

# 1

## *Hoxie, Illinois, 1921*

AT TWO IN THE MORNING the trains were stopped for the night, and the old wooden depot, manned only during the day now that the Great War had ended, was deserted.

Eve could see her breath in the cold January air as Gavin Johnson helped her up the last step of the empty train car. Then he jumped up himself. He moved closer and she smelled whiskey and something musky he'd splashed on his face. He pressed her against the rail and began to kiss her with lips cold at first but getting warmer. That was all right.

She turned her head and kissed him back, a feeling of steam moving up through her body. The night was so still it was like a creature holding its breath. She pulled

## MARTHA CONWAY

away for a moment. "How'd you get a key to the train car?"

Gavin just laughed. "Let me put out the light." He opened his lantern's tiny glass door to blow out the flame, and in the darkness Eve followed him into the empty car.

Her blood was still warm from the corn whiskey she had drunk with the boys after the show, and she felt a little lightheaded. Here she was with a handsome man late at night, alone, her heart beating hard. Before her the rows of worn velvet seats were like people turning their backs. For some reason this excited her more.

"Nice at night, dontcha think?" Gavin asked, taking her hand. With his other hand he touched the soft fold of her dress at the collar. Then he began to unbutton her coat. They were in the Entertainers' car, the special train car they all traveled by and even slept in if there weren't any colored hotels in town. Jimmy Blakeley and His Stoptime Syncopaters, they were called, with Gavin Johnson on tenor sax and Eve Riser on piano. Everyone in the band was young and excited, and Eve felt young and excited just being around them. But sometimes it got lonely going from place to place without resting.

From the window Eve could see the empty depot house. Gavin touched the side of her face and she closed her eyes.

Oh she should know better all right. But she was feeling so good, she had played so well that night, really found her way into the music. Also that afternoon she had started a new song—"Sea Change," she would call it. The first four bars were a gift, just appearing in her

## SUGARLAND

mind as she walked back to the hotel from the drug-store, and they still looked good even after she'd written them down. Eve had learned always to travel with a notebook—she had four songs published already under the name E. R. King—and a one-pound bag of sugar. She liked coffee very sweet and some places didn't offer you even a spoonful.

He kissed her neck and her collarbone. Her throat was dry and she opened her eyes. "Hold on," she said, and went down to the other end of the car, to the tin cup hanging by a nail above the faucet.

"Spigot won't work," she said, turning it round. It was so loose it spun in her fingers.

"You don't need any water," Gavin told her.

He came up behind her and replaced the cup on the nail. Her hand was still out like it was holding something invisible, and he took it and pressed his thumb to her palm. Then he folded her in his arms. It was hardly warmer inside the train than out and she pressed against him too now, wanting to feel every inch. Gavin spread his overcoat on the floor and Eve let him guide her down onto the aisle, a hard space meant for feet. After a while his kisses became firmer and deeper like now they had really started, they were really going somewhere now.

She felt his hands behind her neck, fumbling with the buttons of her new dress.

"Gavin," Eve said.

"Shh, angel girl. I got us all covered."

She let him undo the buttons. She'd been on the circuit six months now. Six months of playing different pianos all in need of tuning, of fending for herself, of

## MARTHA CONWAY

shooing off managers who said come on back to my office and I'll show you something I know you'll like. Eve was tall and dark-skinned with widely spaced eyes and low, prominent cheekbones. Her great-grandfather on her father's side was a Shawnee Indian—where she got her cheeks from, her father always said.

Some of the boys in the band called Eve beautiful but she didn't know about that. What she cared most about was her music. The horn players liked to start off with notes so strong and high you thought there was nowhere else to go, challenging Eve to follow. She always did. She thought of them as brothers, the teasing variety. But then Gavin came in halfway through their tour, a fine-looking man with deep brown eyes and a complexion her grandmother would call Georgia brown. At first Eve thought he was just another alligator with his little straw boater and his silk tie and his fine boutonniere pin from one of his daddy's social clubs, but it turned out he was there to play second sax. He called her angel girl and brought her coffee in the mornings. She was tired of being lonely. She liked his sloping smile.

Gavin got her last button unbuttoned. The moon shone through a window behind him, his eyes dark liquid drops in dark hollows. He pulled her dress down to her shoulders and kissed her collarbone again.

"Beautiful," he said.

"I should say," said a deep voice behind them.

Eve shot away so fast her head knocked into the leg of one of the train seats, and the sudden throb made her reach back to touch the spot, causing her dress to fall farther. She quickly pulled at it with her other hand.

## SUGARLAND

"Don't stop," the voice said.

Eve looked up. A man was looking down at her. A white man.

"What the—? Why you here?" Gavin said, getting to his feet. Eve moved behind him. "The meeting is set for tomorrow."

Eve tried to stand and found that her legs were shaking. She was confused. Gavin knew this man? Why would he have a meeting with a white man from—where were they now, Hoxie? A little town south of St. Louis, where she was fairly sure Gavin had never been before. She held on to an armrest, crouching in the aisle.

"Saw the light from your lantern," the man said. "Thought plans had changed."

She could hear the leer in his voice. With one hand she reached behind her and tried to button her dress's top button.

"Don't you move," the man said. When Eve looked up she saw he had a gun. She fumbled harder with the dress button.

"I said get your hand down." He pointed the gun at her.

Gavin put up his arms. "Now calm down, calm down, let's talk all this over."

"I don't mean to talk," the man said.

"You and me have some business tomorrow. Let's not upset that."

The man cocked his head. He was younger than he first looked but with an older man's thick build and stomach. Dressed like a farmer with heavy brown boots

MARTHA CONWAY

and the smell of straw about him. Wearing a hat you'd only see in the country.

"Man can have more than one kind of meeting," he said. He was looking at Eve.

Eve stood up behind Gavin, her hands holding her dress up as high as it would go. "Don't you start thinking you have business with me," she said. Her legs were still shaking.

"Hush," Gavin told her.

But the man laughed. "I like a girl with some life."

"Let's go outside," Gavin said to the man. "We can talk about this. We don't want anyone upset. Especially folks in Chicago—you know what I'm saying."

"Why would folks in Chicago be upset?"

"If they don't get what they paid for."

"It's not me they'll be looking for," the man said.

"Oh I think it is," Gavin said. "Say I come to find I can't trust you."

The man looked at him, glanced at Eve, and then looked back at Gavin. "Well, you know. I could call off the deal myself. Our Chicago friends wouldn't like that, either." He waved the gun a little, reminding them all of its presence. There was a slight slur to his speech that Eve hadn't noticed before. "Five minutes outside with the girl," he said. "Then I'll leave."

Gavin pressed Eve farther behind him. "You swear, just five minutes?"

"Gavin!" Eve said.

The man started backing up the aisle still pointing the gun. Gavin took hold of Eve's arm.

"No I will not," Eve said.

## SUGARLAND

Gavin pushed her in front. "Don't worry," he whispered. But his voice sounded scared.

The man tripped a little and then righted himself. "What'd ya say?" That slur again.

"I told her not to worry," Gavin said. "You won't hurt her. Am I right? Watch it now, there's my lantern right there on the step. Here's the girl."

By now the man was out on the little balcony. He held out his arm for Eve and at the same time looked down on the step for the lantern, and Gavin took that moment to pull Eve back, slamming the heavy train door shut. From the other side they heard a kind of roar.

"Is there a bolt?" Gavin asked with his shoulder to the door. His breath came out in a spurt.

The man shouted a curse, then a string of curses.

"Pull up the handle—that locks it," Eve told him. She had once locked herself in by mistake down in Georgia when they had to sleep on the train.

A gunshot sounded.

"Christ!" Gavin said. He pulled himself away from the door and Eve moved quickly to the other side of the train. "Am I shot?" he asked.

"Open that door! Open it!" the man was shouting.

Gavin pulled the last window down a crack. "Go away and come back tomorrow!"

"I ain't leavin' this train car!"

"Oh Lord," Eve said. She looked out the window. "He's coming round the side."

Gavin pulled something out of his coat pocket—a pistol. He wedged it in the window crack.

MARTHA CONWAY

"You had that all along?" Eve couldn't believe it.

"I wasn't going to let you out there with him."

That's not what it sounded like to me, Eve wanted to say, but she kept her mouth shut.

"I have a gun here," Gavin called out to the man. "You go on home!"

Another gunshot sounded and the window next to Gavin broke.

"Christ!" he said again. "The man is drunk."

"I could've told you that," Eve said. She crawled across the aisle to the other side of the train, surprised that as scared as she was she could still be mad. When she looked over Gavin was pointing his gun out the window again. "Gavin, don't!"

"I'm just going to scare him into leaving." He pulled the trigger. The gun made a weak noise as it fired, like a toy. Outside, the man only laughed. But even so a dark feeling came over Eve, like a warning.

Gavin pulled the trigger a few more times. Pop. Pop, pop.

Eve held her breath so she could hear better. The man wasn't shouting or laughing now. That was bad. After a minute she crawled across the aisle and pulled herself up to look out the window. The moon was on this side of the train, which was unfortunate because it meant that she could see clearly the man's fat, unmoving shape on the railroad ties below. His neck at an unnatural angle.

"Lord Jesus," she said.





Eve had never seen the sea—she was from Pittsburgh—but she understood how something could ebb away while you watched. People got lynched for just being near a dead man, let alone the ones who did the killing. She couldn't stay in this town one more minute, and neither could Gavin.

As she looked down at the man's body sprawled on the ground she put her hand on her coat, near her heart. No question—dead. "Got him clean through the eye," she said. Gavin had come outside with his pants still half-unbuttoned, and he fumbled a little with the top one.

"I just wanted to scare him away," he said again.

Eve let out a breath she could see in the night air. "Well, he went."

She was cold but her palms were wet and her heart was beating right out of her body. Only last month two black men in South Carolina were killed for giving a robber a room for the night, and one of them had his feet roasted in a fire before he was shot. Hoxie was a small town, too, and it was worse in small towns. No, they couldn't stay here even just to finish out the gig.

Gavin turned and kicked up some gravel. "We got to get him away." His breath had a sour, scared smell.

"Get him away?"

"To the woods."

"And how do we do that?"

"Just, I don't know, drag him over. Come on."

MARTHA CONWAY

They tried, each to an arm, but the man was as heavy as a hundred-year tree. After a few feet they stopped. Gavin took off his hat and mopped his brow. "Let me think." He looked back again at the empty depot house. Eve was thinking, even if we get him to the woods then we have to bury him, and how do we do that?

"Wait a minute. Wait now. I have an idea." Gavin looked around. "Help me pull him to that tree there."

There was a sapling at the end of the siding. "That tiny thing?" Eve asked.

With a grunt Gavin bent over the man. He blew tenor like a long breathless kiss, but he was small and not very muscular. Also, Eve had to admit, a bit of a dandy. Back in Chicago he was known as the Saint because he always dressed like he was going to church, and Eve noticed that even now he was careful with his pants.

She stepped backward over weeds trying to keep her grip on the dead man's arm. Beside her Gavin kept huffing, and twice he nearly fell. Hard to believe he'd been a soldier. He'd told her that he played sax in one of the Pioneer Infantry Bands during the war, and that even though he was shipped overseas he never saw the inside of a trench—Gavin claimed they just played rag-time all day long and drank hot chocolate. Never once shot a bullet, she suspected, until now.

They got the body over to the tree and propped him up against it, like the fellow was just resting a minute. Off in the woods a hoot owl called but nothing answered.

## *SUGARLAND*

“Got anything black?” Gavin asked Eve. “Like a ribbon or something?”

Eve thought. “Some black lace I used when I hemmed up my dress.”

“Give it here.”

“No I won’t. My dress’ll come all undone.”

Gavin’s voice rose. “I’ll get you a new dress! Now come on.”

Eve turned up the bottom of her dress and bit the thread end of the lace off, then began pulling at the lace and the loose thread. How long did they have until the sun came up? She had to get back to the hotel, get her things, get gone. The hem of her dress started to fall.

“Here,” she said, giving the lace to him.

“That’s the one. Now . . .” Gavin looked around. “You see any flowers near here?”

“In January?”

“All right then, what. Let’s see.” Gavin found some tall dark weeds and pulled them up by the neck. “Here.” He wound the black lace around the clump like it was a bouquet, tying and then retying the bow.

“What’s that supposed to be?” Eve asked.

“Look like the Black Hand Society done it.”

“The Black Hand Society! No one believes that old story.”

“Sure they do. Anyhow, man’s a moonshiner. Sells off his crop to gangsters so they can make whiskey. Everybody knows that.” He started buttoning up the man’s coat. “They’ll say he had it coming.”

Eve stiffened. “You involved in that business?”

MARTHA CONWAY

"Me?" Gavin scoffed, holding up his thin arms. Not really an answer, Eve thought.

"Listen to me now," he went on. "I'm going to give you some money and a letter. You deliver all that to Mr. Rudy Hardy—he's a white man in Chicago. I'll give you a telephone number where you can reach him."

"And where will you go?" Eve asked, trying to think what towns were nearby.

"Back to the hotel. I mean to stay with the band."

Eve was astonished. "But the sheriff'll come! They'll kill you!"

"If I run, they'll know it's me. You're a woman. We'll say you got a telegram late last night from your sister in Chicago. She's singing for Henry James now, ain't that right? We'll say she telegraphed over, calling you back."

"I don't know."

"You got to, Evie! Else I'm really in trouble."

"Lord," Eve said again. Was the sky getting lighter? The dead man sat crazily against the slim tree with his coat buttoned up to his chin. His face with the one eye running blood reminded Eve of a dead owl she'd once seen with its eyes pecked out—it had been sick with something, and the little birds just pecked and pecked its eyes till it died.

Gavin pulled a clean white handkerchief from his pocket, took off his hat, and wiped the inside brim. Then he went through the heavy man's pockets. Even hares leap on dead lions, her grandmother used to say, and here it was played out before her. After a while Gavin counted what he'd fished out, and added a thick

## *SUGARLAND*

fold of bills from his own pocket. He held the whole wad out to her like it was poison. His hand was shaking. Eve folded her arms and took a step back. This was not a good plan.

“Go on, take it. I’ll write a letter explaining everything. You can carry that along with the money.”

She shook her head.

“You’ll be all right,” he said.

