

## Frankie

*By Michelle Pugh*

“May I sit here?”

Those were the first words Frankie ever said to me. They stick in my mind, even to this day, because I had watched him from afar for weeks before he first came over. Frankie was different. He didn't seem to care much at all about his schoolwork or his grades, which was dramatically unique at Alderbrook, where the topic of conversation was yesterday's test and friendships blossomed from studying for tomorrow's. He spent the three classes we shared as far back in the classroom as the teacher would let him sit (if he were able to stick to the back wall like Peter Parker I imagine he'd have done so) and scarcely opened his mouth.

The four words that opened Frankie's world to mine were uttered a few minutes after I had arrived at Starbucks, armed with my physics textbook and binder. My intentions had been to do homework for a few hours over a coffee, then head home for an early night in order to perform well on the next day's test. That was how life worked for me: learn, study, test, repeat. It was the culture. It had been ingrained into me from the beginning of time. Anything below an “A” was a failure. Hell, a 91% was a failure. And I currently had a 91 in Physics, so naturally was dedicating as much time as possible to learning the material. Frankie had entered the shop without my noticing and quietly ordered a hot chocolate, which he now cradled against his chest, waiting for a response.

“Y-yes?” I stuttered, shocked to even hear him speak. “Yes, you can sit.”

He smiled and took a seat, putting down his hot chocolate. “What's your name?”

“Shane,” I said. “You're...”

“Frankie.”

I knew that.

We talked. He explained to me that he had recently transferred to Alderbrook because he had gotten kicked out of his old school for getting in a fight. He asked me a little bit about my background. About five minutes later, he answered the question on my mind.

“I’m here because I need help,” he admitted.

My brow furrowed. “With... what?”

He gestured at my physics textbook. “That.”

“I didn’t think you cared about your grades.”

“I don’t.” He shifted forward in his seat, making me feel like I was being interrogated in some detective movie. “But I still have to pass my classes.”

“So you what, you followed me here?”

Frankie shook his head, annoyance drifting briefly across his face. “I didn’t follow you. I just came here and saw you were also here and I need help with school and I want you to help me.”

A part of me wondered if he’d have asked the first person he saw from school to help him. I didn’t let myself wonder for long, though, because I knew the answer was probably yes. I don’t think Frankie gave a single shit about me when we first met. Maybe he never started giving any.

After a little bit of discussion, he and I set up regular “study sessions”. I knew it was more like unpaid tutoring, but I found myself enjoying his company, so didn’t bring it up. There was also one miniscule detail that kept me from even suggesting he pay: I was scared of him. Completely and utterly terrified.

The more he told me about his life, the more frightened I got. I learned that his dad had left his family when he was four years old, that his mom went out and drank instead of job searching and sometimes brought random men home. He lived in the East Side, a place rife with gang violence. In the fight that had gotten him kicked out of his last school, he had broken the nose and shattered

several ribs of the other kid, walking away with nothing but a scratch on his left cheek and a black eye.

I knew after a few sessions why Frankie had grabbed my attention so quickly and so severely. I loved people, the way their minds worked, the way they operated, and Frankie was human to the core. He emanated this wonderful sense of pure *being* , and I had picked up on it the moment I first saw him. So yeah, he scared me. A lot. But he fascinated me even more. He spoke openly about his fears and the deep sadness that haunted him at night. He described to me watching one of his childhood friends getting stabbed to death when they were only fourteen. He spilled his agonizing life story out to me one day at a time, and occasionally, I taught him physics, but I was starting to get the feeling that Frankie hadn't really wanted to do better in school at all—he just wanted a normal friend.

The day that everyone at Alderbrook will always remember came a few months after Frankie and I started our study sessions. I was in AP Statistics, about half an hour after school started. I know because an announcement came on over the PA and I looked up at the clock.

*“Attention, students. This is a code red. This is not a drill. Go into lockdown immediately.”*

Immediately there was chaos, and students were scrambling over each other to get away from the door. Our teacher tried frantically to calm us down, but as he cried out for us to move “slowly and methodically” there was fear lining his voice and we all heard it. I tried to ignore my heart pounding out of my chest, pushing backpacks out of the way and moving desks and trying my best to maintain as much peace in my mind as one person possibly could but all I could hear was crying and my friends' voices, scared, so scared...

And then the lights went off and everything got quiet. But no, the door, the door wasn't locked, no one had locked the door and there was no safety barrier, only a few desks haphazardly piled on top of each other and it was barely a second before they all started to crumble and fall. Jenna Miles screamed—her foot was trapped underneath a fallen desk. Her scream sent the students into yet another panic and then the door opened and light flooded the room and there was a gunshot. And Jenna Miles stopped screaming.

It was that moment when the entire world seemed to slow to a stop. I think every kid in the world thinks they'll always be the hero in a situation like this, that they'll be the one jumping in front of the bullet, the one tackling the bad guy. But it doesn't come down to strength of character or confidence. All it comes down to is a split-second decision. In the stand still frenzy of that day, I made that decision. I resolved myself, looked up, began to move towards the door. And in those seconds, I watched the gunman put his rifle to his own head and pull the trigger.

I'm writing this down because I believe Frankie needs to be remembered for who he is. I think a lot of people will look at what he's done and label him as insane, as angry, as evil. I'm not going to try to offer an explanation for him. I don't think there was one, not even in his own mind. I just know that in those final moments, I looked into his eyes and I didn't see murder, didn't see insanity or anger or evil. All I saw was a boy more frightened by the world than I ever was by him, consumed entirely by a pain I knew none of us could ever understand.