

Bestselling author of *An Unfinished Story*

BOO WALKER

THE  
SINGING  
TREES

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*a novel*



# PRAISE FOR BOO WALKER

## *An Unfinished Story*

“Walker’s attention-grabbing and surprising plot highlights the engaging characters in this tale of second chances. For fans of women’s fiction such as Nicholas Sparks’s and Kristin Hannah’s work.”

—*Library Journal*

“*An Unfinished Story* is an immersive tale about a quest to find something real and true after life turns upside down. Boo Walker has written a book with a tender heart, cast against the soft background of coastal Florida, a setting rendered with a hand for delicate detail. A great story of redemption that carted me away.”

—Barbara O’Neal, bestselling author of *When We Believed in Mermaids*

“*An Unfinished Story* is the perfect mix of character-driven, heartstring-pulling drama and sharp-witted humor. I was thoroughly entertained and found myself in awe of Walker’s talent as a writer. I’m not even sure where to begin . . . His story line was poignant and meaningful. His prose was masterful and full of gorgeous imagery that made the setting come alive for me. His pacing was spot-on. The dialogue was brilliant—deep and soulful at times, witty and amusing at others. On top of all that, he has created a complex and marvelously memorable character in Whitaker Grant, who charmed and amused me at every turn. I could go on and on. At the end of the day, this was a wonderfully enjoyable book. Clearly, Boo Walker is an author whose time has come.”

—Julianne MacLean, *USA Today* bestselling author

“I love books with breathing characters you can root for, a narrative of human life to which you can relate, a conclusion that can stop the heart, and

an author who can bind them all together with passion and soul. Boo Walker proves he's that kind of writer with *An Unfinished Story*."

—Leila Meacham, bestselling author of *Roses and Titans*

"Grieving widow Claire Kite and frustrated writer Whitaker Grant cross paths in Boo Walker's moving novel, *An Unfinished Story*. Accurately conveying the complexity of human emotions, this story of love and healing kept me turning pages and tugged at my heart. Not to be missed."

—Karen McQuestion, bestselling author of *Hello Love*

"If Nicholas Sparks and Maeve Binchy had a baby, he might sound a lot like Boo Walker. *An Unfinished Story* strikes a perfect balance between humor, warmheartedness, and the daily pathos of being human."

—Jodi Daynard, bestselling author of *The Midwife's Revolt*

THE  
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# OTHER BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

*An Unfinished Story*  
*Red Mountain*  
*Red Mountain Rising*  
*Red Mountain Burning*  
*A Marriage Well Done*

## Writing as Benjamin Blackmore

*Lowcountry Punch*  
*Once a Soldier*  
*Off You Go: A Mystery Novella*

THE  
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BOO WALKER

LAKE UNION  
PUBLISHING

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*For Patty*



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# Prologue

*December 2019*

*Cape Elizabeth, Maine*

At the top of the steps, with a gloved hand on the icy railing, sixty-seven-year-old Annalisa Mancuso gasped in awe at the hundreds of wind chimes that dangled from the many snow-dusted branches in what had become a forest of singing trees.

The set that she'd made almost fifty years earlier—the centerpiece of her friend's collection—hung halfway up a red oak directly ahead. Vintage keys and silver cylinders circled a gold pendulum bob that had once driven the movements of an antique grandfather clock. Considering they had been here since the eighties, the parts had taken the weather well, as if each were frozen in time.

Annalisa had found each forgotten component in the clock shop where she'd started to make a life for herself, before the angry storm had parked itself overhead, revealing a world tarnished by hidden agendas, lies, and war. That ambitious eighteen-year-old girl had no idea what was to come, the dark of night always following the bright of day.

A swath of memories rose up—flashes of the countless hours she'd spent under her mother's tutelage on their side porch in Bangor, working their paintbrushes to the hypnotizing melodies of the wind chimes they'd made together when Annalisa was a toddler, a set crafted with antique spoons and silver bells. There, on the porch in front of their easels, was one of the few places they could escape her father's dark moods, and it was also where she first discovered the healing power of these wind-driven instruments.

The disturbance in the calm started as a rustle deep in the forest, a white whisper that rose in volume as it grew near. The wet dead leaves on

the ground stirred and spun up into the air. Then a bitter winter wind came rushing through, sending the chimes into a mad dance.

A shiver came over Annalisa as she closed her eyes and listened to the symphony of sound that filled the air, and the past wrapped around her, both like a shawl and a snake.

When the wind calmed, Annalisa let go of the dangerous thoughts, the ones that had plagued her for so many years, and looked back at the chimes with another shiver. Growing up a Mainer, there was a time when she could have stood out here in this frigid cold all morning, but the years had shed the warming blanket of youth, so she knew she better get started. Hopefully, considering her objective, she could still scale a ladder.

Descending the steps and crossing the snow-patched yard, she entered the garden shed and found an extension ladder leaning against the wall, next to the leaf blower. “This seemed like such a good idea earlier,” Annalisa said to herself, remembering her promise to her friend, who was knocking on death’s door a few miles away. Reaching the point of calling Emma a friend had taken a lot of catharsis, but the designation rested comfortably now both on her tongue and in her heart.

And it had all started with these chimes.

“Are you sure you feel comfortable climbing?” Emma had asked, knowing her request came with a certain element of danger.

“Are you kidding me?” Annalisa had responded with a smirk. “You’re looking at four years of overpriced barre classes. I could climb the steeple of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.”

Emma had let out a smile. “Always with the jokes.”

Making her way toward the red oak, Annalisa wondered what barre classes had to do with plucking wind chimes out of tall trees. She extended the ladder and locked it into place, then leaned it up against the branch. After testing its security, she carefully made her way up, feeling the burden of her nearly seventy years on earth in her knees. Her legs shook as the distance between her and the ground grew. She forced herself to take a breath as she finally reached the hook of the wind chimes and attempted to pry it from the branch.

Though she should have been focused on her balance or her mission, in actuality, she was thinking that if someone was secretly filming this absurdity, she’d be the laughingstock of YouTube, might even break the internet. God, life used to be so much simpler before smartphones.

The chill of the ladder crept into her gloved hands as she took one more needed step up and pulled hard at the hook until it came free. The keys and clock parts pinged against the pendulum bob as she carefully lowered herself and her memories back down the ladder.

Thankful to still be intact after her daring stunt, Annalisa carried her prize through Emma's beautiful and well-kept house to the sunroom and gently set it in the box of tissue paper she'd prepared. After making sure the tabby cats had water, she carried the box out to her Subaru and climbed inside.

She drove along the wild and rocky, utterly miraculous shore of Cape Elizabeth, then worked her way through the quaint neighborhoods of South Portland and over the bascule bridge to Casco Hospice in Portland, where she'd spent the early morning. To save her back, she pushed a wheelchair with the rather heavy box of chimes in its seat through the lobby and down the hall.

"Mission accomplished," Annalisa said as she wheeled the chimes into the room.

Emma, wan and obviously hurting, cracked a smile with her chapped lips and muttered a thanks. She wheezed as she drew oxygen from the cannula resting against her nose. "Did you have much trouble?" Each word seemed painful to discharge. She had aged tremendously in the last year, and the skin of her face hung loose and pale. Annalisa thought it overwhelmingly sad and strange to watch a woman four years younger than she deteriorate in such rapid fashion.

Glancing through the two neighboring windows into the December morning, Annalisa wished there were a way to open them—despite the cold. A little fresh air might do wonders for this place. "I don't know if the chimes will make much noise once they're up, but at least they'll put some good energy into the air." Both women knew well the power of the chimes resting inside the box.

Annalisa looked at the desk with the white phone and box of Kleenex on it, and to the cheap print of a bunch of lemons with their bright-green leaves, framed above the bed. The tropical image was wrong in so many ways, so un-Maine. It was a lifeless room that no amount of color could resuscitate. Not the white walls or the light-blue bedspread or the many flowers springing from vases, sent from the veterans Emma had helped over the years as a counselor.

After disappearing to the West Coast, Emma had spent two years in Marrakech as a Peace Corps volunteer. Upon her return, she'd become a certified counselor. For more than thirty years, up until she'd become sick, she'd worked with veterans (mostly Vietnam vets) to help them escape their nightmares. Knowing she couldn't help her brother, she'd chosen to help other warriors like him. If the amount of flowers sent to this room by her former clients was any indication, Emma had saved many lives.

Still, this room, this hospice, was nothing more than a holding room for the end, and it could provide only a trace of comfort as the cancer ate away at Emma's body.

"Don't you want to get out of here?" Annalisa asked. "Don't you want to go out on a lounge chair somewhere tropical, sipping piña coladas while a suntanned, bronze-skinned lover rubs lotion all over you? You say the word, and I'll grab the wheelchair. We'll be on the next flight to Aruba."

"If only I had the energy," Emma said, speaking as if she were tasting the idea in her mind like a touch of sugar on a strawberry margarita glass.

Twisting around and looking to the tile ceiling, Annalisa said, "Where shall we hang these?" She glanced at the swivel chair tucked under the desk. Considering her climb earlier, she thought this daring feat might just kill her. Maybe she should enlist some help.

"Annalisa?" Nothing more than a whisper.

"Yeah?"

Emma put her hand on her own heart. "Thank you. You truly are a saint."

"Oh, *stop* it." Imitating her late grandmother's stilted Neapolitan cadence, Annalisa said with wild hand gestures swatting the air, "Annalisa a *saint*? *Tu sei pazza!* Are we talking about the same girl who gave me the calluses on my arthritic fingers as I worked my way through the rosary praying for her soul?" Just as her grandmother had done, Annalisa blew out a blast of air as if she were extinguishing Mount Vesuvius.

The woman chuckled weakly, a flash of teeth and a slow and mild shake of her shoulders.

Annalisa sat on the edge of the bed and gathered her long white hair into a ponytail, thinking of her *nonna*, who'd taken her in when she was fifteen. "God, I miss her."

"I can only imagine," Emma said, licking her lips. She seemed to be waking up now, her speech flowing easier. "Joking aside, she'd be proud of

you for so many reasons. I know you hate talking about the past, but after what I did to you . . . and what you did for me . . .”

Annalisa brushed a hand through the air. “The past is the past. The way my memory has faded, I can barely remember the Our Father, so you’re off the hook for anything that happened years ago.”

Annalisa was lying: she could remember everything.

Every single day.

“If it were only that easy,” Emma whispered.

Annalisa was sure that Emma’s inability to separate from the past was why she’d turned down any sort of treatment, including chemotherapy. She was ready to say goodbye. After days of trying, Annalisa was through arguing with her on the topic and had come to accept the fateful decision.

Annalisa raised a finger. “Let me see if I can find someone to help.” She pressed up from the bed, poked her head out of the room, and looked down the hallway. A nurse in teal scrubs, bearing an uncanny resemblance to James Dean—without the styled hair—walked toward her with a stack of bedsheets in his hand.

“Excuse me. Can I borrow you for a moment?”

“Sure.” He sped up and followed her in.

“Would you mind hanging these chimes for us?” Annalisa pointed into the box.

The man shrugged. “That’s a first in my ten years of rounds, but I don’t see why not.”

After discussing the best method, the nurse slid the squeaky swivel chair toward the end of the bed, and as the women urged him to be careful, he climbed up. With one arm steadying the chair, Annalisa handed him the chimes.

Nineteen seventy, she pondered. That was the year she’d made these chimes, and they’d sung to her for many years before she’d given them to Emma. It was funny how she thought in years now. That was something that she’d been doing since her fifties. Everything that had happened in her life had a time stamp to it. Nineteen sixty-nine: the year she met Thomas. Nineteen seventy: the year she escaped the small-town clutches of Payton Mills to move to the city. Nineteen seventy-three: the year she first went to Bar Harbor. Nineteen seventy-seven: the year Annalisa almost saw Elvis perform. He, her favorite musician of all time, had died the day before the performance had been scheduled in Portland. Her unpunched ticket stub

(section 122, row F, seat 6) hung in a frame in the studio of her house. Nineteen seventy-nine: the year she'd gifted Emma the chimes as a symbol of her forgiveness.

While the nurse was stretched tall, Annalisa couldn't help herself and took a moment to appreciate his very toned tush. She glanced at Emma, who happened to be enjoying the same view. They shared a knowing smile. Some things stick with you from your youth.

The man with the pleasing posterior slipped the hook over one of the metal brackets that supported the tiles and carefully climbed back down. "There you go."

Once he was gone, Annalisa went to Emma's side and gently took her arthritic hand. It felt like she'd just picked up a snowball without gloves. "I'm sorry I can't put *him* on a hook in here for you. Wouldn't that be a sight. I guess the chimes will have to do."

Emma snorted. "When are you going to start getting old like the rest of us?"

"Please. If you only knew what I looked like naked. I'm as ancient as Rome."

Annalisa patted her hand reassuringly, trying to make some sort of wordless case that everything would be okay, even if it wasn't true. They stared at each other for a long time, and Annalisa's heart burned in the silence.

Emma asked, "Would you help me write him one last letter?"

A tear escaped Annalisa as she nodded. She went to the desk and rummaged around until she found a notepad and pen in a drawer, then sat on the swivel chair and slid toward the head of the bed.

Emma wheezed again as she drew in oxygen. After a long pause—the seconds marked by the chirp of the machine—she finally spoke.

*Dear Thomas,*

*What is there left to say? You know I'm sorry. You know I miss you. How many letters can a sister possibly write to her brother before he believes her? My heart breaks again and again. Did you ever truly find happiness, or did I steal it away forever? How I wish you could sit in this room—as awful as it is—and tell me the stories of your life.*



*You were such a wonderful brother, putting up with me during my teenage years. Can you believe the things I did? So desperate for attention. And you were the only one who ever gave it to me. You even gave up living in the dorms to stay home for me. What would I have done without you? I still laugh about the time you beat up Jim Harrison for calling me a skank.*

*How strange we never spoke of Vietnam. Or the fall of the Berlin Wall, the war in the Middle East. Can you believe we all have computers? Can you believe Tom Brady? That's right, I keep up a little. How about Portland's evolution? I thought the Maine Mall would ruin our city forever.*

*I hope you know that after hitting rock bottom, I've dedicated my life to making up for my sins and attempting to honor you. I suppose it's not much, but it's the most I can offer. I love you, Thomas.*

*Always your sister, I hope,  
Emma*

# Part I

JULY 1969 TO JUNE 1970

# Chapter 1

## NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS

*July 1969*

*Portland, Maine*

Crammed into the back seat of her cousin's brown beater, the Who playing "Pinball Wizard" on the radio, a wide-eyed Annalisa peered through the window at the skyline of the city she'd loved since she was a little girl. When someone from small-town Maine said, "Let's go to the city," she wasn't referring to Boston or New York. She was speaking of Portland, a city that had been pulling at Annalisa long before she'd lost her parents and been forced to endure the rest of her high school years in Payton Mills, a town known for nothing but its football team and textile mill.

For Annalisa, Portland might as well be Paris, and Congress Street downtown resembled the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. The buzz of the city: the museums and art galleries, the clusters of protesters pumping their signs, the psychedelic shops oozing incense, the exciting restaurants bustling with conversation, the concert posters plastered on shop windows promising wild nights, the hippies with their long hair and colorful clothes brushing past the businessmen toting their briefcases, even the honking of the horns, called to her as if moving here were her destiny. Here in this bustling port city, she imagined she'd never run out of creative inspiration.

Her cousin Nino, her best friend and one of the only reasons keeping her from hating Payton Mills, slid to a stop by Monument Square and turned back to her. The son of Annalisa's paternal aunt, Nino was Annalisa's age, had a baby face, and his wavy, slicked-back chocolate hair featured a little curl above his forehead. He was six three, could out-dribble almost anyone on the basketball court, and had a smile that lit up a room. It

was no wonder that one of the prettiest girls in town, a cheerleader named Sara, sat shotgun, smacking on a piece of gum. Yes, she was Italian. Dating someone other than an Italian was not acceptable in the Mancuso family.

“All right, *cugina*,” he said, throwing an arm over the back of the seat, “we’ll catch you later. Don’t take no for an answer, all right?”

“When have I ever taken no for an answer?” Annalisa cracked open the door, and the sounds of the city—the car horns and police sirens, the hammering from a nearby construction site, the loud banter of the city dwellers, the arguing and laughter, the pure excitement—rushed over her. “Just don’t get too blitzed to drive us home,” she added.

“When would I ever?” Nino asked with a charming and devious grin. Annalisa wasn’t sure exactly what he and his girlfriend planned for their day in the city, but she could only imagine it had to do with booze and fooling around.

They had to be back to Payton Mills by seven, or her grandmother, who was a million times stricter than her parents had been, would ground her for her entire senior year. Though she was no stranger to breaking the rules, this was the first time Annalisa had ever been allowed to go to Portland without the accompaniment of her aunt or another adult, and she didn’t want it to be her last.

Annalisa stepped out of the car and immediately noticed Our Lady of Victories, the bronze statue of a woman holding a sword and shield, looking almost directly at her. *Yes, let today be my victory*, she thought. Popping open the trunk, she grabbed her purse with her sketch pad and the orange portfolio tote that had once been her mother’s.

After shutting the trunk and giving one last wave, Annalisa filled her lungs with the salty air blowing in from Casco Bay and crossed Congress Street, walking with determination toward the most well-known art gallery in town. Having been painting since she was two years old and selling her pieces since she was ten, she felt like she was finally ready to garner some attention here in the city.

The gallery was sandwiched between a boutique clothing store and a travel agency in a fancy brick building. Every Mainer knew about the great fire of 1886 and how Portland had been rebuilt with mostly brick and concrete.

Stalling, she wondered if she’d dressed too casually. She could have chosen one of the conservative and dull dresses that she wore to church, but