**Excerpted from Lara Brenckle Malmont's THREE RIVERS HOME**

**(Milford House 2026)**

## FRANKSTOWN AVENUE, PITTSBURGH, AUGUST 1913

The night before Frankie Fortunato stole his father's concertina, the stars fell over East Liberty.

He'd always wanted to see a shooting star, but it felt impossible this far into the city. The three tall, double-hung windows that formed a cozy corner in their second-floor apartment along Frankstown Avenue usually reflected Pittsburgh's factory-forged starshine. Frankie had been up before dawn that morning thanks to Joey, kicking him across their shared mattress and their sister Maria's snoring. She had her own bed, tucked in the alcove, not only because she was older than them both and a girl, but mostly because she'd been born with hips that didn't sit straight. It hurt her to walk most days, which was why Frankie could forgive both her snoring and unshared bed. Almost. Hot mornings like this, he wasn't so sure.

He padded from the bedroom into the front room's hexagonal space, past the worn, cherrywood sofa with its scratchy floral print and a pair of overstuffed chairs whose mismatched patterns Mama covered with clean sheets. Papa'd left the windows' upper sashes open in hopes of pulling out the stuffy air, but it was no match for August in East Liberty.

Climbing onto the kitchen table, his foot grazed a broad-backed chair. It squealed against the wood floor; Frankie's breath and movement stilled. When no sound emerged from Mama and Papa's room, he exhaled.

Frankie hauled the window's lower sash open, and its glass caught the shadowy city street's reflection.

Frankie's dark eyes, hair, and oval face—so like those of his siblings—overlaid it, lit by the rising sun turning the eastern sky's edge from steel-fired red to soft, summer pink.

Frankie moved until all four feet of his body filled the window's open frame, legs dangling against the rough brick, and turned his face toward the sky. A milk delivery cart jangled past, its horse pausing slightly as its massive hooves crossed the streetcar tracks embedded in the bricked street. Closing his eyes, he breathed in his tiny corner of Pittsburgh coming alive. It stretched just two blocks in each direction, but he loved it all: the scent of baking bread from a neighbor's kitchen, the loamy smell of animals from the livery stables, and the damp, vinegary whiff from the saloon down the block. When he opened them again, a glittering blaze arced above him. Frankie gasped and shut his eyes. He had one chance.

*I wish it would always be like this.*

From behind him, Frankie heard Mama yawn and her iron bed rattle. He turned, pushed himself back onto the table, and shut the lower window sash softly behind him. His bare feet landed with a soft

thump, and that was when he spied the open door of the lowest kitchen cupboard. Papa's concertina rested in its storage box on the shelf, its gleaming brass hardware begging to be unclasped.

Papa'd been teaching him to play these last few weeks, and Frankie had gotten those four chords down almost perfectly. Men played on stoops all the time; Frankie felt he was ready to do the same. Nabbing the short, boxy case by its leather handle, he gently shut the cupboard door and tiptoed back into the shared bedroom. He had to wait for Papa to leave for work, of course. But he also needed help. If only Joey would hurry and wake up.

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Murmuring swelled beyond the blanket Frankie had strung between the front porch posts. Turning to his little brother, he whispered, "You know what to say, right, Joey? Like we talked about."

Joey nodded, chin thumping his chest, and stepped forward. The chattering below quieted. "Laid-ees and gent'lmen," Joey called. "The musical, mawfulous Frankie Fortunato!" Frankie whipped back the curtain and bowed. A crowd of boys clad in overalls, heads cropped to the scalp in summer brush-cuts, waited on overturned soap boxes and small battered wagons. Then, drawing back the bellows of his father's concertina, Frankie pranced along the porch's top step. His squawking notes transformed into a familiar fast-paced tarantella as his friends' feet stomped in time with the whirling rhythm. When he forgot the Calabrian word, Frankie called, "And a-hey! And a-hey!"

His arms strained to keep the pearl-and-abalone-studded instrument upright. *Don't drop it.* Frankie winced, imagining the wooden spoon's sting if he did.

Looking out at his audience, Frankie's chest puffed with pride as he silently counted up the joyous faces of the people he and Papa called *paesan*, countrymen.

Mateo Sgro, his best friend, came from the same village as his parents. So did Pauley Sangino, Marco Ferretti, and Angelo Gagliardi, a distant cousin and Joey's best friend. Aurelia and Aurora Maida's parents had come over on the same boat as their parents. The dark-haired girls in their twin blue sundresses grabbed hands and started twirling, winging each other across the patchy yard.

They made such a racket that Frankie didn't notice the slim, black-suited man raise his arms and prance through the crowd, clapping as he burst into the song's final chorus.

"Papa!" Joey squealed.

The music rose, mixing with their friends' cheers, laughter, and shouted English words. In his best showman impression, Frankie sang, "Dance, dance, single and married men! If you don't dance well, I won't sing and play for you!"

Their father reached the porch, dropped to his knees, and draped one arm over Frankie and Joey as they finished in three-part harmony.

"And dance, lady Natredda, and you, man with a tambouriiiine," a man passing on the street intoned in bullfrog baritone. Their friends went wild, clapping and jumping up and down. The man tipped his hat and walked on. Papa lifted Frankie, thumbs tucked beneath his overall straps, pulling their

identical dark-brown eyes level with each other. “Did you steal my concertina, young man?” Papa asked with phony indignation.

Frankie gulped.

“I see. And all this was your idea?”

“No, sir!” Frankie said. “Joey’s, too.” “A thief and stool pigeon, I see. Not much has changed from when your *Ziu* Antonio and I were little,” he said, putting Frankie down. Papa threw his head back and roared with laughter, then smoothed Frankie’s unruly black hair into place. “Mama can deal with you. I’ll take the concertina.”

Thrilled to escape a spanking, Frankie loped up the steps on all fours, Joey scrambling close behind. At the top, Frankie flung the apartment door open, and Mama whirled, the evening’s bread tipping from her loaf pan onto the flour-covered kitchen table. Her round face split into a smile, honey-brown eyes wrinkling at the corners, as she dropped the loaf pan and opened her arms.

Frankie raced to hug the folds of her blue-striped work dress. “Did you hear us?”

“Nobody could have missed you, Frankie,” she said, swiping a thick lock of dark-brown hair back into the bun at the nape of her neck. Stepping back, she put her hands on her broad hips and shook her head. “I don’t know what your father will say when he finds you took his—”

“No need to worry, Angelina, my dear,” said Papa, sweeping through the open door with Joey on his back.

Mama giggled as he kissed her hello, set his brother down, and headed toward the bedroom.

Frankie loved the sound of his father coming home. The soft *whuft* of his coat shrugging free of his shoulders—the silken *zip* of an unfurling tie. Shirt buttons *twhick-twhick-thwicking* as they snapped through perfectly sutured buttonholes. The straight-back chair’s telltale squeak as he sat to remove his shoes.

From behind the thick curtain separating their bedroom from the kitchen, another sound emerged. It was Maria, sobbing. He heard Papa’s footsteps head toward her. Frankie’s stomach dropped. “Is she OK?” he asked Mama. “Of course,” Mama retorted.