

I shrugged. "I never knew him. He was just some guy my mum slept with one night."

"So your gran's been looking after you since you were a baby?"

"Yeah, my mum had to go back to work straight after she had me, so Gram was looking after me most of the time anyway. After Mum died, Gram just carried on bringing me up."

Dr. Kirby smiled. "You call her *Gram*?"

"Yeah," I said, slightly embarrassed. "I don't know why . . . it's just what I call her. Always have."

He nodded again. "She's a very determined and resolute woman."

"I know."

"She hasn't left your side for the last seventeen days. She's been here day and night, talking to you, watching you . . . encouraging you to wake up."

I just nodded my head. I was afraid that if I said anything, I might start crying.

Dr. Kirby smiled. "She must mean a lot to you."

"She means everything to me."

He smiled again, stood up, and put his hand on my shoulder. "Right then, Tom . . . well, I've given your gran a direct phone number in case you need to contact us urgently when you're at home. So, as I said, any problems, just tell your gran or call us yourself. Have you got a mobile phone?"

I tapped the side of my head.

He grinned.

"Yeah," I told him. "I've got a mobile phone."



Later on, in the hospital toilets, I took a good long look at myself in the mirror for the first time. I didn't look very much like myself anymore. For a start, I'd lost a fair bit of weight, and although I'd always been pretty skinny, my face now had a strangely haunted, almost skeletal look to it. My eyes had sunk into their sockets, and my skin was dull and kind of plasticky-looking, tinged with a yellowish-gray shadow. My once-longish dirty blond hair had gone, shaved off for the operation, and in its place I had an embarrassingly soft and babyish No. 1 crop. I looked like Skeletor with a piece of blond felt on his head.

For some reason, the skin surrounding the wound on my head was still completely bald, which made me look even weirder. The wound itself—a raggedy black track of twenty-five stitches—ran diagonally from just above my right ear toward the right-hand side of my forehead, about four inches above my right eye.

I leaned closer to the mirror, gently touching the wound with my fingertip . . . and immediately drew it back, cursing, as a slight electric shock zipped through my finger. It wasn't much—a bit like one of those static electricity shocks you get sometimes when you touch the door of a car—but it really took me by surprise. It was just so unexpected, I suppose.

Unusual.

I looked at my fingertip, then gazed at my head wound in the mirror. Just for a moment, I thought I saw something . . . a faint shimmering in the skin around the wound, like . . .

I don't know. Like nothing I'd ever seen before. A shimmer of something unknowable.

I leaned in closer to the mirror and looked again.

There wasn't anything there anymore.

No shimmer.

I was tired, that's all it was.

*Yeah?* I asked myself. *And what about the billion non-bees, and that definition of pterion that inexplicably popped into your head earlier on? Was that just tiredness, too?*

I didn't answer myself.

I was too tired.

I left the toilets, went back to my room, and got into bed.