

## Chapter 1

Wade Riley strummed the final chord of a catchy little blues tune and waited for the applause he knew would not come. The chord faded, and someone bellowed over the boiling revelry: “Play some Led Zeppelin!”

A voice with a heavy drawl weighed in with the inevitable country counter request: “Bocephus!”

Hoots and laughter rose up like a flock of starlings, then dropped back into the roar. Wade half grinned. The requests were always like that--hardcore rock and roll classics or bouncy honky-tonk standards that sounded like Willie Nelson on Quaaludes when sung solo. The Boston Biscuit’s owner was too cheap to pay for an entire band.

And so he sat there alone on the tiny stage surrounded by a sea of cowboy hats and played-out hairstyles. Everyone was liquored down to the lowest common denominator. The windowed foyer bubbled with a jostling crowd waiting for tables. Waitresses in gingham shirts, jeans, and western hats crisscrossed the floor, their arms lined with plates of food. Chas Martino, the night manager, stood talking to the doorman, a dangerously quiet man named Lyle.

Like the Biscuit’s owner, Chas was a transplanted Yankee bitten by the country music bug. Together they’d come up with the idea of a cross between a redneck roadhouse and a sidewalk café, five thousand square feet sporting an all-you-can-eat belly-buster meat buffet, a complete menu of tofu and other dishes, beer pitchers shaped like boots, and a pastry bar whose desserts ranged from death-by-chocolate concoctions to an exquisite, subtle French *gate*. And Live Country Music! All served twenty-four hours a day! On weekends, it was the party monsters’ last stand before heading home. Wade had come to view it as a personal Waterloo, the

Bataan death march leg of his journey to country music stardom.

The wagon wheel clock behind the cashier read 1:20.

Regina planted one boot against the edge of the stage and pulled herself up by the railing. She hovered a few seconds, grinning in a silly straw hat. A sultry fragrance wafted over him. Gardenias. He grinned back. There was nothing silly about Regina's thick chestnut hair and tight jeans.

"Hey, darlin'," she said. "What say we drive to the lake when I get off and see what's what."

"I know what's what," Wade said. He'd found out she was married after the one time. And tonight, the top two buttons free, her blouse yawned open.

A loud whoop from a table of four thick-necked men to his right exploded into drunken laughter. One yelled something at Wade he couldn't make out over the roar.

Regina rolled her eyes. "The kids are tight tonight."

"You know, Regina--"

"I said why don't you quit fuckin' off and entertain us!"

One of the drunks had stood up and was hollering at the stage, the hairy brawn of his forearm stark against his white Izod. His companions let out a round of whoops.

Lyle stepped in front of him. The drunk arched back, Lyle moved in closer. The doorman was physically shorter but a much bigger presence, as though a violent past had left him with a scarred aura snarling out in every direction. His face was only inches from the drunk's as he spoke. The man eased back and sat down.

"That Lyle's something, ain't he," Regina said.

Wade started over. "What I was going to say, Regina, is--"

"Come on, girls!" Chas Martino blustered toward them. "There's customers waiting." He pulled Regina down by her waist, steered her away from the stage, then turned back around.

“And I’m hearing a lot of dead air.”

Dead air? It was full of lethal noise—way too many decibels of jacked-up sonic trash. Wade launched into “Mexicali Blues,” defying the owner’s country-only mandate, framing as much volume from the guitar as he could. When he started singing, he practically shouted. At the last second, he changed the song’s lyrics.

Layin’ back in an old saloon with a peso in my hand, counting all the assholes in the joint...

The improvisation warmed him, made him feel like he was giving back a little for all he had to take.

Nobody noticed.

He surveyed the crowd again. They all seemed focused on their drinks, like beasts on the Serengeti hunched over the only watering hole for miles. His energy sputtered. He eased up on the guitar and sang at a normal volume. Now he could barely hear himself.

He finished the song thinking that if he turned off the PA amp no one would even notice. He could just go through the motions. A mime musician.

Regina was giving him the eye. Would he meet her tonight? He wanted to. He didn’t want to. The one time, after they’d done it, he asked her if she ever felt guilty about stepping out on her old man.

“Wendell’s too busy selling his damn tractors.” She chuckled. “He’d rather ride a John Deere than me.”

“But he’s your husband.”

“Yeah, he is.”

Moonlight buttered her skin and cast her perfect nose in shadowy relief. Wendell must

be an idiot.

“So why don’t you leave him?”

She looked at him and grinned. “You making an offer, cowboy?”

He gulped. “I mean, what’s the point? Being married, seeing other guys and all.

Where’s that going to leave you in ten years?”

She was caressing herself. Damn.

“Not far from where you’ll be, I reckon.”

“What do you mean by that?” He wasn’t so sure he wanted to know.

“You expectin’ to become a doctor or somethin’ working at that nuthouse? And the Biscuit... well, it ain’t exactly the Grand Ole Opry.”

“I’m working on it!” he said. “At least I’ve got a plan.”

“You’ve got the voice and the look, son,” Marty Groll had told him three years ago.

“Hell, you’ve even got the name! But you don’t have much of your own material.” Marty was vice president in charge of artists and repertoire for Hog High Records. “It’s 1993! I’m looking for singer-songwriters. Write more country tunes. Get yourself a following!”

Wade had left Nashville determined to do just that, making his way through the South, writing his songs, playing them to whoever would listen. Turned out most folks weren’t particularly interested in the plight of down-home Dixie unless someone already famous was singing about it. Gainesville was the longest he’d lived anywhere in the past three years, and it was the only town where he’d had to get an extra job—lackey at the Butterfield Behavioral Health Unit--to make up for the piss-poor pay he got playing music. He was more like Regina than he was willing to admit: married to a career that cared little for him, taking pleasure where he could find it....

Now Regina had stopped to take orders at a table of sorority types near the stage. One of the girls, a blonde, pointed toward Wade as she said something. Regina paused, nodded, and

continued taking orders.

Wade played “Friends in Low Places.”

When he finished the song, the blonde stood up and made her way to the stage, her denim miniskirt showing a whole lot of thigh.

She said, “Hi there!” as though it were a brilliant conversational gambit.

“What can I do for you?”

“My girlfriend Missy just broke up with a guy,” she said. “He was married!” She held the sneer for a second, then said, “Can you play Jo Dee Messina’s ‘Bye-Bye’?”

“I do happen to know that tune,” he said. Well, he liked it and knew the lyrics from singing along with the radio.

“And say it’s for Missy?”

“No problem.”

“That’d be super.” She smiled at him as though he had just offered her a modeling contract, slowly backed away, then turned.

Wade suddenly felt good, expansive.

“Hey, excuse me!”

She wheeled back around.

“I wrote a song about that very situation,” he said. “Married man, good-hearted woman who gets fed up. Maybe your friend would appreciate it.”

The girl frowned. “Who are you?”

“My name’s Riley. Wade Riley.”

“I never heard of you,” she said. “Are you famous or something?”

Of course that made him think of Baby Sams’s question. *Boy, what you want with famous?* He hadn’t had much of an answer for the old bluesman, either. The girl turned and walked away, dragging his mood behind her.

He was right about the Jo Dee Messina song, played “Bye-Bye” without a hitch. The blonde looked at him once, said something to her friend—Missy?—who turned around for two seconds, then without even a change of expression rejoined the huddle.

The room was a hive of distorted faces, honking and hooting, stuffing themselves with food. He was about to slink into another upbeat ditty--more cheating hearts and sassy flip-offs--when Regina rounded the corner of the stage and stopped. Steam rose off the heaped plates of food cradled in her arm. He had to lean forward to hear what she was saying.

“Folks in the far corner booth asked if you could play some James Taylor.”

Across the room, a woman with her hair in a ponytail steepled her fingers and made a little bow. Next to her a girl who looked to be twelve or so, with black bangs and big glasses, sat clutching a tumbler of water in both hands. He could see nothing of the man with them but the back of his head.

“Kind of late for kids, isn’t it?”

“They’re on the road,” Regina said and left.

He sighed and without a word of introduction launched into “Sweet Baby James.”

The woman watched the whole time.

When he finished, her hands fluttered in silent applause. He felt lighter. There was someone to play to.

He sang every James Taylor song he knew, each one winning some sign of approval from the woman--a smile, a nod of enthusiasm, once even audible applause. Finally, there was nothing left on the woman’s table but two coffee cups and a glass. He checked the clock--he hadn’t taken a break in over an hour.

It was time. Her attention had wound him up, encouraged him to do it. If she liked James Taylor, why wouldn’t she like him?

He adjusted the guitar’s tuning, then spoke softly into the microphone.

“Here’s one I wrote called ‘Compromise.’”

Mary stares at the wall  
And wonders if the mirror there really tells it all.  
All the lines on her face  
Make her wonder how she ever wound up in this place.

The woman never took her eyes off him as he descended into the somber tones of the relative minor.

She longed to be a dancer  
Ever since she don’t know when  
But she’s married to a man  
Who has to know just where she’s been.

During the turn-around, the woman strained forward, swaying slightly, her expression dreamy. The guitar’s vibration drove deep into Wade’s viscera, then spread, his entire body humming a note only she could hear. It was all him now. And her. *Find one and sing like they’s your woman walking out the door on you for the last time.* Maybe Baby was right. He had his one.

He sang the second verse, closed his eyes for the chorus.

Compromise, see the tears fall from her eyes  
As the dreams that filled her youth  
just slip away.

Realize, as she sits and wonders why  
And tomorrow dances off with yesterday

The woman cradled her face in her hands now--looked as though she might weep--and all the honky-tonks and drunks he'd ever played for suddenly seemed worth it.

He sang the next verse, attacked the strings harder to announce the lead-in to the bridge. He clenched his eyes tight and nearly cried the lyrics, his chest tight with the swell of emotion.

Up before the audience she dances gracefully,  
The people sigh amazement, ooh! she moves so  
fancy free.

But somewhere in the final act  
The bell begins to ring.  
She wakes up next to Harry  
And life's the same old thing.

He began to replay the intro leading into the last verse and opened his eyes.

The table was empty.

The family stood at the cashier's counter, the man's back still turned, the woman still watching Wade. The man finished paying the bill, rolled a toothpick from the dispenser, and walked out.

The woman and girl followed. Across the chaos, she offered a tight smile and a quick wave, then turned and left. He followed them through the pane glass of the foyer until they disappeared into the parking lot.

Something in him began to shrink, and when it had shrunk to nothing, kept on shrinking

until his flesh felt like it was sucked in by the force of the vacuum against which he had to strain to keep from collapsing. The guitar sounded thin and tinny, as though far away.

*Sing like they's your woman walkin' out the door on you.*

Then what? What about after they're gone? Baby never said anything about that.

He launched into the song's last verse.

Mary sits all alone  
In the terminal, her suitcase packed,  
quiet as a stone  
She contemplates one more time  
Her life of crowded solitude  
Not a reason, not a rhyme  
The note she left for Harry  
summed it up so carefully  
I could've been a dancer after all  
If you'd only danced with me.

[This is the perfect place to close your opening chapter. Trust me when I say I know what agents are looking for in a first chapter—it has to be seductive beginning to end, has to move swiftly, and it has to end, not just stop. Ending here, the song line “I could've been a dancer if you'd only danced with me” is poignant, kind of epitomizes Wade's state of mind.

One final suggestion: I think even as you used to refer to your protagonist as Mills, you should refer to him now as Riley throughout. (Though other characters might call him Wade in dialogue.) Riley is a great name, and homage to a great blues singer. (Many readers will know B.B. King's real name is Riley B. King.) If you agree, I'll do a search-and-replace, then accept the change before I continue the line-edit.]

