

# CHAPTER 1

## W I N N I E

*Everything I know I learned in vaudeville.*

—James Cagney, singer, dancer, and actor

**N**othing good comes from a knock in the middle of the night. The windows rattled in their casings as someone banged on the front door. I roused myself from sleep, thinking that between the banging and the cold, the glass would surely break. As it turned out, mere broken glass would've been a blessing.

I heard Mother's thumping footsteps in her bedroom below, through the kitchen, and across the living room, and I scurried downstairs to meet her, followed by my older sisters, Gert and Nell. Mother was at the front window, her back hunched against the cold, the few threads of silver in her hair made eerily iridescent by the streetlamp. She peered through the curtains she'd made from cut-rate lace. They did nothing to keep in the heat, but she said they gussied up the place, and the occasional hole in the pattern made it easier to peek through if you didn't want someone to know you were watching.

She stood motionless, like a rabbit after the snap of a twig, trying to determine whether the door should be opened or, as was sometimes the case in our neighborhood, a chair wedged under the knob. "Nobody there," she whispered to us without turning.

"Where's Dad?" Nell asked, wrapping her thin arms around her.

"He went out. Got his temper all twisted up about Prohibition."

"His *temper*?" Gert's tone conveyed the skepticism we all felt.

Dad was the most placid man we knew. Yet his voice did take on a slightly brittle edge at the mention of the rapidly approaching Prohibition Act. He didn't tend toward drunkenness himself, nor to public consumption in rowdy beer halls, preferring to sit home with his Blatz beer and sip quietly in the midst of his own rowdy family. He could not understand why Congress had taken this away from all the well-meaning souls whose lives were speckled with hardships of every variety, and who just wanted to enjoy the gentle lulling effect of a libation or two in the evening.

Prohibition was passed on January 16, 1919, and the next day the *Binghamton Press* in Upstate New York, where we lived, had extra-large-type headlines:

### U.S. IS VOTED BONE-DRY

Though it would not go into effect for another year, once he saw that headline, Dad had been even quieter than usual.

That tar-black night, Mother opened the front door with the three of us, now joined by our youngest sister, Kit, crowding behind her. What we saw, we'd never seen before.

Dad leaned against the doorjamb, blinking slowly, a wobbly half smile on his lips. Blood seeped from crooked gashes on his right hand, bone visible at two of his knuckles. His fingers were bent at unnatural angles as if they'd been smashed under the heel of a boot.

He stumbled through the open door, and Mother lurched forward to catch him. With uncharacteristic care, she half guided, half carried him to a kitchen chair. Kit brought a pot of warm soapy water and a rag, and I dabbed at the jagged, pulpy wounds to get the grit out.

Then Mother's temper set in, and her hands balled into fists at her hips. "What in the name of holy hell happened to you! Can't you go out and tie one on like any other man without disaster striking?"

Dad seemed as surprised as we all were at the state of his hand. "There was a fight . . ."

"Frank Turner, when have you *ever*, in all your born days, gotten into a fight?"

"Wasn't me. Coupla guys at the tavern," he slurred, shaking his head mournfully. "Tried to stop it . . ."

Mother's face twisted in disgust. "Of all the stupid—"

Gert cut her off, ice-blue eyes flashing with annoyance. "It doesn't matter how it happened, Mother," she muttered. "It only matters that it can be fixed."

Mother hustled Dad and me through the dark streets toward Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, our breath pluming like frozen feathers into the air, and I practically had to skip to keep up. I had an after-school job as a nurse's aide in the Lourdes maternity ward; Mother brought me along in case my experience or connections, lowly as they were, might come in handy.

They did not. I recognized a nurse in the Emergency Department, but she didn't have a reciprocal response. Without my uniform, she likely mistook me for a child, as my small stature often prompted people to do.

As for experience, I could have discussed any number of baby delivery procedures (having shut my mouth and listened carefully in the nurses' break room as often as I could justify my presence there), but thankfully broken bones and torn tendons were not issues we generally faced on the maternity ward.

The Emergency Department halls were quiet, save for the murmurs of worried family members or nurses checking vitals, white curtains billowing with their comings and goings. The place smelled strongly of carbolic, and I knew some poor nurse's aide like myself had recently cleaned up a mess of some kind. I looked down at my hands, dry and cracked around the knuckles. At seventeen years old, I had already scrubbed away a lifetime's worth of bodily events.

We were ushered behind one of those curtains, and the doctor, an elderly fellow with a tentacular bush of gray hair, applied shots of Novocain to numb Dad's hand. He then began the lengthy task of stitching up all that damage. The old doctor's fingers trembled as he stabbed the

needle under the skin and tugged it out on the other side, the stitches growing increasingly more uneven. Though I was a poor seamstress, I had the absurd notion to offer to help. Dad lay on the gurney with his eyes closed. Mother always went gray as old bedclothes at the sight of a pinprick, so she'd stayed in the waiting room. I was the sole witness to the doctor's skill slowly wilting like a dying flower.

After he'd bandaged up Dad's hand, the old doctor said, "Now say your prayers that the nerve damage isn't too bad, and there's a reasonable chance he might recover full use."

This was the one moment when I did prove useful. I asked, "What are the chances that he *won't* recover full use?"

The doctor blinked at me once or twice as if just now noticing my presence. "Well, I suppose there's a reasonable chance of that, too."

The sun was just beginning to lick up through the treetops in the Floral Park Cemetery as we walked home. Mother was quiet, but her fury pulsed like aftershocks from an earthquake. Father, now sober enough to suffer both the physical pain and the mental anguish caused by what he'd done, was also mute. For myself, I vacillated between the childish belief that things couldn't possibly be as bad as they seemed, and the adult knowledge that they could hardly be any worse.

Mother suddenly turned on Dad. "You're a *boot stitcher*, for god-sake!" she hissed.

My father worked at the Endicott-Johnson shoe factory. He spent each day with a large metal needle in one hand, wrenching it through stiff soles and thick leather uppers grasped in the other. I'll make it plain: there is no such thing as a one-handed boot stitcher. In fact, in a shoe factory, there is no manual labor that can be done by a man with a crushed dominant hand.

When we opened the front door, my sisters were crowded into the kitchen. Nell poured coffee from the percolator. Kit sat at the gate-leg table eating a soft-boiled egg; Gert ironed her shirtwaist. To their credit, no one gasped when they saw Dad's hand wrapped up like a mummy.

Then Dad spoke. "I . . . I'm sorry . . .," he stammered, eyes damp with remorse. My throat clenched in sympathy. Nell bit at the inside of her lip, Gert's nostrils flared, and Kit inhaled a childish little snuffle.

Mother let her hand rest on Dad's shoulder, perhaps in acceptance of his apology, or perhaps it was simply to steady herself. After a moment, she gave him a little push toward their room behind the kitchen. "Go on and get some rest," she said, her voice hoarse with exhaustion.

She dropped onto one of the mismatched chairs and Nell put a mug of hot coffee in front of her. Mother took a sip, and we waited—for the solution to this seemingly insurmountable problem, or for her to howl like a wounded animal and throw her mug against the wall.

I don't believe I would have been truly surprised by almost anything she could have said or done in that moment. She could have told us she was selling our father into indentured servitude to pay the bills, and I wouldn't have been truly shocked.

She stared menacingly at the frost lacing the kitchen window, and we could almost see the schemes she silently conjured as they took shape and then were cast aside. Mother is a force, sometimes for our betterment, sometimes for retribution, and sometimes simply for her own entertainment. We waited, barely breathing, for her word.

Her expression shifted almost imperceptibly, from desperation to determination. What she said was this:

"Be ready to work on the act when you get home from school. And I mean *work*."

That was unexpected.