

1 TONY GIBBS STARTED up the front steps to Adams High School and stopped short. Up at the top, a beautiful, dark-skinned woman stood near the double doors, looking around. Her dangling, gold earrings glittered in the Monday morning sun beneath her short, stylish hair. As she put her hand up to shade her eyes, Tony noticed that her long, red nails were well groomed.

But what really struck Tony's eye was the huge diamond ring the woman was wearing. It looked big enough and bright enough to blind anyone who stared at it too long.

Who is she? Tony wondered as he continued up the steps. A new teacher? Then one of the doors opened and Bruce Campbell emerged from the school. Mr Campbell was Tony's history teacher. He smiled at the woman with the diamond ring and spoke to her in a low voice. The woman threw back her head and let loose a throaty laugh. Then she handed the teacher a stack of papers and turned to leave. She passed Tony without looking at him, leaving behind the strong scent of expensive perfume.

Suddenly someone gave Tony a little shove from behind. Tony barely caught himself from tripping on the top step. Turning, he saw Wayne Townes almost right in his face. Wayne was in Tony's class, but Tony didn't consider him a friend.

'Where's your manners, boy?' Wayne said, giving Tony another shove. 'Don't you know enough to move out of the way when ladies pass?'

‘You know Michelle who,’ Shauna said, tossing her head. ‘Your gorgeous ex-girlfriend, Michelle Calder. When I’m at high school, I’m gonna be beautiful like that girl.’

‘In a pig’s eye,’ Tony said, laughing. ‘You don’t have dark gold topaz eyes like her.’ He was just teasing his sister. Tony used to admire Michelle’s beautiful eyes, but no more.

‘Shut your mouth, Tony-baloney,’ Shauna said, giving Tony a playful punch. ‘You’re such a bad dude. You’ve got a different girlfriend every month!’

‘No, I do not. Me and Soroya are really close,’ Tony said. ‘Speaking of Soroya, she’s coming around. Should be here any minute now.’ He glanced at the small clock on the kitchen counter.

Suddenly the calm was shattered by a scream and a sharp screech of brakes. The sounds came from the street below.

Tony ran over to the window and peered out. But the rain and the darkness formed a shroud over everything. He squinted his eyes and looked hard. Dimly he could see people running out into the street. Someone hit by a car, Tony thought.

Tony peered closer. He spotted something bright yellow lying in the middle of the street. It was towards this splash of yellow that people were hurrying.

Tony’s heart jumped to his throat. Soroya always wore her yellow raincoat when it rained.

‘Oh, God,’ Tony breathed.

‘What is it?’ Shauna asked, her dark eyes big in her face. She looked like a deer caught in headlights. ‘What happened?’ She grabbed Tony’s arm and shook him.

‘I don’t know,’ Tony moaned. But in his heart, he did know. As Shauna phoned for an ambulance, sickness and terror spread through Tony’s body. This was about the time when Soroya would have been crossing the street, heading for his place. What if it was Soroya –

No, no, no! cried a voice inside Tony’s head. It couldn’t be. Not Soroya. She couldn’t be lying down there in the street with all those people leaning over her.

2 'SHE'LL BE OKAY,' Andre said over and over. 'You'll see. That Soroya is a strong girl.' The big double doors in the foyer opened and Andre's sister, Michelle, stood there. She looked oddly small, wrapped in a red raincoat. She ran to Tony and took his big hand in her small one.

'I heard the awful news, Tony,' Michelle said in a voice barely above a whisper. 'I'm really sorry.'

'Yeah,' Tony said. He wanted to thank Michelle for coming. It was a really nice thing to do. Especially since Michelle thought Soroya 'stole' Tony from her. Michelle didn't seem to remember that she and Tony had never really gone out.

But Tony's tongue seemed stuck to the roof of his dry mouth. He couldn't make any words come out.

'Probably it was somebody who'd been drinking,' Michelle said. 'Some creep too drunk to know he'd hit anybody.'

Tony closed his eyes again. A few hot tears pressed through and ran down his cheeks. He kept thinking of one of Soroya's favourite quotes: 'It's not how long you live that counts. It's how you make the time you get count.'

'There's Soroya's sister now,' Andre said.

Tony's eyes flew open. 'Denique!' he almost shouted. 'How is she?'

Denique Curtis was two years older than Soroya. She used to attend the high school. Her usually calm face was now twisted with pain. 'She's still unconscious, Tony. They're afraid she's slipped into

4 There was a new athletics coach at Adams this year. His name was Ken Defar. He had come to Australia as a refugee from Ethiopia.

Ken Defar had been a splendid runner himself, with a real shot at the Olympics. Then he lost part of his foot during the violence in his home country.

Now Ken Defar was determined to bring the championship trophy to the Adams Cheetahs athletics team. He made no secret of seeing Tony Gibbs as the key to his dream.

‘Ready for the big relay race on Saturday, Gibbs?’ he asked Tony at Wednesday morning’s practice.

‘No, Coach, I’ve got personal problems,’ Tony said, stifling a yawn. He’d been awake most of the night before, worrying about Soroya.

‘Girl trouble?’

‘My girlfriend – Soroya – she’s been in a coma since Monday night and might not make it. Hit-and-run accident,’ Tony explained. He expected some sympathy, but the coach frowned instead.

‘I feel for you, kid, but that’s no excuse for slacking off on the team. Is it gonna help your girlfriend if you don’t do your best for yourself and the team? How are you gonna feel when she gets well and wants to see the team trophy? You’re gonna have to say, “Honey, I blew it ’cause I was moping around for you.” What’s she gonna think then?’

Teachers and coaches at Adams didn't make much money. Unless the guy with the Ford was a friend of the coach.

Tony restlessly tossed and turned. He didn't think he could take much more without exploding.

The next day at the track, Coach Defar glared at Tony. 'I hope your legs are better than your looks today,' the coach said. 'Otherwise, the Lincoln Lances will make mincemeat out of us.'

Tony felt like punching somebody, anybody. He hoped the coach got off his case really quickly or he'd end up throwing a punch at him. If Tony got mad enough, he might even accuse Coach Defar of being the hit-and-run driver. And Tony didn't want to do that – not yet.

'Back off, coach,' Tony said savagely.

Coach Defar did a double take when he saw the rage in the boy's eyes. He didn't say anything for a minute. Then he commented softly, 'You look like I musta looked that time in the refugee camp when kids called me a cripple. Something like that happen to you, Gibbs?'

'Something like that happened, yeah,' Tony said. He was surprised by the coach's insight.

'Put it in the race, Tony,' Coach Defar urged him. 'Winning is the best revenge. Put all the fury in the race. That's what I did. Run the rage out of you.'

Soon Tony's relay was announced. The gun popped and Kirby Hacker took off. He ran a good first lap for the Cheetahs. But when he passed the baton to Chad, the team was already several seconds behind the Lances.

Chad looked desperate as he grabbed the baton and sprinted down the course. But in spite of his best efforts, the Cheetahs still lagged when Chad passed the baton to Zac. Zac became a blur, travelling at a pounding pace. When he passed the baton to Tony, the teams were dead even.

It was Tony's race to win or lose. A glint in Zac's eyes said to Tony, 'Go on. Give it to the Lincoln Lances. Then everybody will know you for the nothing you are!'