



CHAPTER 1

SEVEN YEARS AGO

Nobody really knew who Cris Taylor was until the day he started screaming on the bus.

A thin, pale boy, he'd never said much. Dyslexia prevented him from ever shining in class and dyspraxia meant he would never excel in sports. Teachers at Harcourt Primary usually spelt his name with an H and sometimes forgot he was in the room.

Ask any one of them to describe Cris Taylor and they'd have to pause and wrinkle their brow. A bit skinny . . . ? Fair hair . . . ?

Until that day on the bus. After that day on the bus *everyone* remembered Cris Taylor.

It was a hot, sunny Friday—perfect for a school trip to *The World Gardens*. Everyone in his class seemed to be having a good time. Not an *amazing* time. Not many of them were seriously interested in the collection of plants and trees from all over the planet. Several had complained that there were no animals.

‘What’s the point of a flippin’ monkey puzzle tree if it hasn’t got monkeys up it?’ whined Kyle Ryman, repeatedly thwacking his Spider-Man lunchbox against the trunk of the 15-metre-high evergreen until Mr Crosby threatened to send him back to the coach to sit on his own.

Cris shuddered. The coach was meant to have air conditioning but it wasn’t working. Driving there it had been OK with the windows open—but sitting inside the coach in this heat would be unbearable. Kyle would probably melt. They’d go back at 2.30 p.m. and discover an empty uniform and a puddle of skin, bone, fat, and entrails slipping along under the seats.

‘You all right?’ Catriona Wild asked him. She was nice, Catriona. She had brown hair and blue eyes and uncountable freckles. Catriona always got plenty of attention—and she didn’t really want it. Maybe that’s why she liked him. Hanging out with Cris was like wearing a cloaking device. He was so unremarkable he sucked anybody into his field of unremarkableness like a black hole.

‘I’m . . . a bit hot,’ he said, as they traipsed out of the temperate house and along the path to the steamy glass of the rainforest zone. He didn’t share his notion of Kyle’s

melting skin and guts. He had a lot of weird, dark thoughts like this. People didn’t always react well to them when he shared.

‘You do look quite pink,’ she said.

He didn’t feel pink. He felt red raw. His skin was prickling and sore. He had put on extra sun cream twice since getting off the coach but it didn’t seem to be helping.

Abruptly he veered away from the main party and over to the patch of darkness beneath a vast spreading cedar tree. ‘Cris!’ Catriona ran after him. ‘We’re meant to stay together! You’ll get in trouble.’

But Cris didn’t care about the rules. He was desperate to reach the dimness beneath the canopy. If he had to spend another five seconds in the sun he was going to spontaneously combust.

He flung himself onto the soft brown needly soil with a gasp of relief and lay with his head against one of the gnarly tree roots, panting like a dog. The pain was still tingling through him but the panic that went with it seemed to subside in the gloom. Catriona was an uneasy silhouette at the edge of the shadow, glancing back over her shoulder. ‘We’re not meant to go off on our own!’ she insisted. ‘It’s not allowed!’

‘I don’t care,’ he puffed. ‘I’m not going anywhere. My skin hurts too much.’

Concerned, she stepped across and crouched down next to him, squinting at his arms. ‘You’re all veiny,’ she said. ‘Does your head ache? Maybe you’ve got heatstroke.’

'Maybe,' breathed Cris. He closed his eyes. There was a growing panic in the pit of his belly about having to leave this oasis. The pain was still really bad but in the shade he could just about keep his head. He could just about control himself. He knew Catriona was right; they would both get into trouble if they didn't get up now and run back to the main group as it headed into the rainforest zone.

But he couldn't do it. He just couldn't do it. Right now he felt like he was face to face with a bonfire. Stepping out of this shade would be like throwing himself on top of it.

'TAYLOR!'

He jumped violently and Catriona gave a little squeak.

'WILD!'

It could only be Mr Crosby. No other teacher called Year 6s by their surnames. He was like some kind of cartoon teacher from a comic strip. Sometimes he even shook his fist and went 'Grrrr!'

'Get over here, NOW!'

Catriona ran, hissing: 'I told you!'

But Cris only got as far as the edge of the shade. He stood, shaking and sweating, and put his forearm out into the sunlight. Instantly the burning was worse than ever. He yelped and snatched his arm back into the shade. Mr Crosby was striding over now, looking thunderous behind his thin, steel-framed glasses.

'TAYLOR! What do you think you're doing? I just told you to GET BACK OVER HERE!'

'Sir . . . I can't,' said Cris. 'It . . . it hurts.'

'What are you talking about?!' Mr Crosby reached the tree, his pale blue shirt see-through with sweat, and beads of perspiration clinging to his balding head.

'It's too hot,' said Cris. 'It burns my skin.'

'Oh for heaven's sake—we're all hot, boy! Did you put sun cream on?'

'Yes, sir—three times,' said Cris, holding out his arms which were slick with white smears of Factor 50.

'And you've got a hat on, so stop making such a fuss,' said Mr Crosby. 'A bit of sun isn't going to kill you.'

'But . . .'

'Enough! Come on. NOW.' Mr Crosby turned and walked back to the others and there was no doubt he expected to be followed.

Cris took a deep breath, pulled the peak on his cap down low, and ran. Running was the only option. Staying still was far, far worse. Even so, it felt as if the blue, cloudless sky was raining needles. He overtook the teacher and caught up with Catriona as she followed the rest of the class into the rainforest zone. He staggered into the tall glass temple of greenery and under the massive leaf of an umbrella plant, gulping in the heavy, moist air and trying not to whimper.

For the next ten minutes he slipped quickly from specimen to specimen, darting across any daggers of sunshine that made it past the leaves. The pain was still awful but the panic wound down a bit. He could manage it. If he just stayed in the shade he could manage. And then it was lunchtime.

'OK, everyone—we're going outside for sandwiches now,' said Miss Barnes. 'Please stay together in the picnic area.'

The picnic area had wooden bench tables and seats and a green carpet of grass. And not one tree. Cris felt sick. The nearest shade did not reach even a finger into the glaring sunlight that washed their lunch spot. He took another deep breath as he exited the rainforest zone. It felt as if he'd stepped into the Sahara desert. Seconds later he was running again—straight for the nearest tree, a good ten metres beyond the picnic park, fear pounding through him and driving the pain up to fever pitch.

Mr Crosby caught up with him before he could get out his sandwiches. He spoke through tight lips that barely moved. 'Get yourself BACK to the others, Taylor! NOW!'

'Sir . . . Please . . . I won't go anywhere else. Can I just stay here for a little while? Please?'

'No, Taylor—you canNOT. I won't tell you again. Get back to the others. And don't give me any more reason to talk to you, you understand?'

Cris joined the others. He didn't eat much lunch. The pain was now so great it was flashing across his skin in scalding, rolling waves. Tears were seeping out of his eyes, but he kept his head down and the peak of his cap hid his face. Catriona had gone to join Rebecca Marsh and so didn't check him out. He was quite glad of that. He needed to concentrate on not whimpering out loud.

By the time they all got back on the coach he was breathing in shallow gasps again, like an exhausted dog. He

found a seat on the shady side and huddled into it, wincing as his bare arm touched the warm glass of the window. He tried to take deep breaths and calm himself, the way his mum had taught him whenever he'd felt panicky. Long—slow—breaths. Keep—calm. It—will—pass . . .

The air conditioning on the vehicle coughed into life and cooled them all down a bit and this probably helped him survive just a little longer, breathing deep and slow with his eyes closed. A cold air nozzle just above his head took the agony down perhaps as much as three per cent. Then the coach drew up outside Harcourt Primary and the driver switched off the engine—and the aircon—as soon as he'd parked. It was just after the end of school and the parents of the kids who'd gone on the trip were all waiting at the gates. Cris couldn't wait to run to Mum and beg her to get him into her shady, cool Renault and take him home.

But Mr Crosby was at the front of the coach, by the open door, and sending the kids out one by one to their parents, working through their names in alphabetical order. 'STAY IN YOUR SEATS!' he bellowed at Kyle Ryman and Ben Jenkins as they grabbed their bags and bundled into the aisle. They sat down, rolling their eyes and muttering swear words.

Cris stayed where he was too. Hemmed in by Jonas Lane.

In a shaft of warm golden sun. With no more cool air nozzle.

It was inescapable. He began to sink down in his seat and slide into the footwell, whimpering audibly now, so that Jonas turned and stared at him. And Mr Crosby was still

only on H—holding each child back on the step of the coach until a parent or guardian came forward to collect them. Still a dozen letters away from release, Cris felt himself burst into flame.

A scream erupted from his throat. It sounded terrifying. Another followed it. And then another.

Mr Crosby dropped his clipboard.

Cris didn't remember much about it later. A flurry of activity; someone pressing him down onto the seat, his face full in sun, checking his pulse and yelling for the first aid box. Then Mum—thank god—Mum—was there and pulling everyone off him and gathering him up, throwing her jacket over him and carrying him off the bus and away to the car and its tinted glass.

Then home to a darkened room. Then cool cucumber pads on his skin and an antihistamine tablet and water and the fan on full and then sleep, sleep, dark, dark, sleep.

But not before he heard her whisper: 'I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry.'

Which was when he understood.

It came from her.



CHAPTER 2

NOW

Spin lay on his back, arms folded across his chest, like a recently laid out corpse. Only his open eyes, blinking occasionally in the gloom, gave away that he was still alive.

Above him dangled blood. Blood in bags. Rather a lot of it. One of the bags was ruby red. The other was so dark maroon it was nearly black.

'Hey, man,' said the boy in the next bed. 'I'ope that black stuff's what came out . . . not what's going in.'

Spin sighed and turned his head. 'Surely it's time they came back and screwed you over again,' he said.

The boy gave him a sour look. 'Yeah, thanks for reminding me, Dracula.'

If he thought *that* was getting a reaction, he thought wrong. Spin just smiled and turned his gaze back up to the bags of