*ood morning, Nashville—best music listeners this world over, better than New York, better than LA—Nashville audiophiles, those of you listening to old Floyd Masters, know the best of the best when you hear it. Yes, ma’am, you do. And you like it early. Five AM is always a good time for real country music. I’ve got quite the playlist coming your way this morning. There’s been all that hubbub about male country singers being the lettuce in the salad and female country singers being the tomatoes everybody eats around. That you can’t play back-to-back songs by women on Top 40 country radio or else you’ ll lose your listeners. First of all, that’s one dumb metaphor spoken from the mouth of one dumb radio disc jockey. Not me, for once. Hallelujah for that. Someone failed to tell him that nobody in the South likes salads. Not re- ally. Put some salt on those homegrown, straight-from-the-vine heirlooms and we’ ll choose tomatoes over lettuce any day. I’m pretty tired of the boys’ club on the radio, folks, where every song’s about trucks, drinking beer, parties on the weekends, girls in bikinis, more trucks. All that music’s written by the same handful of songwriters, all of it’s divorced from the rich tradition of country music. Good country music should make you feel something, should cover the*

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*entire territory of the heart.*

*Glad Jo Lover’s speaking up about women being the unwanted tomatoes of Top 40 country radio. She had a real good interview on CMT and* Good Morning America. *Not that it’ll make that hardheaded DJ believe any differ- ent. Men might dominate the radio playlist on Top 40 stations, but rest assured, my friends, I’ve got a full female playlist for you this morning and every morn-*

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*ing for the next couple of days. Patsy will follow Dolly will follow Loretta will follow Tammy will follow Reba will follow Joanne will follow Mother Maybelle and back again. You’ ll see just how well these ladies follow one another.*

*I bet nobody will be calling in and saying, “Oh, Floyd, please, please, please play J. D. Gunn and the Empty Shells. Please give us some of that lettuce music!” No, I bet you won’t. Even if you do, I don’t have to listen because this here is independent radio. And if you’re listening, Joanne Lover, which I know you’re not, congratulations on your debut tonight as the newest Grand Ole Opry member. She’s preserved the tradition in her songwriting, carried on the history in that voice of hers. Finest female vocalist this side of the Cumberland River. The next queen of country, I have no doubt.*

*And she broke my heart by saying yes to the brightest producer Nashville’s seen in decades. He’s a handsomer devil than old Floyd Masters, I’ ll give him that. Joanne Lover and Nick Sullivan will make some good-looking babies. All right, folks, I guess that’s enough talk from the slickest voice in country radio. Here’s “Your Cheatin’ Heart” by Patsy Cline. Your first fix for the morning. There’s more to come, so keep it tuned right here to 87.3 FM, Vanderbilt’s WHYW morning broadcast.*

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CHAPTER 1

The Wrong Chord

OANNE LOVER WAS ready to stand beneath the bright red lights of the Ryman Auditorium—under those lights she’d feel more herself than she did hiding here in the darkness. Her band members twisted their tuning pegs while stagehands shifted the electrical cords around like they were making calligraphy on the wooden floor. Jo rocked from heel to toe in her red cowgirl boots. Her earlobes turned pink before she walked out onstage; her upper lip could sweat more than her arm- pits, which amazed her; and the left side of her mouth twitched. Same

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thing happened to Elvis but he made it billion-dollar cool.

Jo searched for the king of seventies country music, Phil Doby, due onstage any minute now to invite her out where all of the greats—like Patsy Cline, Dolly Parton, and Loretta Lynn—had once held a micro- phone and filled the room with their sweet melodies. She’d been wait- ing her whole life to be standing out there as an Opry member, and she wished to do right by all that talent tonight. Jo crossed her arms

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and took a deep breath, and as she exhaled, her dress’s spaghetti strap slipped off her right shoulder. She returned it to its proper place, then she began adjusting every part of her outfit: lifting her boobs up in the low-cut dress, a navy one with a pattern of tiny red apples; fluffing the bottom part of the dress; smoothing it back out; fluffing it again. She should’ve followed her instincts and worn her jeans, but her stylist had insisted on this classic outfit for the Opry induction. Her mama would’ve most certainly agreed. Jo could hear her now: *You’re going to church, Joanne. You will not be shameful. You will look nice before God.*

Back in Gatesville, every Wednesday and Sunday of her childhood, her mama had made her dress up just like this, and just as soon as she could, Jo would tear off that suffocating dress and hike down to the creek behind their shotgun house. She’d stay down there for hours in the shade of the rhododendron and paint her face with the mud from the creek and pretend she was putting on makeup. If her mama ever saw her, she knew she’d accuse her of wearing the devil’s mask. Some- times she painted her feet and legs too and then washed them off in the cold water that stayed icy like that year-round. Jo patrolled up and down the creek with a wooden stick in hand. Little minnows nibbled at her feet as she passed. She stacked smooth stones from the creek to make towering sculptures in different places along the way to help mark her path. Robins and cardinals rested on her creations and kept her company. On one of these hikes Jo discovered her daddy’s moon- shine jugs anchored in the deepest part of the creek. She helped herself to a sip every now and then. Her mama never noticed.

Jo pretended to be queen of a river that had the power to deliver her from the life she was living. The little Cleopatra of Appalachia. As long as she could remember, she’d played that game. She’d wanted to be queen of something somewhere someday, and now country music’s

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most important stage stood wide open before her. Jo hoped little girls would admire her and imagine standing up on that stage too, just like Jo did the nights her daddy turned on the Opry broadcast on the radio and her family gathered around it like it was a fire. She’d heard Dolly Parton sing there for the first time and Jo’s entire body had warmed with a desire she’d never felt before. After that night, the little creek turned into Jo’s stage, the birds her audience, and she would sing and sing and sing church hymns and ballads like “Barbara Allen” until her voice felt hoarse. She had one spot where the tree canopy opened to the sky and she sunned herself there, dreaming of the day she’d be- come a member of a different family.

Jo felt the audience’s anticipation now, just like she always sensed a thunderstorm coming over the mountain—the air pressure dropped, the wind picked up, and the sun disappeared. Jo adjusted the silver turquoise rings on her sweaty fingers, which covered both of her hands like brass knuckles. Jo lifted her thick hair upward to cool her neck, and her dress strap fell off her shoulder again. Now a regular drumbeat was going onstage. The audience began to clap. Phil Doby walked out to the front of the Ryman Auditorium stage to thank her opening act, the Wayward Sisters. He had a mane of white hair, thick as kudzu, and he wore a silver and blue rhinestone suit so shiny he refracted himself all over the auditorium. He wore a white cowboy hat to match.

Phil said, “We’re broadcasting the Grand Ole Opry live from the Ryman Auditorium tonight just like we used to for many, many years. It’s so good to have y’all here with us at the mother church of country music tonight, whether you’re at home listening or right out there in the audience. We’ve got albums on sale outside this auditorium.” Phil adjusted his metal belt buckle.

Jo looked over at her assistant, Marie, who usually kept quiet when

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Jo was nervous like this. The blue light from her cell phone illumi- nated her delicate face. Marie was twenty-two years old, with a blond pixie cut and bangs swept to the side, with a degree in business from Vanderbilt and a self-taught love of country music. She reminded Jo of a woodland fairy. “Everything okay?” Jo said.

Marie turned off her phone. She scratched her cheek with her man- icured fingernails. “Just confirmed with *Vanity Fair* for tomorrow. You good for taking pictures with fans after tonight’s show? And signing merchandise?”

“Happy to.” Jo wiped away beads of sweat from her lip.

Phil reached out his shiny arm to the side of the stage. “Now I want to welcome the newest darling of the Grand Ole Opry to the stage. This is her first performance as a member of the family. Long overdue, if I say so myself. This fine Virginia lady’s music is beloved by fans and critics alike. She has a voice like an angel and boots that stomp like the devil. Let’s put our hands together for Ms. Joanne Lover.”

The crowd called for her with whistles and clapping.

She secured the straps of her dress in place, stomped the heel of her boot onto the ground two times, slapped her thigh once, and then ran out and stood on the center staircase at the front of the stage. Jo paused to listen to the crowd clapping for her, their behinds up and out of those wooden pews. She held the fiddle slack in her hand. The sun had set on the streets of downtown Nashville, and the stained glass panels in the back of the auditorium no longer glistened. With the red barn behind her; the lights glowing from the ceiling; the pews situated to the left, to the right, and in the balcony; and the stage floor beneath her, Jo felt like an epicenter—the spirit of the revivalist preacher who first took this stage back in 1892 never had died away.

Her fans usually consisted of mothers and daughters or big groups

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of friends who chanted, “‘Red Boots,’ ‘Red Boots,’ ‘Red Boots.’” Jo smiled. These women—nurses, bankers, teachers, mothers, execu- tives, mechanics—worked so much and still had the energy to come out and support her. Maybe they listened to her album in those rare quiet moments driving home from work, before picking up the kids. She made music just for them, to make them feel like their experience as women was represented in country music, to give them a living heart in a song.

From deep in the audience someone raised a single red boot up high enough for Jo to see. She pointed at it with her bow, and then she tucked her fi dle beneath her chin before putting the horsehair to the strings. She turned around, left the staircase, and stepped onto the main stage of the Ryman, where her backup band began adding beat and rhythm to her sound. She circled around her microphone as she picked up the speed on her fi dle. The audience clapped faster.

Jo stopped playing but her band continued, just a little drums and some rhythm guitar behind her. She took the microphone in one hand. “How you doing, Nashville?”

Whistling and clapping answered her.

“We’ve been on the road these past few months. It’s so good to be back. Ain’t that right, boys?” She turned around to look at her band. They all nodded. Jo looked down into the center pews and spotted Nick sitting next to his father. She winked at him and he smiled back at her.

“My fiancé’s here tonight—” The crowd erupted with hollering and applause. Jo laughed and wiped her brow with the back of her hand. “I’m still getting used to calling him that. Best producer in this business. He’s one of the biggest reasons why I’m standing up here tonight. And I want to thank the Opry for inviting me to be part of

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this wonderful family. Growing up, I never expected to make it out of Gatesville, let alone make it this far. I’m on the greatest stage country music has ever known. A dream come true.”

Women screamed in that way men never do.

“I intend to get a few of you ladies up here with me a little later on. We’ve got some stomping to do. But first I want to give a shout-out to the Battered Women’s Shelter of Nashville. Half of all ticket sales to- night go to support them. It’s a place that matters very much to me, so thank y’all for supporting it too.”

Jo turned around to her band and tapped her foot to count them off, and the drums bore down hard, the bass and the rhythm guitar joining in before the banjo. Jo was last to enter the song, with her fid- dle. Everybody in the two-thousand-seat auditorium would know the words to “Red Boots”: her first big single from her debut album. This song changed her life. Put her on the charts for the first time. She and the band went from the intro to verse to chorus to bridge to verse again, like it was a well-worn hiking path. She’d know her way in this song for the rest of her life.

She sang the chorus with help from the audience: “*I’m thinking of him*

*tonight / He’s thinking of me none / Tell me, girls / Where have the good guys gone?* ”

The audience cheered. Jo spun around on the heel of her boot, the bottom of her dress lifting up around her. The boys ended their part of the song and left the sound of her fiddle filling up the auditorium all by itself. She lessened her pressure on the top string, brought down the sound to the real close of the song. Jo rode the momentum of the applause into the next song, titled “Journey Woman,” about a medi- cine woman out west and the child she bears alone. The lights above

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her shifted into an upside-down V, and the color changed from pearl to red. She and the band played that one straight. Jo paused after that song and put down her fiddle on the stand behind her before picking up her Gibson F-style mandolin, which she loved as much as anything else in this world. The fiddle and mandolin were cousins, same tun- ing and similar length of scales. She could transition easily between the two.

While she tuned the instrument, Jo said, “You know, when I was young and first starting out in Nashville, I was broke. Had no health insurance. Made sure I had insurance on my instruments though. If I got sick, my friends chipped in to pay the bills. We all did that for each other. The community here in Nashville’s good that way.”

The crowd clapped as Jo adjusted the microphone. She was sweating so much, less from nerves now. Jo quickly braided her hair and draped it over one shoulder. Someone in the crowd whistled and shouted, “Play ‘Cowgirl Blues,’” and other people clapped in agreement.

“Hang on, hang on,” she said. She started plucking her mandolin softly to make sure it was ready. “There’s always been a lot of guessing about who I write my songs about. But I think what really matters is heartbreak. Anyone here ever experienced one of those?”

Multiple women shouted, “Hell yes,” and others clapped.

Jo stopped playing the mandolin and nodded her head. “Anybody ever had something important taken from you?”

The Ryman was quiet, but then one woman raised her hand, and then another, and more still, until most of the audience had hands raised high in the air as if they held lighters aflame.

“Yeah,” Jo said in a low voice. “Me too. That’s what ‘Cowgirl Blues’ is about.”

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The crowd erupted into a sustained scream for this song, the most requested one off her recent album. “Cowgirl Blues” might’ve been about heartache, but from the sound of the music alone it would have been hard to tell. The rolling bass solo and the fast drum work, along with the addition of the steel guitar, made people dance from the start. That was something she’d learned to do—dance despite the heart- breaks. She was practiced at the art of putting trouble aside.

Jo put down her mandolin on the stand, but the boys kept playing. She scraped her boots on the stage to get good traction, and then Jo jumped in the air and landed, hands on her hips, slightly crouched. She danced a breakdown, flatfooting from one side of the stage to the other, knees as high as they could go, the heels of her boots leaving marks on the stage. Jo moved her arms out to the sides and above her head like a ballerina. She paused to take a breath and looked out at the seats, where arms were waving for her to come down.

Returning to the microphone, Jo said, “All right, ladies, I’m coming.

Gotta show off those red boots.”

Jo walked down the front steps and the crowd erupted with energy. Fans jumped up and down trying to get her attention. She liked stand- ing among the pews, the stage towering above her. Jo walked through the aisles, smiled, and held the offered hands. One older woman with her silver hair in French braids had red cowgirl boots painted on her cheeks, so Jo chose her, and then Jo spotted a pair of red combat boots on a short, stocky teenage girl that went all the way up to the middle of her exposed thigh. Not really cowgirl boots but powerful nonetheless. “Go on up there,” Jo said to her. She screamed, “Oh my God, thank you,” and hugged Jo.

Jo canvassed the crowd, looking for the most enthusiastic of them

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all to join her onstage and close the first set. She walked a little fur- ther and hugged her fans as she went, said thanks for coming, that she hoped they were having a good time. Then, right before she turned around, Jo spotted him like a clay pigeon she was about to shoot. His bright smile flashed at her, his dimples visible, his skin glowing like he was a lantern lit from within. How did she miss that white Stetson in the audience? She stopped moving and just stared at him as if she’d been transfixed by a stranger she’d passed on the street. She lost her breath, lost her intensity, and forgot what she was supposed to be do- ing. The inside of her chest felt hollow. J. D. Gunn and his band were supposed to be on tour but here he was. J. D. kept his blue eyes locked on Jo’s. His looking at her like that, right there, and so close, made her feel exposed more than that frilly dress ever could.

The crowd began chanting her name, reminding her that she was supposed to be performing. She turned away from J. D., walked slowly back to the stage and up the steps to her fans. Jo felt like she’d lost all her strength right when she needed it most. She encouraged the women to gather around her at the microphone, and Jo picked up her acoustic guitar and wiped the sweat from underneath her eyes. The women onstage wanted her to play a fun, fast song for their dance, and she would, but first she had a different song in mind: “Ms. Loretta Lynn wrote me a sweet note and apologized for not being able to make it here tonight. I want to play one of her hits for you now. ‘The Pill’ is one of her best-known songs and one so controversial that some radio stations refused to play it back in the seventies. I’ve always loved a rebel woman.”

Jo could feel him. She’d always been able to feel him, right there in the center of her body like a hive of bees. The women she’d brought

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onstage started dancing as soon as the band began to play. She looked up once, and there was J. D.’s face, luminous as a full moon, as if his were the only face in the entire audience. The entire world. Her fin- gers held their position on the strings like they were stuck there, and she missed the A7 chord change, lost her pace with the band. Some- thing so simple, and she missed it.