

Grease Monkey Jive

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**A romance about best mates, fancy footwork, family
and falling in love**

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The Moment

This is the moment.

There is before this moment and there is after this moment, but this is the point at which time stops and starts again.

We all have these moments. Sometimes we notice them, sometimes we don't. Sometimes they pass, ushering little of significance behind them. Sometimes they create such chaos that everything before looks washed out and everything after shimmers.

This is the moment for her.

When Alex was a kid she'd given herself a nasty electric shock by sticking a knife down the slot of the toaster to rescue her breakfast. As the electricity gripped her in the seconds before shutting off, every muscle spasmed and the air crackled and fizzed with blue sparks.

She was twelve years old, had burnt her fingers and was in lot of trouble with Mum and Gran.

She was twice that age now and had not forgotten the intensity of that electric zap and how wildly it made her heart beat and her thoughts fly, both from the sheer physical shock and the recognition that she was in serious strife.

There was no toast, no toaster and no knife anywhere to hand, but the sensation that stuck her body when she looked into his eyes was the same. Electricity pulsed through her nerves, leapt in her muscles and fired inside her brain. She was in deep trouble.

All he'd done was lowered his chin and raised his eyes, looking at her from across the room. That's all. It barely counted as a movement. It was more a re-positioning, more of an adjustment than a conscious action but everything changed in that moment.

The breath sucked out of her, the room closed in and her body jolted free of her command. She felt energised and inspired beyond the bounds of her training, her knowledge and the encouragement of the music. There was nothing she couldn't achieve. Her feet flew through the steps, her placement never more accurate, her leaps and kicks never higher, her body positioning and posture never prouder or more abandoned at the same time.

She danced on air, as a beam of sunlight might chase a shadow across the floor. It was physically effortless and without the need to think. She was carelessness and precision, passion and control, pure energy and heat. She was the blue fizz and crackle, she was the jolt of power and she adored it.

When she got closer to him, could hear him breathing hard, see the dark blue of his bright eyes and their expression of wonder, she caught fire. When she circled around him, she saw tension flick along the ridge of muscle in his back and across the breadth of his shoulders, the line of his jaw tighten and his lips twitch into a smile and the intensity of the feelings driving through her body lifted, fired her higher, gave her wings and divine purpose.

When the music stopped, the silence seemed hopelessly profound. It was as though the spell was broken. Her body became her own again and she felt the old stiffness behind her left knee and the too tight strap of her shoe. She looked at Dan, still standing where Trevor had put him, but looking at her as though he'd never met her before. She looked at Scott, surely he'd noticed something odd had just happened, but he had eyes only for Dan, critical eyes.

She shook her head to try to claim her senses again and when she walked across to the stereo she thought her legs might give way on her and spill her on the wooden floor.

Dan's eyes never left her and a flood of self consciousness coursed through her replacing the earlier feeling of joy with embarrassment. That was too much for a dummy run. She could've just walked it through, there was no reason whatsoever to have danced like that, not for Dan certainly, he'd have no idea what he was seeing. Scott might've enjoyed it, the freedom and clarity of it and Scott would've been annoyed that she didn't dance like that for him.

"What do you think?" said Scott, but not waiting for her reply went on, "You're a good physical match and he does look the part. Of course, you'll have to do all the work girlfriend, but assuming he can at least do what he did then, we might be able to pull this off."

Afterwards, Alex would wonder what she'd said in reply, she was already thinking about how it might be better to abandon this idea before it took on its own life and required her to re-organise hers.

This is the moment for him.

He felt like he'd just been hit by a train.

The shock to his chest was palpable, as though something steel hard and lightening sharp had ripped through him, leaving him open and raw

and aching hot with sensation. His jaw dropped, his lids lowered, his breathing was suddenly laboured and every muscle was tense with anticipation.

And despite the impression that he'd been shoved backwards at a great rate, staggering from the sheer force of the impact, he was standing stock still, statue still, shop window dummy still, just like he'd been told to.

He had no idea what just happened, why it felt like there was fire in his fingertips, and his blood was circulating four times faster than normal, why he could hear bells ringing deep inside his head? Maybe he was sick, this was a stroke or an aneurysm, come on suddenly with no warning and pushing him so far off balance that he felt electrified. He needed Google to check for the symptoms, because maybe that explained his unexpected inability to speak or think clearly.

He had no idea how long Scott had been talking at him, so obviously his hearing was blown as well. It was her hand placed softly on his arm that brought him back, rushing back and her honey voice saying his name that snatched him into the present again.

He snapped his mouth closed and made some sound, more a grunt than anything intelligible and she turned away. She thought he was a Neanderthal and he'd just proven it. He ran a hand through the tangle of his hair and pushed a breath out, turning to look at Scott.

"Can you do that again, caveman?"

"Ah...?"

"Don't over think it, you either can or you can't?"

"I don't know what I did."

Scott groaned, "You were perfect. Who'd have guessed, straight out of the box, never been used. You just have to do exactly what you just did then and everything will be rainbows."

'Rainbows!' What was this idiot talking about? He couldn't do that again, he wouldn't live through the intensity of it. How was it that she seemed so unaffected?

She was over by the stereo, nonchalantly selecting the next track, her long dark ponytail swinging over her shoulder, cascading across her elegantly slender neck and the slight flush on her cheekbones. She had her extraordinary pale amber eyes down on the screen, leaning forward slightly, a delicious arch in her back, one long well muscled leg in front of the other. She looked real and natural, made of ordinary flesh and bone, where only a minute ago she'd seemed something entirely illusory, like air, like desire given life in the form of an extravagantly beautiful girl.

He looked at Mitch and Fluke, sitting on the floor over against the mirror. They were both grinning at him like circus clowns. They must have felt it too then, or seen her change form and become something supernatural.

"Dan!"

"Sorry, Scott - what?"

"We're going to do it again."

"No, I..."

"Ok, take a minute."

He glanced back at her, now discussing something with Scott, a bright smile animating her face, totally unconscious of his existence. He might as well have been insect repellent for all the impact he had on her. He shook his head to try to clear it and walked across to the boys.

"You look like you've seen a ghost, mate," said Fluke.

"Did you see it too?" He heard how utterly dazed and insanely stupid he sounded.

"Nope?"

"Mitch?"

"Nah, you're the one got stung."

"I don't know what just happened?"

Mitch laughed, but not unkindly and jostled Fluke. "You're in trouble, Dan."

"But I haven't done anything. I just stood there like they told me to."

"Yeah, you did something."

Dan turned to Fluke, always the go to with tricky things, "What did I do?"

"I think you might have taken the plunge, mate."

"What are you talking about?"

"She's the one."

"What?"

"She's the one."

"What one?"

Mitch jumped in, "Some pissed off angel in a nappy shot you in the fat head with a laser beam."

"Be serious!"

"I am. She just hit you for six, Dan. You're gone."

Dan looked at Fluke to verify the emergence of this horror, both hands up as though to ward off the danger, as though to bounce the dirty truth of it away.

"Yeah," said Fluke, "Your dog days are over bar how fast she tells you to fuck off and how long you stay depressed about it."

Before

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2 Crook

He crooked his finger and she came.

Across the club, in between the drinkers and the dancers, the predators and the prey, the spectators and manipulators, she made her way to him. She was all hip and hair toss, open mouth and wet lips. She was shrink-wrapped in a hot pink package of dress that showed all her sweet curves and angles. Nothing that wasn't fit for immediate consumption. This was a girl without a noticeable use by date.

Except where he was concerned her shelf life was likely to be a night or two, a week maybe, a month tops. Anything more would be some kind of a personal best. Anything more and Dan would have gone freaking soft.

Mitch was in awe and frustrated by it. He elbowed Ant, who nudged Fluke so the three of them could have the pleasure of watching her approach and the gut grinding annoyance of seeing Dan do it again.

It was hard to credit it. The power of that finger. That microscopic bend. It wasn't even a proper movement, you'd think barely even visible in this dungeon lighting and with this much going on in this dive of a place. It had to be more about the extension of his arm than the actual working of the knuckle, but maybe it was more to do with the intention in his eyes than any obvious joint action.

He had bedroom eyes, or so chicks told him, way too many times. Mitch had made a study of Dan's eyes, trying to see what it was that Dan had that he and Ant and Fluke didn't. Well, maybe not Fluke. Fluke

wasn't in the same league. They were just plain old dark blue peepers as far as he could tell, set deep in Dan's fat head, under dark brows with almost girly thick black eyelashes, but he had a way of looking at women that made them come undone. Damned if Mitch would work out what it was, but it was a Class A secret weapon that was for sure.

Cause the chicks, they just kept coming and coming undone. And it wasn't like Dan did that much to inspire them, he never even broke a sweat over them, either before they arrived or after they left.

Whatever it was, Dan got away with it again and again. He was a freaking legend where it came to pulling birds. And what he knew about cars. And that's what made him an acceptable human being - otherwise it was just too painful to be mates with him.

"Fuck!" mouthed Ant, shaking his head at his beer. He was another fifty bucks down. He looked at Mitch who was watching the wet dream, now almost on them, looking real dangerous up this close. Not that she was sparing any of her megawatt smile for anyone but Dan. Not that Dan even seemed to notice. He just expected her to sidle up next to him and whisper in his ear and stuffed if that's not exactly what she did.

She pressed herself against his side and made a show of having to talk directly into his ear on account of the music being so loud. On account of how it let Dan get a real good handle on her wares.

Ant watched Dan's arm slide around her waist, like it was natural, like that's what a chick who came across a crowded room at the crook of a finger and whispered in your ear expected, and next thing he knew, she had both her arms around Dan's neck and their fronts were plastered together like wallpaper and wall.

"Shit!" said Fluke, "there goes my ride home."

"Why'd you even bother?" Mitch shouted at Ant. He meant bother making a bet that Dan couldn't pull a chick from half way across the room in less time than it took for another shout to come around.

“Law of averages. The bastard has to lose his mojo sometime,” growled Ant, his baritone not hard to hear above the thump of the dance music.

“He never even bloody looks like losing it,” yelled Mitch.

“What?” shouted Fluke.

“Dan. Bastard. Magic touch. Ant. Idiot. Soft touch,” yelled Mitch in Fluke’s ear.

“Ah!” said Fluke, because that did explain everything.

“That’s way too familiar,” said Ant, now watching Dan wrap the girl in a proper two hander, one hand at bra strap height, if she’d have been wearing one and she wasn’t, and one definitely spread on the butt. “Cheat already knows her.”

“Maybe,” nodded Mitch. It was a pornographic hug for two people who probably hadn’t even exchanged names and were now exchanging saliva.

“Nah,” said Fluke, “you’re just fucked off he pulled her and you didn’t think to get to her first.”

“Isn’t it your shout?” responded Ant. He was an idiot to bet against Dan and a woman. Unless he could find a woman who was the female equivalent of Dan in the ‘could-care-less, treat ‘em mean, keep ‘em keen, love ‘em and leave ‘em’ school, then he was just chucking good money after bad. That was something to think about, that would be worth betting on and it was about time Dan Maddox coped a bit of his own back. Yeah, that was definitely worth thinking about.

“Great legs,” said Mitch, focusing on the lack of distance between Dan’s hand and the end of the chick’s dress. He was thinking in theory, he could have pulled her himself if Ant hadn’t got Dan all up on the bet. Dan didn’t like to lose and Ant had more money than sense and the sole purpose of this dive was to come in alone and go out with someone to keep you warm. So it wasn’t like it was a miracle that Dan was standing there, not a decent spit away, playing tonsil hockey with some wannabe swimsuit model.

Except it was. Mitch knew he could have crooked his finger, his hand, his whole body in a brightly light room where there was only this chick and himself and she’d still have looked right through him. He seriously had no idea how this whole thing worked.

He’d known Dan since primary school. They were the same height, both of them nudging past 6ft, had the same brown hair, though Dan’s always seemed to need a cut, and blue eyes. They were so physically similar that people took them for brothers, but in the eyes of the female population Dan was a premium parking spot and Mitch was a kind of dodgy off ramp to the back of nowhere.

That’s not to say he didn’t do all right with the birds. They all did, except Fluke. And he and Ant were just as likely to go the roundabout with a chick for a few days and then break the speed limit to hit the exit as Dan was, but Dan never even thought about it, bastard never cared whether they were into him or not. Maybe that was the secret, not to care. Maybe that was the difference between them because Mitch did care. And he was getting kinda tired of being roadkill when yet another girl he liked left him bleeding, and he was sure tired of standing pit crew while Dan drove another effortless victory lap.

When Fluke came back with the shout, Dan broke off from the girl and came to claim his beer and his fifty bucks which he transferred from Ant’s hand to Fluke’s saying, “Taxi home mate, and keep the change.”

Fluke grinned and pocketed the fifty. Dan was alright. Could’ve had a huge ego, he was built, he was smart, he had money and he had his head screwed on right. He could hold his drink and was a good mate. He was pretty much Fluke’s opposite.

Fluke was a short, wiry, freckled ranga, who became a school teacher because he couldn’t think what else to do after school finished. Dan pulled glours and had instant hot sex with them. Fluke pulled chicks too drunk to know their own names and when his car wasn’t in Dan’s workshop, drove them home and when it was, paid for their taxis.

He was on a winner tonight, he hadn't yet had to hold some chick's hair while she threw up, he had the fifty and he could walk home.

He looked at Ant, now chatting up some bird in tight black pants and a little top with spaghetti straps that did nothing to hide her implants. Yeah they were implants, real chicks didn't look like that, not that Ant would care, he preferred them artificial. He looked at Mitch. He had that 'some fucker stole my lunch' look on his face again. He'd had that look since Belinda kicked him to the curb and that was a good six weeks ago now. Mitch was on a losing streak with the ladies lately. No trouble attracting them, but then if he liked them, even a little bit, he was all over them like a cop with a radar gun, and even Fluke with his perpetual loser streak could see that Mitch stunned the life out of them.

Fluke looked at Dan again. He was holding the babe's hand and stroking her hair and she was loving it. He wondered what she'd think if she knew she was just a bet between mates. If she knew Dan might forget to ask her name and would almost certainly have forgotten it by the end of the month.

He sipped his beer, the night was still young and there was time yet to find Cinderella, in fact the sooner Dan took off the better it would be. Some nights Dan was so bright he attracted enough moths that there were leftovers to split amongst the three of them but tonight he'd scored the brightest butterfly in the avery and she was like a queen bee keeping all the other female bees out of her zone.

Birds and bees. That's what it was all about thought Fluke.

After Dan gave them a mock salute and steered Ms Perfect in Pink to the door, Fluke breathed a sigh of relief. Ant had disappeared somewhere so if he could just get Mitch interested in someone in the next fifteen minutes he might have half a chance to at least have a conversation with a sentient girl before it got time for things to get really sloppy.

Mitch said, "Thank Christ. I was getting a crook in my neck from watching that."

Fluke laughed, "He's charmed."

"He's a lucky bastard."

Fluke said, "See that blonde over there in the red dress?"

"Yeah."

"Been checking you out."

"Yeah?"

"Might be worth your while to ask about her day," said Fluke, knowing Mitch would hear that as something like, 'Hey beautiful, can I buy you a drink? Are you interested in hooking up?' Knowing that without Dan in the room, Mitch would probably score, either the blonde who was a babe or the brunette beside her who was a little more average but had in fact been checking Mitch out. Knowing that Saturday morning when the four of them hit the surf they'd hardly bother to mention the random hookups in any detail and that they'd be back here Saturday night trying out the same old routine again and hoping for a different result.

3

Bird

Alex gave Scott a grin, took a deep breath, ran and dived into his extended arms. He caught her and in one fluid motion she was suspended right above his head, his hands on her hip bones, her body in a long almost straight position, her legs together, her toes pointed and her arms out to her sides, like wings, her head held high. She was a beautiful bird in flight.

The watching class broke into spontaneous applause.

Simultaneously Alex brought her legs down and Scott folded his elbows. In a flash he took her hand and spun her out to his side saying, "Tah-dah," theatrically, and they both took a little bow.

"That's a Bird," Alex, grinned. "You can run into it like I did from standing or you can do it standing without the run up. We'll learn both but don't worry we'll build up to it by starting from the floor."

Eight couples looked uneasily at each other. Alex knew all the women were thinking 'what if I'm too heavy' and all the men were wondering, 'what if I drop her'.

"It's got nothing to do with how much you weight or how strong you are, it's all about body position, momentum and trust." She looked at the anxious faces in the advanced Latin dance class. To date, they'd mastered the advanced level of the core routines, the rumba, samba, cha cha, paso doble and jive, but now they needed to learn the lift components, especially if they wanted to earn a ranking or compete.

Teaching lifts was much harder than teaching the dance steps themselves, students could get hurt much more easily and it was a real test of fitness, strength, rhythm, posture and partnership, but it was Alex's favourite thing to teach and Scott was in such a good mood as well, so this was going to be a fun class.

Leading up to tonight they'd done, various holds and drops, Fish, Scarf, Flag and a host of other movements but Bird was the big one everyone was scared of. Tonight it was all they'd do.

"All the boys on the floor. Watch me," said Scott and he got down on the wooden floor on his back, legs out straight and together and arms by his side. Then he bent his elbows, lifting his palms and flattening them to the ceiling, lastly extending them straight up. "This is basic Bird arm and hand position. You'll have her hip bones resting in your palms. If you don't keep your palms absolutely flat you'll tip her off."

There was an apprehensive murmuring and Benjie said "Holy crap," and looked at his partner Laly whose eyes were wide with fear. She said, "How do I get my hips in his hands?"

"Like this," said Alex. She stood either side of Scott's prone body, her feet about level with his knees and she leant forward, body straight, hips thrust out until Scott's hands were on her hips. She grabbed his wrists and lifted her feet and once again she was a bird.

"You should keep hold of his wrists until you feel you have your balance and then you can open your arms to the side. Head up, don't look down or you'll end up pitching over his head." That got a laugh, especially as Scott made a move that looked like he was going to pitch Alex over his head and she made a grab for his wrists again.

"Once you get to here boys then I want to see you work," said Scott, turning his head to look away from Alex and back to the class. "Push-ups." He bent his elbows back to the floor and then straightened them, taking his Alex bird for a ride as though she was a strange new form of human dumbbell.

That earned some more applause and some impressed grunting from the male partners.

Over the next hour, the eight couples tried out Bird from the floor and despite some impressive collapses and quite a few near unmannings from poorly placed knees and suitably painful consequences for the male partners, by the end of the session they were all able to hold the Bird position and complete a few push-ups.

"Thanks everyone. Next week we'll pick this up and we'll try it from standing," said Alex and the class gave her and Scott the traditional end of class thank you handclap.

When the room emptied she looked at Scott. "You had a good day?"

"I had a completely yummy day."

She took his hand and dragged him over to a bench seat adjacent to the floor to ceiling mirrors that lined two full walls of Wallace Dance Studios, "Tell me about it because this just now was the best part of my day so I'm jealous."

"Poor baby, you first and then I can cheer you up."

"I missed out on a High Distinction in Business Statistics by two points."

"Two tiny points?"

"Two. They might as well be Ayers Rock big, that's the difference between the HD and an ordinary Distinction."

"Poor baby, an ordinary Distinction in the subject, half your class will fail because it's so damn hard."

"That's not helping, Scotty."

"Oh get a grip Alleycat. It's two points. Who's going to care?" he said, rocking his shoulder into hers.

Alex looked at her bare feet, "I care."

"And what about Mommy Dearest. I think this is all about her."

"It's not, of course it's not, but she won't be pleased."

"I guess it mars you're perfect record in Mommy's big black eyes?"

"I wish you wouldn't call her that."

Scott rolled his eyes, "I'm not the one with mummy issues."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Totally, girlfriend. As if! Anyway, why does she even have to know?"

"She's my mother and she loves me and I still live at home so she supports me too."

"She keeps you tied to her more like."

"You really hate my mother."

Scott sighed, "I don't hate her, that would require a certain amount of energy, I'm simply not willing to expend on her. I just think she has a serious case of living her life through you and you have a serious case of thinking that's ok."

Alex thought it was possible that Scott had a point, "Since when did you graduate with a psychology degree?"

"Hmm, doesn't take an official qualification to work out that you have some separation issues to deal with, girlfriend."

"I don't think I like you anymore."

"Oh, such tough talk from such a little bitty girl."

Alex put her hand over Scott's face and gave him a little shove, "Shut up and tell me about your day." He shifted back and said, "Oh yes, let's make it all about me - that's much more interesting. I had a spectacular day. I have a new client and he's a complete dish and I think I'm lust with him."

"Your new client?" Alex spluttered. Scott was often in a state of lust so that wasn't surprising but he usually kept lust and his graphic design work separate.

"Yes. Well, I can dream can't I?"

"What does he want?"

"A new logo, a new website, some brochure ware. It's all very exciting."

"Does he know you're in lust with him?"

“Ooo, I should certainly hope not. That would take all the fun out of it. He’s very married and kids by the look of him and I’m not about to corrupt him. I just like looking at him.”

“You are so easily pleased,” said Alex, ruffling Scott’s blonde hair, thick with product to keep it sleek and unruffled.

He dodged out from under her hand, “I am. Don’t let anyone tell you anything different. Are we going to rehearse?”

Alex nodded and got to her feet. Scott sashayed to the CD player singing a lyric from Sneaky Sound System’s ‘We Love’, “Keep it under cover, don’t tell your mother, can’t have mine, have to get another.”

“You think you’re smart don’t you?”

Scott grinned, “That shoe so fits, girlfriend,” and executed two super quick jump pirouettes before catching Alex’s hand and leading her into the opening steps of their new routine.

They had a week to get this routine perfected before the first heat of the upcoming Australasian Dance Theatre competition and that meant rehearsing every day between here and there. Not that Alex minded, it was term break and getting her head out of her books would be as good as taking a holiday.

As she concentrated on the sequence of steps and the feel of Scott’s strong hands at her waist and shoulders, she started to relax. It was only two points, it was still a high mark and her mother could just suck it up and she could suck up the fact that Alex was competing again as well.

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“Oh Alex, two points,” huffed Sylvia.

“But a Distinction, that’s excellent, darling,” said Gwen, looking from her daughter to her granddaughter to read the wind.

“It is excellent, Gran. You know lots of people have to repeat Stats, Mum,” said Alex laying heavy emphasis on the word ‘repeat’.

Sylvia sighed. A Distinction was an excellent mark, but maybe something was distracting Alex. It was only two points and no doubt the math was difficult but still it was distressing to think that Alex might not be making the most of the opportunity to be at her best. She frowned at her mother and daughter, making Alex flounce off into the kitchen and Gwen drop her eyes back to her book.

Sylvia went to the window and looked out at the street. The 387 was dropping off passengers from the city. Mostly men in dark suits, but some women too, wearing stylish clothing and carrying brief cases. That’s what she wanted for Alex. That sort of power. The power to have choices in her life and not be dependent on anyone for her security. Never have to clean toilets or work shifts in a call centre.

And she’d come such a long way towards that already. Considering where they started. She’d been a dreamy sort of kid, just like him, always getting comments on her school reports about how nice she was. Nice didn’t put a roof over your head or feed you, so it had been a challenge to tap down Alex’s natural inclinations to be simply a nice girl with an artistic temperament and get her to focus and be serious about her school work.

Oh, there had been tears, lots of tears, starting with the insistence that she read rather than draw, write rather than play, and attend extra tutoring rather than watch TV. And the school fees hadn’t been cheap either. They’d gone without, so that Alex could attend a better high school than the local public one. But what was the cost of wearing season’s old clothes and foregoing frivolities like movies and eating out if it meant Alex had the chance for a better life? It was nothing at all.

Of course it hadn’t been easy and once Alex hit her teenage years, the scent of rebellion was always in the flat, mixed in with the smell of Gwen’s soups and stews, that’s why she’d been allowed the dance classes and it only took two additional shifts in the taxi to pay for them at first and later when Alex showed some talent she started teaching and paid her own tuition.

They really had come such a long way, if you put aside the horrible accident that was the two ridiculous gap years Alex insisted on after school to work in a clothing shop and teach at the dance school. God, that had been an uncomfortable time, flavoured by the constant fear that she might suddenly decide not to go on to university at all, and do what – be a shop assistant, that was no better than driving a taxi – dance professionally, for heaven’s sake! Apparently she was talented enough to have done that but what a waste of her brain and dancers made no money and their professional careers were so short. Not a real choice at all. Thank the Lord it was a temporary aberration and they were now back on track.

A woman in a lovely soft grey dress and matching coat was last off the bus. Sylvia smiled to see her with her groceries and her laptop bag. She looked professional, competent and in control. She was no doubt going home to her own flat, maybe she had a mortgage, maybe she had investments, she certainly had expensive looking shoes on. That could be Alex soon, with her Bachelor of Business, and good shoes, probably not the investment portfolio or the mortgage yet, she’d still have student loans, but with the chance to be in control.

Sylvia craned her neck to watch the woman in the grey walk down the street, her laptop bag looked heavy. Keeping the pressure on Alex was going to be heavy too. She wouldn’t like it. She was twenty-four years old now and would be quick to remind her mother that she was well and truly an adult and a responsible one at that. So making an issue of the two points probably wasn’t smart, still Sylvia thought it worth discussing further.

The woman in grey was gone now, Sylvia turned back into the room to hear Alex clattering plates in the kitchen and to call out. “Oh Mum, by the way. I’m competing again this year with Scott,” throwing her for a complete loop.

“Competing again! But you said last year was the last time.”

“Well, I changed my mind.”

“Oh, I think that’s lovely darling. He is such a nice boy that Scott,” said Gwen keeping her eyes on her book to avoid the annoyed look she knew Sylvia would give her.

“Alex, do you think that’s wise? Won’t it be a big distraction?”

“You think it’s stupid and a huge distraction don’t you, Mum?”

“Well, yes I do. I think you’ve grown out of all that now, haven’t you?”

“Apparently not.”

Gwen licked her index finger and used it to turn the page. She was re-reading Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, she knew she should probably speak up, try to talk some sense into Sylvia, it was long past time to be pushing Alex and high time her daughter got some perspective. She bit her tongue trying to think of something useful to say.

“Alexandra, really!” said Sylvia.

“Oh, she must be mad Gran, she’s dragging out the full name,” said Alex coming into the room and rolling her eyes, an old, well washed tea towel in her hands.

Gwen pursed her lips, thought about saying something in response but Alex got in first.

“Look, Mum, this year we have a real chance of winning and the prize money has gone up to fifty thousand dollars, that’s twenty-five thousand dollars each. I could buy us a new car with that.” Alex was thinking how she could buy them something younger than their rust bucket clunker and still have enough money not to need a second part time job.

“There is nothing wrong with the Mazda.”

“It’s almost as old as me, Mum. We barely got it registered last time.”

“We could do with a better car, Syl,” said Gwen.

“I’d rather get the bus than have you wasting time on this stupidity.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll probably still have that privilege. Who knows if we can win, but we’re going to try and I don’t want to hear another thing about it.”

“Really, Alexandra!” Sylvia shook her head in distress, snatched the tea towel from her daughter’s hands and retreated to the kitchen. She wondered if the woman in grey had argued with her mother too.

“Really, Ally,” echoed Gwen, in her excitement, sounding younger than her seventy-five years. She abandoned her book to look at her granddaughter. Alex was a stunning looking girl. There was absolutely nothing of herself or Sylvia in her. She had the exotic looks of that man. All that midnight black glossy hair and those enormous pale amber coloured eyes, the high cheekbones and the almost translucent, perfect skin. She was a real beauty and it was a wonder she hadn’t already captivated some eager young man. That Phillip who was the accountant and drove the nice car, Sylvia liked him, or maybe she hadn’t yet met the man who would sweep her off her feet. And as far as Gwen was concerned sweeping was important.

“I think you can win, darling,” she said, sitting forward, already thinking about fabric and how she’d need to buy some new needles for the machine, “What am I going to make you to wear?”