

## **BEN THREE YEARS LATER**

### **PROLOGUE**

He allowed himself to think of Maggie in the produce section. Not a specific memory. That was too painful. But he could handle something simple, something generic like going to the store and shopping with her. She'd make up songs about the cauliflower and the mandarin orange, the butternut squash and the radish. Nonsense songs just for him, just for the two of them, and when he'd beg her to sing them again, she'd laugh and say that was impossible, she didn't remember.

He didn't buy much produce. He didn't buy many groceries at all. Beer, chips, frozen dinners. But once in a while he'd meander through the produce and buy an apple or some grapes and he'd let himself think about her. The Maggie she'd been when he was 5 and 6 and 7. That was safe enough. When images of her pale and cold on the couch came to him, he pushed them as far down as he could.

Gordon was a different story. His father never appeared in his dreams, didn't even cross his mind much. Once in a while he'd flash on the hospital room, the machines with their whirring and clicking, and then the final silence when he'd given his consent.

No, it was Scully who visited him the most often. Scully sitting in a bar, Scully playing bingo, Scully in the pool that last night.

## Chapter 1

Billy Morgan had tables 12, 13, and 14, the ones against the wall in the corner, as far from the kitchen as you could get. He wasn't surprised or even annoyed. He was the new kid on the block, a temp for the agency, somebody hired out to the caterer as a strong shoulder with good manners and presentable looks. It was a couple of bucks more than minimum an hour plus a share of the tips if the caterer was fair. He didn't have to have a uniform—just black pants and a black dress shirt. It was something to do on a Saturday night.

This was a fancy fundraiser for some nonprofit that helped the homeless with food and clothes. It wasn't black tie or anything. Portland didn't seem to have those kinds of events very often, but the men wore suits and the women wore dresses and a lot of bling. They mingled and ate the hors d'oeuvres that he passed around on a white ceramic platter, and they were polite to him and to each other. Billy liked working fundraisers. He liked helping people help other people. Part of the mission he'd carved out for his new life.

The first two tables had nice folks. They thanked him when he served them, shifting their bodies to make his work easier, laughing and having a good time. But at table 14, one of the men had had too much to drink already. The event was an easy place for it. Several bars were scattered throughout the ballroom and out in the lobby, and open bottles of wine sat on every table. The wait staff had received the required instruction to report anyone who got out of hand, but Billy had worked enough of these benefits to know that that never happened. It was up to the wife or a friend to handle the drunk.

The wife this time was a small, timid woman with close-cropped gray hair, a glittery silver dress that was way too small, and a fortune around her neck in the form of a diamond choker. The drunk husband was twice her size. His bull neck, stuffed into the collar of his dress shirt, was flushed and damp with sweat. As Billy passed the table with the tray of empty salad plates he'd cleared from table 12, the man reached out and grabbed his arm. Billy did his best to right the tray of dishes and himself and move back from the man.

"Just a moment, sir," he said. "I'll be right back."

But the man grabbed his arm again. "Can't you see we're out of wine?" His voice was loud, a hoarseness to it. He let go of Billy's arm and held up two empty bottles. "Isn't it your job to watch out for that? We shouldn't even have to ask."

"I'll see what I can do, sir," Billy said and took a step back, trying to relax his shoulders.

"I'll see what I can do, sir," the guy simpered. "Don't 'see' what you can do. Just bring us some wine."

Billy nodded and moved on to the kitchen. The entrees were coming out quickly now and the tray for table 12 was waiting for him. "14's out of wine," he said to the supervisor on his way to the loading counter. Billy had worked with Connie several times before. She was somewhere in middle age—he never could tell how old women were. She wasn't attractive, not to him, but she smiled often and worked hard to make things easier for the staff.

"They're supposed to buy more wine if they want it from the wall of wine over in the corner," she said.

Billy shook his head. "The guy at 14 isn't going to accept that. He's already close to making a scene. What do you want me to do?"

“Shoot him, will you?” Connie sounded serious but she smiled and moved to the door by the walk-in cooler. She pulled a bottle of red from a carton on the floor and a bottle of white from a carton in the cooler. “Take the food to 12 and come back for the wine.”

Billy hoisted the tray and headed out to 12. He served their dinners and collected the salad plates from 13, avoiding 14. Then he served 13 and when he got to 14 to remove the salad plates, the drunk stood up and came around and got in his face.

“Where’s the wine I asked for?” The man leaned in towards Billy. His breath was so heavy with alcohol and cigar that Billy turned his head. “Don’t turn away from me when I’m talking to you, boy.”

Billy said nothing. He moved around the man and cleared the salad plates to his tray stand. The man followed him and pulled on his arm. One of the other men at the table said, “Stan, let the kid do his job. We’re hungry.”

“His job is to get us more wine.”

“Sir, I will bring it just as soon as I get everyone their entrée. Please be patient.”

“I’ve already been patient. I want the wine and I want it now.”

“If you’ll just let me do my job, *sir*, I can get that wine for you.”

“Get the wine now.”

Billy nodded and picked up the tray.

“Put the tray down and go get the wine.” The slur had gone from the man’s voice and there was meanness and threat in it now.

Billy took a deep breath and put the tray down and moved towards the kitchen.

Connie was waiting at the door. “The food for 14 is getting cold. What’s the hold-up? And where’s your tray?”

“The man at 14. He’s a complete asshole and wants that wine now.”

She looked at him and then handed the two bottles to him. “Come right back for the food.”

Billy took the bottles to the table, opened them, and placed them in the center of the table.

“Two’s not enough,” the man said.

Billy looked around the table but none of the others would meet his eye.

“Stan, just pour the wine,” said his wife.

“Don’t tell me what to do, Marlene. You know I hate that.” The meanness and threat was there again.

Billy turned on his heels and went back for the food. The man ignored him when he put the steak down in front of him.

The auctioneer went into action a bit later, and his microphone and rapid patter drowned out the anger in Billy’s head. He cleared 12 and 13, served them coffee, left 14 alone, ignoring Stan and his demands for more wine, hotter coffee, different desserts. He finally cleared 14, brought a fresh carafe of coffee. Then he mustered up all his politeness and asked Stan if he still needed more wine.

“Of course I do. We all do.”

“Well, no, Stan, the dinner’s over,” Marlene said. “Let’s just have coffee, okay?”

“No. Get off my back, Marlene, or you’ll be sorry.”

The kitchen was winding down, and Connie had left the clean-up crew on its own. Billy went into the cooler and found what he was looking for: a bottle of white with a screw-top. It took him less than a minute and then he took the wine out to 14.

He moved over to the side of the room and stood with the other servers who were watching the auction. The auctioneer was good. He was funny and kept up a running dialog with the emcee, who was some local TV celebrity that Billy had never heard of. Lots of clapping, lots of rich people impressing each other with their bids on stays in vacation homes or hunting trips or weeks at a spa.

Billy watched the action for a while, but mostly he watched Stan. He saw Stan try to interest the others in some of the wine and Billy held his breath but no one wanted any. They all turned away from him and went back to watching the show. Stan poured a big glass of the white wine and drank it down, then poured another. His wife leaned in and said something—Billy hoped she was asking for the keys—but Stan raised the back of his hand to her and she shifted her chair away from him. Stan kept on drinking.

It took a bit longer than Billy had thought, close to eighteen minutes by his watch, but then Stan was face down on the table and one of the bid spotters spoke to the auctioneer, who called for a doctor. Two of the bid spotters and a waiter Billy didn't know moved Stan to an open spot on the floor near the far wall.

As soon as the attention moved away from table 14, Billy cleared it. He collected his part of the tips but didn't stay to share the leftovers or go out with the other servers as he sometimes did. He wasn't in the mood.

## Chapter 2

The front of the house was dark when Billy rode up. He walked his bike down the driveway and locked it in the garage. He could see a glow of light from Dede's room on the second floor. He went back around to the front yard and climbed the steps to the door, entering as quietly as he could. Some nights he liked checking in with her, but not tonight. He took off his shoes and left them in the basket by the door, then got some slices of turkey from the fridge and a banana from the pantry and went to his room. The light from the neighbor's side porch let him navigate to the lamp by the bed. He clicked it on and sat down in the wingback chair in the corner to eat.

He liked this room. It had been a dining room in a fancier incarnation of the house. It had a regular door to the hallway and pocket doors into the big living room. Dede had hung a bright-colored quilt from a yard sale over the pocket doors and he'd left it there. It matched the pale olive green of the walls and the colors in the hooked rug on the floor. Maggie would have approved. There was no closet but a metal shelving system stood against the one solid wall and he kept his clothes and a stack of books there and the rest of his gear in the two drawers in the nightstand. The other furnishings were of the same dark wood—the old bed frame, a table and chair in front of one of the big side windows.

He was still restless although the fast ride through the dark streets had helped dissipate some of it. He thought about a shower, but then he heard the floor upstairs creak with Dede's

steps and he moved over and turned off the lamp so if she came down to check, she'd think he'd gone to sleep.

Dede was interested in taking their relationship up a big notch, but Billy wasn't sure that was a good idea. She was older, maybe twenty years or more. That didn't matter to him. And he liked her. Liked her smile, liked her laugh. Long brown hair, nice eyes, a body that would do just fine. But sex with her would mean settling in or moving on and he wasn't ready for either.

He heard the toilet flush, heard her steps creak back across the upstairs. He turned the light back on, then got a couple of chocolate bars from his stash in the nightstand and ate them slowly. He stripped off his clothes and climbed into bed. Sleep wasn't coming for a while so he turned on his iPad and was soon immersed in Knaussgard's *My Struggle*.