

THE FIFTY-MINUTE HOUR

FIVE THOUSAND MILES AND THREE TIME ZONES AWAY, RYAN Bolt was fighting an anxiety attack.

“You’ve got to talk about Matthew eventually,” Dr. Driekurs was saying.

Ryan was sitting in her beige-on-beige office, focusing intently on his Air Jordans, trying to keep from jumping up out of the reclining chair.

“He’s been dead a year and you’ve barely said anything about it,” Dr. Ellen Driekurs continued.

The neon red and green shoe colors strobed momentarily. He felt dizzy.

“Okay, let’s talk about something else, then.” She brought him back.

“Like what?” He looked at his gold Rolex. . . . Shit, twenty-five more minutes. He was having his weekly fifty-minute hour. He knew

he was wasting his time and money but he had to do something, because his life this last year had been a psychotic nightmare. It had started with Matt dying . . . And then Linda filing for divorce, and then the dreams that had scared him, keeping him up nights. And on top of that was all the career shit dragging him down, making him wonder if he really had it or had just bowled a few lucky frames.

“Let’s talk about what happened at NBC. You said they asked you to leave?”

She had a stumpy build and kept her mid-brown hair pulled back tightly in a bun. She was beige, like her office . . . As if lack of color was what would soothe all the manic Hollywood head cases that paraded through, plunking their Gianni Versace asses on her beige sofa, unpacking emotional luggage, putting a good face on career hijackings and drive-by divorces.

“Does it seem funny to you that I stopped dreaming two weeks ago?” He lied, trying to get off the fiasco at NBC. He hadn’t been asked to leave. . . . They’d had security remove him from the screening room when he’d threatened Marty Lanier’s life, promising to beat the shit out of the quivering head of drama development while three of Marty’s loyal Jedi made no move to save him.

“You dream, Ryan. Everybody dreams. You’re just not remembering your dreams.”

“Why is that?”

His right eye began to twitch, a nervous tic that had been coming and going for almost a week now.

“Are you asking me why people dream or why you aren’t remembering your dreams?”

“I guess why people dream . . .” Filling up more of the hour with bullshit, hoping he could skate through, the Brian Boitano of session therapy.

“Mental images are produced by the subconscious during sleep. Your dreams are the day’s residue being reprocessed by the mind. Dreams offer us a look at the subconscious.”

“I see.” But he didn’t. He hadn’t told her about the terrible nightmares. Twisted and frightening dreams. Always he was in the water, always a dark shadow chased him. Sometimes he would be swimming,

trying to get away, and then, suddenly, he would become the monster. Last night he'd been after Matt . . . chasing his dead son, mouth open, trying to devour him while the boy screamed. His own screams woke him up, drenched with sweat.

If it weren't for him, Matt would still be alive.

"I know you think this is all wrapped up with Matthew's dying"—his eyelid doing a machine-gun chatter—"but I've done my grieving. I've dealt with his death." A triple-Lutz lie.

"You don't dream. You don't think about Matthew or your divorce. You're afraid to leave your house. You have your secretary drive you. You're being asked to leave the few appointments your agent can set up. Ryan, I think you'd better start taking our work more seriously. You can spend your money here, dodging me, trying not to deal with what's bothering you, but it's not going to lead you to any solutions."

He glanced at his watch . . . ten minutes more. Some things he couldn't share. He couldn't talk about Matt.

He felt so goddamned guilty.

"That mess at NBC . . . I can clean that up. After all, I'm the guy who gave them *The Mechanic* and *Dangerous Company*. Those two shows made the network hundreds of millions." But that was four years ago, and back then he'd have found a way to get Marty Lanier laughing at his own ideas, instead of calling him a cocksucker and threatening his life in front of the assembled network Jedi. Marty's ideas were creative arsenic. Thoughts delivered from the hip with no real reasons, just "interesting notions" he called them—this from a man who probably got erections playing Nintendo.

"I want you to think about why we can't discuss Matthew," she was saying. "I want you to work on a reason."

"Okay." He looked at his watch: eight more minutes. "Look, Ellen, I don't want to cut this short, but Elizabeth is picking me up and she has to get back to the studio by three. So I better leave now."

"If that's what you want."

He made it out the door, his eyelid doing the fandango.

He got in the elevator.

Too small. It felt like a coffin, out of control, cableless, falling down

T H E P L A N

the side of the steel and glass building, about to bury itself and Ryan in the oil shale deep below Century City.

He walked into the sunshine. The fifty-minute hour was over. He just hoped Elizabeth wasn't late and he could make it home without cracking up.