

## CHAPTER ONE

Here's something you won't believe.

Veronique Chang did NOT get a Distinction in her Grade 5 piano. In fact, she only just passed! Why should you be surprised? Well. This is Veronique we're talking about – our class genius. Answers LOVE her! They seem to float down to her from the ceiling before they get to anyone else (Marcus Breen calls her Siri). It was her birthday last month and I asked her what she wanted.

'*War and Peace*,' she said, and I frowned at her.

'Greedy.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you can't have both,' I said. 'And anyway, I'm not the prime minister, how am I supposed to organise either?'

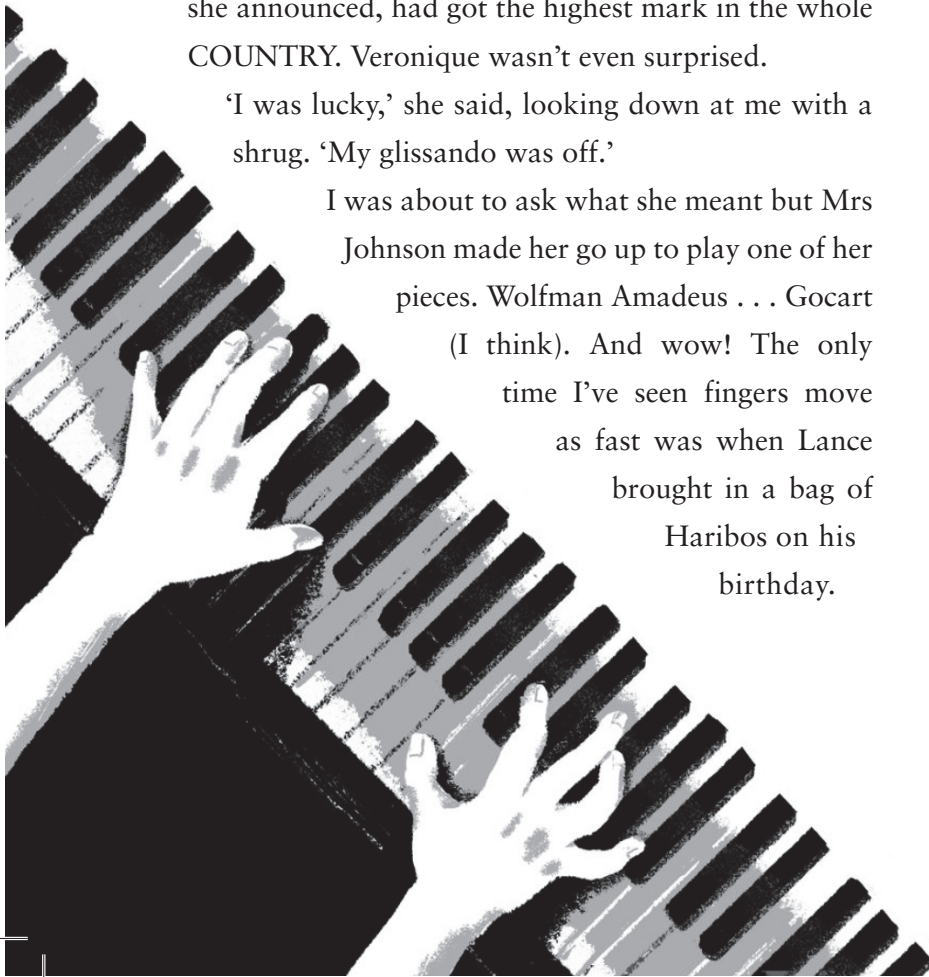
Veronique looked at me. 'It's a book. By Tolstoy?'  
'Oh,' I said. 'Bet it's not as good as *Mr Gum*,  
though.'

And when I found a copy later in the Blackheath  
Bookshop I realised that it certainly wasn't.

As for music, Veronique is INCREDIBLE. When  
she did her Grade 4, Mrs Johnson (our last head  
teacher) made her stand up in assembly. Veronique,  
she announced, had got the highest mark in the whole  
COUNTRY. Veronique wasn't even surprised.

'I was lucky,' she said, looking down at me with a  
shrug. 'My glissando was off.'

I was about to ask what she meant but Mrs  
Johnson made her go up to play one of her  
pieces. Wolfman Amadeus . . . Gocart  
(I think). And wow! The only  
time I've seen fingers move  
as fast was when Lance  
brought in a bag of  
Haribos on his  
birthday.



Marcus Breen started clapping at one point, but that was actually a quiet bit and Veronique went on some more. When she did finish, I stared at her.

‘Amazing,’ I said. ‘If also quite boring.’

Lance agreed. ‘You’re *brilliant*,’ he said. ‘Does that mean you can play . . . um . . .?’

‘What?’

He was so in awe he could hardly say it. ‘*Star Wars*?’

‘I don’t know,’ Veronique answered. ‘Who’s it by?’

Lance had to think about it. ‘Obi-Wan Kenobi.’

‘Is he Renaissance or baroque?’

‘Jedi,’ Lance said.

That was six months ago. She got the Grade 5 back last week. I was at her house. Veronique’s mum came into the kitchen waving an envelope. She had a smile on her face – but it faded. Her mum had the envelope in one hand and the results in the other and she just stared at them, amazement about to turn to disbelief, when she sighed – and picked up her phone.

‘I think there might have been a mistake,’ she said. ‘It’s Veronique Chang. C. H. A. N. G.’

But there wasn't. The woman on the phone was sure of it. Veronique *hadn't* got a Distinction and she hadn't even got a Merit.

'Well done anyway,' her mum said (because she's really nice). But then she got on the phone again, this time to Veronique's piano teacher, and walked off into the living room to talk to him. I don't think Veronique wanted to be there when she came back so we went outside, then down to the little wooden house at the bottom of their garden where her granny used to live (who she calls Nanai). It was quiet in there. And dusty. We stood for a minute, not speaking, just looking at all the old photographs that lined the walls, and then down at Nanai's chair. It was even emptier than the rest of the place. There was a hollowed-out bit, like the empty spaces we'd seen at the Pompeii exhibition at the British Museum. On top of it was a photograph. Old. Black and white, no glass left in the frame. I picked it up and we both stared at it until Veronique did something that scared me.

She began to cry.

Eeek! I watched her, with no idea WHAT to do until my hand went out, hovering over her shoulder

like an X-wing starfighter, just about to land. It stayed there until her dad came in.

‘Don’t worry, love,’ he said, setting a spade down against the wall. ‘It’s just a grade exam.’

‘What?’

‘It’s okay to be disappointed. But you can do better next time, can’t you?’

Veronique didn’t answer. Instead she just stared at her dad and shook her head, tears tumbling out of her eyes like kids from a school bus. Then she did something that amazed him. She stopped crying – and began to laugh! She laughed and laughed and didn’t stop and her dad was confused. He didn’t know why she was laughing, though I did – I knew perfectly well. Of course I did! It was her NOT getting a Distinction! For the first time EVER! It wasn’t a *bad* thing. It wasn’t something to make her cry.

In fact, believe it or not, getting just a pass on her Grade 5 piano was one of the best things to happen to Veronique Chang in her WHOLE LIFE.

And this book is all about why.

(See you in the next chapter, then.)

