

Chapter 1

Did you know that the stats for people who have died or been enlightened in confined spaces are really quite high? On that list are Elvis Presley, Martin Luther, a sixteenth-century priest, and now me, Lara Pearlman, a Year 12 drama student from the small coastal town of Point Jerome.

I'm crammed into the change-room at my favourite op shop, Altitude, trying on a fifties ball gown. It's very cramped in here, and I have an overwhelming sense of urgency. Here are the reasons why.

First: I heard the fabric rip when I did up the zip.

I knew I shouldn't come here today; the ball isn't for ages. But this gown is gorgeous. It's handmade and it has a bodice of black lace and lilac silk and a cinched waistline. Except my waist isn't cinched. My mother would not approve of this gown because she thinks it's undignified for the daughter of the local bank manager to wear second-hand clothing. She brought home a fluffy pink tulle thing for me from Country Ladies Outfitters

that she imagines I will wear after the ball. Yep. In that much tulle I could rent myself out as a five-piece bridal party.

Second: There's a hand in my change-room.

About a minute ago a hand groped its way under the partition from the next cubicle and grabbed the strap of my bag to steal it. Just like that. So I stamped on the wrist. Now, I'm no lightweight and I've still got my foot holding it down. That really must hurt. But I have to say that The Hand has not flinched. It is a very determined hand and I am developing a lot of respect for it, although we're both in a no-win situation. Neither of us can move. I can't squeal for help because I don't want to get caught in a torn dress on my school lunch break, and for The Hand it's just plain awkward.

Third: I have to get back to school for an important test in exactly five minutes and then go to drama rehearsal. I really do *not* have time for this.

But it's amazing how focused I feel. I could do ten tests right now. Just shovel them under the door and let me go for it. Actually, I feel inspired. I'm sure this constitutes a 'meaningful moment'. I wonder if I can reach my drama journal from this position. Probably not. We're supposed to be recording our thoughts and experiences for the upcoming school drama production. We have to devise the play ourselves and everybody can

audition. That means all the dance girls, the tragic Year 10 boys, my entire drama class and gorgeous Blake Taylor will be in it. I think we should do a love story and Blake Taylor should die in my arms in the final scene.

Naturally, my mother doesn't like Blake Taylor. She reckons that she saw Blake in the car park after school and that he smells funny. My mother can now smell a boy at forty metres through a windscreen.

It's a pity The Hand didn't sniff out my bag in advance because I have zero cash in there. C'mon Hand. Let go!

Oh! The Hand has adjusted its grip. Maybe it's weakening. I really like this hand. It's broad and smooth and strong. It has big oval knuckles and tiny pits where the hair follicles and pores dot the surface. Mr Hatherly, our drama teacher, has been teaching us how to build a character from small and intriguing details. He said you have to get completely involved and let the ideas flow. I can use this. This is important creative material. I am utterly absorbed. I find The Hand completely fascinating, can't take my eyes off it.

In fact, I think I may be having a seminal life experience — like when people who are trapped in small spaces become transcendent. Eat your heart out, Martin Luther. Speaking of eating, I have some very good chocolate in the side pouch of my bag. I wonder if I can reach it from here?

If I shift my foot a little to the left on to the forearm, I should be able to. Here we go, easing my toes forward and my heel off the wrist.

Hmm. Nice watch: vintage gold rim, black dial, fat numbers.

Oh no. Is that the time?

Only two minutes to class.

Sorry, Hand, I really have to go. And I'm taking the bag with me.

Chapter 2

Rehearsals suck.

Chelsea Wilson sucks.

Mr Hatherly is totally suspect.

I walk into the drama studio after school and find Chelsea Wilson sitting with Blake Taylor. No, correction, make that *on* Blake. You could almost say *around* Blake. She has her teensy bum on the stool next to him, her legs in his lap, her elbow on his shoulder and her upper torso twisted around at 180 degrees to flirt with Nathan behind. I guess all those gym classes have paid off. She's got the flexibility and figure of a rubber band.

I dump my bag on the floor down the front and take out the box of smooth-as-silk chocolates that my mother keeps for her quilting club. They need such good chocolate? Normally I can make do with dates and butter — the perfect blend of sugar and fats — but today is bigger than dates. Today we start work on the play — which I've just found out is going to be a piece about World Poverty. I still think there could be a tragic final scene where I

hold Blake Taylor while he dies. Not overplayed, but simple and deeply moving. Please note: that's me doing the holding, not Chelsea Wilson.

The chocolate melts and rolls to the back of my tongue. Nougat or toffee nut? I can't choose. I wonder what they'd taste like together. Chelsea is staring at me but I had to bring the whole box for Oggy. I try not to worry about what Chelsea Wilson thinks because I'm not part of her group. She hangs out with the dance girls and doesn't actually speak to me.

Here's Oggy. She throws her bag to me, clips Chelsea's arm and hops over the chairs to sit down. Oggy is ten days older than me, has enough uniform slips to wallpaper the room and, next to Nathan Young, she's my best friend. Oggy is very small, very white, with huge feet. Today she's wearing a knitted cardigan and her steel-tipped boots. The Oggy-boots will dictate who gets the last chocolate.

Oggy wants to tell me about an idea she's got for the play but the chocolate is very rich and first she needs a sip of my drink. I don't want to share because Mum always goes on about the risk of catching meningitis from sharing water bottles, but the boots are in my lap and they say I have to. I can't think properly. There's a glug of chocolate stuck to the roof of my mouth and Chelsea's little laugh is circling the room and if she gives me one more of her looks I might have to ditch the chocolate

and thump her. Now, that *is* meaningful and it goes in my journal.

Mrs Kaye, the relief teacher, has just arrived to tell us that Hatherly is late. She whips out her Mad Hatter watch and yells 'Start!' to begin the warm-up. We all have to lie on the filthy floor and listen to Mrs Kaye telling us to relax and imagine a special journey. My special journey is on hold because of the smell. The cleaners are supposed to sweep the floor but they can't because there is always the string quartet or the tai chi group here after school, and, from where I'm lying, I can see right under the seating stand where chip packets and drink cans roll around in the draught. I think I can smell a pizza from our last production festering under there.

Mrs Kaye takes us down a labyrinth; our bodies are getting heavy, heavy, heavy. Down. Down. Down. Well, my labyrinth is gloomy and dripping fungus and I feel really claustrophobic, so I open my eyes and see that Chelsea has her legs wound around Blake and her nose in his ear. Mr Hatherly would never let that happen.

I get up, which really upsets Mrs Kaye. She reckons I've broken the mood. I start to argue with her and Chelsea sits up. Yep, she actually disengages her tonsils from around Blake's throat and begins to complain. Complains that I am ruining the creative atmosphere!

That's when the studio goes pitch black and there's a

piercing cry from the back of the auditorium. Everyone's really quiet at first and then there's a stampede for the back door, with its square rim of light. We all push and shove to get ahead and there are squishy arms and legs everywhere. I hear Chelsea scream 'Blake!' in her strangled don't-you-love-me voice, which means that Blake is not galloping towards safety with Chelsea in his arms but instead he's dumped her among the chip packets.

Some thug rams me into the doorframe and I don't know how many hands I have to slap away. I think two belong to Tom Novic. I can smell his skate shoes. He eats salami on rye for lunch and the garlic slides to his feet. I swear someone is kissing my neck. Then I bend down to let Oggy climb on my back to slip the bolt from the door. Ouch. I straighten up and stumble back against a warm chest and this time the hands that grip my waist and travel over my body are strong and searching.

Suddenly all the house lights go up and a voice booms from the sound and lighting box: 'Freeze!' We don't move. We're a bunch of ferals blinded by the floodlights.

'How do you feel?' says the voice.

How do I feel? I feel ridiculous, like walking out. And whose hands were those?

'Go to your journals and record your response,' Mr Hatherly calls from the lighting box.

He's on the floor, a slight man with silky blond hair and limp hips. He's always leaning against something, as if he can't support the weight of his feelings.

'That sense of panic is what I want from the crowd scenes. And I want you to research World Poverty.'

Good one, Hath.

Mrs Kaye picks a chair off the floor, sits down sideways and hunches over her notebook. She doesn't seem ruffled at all. I bet she knew that was going to happen. She expects us to cooperate. Everyone is acting cool. The Year 10 dance girls are laughing and sharing a lip gloss. Two boys chase each other behind the black curtains. Am I the only one who's pissed off? Two minutes ago we were sprawled on the floor.

Blake talks to Mr Hatherly. Blake doesn't keep a journal. Doesn't have to. Blake always has his script delivered by the stage manager because Blake Taylor is the top drama student in our school. He even changed his casual work hours to take a role as a special favour to the Hath. Blake strokes the stubble of a new beard and relaxes against the stage. But I'm seething. I glare at Mr Hatherly and Blake gets in the way. Then it happens. Blake gives me the cutest wink. Ooh, I hope it was his silky lips on my neck. But he's leaving; I have to say something.

'See ya, Blake.'

‘Yeah.’

Does yeah mean where?

‘At school tomorrow.’

Oh, that is so dumb and now he’s gone. Maybe he didn’t hear me. But Nathan has. He stops with a sound cable wound around his arm and his crinkly hair on end. His eyes are frozen to my lips. Was I that obvious?

I need more chocolate but the box is jammed under the seating stand.

Hell. The box is empty.

Chapter 3

I didn’t tell my mother about the chocolate because what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her and, besides, I figured that in two weeks’ time, when she wants them for her club meeting, it won’t be so shameful. Two weeks? It took her two hours. I tell you, my mother would be a great asset to our national security forces and I prefer it when she screams. At least it’s over. But she is disappointed and this is ten times worse. It was only a box of chocolates. But in just a few snappy steps we have the whole of international terrorism in our home. Clandestine Activity, Betrayal, Secrecy, Lies.

That woman can really catastrophise. She’s good. She’s the best. The common cold is the bubonic plague.

So my mother has decided. The theft of the chocolates represents a total breakdown in our relationship and she wants to talk. She wants to talk with one arm across her belly in pain as if holding back the grief. She shakes her head and sighs. How can she get so personal about chocolate? I had a little crisis of

confidence, that's all. I needed those chocolates. I wish Nana was still alive. She would have understood. Nana *loved* chocolate.

But my mother is not happy. Actually, she's not happy for lots of reasons, and so it starts. She's worried about my health, she's worried about my need to cover things up, she's worried that I can't talk to her. She's worried because she's worried. In truth, my mother thinks I'm too fat but can't say the words, so she goes on a diet and hopes I might follow. I do. She eats celery. I eat celery, smothered in cream cheese.

She is obsessed with how I look because at some level it's a direct reflection on her. If someone should see me down Duke Street with my hair in a mess and my belly bulging they would immediately think of her, a well-groomed, middle-class woman in pressed, size ten jeans. Really?

But we are not finished yet. The chocolates are only a warm-up. Her hands circle the coffee mug and she waits in that respectful and dangerous silence they teach them at the Twelve Step Parenting Course.

'Is there anything else you want to tell me?'

Yes. I want to tell her that Chelsea Wilson puts out to all the guys and that I'm going for a central role in the play so that I can kiss Blake Taylor in the final scene. But the respectful pause is over.

'How is drama going? I hear you're making up your own play.'

Oh no, she has inside knowledge. And then the floor gives way.

'Will there be any dancing?'

I wish I'd saved some chocolate. Now I really need it. She knows I gave up dance after the Year 10 Rock Eisteddfod, when I helped with the choreography, washed and counted all the costumes and trained for hours. But Miss Spiro still put me in the back row, all 180 centimetres of me in jungle stripes. I told Miss Spiro that we should measure everybody first but she still went right ahead and hired the costumes. So I slit the lycra from thigh to armpit and inserted netting. It looked really tribal after I added the body paint. The girls reckoned it cost them the trophy but I say that Cindy screwed up the last twenty counts anyway.

'*Will* there be dancing? Will there be *dancing*?'

Her question is a triumph. It implies everything and says nothing. It undermines, it suggests, it hurts. She has told me, without having to, that she has contacts and that she knows things, that I am no performer and that if I'd stuck to the Grapefruit Diet, the Pritikin Diet, the Celebrity Diet, the Zone Diet or, best of all, the Helen Pearlman Diet, then the world would be my oyster, which I could afford to eat battered and fried.

‘There might be some movement in the crowd scenes.’

‘Is that so?’

She hoards the information, like the ruthless stock trader that she is. My mother sells everything on a high and holds on to the money till the next low. My father sings her praises. ‘Oh, what nous, what drive, what a genius.’ But I say she’s a born pessimist and sells at the top because she never believes that a good thing can last, and then scurries like a mouse with her hoard into her hole. Look what she does with chocolate.

‘Who is in it?’

‘Everybody, and we have to write it ourselves. If it’s really good, Mr Hatherly might take us to the city to perform at a youth arts festival.’

‘And what is it about?’

‘World Poverty.’

‘How interesting. So it’s about the haves and the have-nots?’

‘Yeah, and suffering and stuff.’ And me kissing Blake in the finale.

‘Is Chelsea Wilson in it?’

Chelsea Wilson? Who cares? But she’s right about the haves and the have-nots: the people who were born here in Point Jerome and those who weren’t. Chelsea’s family has lived in this town for five generations. Her dad virtually owns the fisheries and half the foreshore, which makes her

Princess Chelsea, and Oggy and me the peasants.

I have my face in the fridge for the next question because she’s using her involved-parent voice and I can see I need some reinforcement. I lather a rum and raisin muffin with cream and plum jam. Her mouth goes down. If she doesn’t want us to eat cream, why buy it? What is it? A fridge ornament?

‘Lara, when is this production?’

‘June.’

‘Second term?’

‘Yes.’

‘Before or after the exams?’

It’s a tricky question and I don’t know which way to play it, so I go for the full-mouth muffin mumble. But before she can repeat the question I decide to trade in some info.

‘There’s a drama camp at the end of this term. Mr Hatherly is going to get us released from class so that we can finish the play. It’s a day camp, so we sleep at home and rehearse at school.’

‘We’ll be in the city. You can’t go.’

‘What?’

‘Nana’s gravestone is ready and we’re going up for the ceremony.’

‘When?’

‘In the holidays but we’re going early. I’m not leaving you here.’

‘I can’t, Mum.’

‘You have to come, for Nana’s sake.’

I reach for the second muffin. Her hand comes down.

‘Lara, it’s too expensive to go for just a few days.’

‘We fly on points and stay with Aunty Claire. It’s free.’

‘But I have to help Claire organise things.’

‘She won’t even let you in her kitchen to wash up.’

‘We go as a family.’

‘No!’

Match point: ‘I thought you loved Nana.’

I dump my plate on the table and knock over her mug. The coffee slops onto her mushroom-grey silk rug and pools in a dimple left by my chair. I don’t care. She can clean up the mess herself. I stomp to my room and flip open my journal. I should write up the rehearsal notes about world poverty but instead I make nasty gashes on the page. I draw a sketch of myself as a nomadic woman in a kaftan. Those women had it so easy — you could hide a few extra kilos and a spare goat under there.

Hell! This is so not fair. Why can’t she leave me here? What is her problem? Nana is really important but I *have* to go to camp.

‘Lara? Lara!’

I won’t answer. She can scream her lungs out, for all I care.

‘Lara, Nathan’s here. Go on, Nathan, I think she’s in her bedroom.’

Nathan is a family friend and in the old days he used to hurl himself from the door to my bed and then trampoline back upright, an impressive three-point manoeuvre. These days he hesitates over my sound system, flicking through channels to select a mood. But my mood is set to Preselect: Mad with Mum.

‘Stop it, Nathan.’

‘These guys are great.’

‘No, they’re not.’

He surfs through static and some really bad Metal, spins through a few more stations, ups the volume and hovers, waiting for my response. I sit on the bed with my back to the wall, balancing my journal on my knees. He’s twitchy and I see he wants to be invited to sit down. I wish he’d just do it.

‘Nathan?’

‘Yes?’

‘Have you done this drama assignment?’

‘Which one?’

‘The journal entry from last rehearsal.’

‘Oh, that.’

‘Yeah, that. What is it with you today?’

His hair is an arc of wiry curls, and a silver chain

glistens between freckles. He slips on a track by Red Alert and eases down the volume. Nathan does all the tech stuff at school, and when he's not hauling equipment around for Hatherly he uses it to burn totally weird CDs. Today's choice is bearable, which means he must want something.

'Are you doing the play, Lara?' He twiddles the dial but it slips between sweaty fingers, which he wipes on his lime T-shirt.

'Yeah. We all have to do it, don't we?'

'No. I promised Hatherly I'd help with the lights, but you don't have to be in it; it's not part of our course.'

'But I want to. I want to get a good acting grade.'

He shaves a micro decibel off the volume. 'Blake might not do it. I heard him tell the Hath that he's got work in town.'

'I'm not doing it because of Blake.'

That's a blatant lie and Nathan's eyes dart around the room for cover.

'Is that what you think, Nathan? I'm a groupie?'

He cringes. I should let him trampoline off some tension, but this is serious.

'It's just I know Blake a whole lot better than you do, Lara.'

'And you think you have to protect me. You can't tell me what to do.'

'I'm not.'

I brush past him and stand in the hall, half a head taller than he is. 'Thanks, but I'm a big girl now.'

'Where are you going?'

'Into town.'

Red Alert's number-one single screeches to a high and is throttled in static.