

1 TINA HAYES ALWAYS told the boys she went out with that she had to be home early because her mother was very strict. That wasn't the case at all. Her mother wasn't strict.

Tonight Tina gave the same excuse. Jimmy didn't seem too happy about it, but he agreed to take her home.

Going home and getting in the door was another problem. Tina never let any of her boyfriends near her house. She never knew what would be happening inside. But whatever it was, it would probably be something that would embarrass her.

As usual, when the car stopped in front of her house, Tina got out as quickly as possible.

'I had a lot of fun, Jimmy,' she said.

'The movie was great, wasn't it?' Jimmy said.

'Great,' Tina said, trying to close the door before he offered to go in with her. 'Thanks. See you, huh?'

She made it. She ran halfway up the path before turning and waving goodbye.

She felt greatly relieved when Jimmy waved back and drove off. Already she could hear voices coming from inside her house. The voices were loud. Tina could tell that her mother was arguing with a man. Tina hoped it wasn't Harry.

'Let it be anyone but Harry,' she whispered. Her hands shook as she opened the door.

'What's she doing home?' Harry yelled as soon as he saw her. 'You said the kid wouldn't be home tonight.'

Come over,' Jack said.

Tina went to the fire and sat down opposite Jack.

'You here for the first time, Tina?'

'Yeah.'

'You running away from somebody?'

'I suppose so,' Tina admitted.

'That's okay. We're all running away from somebody.'

He studied her for a moment. Then he said. 'That's a nasty bruise. Did your boyfriend hit you?'

'No. My mum's boyfriend did,' Tina said.

Jack smiled. 'Your boyfriend should have beaten him up.'

'I don't have a boyfriend.'

Jack smiled more. 'Well, well. I don't have a girlfriend. Maybe we met at the right time.' He laughed.

'Look, I just want to lie down and sleep. My head hurts like mad,' Tina said.

'Listen, Tina. I've got a motorbike. I won't be sticking around here long. I wouldn't mind taking you with me when I go. I do construction work—make pretty good money at it. You could do worse, Tina.' Jack leaned forward and took Tina's hand.

Tina felt very uncomfortable. 'Thanks, but I don't want to go anywhere. I mean, I'm only sixteen and I'm at high school and maybe—well, maybe things will be okay at home in the morning.'

Jack didn't let go of Tina's hand. 'Aw, come on. You won't go home again. I can see it in your face.'

Now Tina felt frightened. Jack was holding her hand too tightly. 'Please, Jack. I just want to rest now. Okay?'

'Tina, stick with me. You won't be sorry. Come on. Look, Tina, the world is a rough place. Lot of dodgy people around. You should see the rotten people right around here—man, they'll tear you to pieces. You need somebody to protect you. If you think you're hurting now, just think what'll happen if you stick around here with no one to look after you.'

Tina pulled on her hand, but Jack's grip was too tight. The top of her head began to burn. 'Please let go of me. I feel awful. My

3 TINA WALKED SLOWLY back to the van. Piney immediately asked her the question she'd been dreading. 'Your mother going to come for you?'

'No,' Tina said. Then she blurted out, 'She doesn't want me to come home at all.'

He looked confused. 'Can't be,' he said.

Tina straightened her shoulders. 'Look, if you can break my twenty, I'll pay you for dropping me off in Sydney.'

Piney's eyes narrowed. 'What are you going to do in Sydney?'

'What's it to you?' Tina demanded.

'Hey, listen, what kind of a job are they going to give a scrawny kid like you? A decent job, that is.'

Tina felt both ashamed and irritated. 'I'll be a waitress. Anybody can do that.'

'You think they want a fifteen-year-old runaway waiting on tables, Susie?'

'My name's not Susie, and I'm sixteen! And mind your own business!' Tina snapped.

'Only thing you're going to find is trouble.'

Tina glared at Piney. 'Don't act like you care, because you don't. Nobody does.'

'Little runty kid pushes herself on me—well, I guess I'm involved whether I want to be or not,' Piney said.

'Just forget about me!' Tina said.

'Okay, okay. Have it your way. Let's get started. I want to get to

But Arthur's mother was different. Tina knew straight away that she would have a hard time fooling Mrs Morley. She was a slim, good-looking woman, except for her piercing little eyes. Those eyes were like a hawk's, the kind that can turn you inside out.

'So you're from Tamworth, are you, dear?' Mrs Morley said. 'We have friends there. Perhaps you know them: Roy and Cora Jackson?'

'No—no, I don't believe I know that name.' Tina was shaking inside. She hoped she wasn't shaking on the outside, too. She kept remembering something her mother had once said: *Nice guys never take me out, sweetie. I suppose I've got a sign on me or something.*

Tina felt that, like her mother, she was wearing a sign. And like her mother, she didn't belong with classy people—people like Arthur. It had been a mistake to go out with him in the first place. The more she thought about it, the more convinced Tina became that this day would end badly.

'Want to go riding, Tina?' Arthur said.

'What?' Tina turned her head sharply.

'Riding. I thought we'd have a good ride before we eat Dad's steaks,' Arthur said.

'Good idea,' Mrs Morley said. 'I'll bet you haven't ridden a horse since you left home, have you, Tina?' She had a strange gleam in her eye. Tina was afraid Arthur's mother had her worked out already. She'd probably guessed Tina's parents didn't own any farm.

But Tina was trapped. If she was wearing a sign, it must say "liar", she thought grimly.

Mr Morley excused himself to look after the barbecue and they walked to the horse stables. To Tina, the animals looked like monsters. They snorted and paced wildly around the pen.

Tina stared at the horses. She imagined what might happen to her if she actually tried to ride one of these animals. She could easily be thrown—even stomped on.

'Pick me a gentle horse, Arthur,' Tina said.

8 TINA DID TAKE the job. She couldn't deny she was afraid. Yet she was determined to put Eddie and the stealing behind her.

And the Lovells made it so easy to say yes. When they showed Tina her room, she almost gasped. It was so beautiful. The rug was thick and soft. The four poster bed had a canopy over it.

The decor was lovely, too. A seascape on the wall caught Tina's eye. It was an oil painting of silvery water on a sandy beach.

Mrs Lovell noticed that Tina was staring at the picture. 'Linda painted that,' she explained.

'Linda!' Tina exclaimed. 'She's really talented.'

The Lovells offered Tina wonderful comforts. Yet Tina vowed she would give them their money's worth. The very next day, she helped Linda finish the decorations for Tommy's birthday party.

Tina tried to do most of the hard work. She noticed that Linda was much too thin. Sometimes she seemed terribly tired, too. Tina thought that was because she'd been sick for quite a while.

But Linda was getting better, Tina told herself. She refused to believe anything else.

They went to the children's centre that afternoon. The Lovells' chauffeur drove them and the two girls sat in the back.

Linda pointed out a few things on the way. Then she said, "Tina, you haven't told me much about your life. What about you?"

Tina laughed, a little embarrassed. 'What about me?'

'Well, boyfriends for example. Do you have a boyfriend?'