

NATASHA PETERS

Bestselling author of  
*Darkness into Light*

# Star Dust

A NOVEL

*Born to be on the stage,  
Frankie Fallon vowed  
she would never become  
a falling star....*

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# STAR DUST

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Naishan Peters

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"I know you're starving. You always are after an afternoon in bed."

Frankie recoiled from the liquor fumes on his breath. She had never seen him drunk.

She put the pizza down on the card table and wrapped the raincoat a little tighter around her waist. Sam, who had assessed the situation right away, was zipping up his trousers and tying his shoes.

Ray looked around the room. "Is your boyfriend some kind of cheapskate, Frankie? This is the best he could do?"

"We don't need Versailles." Frankie stood beside Sam, who was watching Ray with a wry smile on his lips. "This is perfectly adequate for our purposes."

"I'll bet." Ray flipped open the lid of the pizza box. "You didn't learn anything, did you? I give you the cook's tour, nothing but the best—Paris, Lyons, Rome—and I catch you ordering out crap like this. Finding you in the sack with this joker is bad enough. But this—canned mushrooms and the crap they call pepperoni—this is real treachery."

\* \* \*

## **\* \* 1 \* \***

**“We did it! We’re going to be famous! We’re going to be on ‘The Ed Sullivan Show’!”**

**Like a fluffy pink cannonball, Lily Fallon hurtled up the steps from the lobby of the residence hotel in lower Manhattan.**

**“Rick! Don! Wake up! We’re going to be on television!”**

**Her partners stumbled into the hall from the room they shared, Don tying the belt of a flannel robe around his middle, Rick shrugging into an old baggy trench coat that served a multitude of purposes. Their trio, Lily and the Luminaires, performed upbeat arrangements of old standards, with Lily taking the lead on the vocals, while Don Parks and Rick Henley added harmony and backed her up on piano and bass. For the past four weeks, they had been playing at a supper club on Forty-ninth Street.**

**“This is it! Our big break!” Lily’s hair was in curlers. The edges of her pink chenille bathrobe barely met over her broad bosom. “Two acts have canceled because of the storm and somebody else can’t get out of Buffalo and they’re really stuck for talent, and this producer’s assistant—I don’t know his name but, God, I’ll love him forever—caught our act a couple of weeks ago, and he called Milt and Milt just called me! ‘The Ed Sullivan Show’! Can you believe it? Oh, God!” Her hands flew to her head and then to her robe. “What am I going to wear?”**

**She dashed back into her room. Rick and Don followed.**

While Lily rummaged in her closet, the men reviewed their repertoire.

"They want two numbers," Lily called over her shoulder. "I thought something upbeat, followed by a ballad. I'd love to wear this blue dress, but I don't think I can get it zipped anymore. Oh, God, why am I so fat? Fat, fat, fat, and getting fatter by the day."

"'Fascinatin' Rhythm,'" said Rick, the bass player. "It's one of our best numbers."

"And we'll follow up with 'Deep Purple.'" Don, the pianist, flexed his long fingers. "How does that sound to you, Lily?"

"Oh, no!" Lily wailed. "The whole side seam on this dress has split wide open. I've got to do something about this disappearing waistline by tonight. But where am I going to find a longline bra in Manhattan on a Sunday, in the middle of a blizzard?"

On that cold, snowy afternoon in January 1960, Lily and the Luminares were preparing to make television history.

When the director of the show saw Lily, he groaned. "Cripes! Petunia Pig! All right, we'll keep camera number one on her face, do some hand and head shots of the other two, and save the long shots for the opening and the finish."

Lily and the Luminares got one of the better spots on the show, smack in the middle after the 8:30 break for commercials and station identification. The host of the program, Ed Sullivan, introduced some of the celebrities in the audience that night, including his rival newspaper columnist, Earl Wilson, New York's Cardinal Spellman, and fifteen Sisters of the Sacred Heart from Hackensack, New Jersey. Then at 8:35, he asked the audience to welcome "three fine young people who have been working hard to polish their act. Please give them a nice round of applause. Lily Fallon and the Luminares!"

Lily and the boys smiled at the cameras. Rick and Don wore white dinner jackets, while Lily had squeezed herself

into a cloud of pink chiffon. The trio performed "Fascinatin' Rhythm" flawlessly, with a good, brisk tempo, clear vocal line from Lily, and nice support from the men. After warm applause from the people in the studio, Don pounded out the introduction to "Deep Purple."

Halfway through the verse, Lily got a funny look on her face. Her voice died in her throat. Rick and Don carried on without her, but their harmony sounded strange without a melodic line to support, and after floundering for a few seconds, they, too, fell silent.

Lily clutched her middle. "Oh, shit," she screamed. "Oh Christ!" She fell to her knees.

Don bolted from the piano, knocking over the bench, and threw himself down beside her. "Lily! Lily! Oh, my God, what's wrong?"

"Oh, Christ! Oh, shit!" Lily shrieked into thirty million living rooms across the nation. "I'm—I'm having a baby!"

Shielding his eyes from the lights, Don addressed the audience: "A doctor! Is there a doctor in the house?"

Rick, who always wore a worried expression as if he were anticipating the worst, threw down his double bass and sprinted away from the set. The director cut to a commercial, but when the camera zoomed in on Julia Meade, who was supposed to be holding a bottle of liquid detergent, it found her openmouthed with astonishment, unable to speak. In the background, Ed Sullivan could be heard shouting, "Get them off the stage! Get that woman off my stage!"

The members of the studio audience were buzzing with excitement, and some of the nuns climbed up on their seats to get a better look at what was going on. A couple of stagehands attempted to shift Lily to a dressing room backstage, but they were having a difficult time of it. They got her as far as the wings when an elderly priest who had spent forty years in New Guinea as a medical missionary climbed onto the stage. He took one look, then told the men to leave her alone and to stand back. A quick-thinking makeup girl rushed over with a couple of sheets.

The stagehands held one up as a screen while the old priest delivered the baby onto the other. Ray Bloch and the orchestra attempted to cover Lily's cries with their own brassy rendition of "Fascinatin' Rhythm," but the musicians' minds weren't on their music, and their ragged toots were no match for Lily's stentorian bellows.

After ten minutes that were excruciating for everybody, Lily and her new baby were on their way to Doctors' Hospital in an ambulance.

"So, what are you going to name her?" the ambulance attendant asked the new mother.

"I don't know." The cool air dried the sweat on Lily's forehead. "I hadn't thought about it."

"You're a singer, right? So, who's your favorite performer of all time?"

"Are you kidding? Frank Sinatra. I had all his records when I was growing up." Lily smiled dreamily and shook her head. "Frank Sinatra and Tommy Dorsey. God, they were wonderful."

The attendant nodded as if that settled the matter. "Francis is a nice name."

"Nah." Lily made a face. "Francis was the name of that talking mule in the movies. But Francine—now Francine is nice. And I can call her Frankie. Frankie Fallon." Lily grinned weakly at her daughter. "Hi, Frankie. Welcome to New York."

"They tell me that the dog act that followed us went crazy." Lily lifted the sponge and squeezed it over the baby's round, pink head. Frankie waved her hands and gurgled. Lily dabbed at the pearl of spittle that oozed from the corner of her mouth. "Too many strange smells, I guess. They were all over the stage, sniffing and barking. Then Ed Sullivan called out the comic who opened the show, but the guy told him to get lost. I mean, who in his right mind would want to follow an act like mine, right?"

"Roogle." Frankie blew a bubble of saliva. "Argle oof."

"You said it, babe. So Ed tapped some scared kid, a



ventriloquist who was making his debut on national television, and my sources in show business tell me that Sullivan didn't pull any punches; he told that kid that if he so much as mentioned me or you or what happened that night, he could kiss his ass—and his career—good-bye. I don't know, I still say old Ed could have been nicer. He didn't have to fire that nice producer who found us at the Eavesdropper Club. I mean, was it his fault I thought I was having heartburn on Sunday morning when I was really in labor? He probably thought I was always plump. He never asked me if I was pregnant, and I didn't think I was far enough along for it to make any difference." Lily applied a drop of shampoo to the damp fuzz on top of Frankie's head. "No, the ones I really feel sorry for are Don and Rick. The whole thing shook them up so bad, they'll probably never perform again. Poor Rick's hitting the booze day and night. And Don went home to Maine to work in his family's boot factory. From show business to shoe business, as Sullivan would say. Uh-oh, there he goes."

A wail went up from the adjoining bedroom. Lily scooped her daughter out of the little tub, wrapped her in a towel, and hoisted her to her shoulder. In the bedroom, she quickly dressed Frankie in a diaper and flannel sleeper and placed her in a bassinet trimmed with pink ribbon. Then she lifted another infant out of a second bassinet, this one trimmed with blue.

"A double whammy," Lily sighed. "The best baby in the world, and the worst. What the hell is the matter with you now, Tommy?"

She jounced the screaming baby on her lap. His wails grew louder. He spurned the bottle she gave him and kicked furiously when she changed his soiled diaper.

"All right, all right, I know. You want your sister."

Lily placed Tommy beside Frankie in the pink-ribboned bassinet. Frankie gave him a delighted smile and gargled a welcome. Tommy shouted a complaint. Frankie cooed. Tommy grumbled.

Lily sighed. She really couldn't blame her son for feeling cheated. After all, Frankie had made an unforgettable debut in thirty million living rooms across the nation. Tommy's birth at Doctors' Hospital forty minutes later had been a poor encore. By that time, Ed Sullivan's theater audience had gone home, and all those living rooms full of people had switched their attention to "Perry Mason."

Baby Frankie seemed delighted with the world, eager for more. Tommy hated everything. He was scrawny, cranky, and undersized. Lily couldn't please him. When she picked him up, he cried. When she put him down, he cried. The only one who could distract him from his woes was his sister.

Frankie batted a rattle that was strung over the top of the bassinet. Tommy grinned. He made no move to hit the rattle himself, but he enjoyed watching Frankie perform.

Lily reached down to stroke Frankie's head. Tommy's face darkened ominously. Wisely, Lily withdrew her hand. "You are one gorgeous little girl," she sighed. "Personality plus. And you love being on stage, don't you? You got an audience right there in the crib with you, and you love it. You're playing right to him, making him smile, making him laugh. It's in your blood, isn't it? Show business."

Frankie lifted a plump foot and kicked the rattle. Tommy laughed.

"Milt says that Ed Sullivan's trying to blacklist me. He can't forgive me for wrecking his show and giving Earl Wilson all that ammo to take pot shots at him with." Lily folded her arms on the side of the bassinet. "I don't see why he has to be so mean about it. It's not like I planned to have a baby on his show. Don was all set to marry me, just to give you kids a name. Wasn't that nice? A sweeter guy never lived. Hell, I figured I had a good two months yet. Just shows you why I flunked math, right? I never could count."

Frankie waved her tiny fists, punching at the empty air. Tommy tried to put his big toe in his mouth. Lily tickled

her son, and then she twisted Frankie's few hairs into a little curl.

"This was all your doing, wasn't it, Frankie? When you felt the heat from those lights, you couldn't wait to get out there and greet the folks. You've got the gift, kid. It's in your blood. Your mom may be washed up, buried in diapers and too tired even to sing her own name. But not you. You got your whole future in front of you. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Miss Frankie Fallon, the biggest little star this country has ever seen!"

"Don't touch that curl! Don't even move your head. Your hair is perfect."

"But my forehead itches," Frankie whined. "Just one little scratch. Please?"

"I don't feel good," Tommy moaned. He was huddled in a corner of the taxi, his hand pressed over his mouth.

"Don't you dare throw up. And you! Stop that!" Whipping around, Lily slapped her daughter's wrist.

"But it itches," Frankie protested.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Tommy moaned.

The cab jounced over a loose manhole cover. Lily's purse fell to the floor, and when she bent over to retrieve it, Frankie seized the opportunity to administer a quick scratch to the maddening itch under her bangs. Lily caught her in the act. "Are you out of your mind?" she yelled. "Now your hair is a mess, and you've left a mark besides. Do you want this part or don't you?"

"No." Frankie's face assumed a stubborn expression. "I don't like working in TV. You have to get up too early and it's hot and you have people yelling at you all the time."

"No?" Lily's carefully penciled eyebrows shot upward. "Did I hear you say *no* to me? I don't believe my ears. After all the time and money we've invested in your career, that's the best you can do? *No*?"

Frankie took a deep breath. "I want to be a dancer."

"Enough!" Lily roared. "Enough of that dancer crap. Dancers don't get rich. Dancers don't get famous. Dancers

are worn out, washed up, on the junk pile by the time they hit twenty-five. I'm not talking Astaire or Gene Kelly or Ann Miller—those people are exceptions. The only reason they've lasted is because they can do other things. They sing. They act. And so do you. So you just make up your mind, little lady, that you are going into this audition with the right attitude, with one thought and one thought alone in your mind: getting the part. Tommy, stop squirming. What in hell is the matter with you now?"

"I still have to throw up, and now I need to go to the bathroom, too."

"Well, you'll just have to hold it at both ends. Honestly. Kids! Driver, go up to the middle of the next block and then pull over, will you? The wind from the river is going to tear us apart if we get out at the corner. Ready, baby?" Lily patted Frankie's cheek. "You look fabulous. You'll be brilliant, I know you will. Let's go."

Lily grabbed Tommy's hand and pulled him along while Frankie followed in their wake. Lily was always a nervous wreck before auditions, but Frankie felt perfectly calm. After all, she had been performing since the age of six months, when she appeared in a nationwide television commercial for baby powder. By the time she and Tommy had to start making some appearances in the first grade at school, Frankie had already had hundreds of hours of instruction in dance, voice, acting, modeling, and baton twirling. Somehow, Lily always found the money to pay for lessons. When the residuals from Frankie's commercial work dried up, Lily took a temporary job behind a sales counter or waiting on tables.

Using *Variety* as her guide, Lily plotted her daughter's relentless assault on stardom. The little family shuttled back and forth between New York and Hollywood. Every producer and agent in those places knew Frankie's face better than her first grade teacher.

The call had been for 10:00, but when the Fallons arrived at 9:30, the room was already mobbed with kids,

their business managers, their agents, and their parents. Some of the boys were tearing around like maniacs, ignoring the pleas of a harried-looking producer's assistant to keep quiet so they could proceed in an orderly fashion.

Lily filled out an audition sheet, attached a résumé and an eight-by-ten glossy of Frankie, and handed it in. Then, after admonishing Frankie not to touch her face, hair, or dress, she hustled Tommy off to the bathroom.

Frankie sized up the competition as she circled the room. She stopped in front of a big poster announcing the fall premiere of "The Gary Galloway Show." It featured a life-size photograph of the star. Frankie thought he looked like a pretty nice man, with a square, seamed face under a businesslike crew cut and a pair of friendly blue eyes.

A couple of boys were talking behind her. "I hear Galloway's a real creep," one of them said. "Get a load of that rug on his head, will you? Looks like a dead rat."

"My dad knows somebody who used to work with him at Grossingers," the other kid said. "Says he's a drunk. He talks dirty, and he's always feeling up the girls."

Just then, Lily and Tommy reappeared. Small of stature, with his fair hair falling over one eye, Tommy looked puny and pathetic, at least two years younger than his sister. Frankie patted his shoulder. "Maybe you ought to audition, too," she told him. "The call was for boys and girls. Maybe they'll hire you instead of me."

"No, thanks." Tommy gave his head a vigorous shake. "Don't want to."

"Look at all these brats," Lily growled as she surveyed the scene. "Can't their parents read? The producer is looking for somebody between the ages of six and nine, plenty of personality, acting experience a must. If they made these idiots stick to the rules, they could eliminate two-thirds of this crowd right now."

She dragged a comb through one of Frankie's auburn curls with unnecessary force. Frankie protested loudly.

"With our luck," Lily muttered, "they'll give the part to



someone else before they have a chance to see you. That's what I'm worried about."

But luck was with them that day. They waited barely an hour before someone called Frankie's name.

"Right this way, Frankie," a young woman said. "Mrs. Fallon, you'll have to wait outside, please. No mothers allowed."

"But I always watch Frankie's auditions!" Lily protested. "She needs me."

"The producer insists," the woman said smoothly. "We can't allow exceptions."

"Don't forget to smile, honey," Lily called after her daughter as Frankie passed through a pair of soundproof doors to the studio. Tommy gave his sister a halfhearted wave.

Frankie grinned and expelled her breath in a relieved sigh. Her mother was a disruptive influence at auditions. Lily was always offering helpful hints to the bigwigs and coaching Frankie from the sidelines. When producers and directors told Lily to be quiet, she would wave her arms at Frankie in an attempt to communicate silent signals.

In the studio, Frankie recognized the star of the show, Gary Galloway. He was an old-time vaudeville and radio comedian who had made a couple of movies, and now he had found a dog food company to sponsor his first television show, a situation comedy. His character was supposed to be a cynical, fast-talking, high-living comedian who suddenly finds himself the guardian of an orphaned niece—or nephew. The casting director was auditioning children of both sexes for the part of the orphan.

The young woman who was escorting Frankie handed her a script. "You need to learn a couple of lines of dialogue. Mostly they want to see the chemistry between you and Mr. Galloway."

"Chemistry?" Frankie wasn't sure how to act chemistry.

"You know, how you play off each other. Don't be nervous, he's not as mean as he pretends to be. Concentrate on learning your lines. We'll call you in about ten minutes."

The casting director called for action, and Gary began to read the scene with a pug-nosed boy who looked about the same age as Frankie. By watching and listening, Frankie learned her lines without having to refer to her script once. Not that her part was terribly challenging:

GARY: You mean you're Mary's kid? My sister Mary?

KID: Well, she's not my sister. Yeah, Mary. (Looking around.) This your place?

GARY: Well, it's not your place. Look, kid, I'm sorry about Mary, but you—you can't stay here. I'm a busy man. I get a lot of, ah, visitors. You'll be in the way. Underfoot.

KID: Visitors. You mean dames.

GARY: I mean visitors. So while I'm very sympathetic to your problems, I think you'll have a much happier life with somebody else. I'll call an orphanage. Or the zoo.

KID: Where's my room?

GARY: You don't have a room. You will never have a room. This house isn't big enough for both of us.

KID: (Starts to cry.)

GARY: Aw, now look, don't start that stuff. You can cry me a river. Cry me the Gulf of Mexico. The entire Pacific Ocean. It won't work. (Watches helplessly as KID continues to wail.) Down the hall on the right. Your towels are on the rack in the bathroom, and the cook will be here at eight to fix you some breakfast.

KID: (Suddenly jaunty.) Thanks, Unk.

GARY: And don't call me Unk.

The boy reading for the part of the kid was cute enough, but he was nervous and he didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. When the casting director yelled, "Cut," Gary threw down his script.

"This is not my idea of entertainment," he said to the people who were watching. "I'm used to working alone."

"We've been all over that, Gary," the casting director said. "Who's next? Let's go, people, we're running behind."

Gary wasn't finished. "At least make the kid older," he suggested. "And female. Sixteen and blond."

"This is a family show, Gary, not a documentary about how to violate the Mann Act. Next kid."

Frankie sat through two more auditions, and then it was her turn. The set was decorated with a sofa and a deep armchair. She settled down in the chair and checked out the contents of the candy dish on the end table. Some thoughtful person had filled it with sour balls. Frankie popped one into her mouth and tried to deliver her lines around it. Gary lost his temper.

"What in hell's the matter with this one? Mother forget to give her breakfast? Leave that stuff alone."

"This candy is stale," Frankie said. "Don't you have anything fresher?"

"Only this fist." Gary shook it under her nose. "So are we going to read this scene, or is there anything else you want?"

"You got any soda? I like orange soda."

"Forget the soda. We're here to audition, not to raid the refrigerator. Jesus, where did we get her?" Gary appealed to the director. "Get rid of her. I don't like her."

Frankie helped herself to another piece of candy. "I don't like you, either. And I don't like that thing on your head. It looks like a dead rat."

Gary clapped his hand to his toupee. "You leave my rat alone. I mean, my hair. Get lost, you little creep. This is my show, and I don't want you in it."

Frankie shrugged elaborately and hauled herself out of the chair. "It's your loss, Unk. But you could really use a professional actress like me around here. Can I have another piece of candy before I go?"

"No!" Gary roared. "Take your goddamn hands off the set, do you hear me? Get out of my show. You're fired."

On her way out, Frankie stopped in front of the casting

director. "My name is Frankie Fallon, and I'm nine years old. I can sing and dance and act better than any kid you ever saw. Wanna see?" She performed a snappy time step. "Maybe you'd like to put me in a show of my own?"

"Out!" Gary yelled. "I want her out of here!"

The producer came forward, rubbing his hands together. "Tell the rest of them to go home. I think we've found our orphan."

"Oh, no," Gary wailed. "I refuse. I will not act with this brat. I'll quit before I'll do another scene with her."

"You can't quit," the producer said. "You have a contract, and said contract does not give you the right to approve of your costars. I'm casting this show, Gary. Not you. I've got the sponsors breathing down my neck, asking when we're going to start shooting, and we've wasted three days looking for just the right kid. Well, we've got her. Did you see these two?" The producer beamed triumphantly at the other people in the studio. "That was chemistry."

"Frankie, honey, you did it!" Lily came rushing in from the waiting room, Tommy stumbling along beside her. She kissed Frankie first, then embraced the producer, the casting director, the assistant cameraman, and everybody else within reach. That did not include Gary Galloway, who had stormed off to his dressing room.

"What did I tell you?" Lily helped herself to another bottle of beer. "Getting noticed. That's what you have to do in this business. Stand out from the crowd. Make yourself visible. We are going right to the top with this job, baby."

Frankie sawed listlessly at her steak. "Do you think they'll ever let me dance?"

"If you become popular enough with the viewers, they'll let you stand on your head and fart 'Dixie.'" Lily looked around their new hotel room. As soon as she had signed the contracts that afternoon, she moved her family out of their dingy room near Penn Station and booked a