. The family business was about to get fleeced, and Jon was *still* fixated on me.

“What?” Heck barked. “Somebody *else* is in here? I thought you guys were it.”

He pointed the rifle at Mr. Rafferty’s head. “ENOUGH OF THIS CRUD. I WANT THE DOUGH NOW, OLD MAN.”

I had to get hold of the police.

Maybe Mr. Rafferty kept a cell phone in his desk. Quietly, so Heck wouldn’t hear through the speakerphone, I started opening drawers.

I found the usual stuff: files, pens, pencils, a calculator. In a middle drawer, I found a rolled up set of blueprints, bound with elastic. I pulled the blueprints out.

Dimly I remembered, at dinner the other night, Alvin telling Mom and me about how he started

each security assignment. Blueprints in hand, he'd suss out a client's building, whether it was business or home. He needed to consider all aspects of a building, its ins and outs.

I have to get out of this one, I thought.

And my brain hammered home the despairing truth: *There's no way out*.

Heck raised his mumbly voice a notch. "First, just so nobody gets any ideas about calling the cops, I want you all to throw down your cell phones."

I looked down the aisle. Gina was shaking her head.

"Don't play smart with me, toots," Heck glowered at her. "I know you got a phone. All you girls do. Or maybe," he smirked, "you want me to step over and do an extended body search for it."

Trembling, Gina withdrew a cell phone from her smock pocket and tossed it on the floor, joining the ones Jon, Mr. Rafferty and Rick the custodian had dropped.

I cursed silently. I was the one person without a cell. And why? Because I was several shades of idiot, that's why. Aware that my own cell would chalk up roaming charges if I used it in Winnipeg, Alvin had offered me a brand-new BlackBerry as a gift. And I'd refused it.

Heck pulled a pillowcase from his back jean pocket and tossed it to Mr. Rafferty. "You're gonna fill that with dough. I know you got lots of dough on Fridays: it's bank deposit day, ain't it,

Rafferty old boy?”

Heck chuckled at the storeowner’s bewildered expression. “What didja think, I’d come in here without a plan? I’d come in here *ignorant?*”

“I’m sure you had a great plan,” Mr. Rafferty sighed. Even from here, I could see how pale he looked, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

“No more delaying,” Heck barked. He waved the rifle. “Everybody, MOVE. But stay low, and stay where I can see you.”

Led by the storeowner, with Heck at the rear, the hostages started down the aisle toward the office. They walked bent, arms swaying, like you walked in kindergarten when the teacher told you to pretend to be an elephant.

This didn’t strike me as funny, though. It made me angry. Rifle or no, Heck didn’t have the right to treat people like that.

It turned out I wasn’t the only one who felt angry. All at once Jon swung round, colliding with Rick the custodian, and charged at Heck.

Heck fired.

A body crumpled and fell.

I ran to the office door, wrenching vainly at the knob. I’d taken CPR at school. I might be able to help, *if I could just get out of here.*

I couldn’t see who’d fallen. Mr. Rafferty was in the way, leaning over and wailing. Heck forgot his command about crouching. He stood, aimed the rifle at Mr. Rafferty’s head, and yelled at him

to shut up.

Gina staggered away from them. She pressed her hands over her mouth. To stop from throwing up, I was guessing.

Jon, I thought. It was Jon who got hit.

Gina lurched behind the cosmetics counter. Lifting a wastebasket, she heaved into it. You had to give the girl marks for tidiness in the midst of a crisis. Most people would've just barfed anywhere.

She glanced up and saw me. For an instant we stared at each other.

Then somebody got up from the floor. Jon.

It was the custodian who'd been shot.

Jon pulled his dad aside, turning Mr. Rafferty away so he wouldn't have to look at the body. But I got a clear view.

Rick lay on the floor, motionless. Blood had soaked the chest of his gray overalls bright red.

He was dead.

I pressed my forehead against the glass and shut my eyes for a moment. When I opened them again, they were all watery.

Now Heck was yelling at Jon, blaming him for what happened. Jon yelled right back. I had to hand it to Jon for nerve. Or else stupidity.

Mr. Rafferty joined in, too, begging Jon not to make Heck mad.

Setting the wastebasket down, Gina stepped out from behind the cosmetics counter.

She hesitated, watching Heck, Jon and Mr.

Rafferty. All three were so busy shouting, they didn't notice her.

Gina backed slowly down the aisle. At the first corner, she slid around and vanished.

Good for Gina, I thought, even as I broke out in a fresh sweat on her behalf. I just hoped she could stay hidden.

I had to get out of this office.

I'll smash the chair against the panes, I thought. That might work. Even if the chair just cracks the pane, I'll kick the rest of the glass through.

I grabbed the back of the black leather chair, then hesitated. Heck would hear the glass shatter. I'd be in his crosshairs in a matter of seconds.

My grip on the chair leather loosened. My brain was hammering at me again. *Your plan's not practical. It won't work. Accept the situation. You're trapped on all sides.*

Outside the office, down the aisle, there was a sudden roar of rage.

Heck had discovered one of his hostages was missing.

I used the folded up blueprints to wipe my forehead. Heck would have a replacement hostage soon enough. Me.

Trapped on all sides.

Sides?

I stared at the blueprints and thought of Alvin. My stepdad had something. *Consider a building's*

ins and outs.

Sure, I couldn't escape the office by any side route. But ...

I lifted my gaze to the ceiling.

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