

CAROLE
WILKINSON

Stagefright

GO ON,
BREAK A
LEG.



CHAPTER 1

Velvet S Pye stood outside the gates of Yarrabank High. She was certain of one thing: this was going to be the worst day ever, the beginning of a miserable year, in fact the rest of her life was totally ruined. A group of boys smoking by the front gate eyed her up and down – obviously checking out her breasts. One of them spat onto the bitumen. Velvet ignored them. She hitched her schoolbag over her shoulder and pushed her earbuds into her ears. Her music was on shuffle. As she walked through the gates, her phone chose that moment to play “The Point of No Return” from *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The garden bed alongside the driveway was a rectangle of trampled earth with one stunted shrub growing in it. Empty drink cans and screwed-up chip packets provided the only colour. The school

building was crumbling red brick, not old enough to be historical, just faded and ugly. Paint peeled from the window frames, and the cracked glass was held together with masking tape. Two students leaning on a car were locked in a passionate embrace. They both wore grey pants and had matching asymmetrical haircuts. Velvet thought they were a boy and a girl. Their tongues explored each other's mouths. She didn't want to look, but she couldn't help it. She felt queasy. It was only 8.35 in the morning.

A group of girls, the hems of their uniforms millimetres away from showing their underpants, stopped talking to stare at her. They sniggered as she walked past. Velvet ignored them too. At least she wasn't wearing the ugly polyester green and white check Yarrabank dress. Her uniform, from her old school, was a lovely charcoal-grey woollen tunic, and she wore it below the knee. She patted her hair, which was pulled back in a neat ponytail, touched the school badge (an arrow-pierced heart) pinned to her maroon tie and took a deep breath (a mistake as someone was spraying chemicals on the walls to remove the tagging from the previous night). She entered the building.

The doors closed behind her with an ominous thud. Clumps of fluff swirled around in corners. Velvet went up to the office window where a sign informed her

that Mrs Mangalis was the Office Manager. Someone had written “Arvi is a dickbrain” on it. Velvet closed her eyes and imagined that she was an exiled princess living in secret among peasants. She was hoping for immediate rescue.

Velvet opened her mouth to speak to Mrs Mangalis, but a girl with blue-streaked hair pushed in front of her.

“I forgot my excursion money at home, Miss,” the girl said.

She had the sort of Australian accent that set Velvet’s teeth on edge.

“Bring it tomorrow, Roula.”

“I can’t.” The girl posted three sticks of chewing gum into her mouth. “Next-door’s dog ate it.”

“Ate your \$12.50?”

“Yes, Miss. The dog ate the lot, coins and everything. It’s a huge Rottweiler, with yellow eyes. Seriously, it’s got teeth like a shark.”

“You better report to your class anyway.”

“Yes, Miss.”

Roula walked off, leaving behind a cloud of body fragrance and a chewy packet.

Mrs Mangalis looked over her glasses at Velvet. “Yes?”

Velvet pulled herself up to her full height. “My name is Velvet S Pye.”

“You must be new,” Mrs Mangalis said.

Velvet’s eyes filled with tears. “I shouldn’t be here.” Her voice started to waver. “If fate hadn’t dealt me such an unkind blow, I’d still be at St Theresa’s Anglican Ladies College – where I belong.”

A small thin man in trackpants and a polar fleece vest jogged into the foyer.

“Mr Kislinski will show you to your classroom, dear.” Mrs Mangalis turned to the man. “This is Velvet. She’s ... new.”

“Welcome to Yarrabank, Velvet. What sports do you play?”

“I don’t play sport.”

Mr Kislinski winked at Mrs Mangalis. “We’ll see about that,” he said and jogged out through a door.

Velvet followed Mr Kislinski into the school hall. Glass cabinets lined every wall, each one filled with trophies. Above them, the walls were festooned with plaques and pennants. The honour board didn’t record school duxes or past head prefects, it listed the best and fairest from 1938, when the school was built, up to the present day. The last name, in fresh gold paint, was Jesus Mbele.

The principal opened a door that led into a quadrangle where rows of students were doing pre-school aerobics and a dozen intense, sweaty boys were

playing basketball as if they were competing in the Olympics. There he stopped to do some calf stretches before jogging into a classroom on the other side of the quadrangle. Velvet followed him. The noise level was unbelievable. Not a single student was in their seat. Two boys were playing football with a coke can at the front of the class, while another boy gave a continuous commentary.

It was just three years since Yarrabank had changed from an all-boys school, and there were only four girls in this class. Two of them were sharing iPod earbuds and singing along to a song. There wasn't a teacher in sight.

"Settle down, 9C," said Mr Kislinski. "Where's Miss Ryan?"

A harassed-looking woman wearing a purple floral blouse and a shapeless khaki skirt rushed into the room. She dropped her crocheted bag onto the teacher's table. Two apples and a well-used handkerchief fell out.

"Ah, Miss Ryan, this is Velvet. She'll be joining your class."

"Lovely to meet you. Welcome to Yarrabank." Miss Ryan patted Velvet on the arm. She smelled of patchouli and bacon.

Behind Miss Ryan's back, a boy with a swastika stud in his eyebrow was making obscene gestures. Velvet

smiled feebly, and considered joining a convent.

“There’s been a mistake,” she said. “I need to speak to the principal.”

Mr Kislinski smiled at her. “I am the principal.”



That evening, Velvet begged her parents to let her go back to St Theresa’s. She offered to take three after-school jobs to help with fees. She pleaded with them to let her apply for a scholarship to any private school, but her parents’ new poverty had transformed them into keen supporters of state schools. She did her best to cry all night and came to breakfast the next morning looking haggard and tear-stained.

“Mother, I’ll die if I have to stay at that school.”

“We’re all having to make sacrifices, darling. You’ll get used to it.”

Velvet was horrified by the way her parents were adjusting to being poor. Her father had a job mowing lawns for the local council, and claimed he was happier since he’d lost his high-powered, well-paid job as a merchant banker. Her mother seemed to actually enjoy being thrifty and devising budget meals.

“There’s no music program.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“No one speaks English. They’re all ethnic.”

“It will be a cultural experience. You’ll learn from it.”

“Learn what? How to swear in a hundred and twenty-two languages?”

“I might organise a multicultural evening so that we can get to know the other parents. Everyone could bring one of their national dishes.”

“Mother, Yarrabank isn’t that sort of school.”

As far as a different school was concerned, the subject was closed.



The rest of the week was just as awful. The English text 9C was studying was a book about a dragon that Velvet had read in Grade 5. The science teacher was Russian and his accent was incomprehensible. Technology was a bizarre subject that consisted of alternating classes of information technology and food technology. Velvet had studied French at St Theresa’s, but Yarrabank’s Year 9 French class was already overcrowded, and she had been forced to take up Mandarin. Everyone else in the class had been doing Mandarin for two years and even the dumbest boy could scrawl a few Chinese characters and understand most of what the teacher

said. There were other strange subjects that Velvet had never heard of before – sports science and sports history.

But worse was yet to come. Thursday was sports day. Every day of the week students at Yarrabank had phys. ed., but on Thursday afternoons the entire school focused on sporting pursuits. There was a special timetable designed to make Thursday afternoons as long as possible. In the morning there were two forty-minute periods followed by recess. The entire school was expected to be in sports uniform and on the oval by 10.45. Then there were four hours of competitive sport, interrupted only by a brief break for a high-protein lunch provided by the school.

Velvet made sure she left her (secondhand) sports uniform at home, but Mr Kislinski found her a spare pair of shorts and personally ran her through a sports aptitude test.

“Won’t take a minute,” he said, collecting up an assortment of balls, bats and mitts. “Just need to get an idea of your skills. Make sure you start at the right level.”

Velvet failed to catch, hit or kick whatever was thrown in her direction. When Mr Kislinski asked her to shoot a goal, she put on her mother’s reading glasses (which she’d brought for just that purpose) and peered

around short-sightedly until she located the netball ring. She missed that too.

“We’ll have to start you at the lowest level, I’m afraid, Velvet,” Mr Kislinski said sadly. “But don’t worry, we’ll soon have you up to scratch.”

Velvet watched Mr Kislinski jog off. “I don’t think so.”

She’d been forced to go to an awful school. She’d had to drop French, which was her best subject. She had to write an essay about What I Did Over the Holidays. She put her hand on the arrow-pierced heart pinned to her uniform and made a vow. There was one thing she was not going to do, and that was play sport.

Miss Ryan appeared, wearing baggy orange shorts and an enormous Garfield T-shirt. She was in charge of Year 9 girls’ sport.

“All right, girls, let’s do some laps of the oval before we start our netball.”

Velvet jogged for about twenty metres and then got a stitch. She walked the rest of the laps, ignoring the panting girls who streamed past her time and time again. There was only one other girl who wasn’t sweating and straining. She appeared to be striving for the slowest jog in history.

“Come on, Hailie,” shouted Miss Ryan. “You can do better than that.”

Hailie Murchison was in Velvet's maths and humanities classes. She was one of those stupid boy-crazy girls who thought being smart was a social handicap. Velvet didn't like her. Hailie jogged up alongside her.

"Have you got your periods yet?"

"Excuse me?"

"Just asking," Hailie replied, as if chatting about menstrual cycles was a perfectly normal way to start a conversation with a stranger. "Well, have you?"

"Of course."

"How old were you?"

Velvet looked around, hoping no one was listening.

"I don't know, twelve I think."

"God, you're lucky."

Velvet's stitch had gone. She was about to jog away, but Hailie hadn't finished quizzing her.

"Got a boyfriend?"

"No."

Hailie smiled. "That's my boyfriend over there." She pointed in the direction of the football pitch. "The one with the Iron Man T-shirt. Gorgeous isn't he?"

Velvet didn't find muscles attractive. "No."

"Geez, you're a snob."

Hailie jogged even slower to make sure the gorgeous boyfriend got a good look at her in tight-fitting singlet

and shorts, though Velvet didn't think that her stick-like body was likely to get any male too excited. Velvet started to run. She actually managed to jog a whole lap before she got stitch again. She stopped, chest heaving, and pretended to do up a shoelace. Hailie wasn't far behind, but she was busy smiling at the boyfriend and wasn't looking where she was going. She crashed into Velvet and both girls fell in a heap.

Velvet pulled herself out from under Hailie. "You should watch where you're going!"

Hailie lay writhing on the ground. Velvet thought she was faking at first, but real tears streamed from her eyes and there was a bone in her ankle sticking out at the wrong angle.

Miss Ryan came running over, T-shirt and arms flapping. "Not your ankle again, Hailie! I knew you shouldn't be jogging yet."

She bent down to help Hailie up, but Hailie squealed with pain.

"Oh, oh," wailed Miss Ryan, looking around for help. "Nestor!"

The gorgeous boyfriend came running over from the football field.

"Can you carry her to sick bay, Nestor?"

"Nah. I've got a shoulder injury. Can't risk it. If it gets worse, I won't be able to play next week."

“Velvet, help me,” Miss Ryan said.

With Velvet supporting her on one side and Miss Ryan on the other, Hailie hopped to sick bay.

“That’s the third time she’s broken that ankle,” Miss Ryan told Velvet.

She recounted the history of Hailie’s ankle – the two previous breakages, their inability to heal, the perpetual cast that had only been removed in the last week of the summer holidays. Velvet put on a concerned face and tutted. Anything to get out of sport.