

RETRouvAILLES

A Novel

By Bill Chastain

Chapter One

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Tiny fingers smelling of grape lollipop danced across her upper lip, seeking an answer. She recognized the drill. One deliberate breath ended the suspense for her precocious eight-year old.

Satisfied that sleep—not death—had captured her mother, the little girl withdrew her fingers. “My pretty mommy.” Her hand ran along her mother’s face, adoring her like a favorite doll.

She continued to feign sleep, prompting a reprimand from the guilt police for not wrapping her arms around her frightened daughter and squeezing her with enough conviction to ease her worries. She just felt too tired, too weak, and too comfortable where she lay on the couch. Her daughter scampered away across the hardwood floor to the stairs taking five leaps to cover the twelve steps to the second floor. If only the boys had not told her of their mother’s cancer.

She awaited an energy injection to rally her toward the kitchen. Understanding such a jolt would not happen, she slung one leg onto the floor, sat up, opened her eyes, and stretched. Somehow an autopilot clicked within, then she watched like a detached bystander while she loaded the dishwasher, took out the garbage, and made a final pass over the tile counter with a Handi Wipe. *Mission accomplished.* She turned out the lights and walked through a darkened living room to the French doors opening onto a covered deck.

This remote area of the three-storied house in the Marina district served as her special nook to disappear into. Solitude lived in her retreat, allowing her mind to breathe more easily. Troubles never invaded the tranquility created by stepping outside to plop down in her weathered rocking chair. Her husband had once asked if she wanted him to haul off the thing. She declined, detailing grandiose

restoration plans. A fresh coat of paint, a little patching here and there, then she'd bring the rocker inside. Truth be known, she had never planned to relocate the piece of furniture; it felt more like an old friend than an inanimate object.

She removed the black vinyl tarp covering the chair and swept her hand across the crushed velvet cushion. She turned and leaned over the iron railing to welcome the cool air. Lights from Sausalito dotted the horizon like stars in the sky. The boats at the marina felt like family. A lone siren wailed in the distance. She found herself drawn to a pair of high-top, Nike basketball shoes tangled around a power line.

What a cruel trick. Some bully must have thrown the shoes around the wire, sending home a neighborhood youngster barefoot and in tears. Bullies suck! Despite the pang of sadness brought on by her survival-of-the-fittest theory on the shoes, she stared until invisible feet filled the footwear, transforming a bully's ugly work to that of an artist. A spirit tap-danced on an air stage elevated above the street, providing a thrill similar seeing her first Broadway show, *West Side Story*.

The Jets are going to beat the Sharks, to-ni-ight...

"You're deep, babe," she teased herself aloud.

Will I become the wind dancing in those shoes?

In the distance the Golden Gate Bridge wore the glow of a doting grandfather surrounded by his grandchildren. She could have camped outside for hours curled underneath the stiff wool army blanket, splendid company for herself and her vivid imagination.

Fatigue came easily these days. The mawkish sweat bathing her face reminded her about the root of that fatigue. Cancer had broken her will. The Big C had won the game. All that was left was the crying.

Funny thing about cancer, she hadn't been able to fully comprehend what toll the disease had taken on her. Glances in the mirror concealed the truth about her transition, though her loose-fitting clothes raised suspicions. A photograph from her daughter's birthday party finally served notice about her grave condition like a writ of foreclosure. There she stood, holding a knife perpendicular to her folded arms waiting to cut the square white cheerleader cake. The symmetry between the form holding the blade and the blade itself haunted her.

She hadn't planned on allowing him to see how the cancer had sucked the life from her body, turning her cheeks hollow and her being frail. Only when he called did she understand she needed to go to him, engraving in her soul the unpretentious gait of his loose-jointed, angular body; the deep voice filled with pillow-like softness; and the touch. When his hands found her, she never wanted them to leave. She occasionally wondered if he were real or some character she had dreamed up to keep her company on the balcony during frigid San Francisco nights—a mirage, like her daughter's imaginary friend, Rupert. She knew better.

He represented the only passion she'd known in her life. Now her life was gone, with ample opportunity for regret. Only, regret translated to anxiety and she had no spare hours, minutes, or seconds to waste on such an emotion. What she had time for was him. Though fragile, she decided to make a trip to Tampa to afford them one final moment. She needed to take enough from him during her visit to last an eternity. And, she needed to free him. Free him from her.