

# ***Frances Grubb***

**by Angie Tonucci**

*Frances was finding it difficult to remember her life before this week. It felt like years had gone by since she was last at school. Learning regular things like linear equations and the biology of plants seemed totally pointless. And a middle school gym class after all the physical training she'd been through? Did she really have to go on pretending to be normal and average and boring now that she knew she wasn't?*

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## **CHAPTER 1: FANNY CHUBB**

Thunder. Fitting. Frances' mood was unquestionably stormy.

Another deep rumble echoed outside as the final bell rang throughout the school. Frances had asked for a bathroom pass a few minutes before the end of study hall. She couldn't take another second of her best friend, April's, recapping of the big movie date with Dan Hafferty, eighth grade soccer god. She reached the locker labeled F. GRUBB just before the hallways were flooded with hundreds of eleven-to-fourteen-year-olds talking about anything except what they had just learned in their last classes because it was now the weekend, and education was irrelevant until Monday. She tried her locker combination twice without results. Her locker neighbors, L. GREEN and B. HARRIS, were both basketball players with extra-long arms and knobby elbows, and she knew if she didn't get out of there before they arrived she'd have no room to even open the locker door, let alone maneuver her backpack to unload her books.

She released a long breath as she twisted the knob a third time. Twenty-four right. Seven left. Easy now. Eleven right and... pop. A binder crashed to the floor and scattered American History notes around her discount sneakers. A half-empty soda bottle rolled down the hall and was kicked into oblivion by fast-moving feet on their way to the bus lot.

Frances rolled her eyes and quickly adjusted the contents of her locker. She swapped the school-day's books with the ones she would need for weekend homework, crammed the now crumpled and foot-printed history notes back in the binder, and forced the binder between *Pre-Algebra* and *Life Science*.

She caught her reflection in her tiny locker mirror as she zipped her backpack. She didn't stare for long. The mirror was only good for one thing. She grabbed the dry-erase marker from her locker shelf and smeared the number 90 from the bottom corner of the mirror. She replaced it with the number 89. She was half-way through the seventh grade. She smiled. The corner of the locker door hit her forehead as B. HARRIS arrived behind it. She took a step backward into L. GREEN who ignored her completely as he tugged at his own locker door. It was definitely time to go home.

She slammed her own locker closed and took off for the closest exit as more thunder bellowed, louder this time, outside. She thought about wishing the rain would hold off for at least the six minutes it would take her to walk home, but then she thought making a wish would jinx it. Then she realized just thinking about wishing it had probably already jinxed it, and at any rate, getting caught in a thunderstorm was exactly the kind of thing that would happen to her at the end of an already miserable day. She'd probably even get struck by lightning.

She stepped outside into the gray as a cool rush of wind blew her already frizzy hair into her face. She had no jacket on, so she shivered. It was the end of January, but it was Shreveport, Louisiana, so it was occasionally acceptable for a winter day to start out warm and end with a thunderstorm. Frances made her way down the sidewalk, weaving between other students, as the first large raindrop landed on her nose. She started to trot but tripped on a shoelace and landed on her hands and knees, her backpack falling forward onto the back of her head.

"Whoa, wipe out, Fanny Chubb!" said the voice of Tiffy Cadigan followed by the laughter of her Student Council minions.

Good one, Tiffy. Frances had *never* heard that nickname before.

Since the third grade, when Tiffy had first come up with it, Frances had wished she could have responded, “That might be funny if I actually *was* chubby!” as if she wasn’t even remotely overweight. But the problem was that she *was* a little chubby in addition to being short with thick, wide hair that made her look even rounder, so she never had a proper comeback.

She shoved her backpack off her head and leaned back to tie her shoe as if just maybe passersby would believe that was the reason she was down on the ground to begin with. She pulled herself up by the chain-link fence that outlined the schoolyard and jogged toward home, pretending she hadn’t just scraped a fair amount of skin off the heels of her hands.

The rain bombs pounded the concrete with audible splashes. By the time Frances reached the end of the school fence, her clothes were already soaked through. Her backpack had doubled in weight. She glanced behind her as she turned the corner onto Boots Ferry Road. The coast was clear. All the other kids had either piled into the buses and carpools or holed up in the school to wait out the storm. She slowed her pace to a soggy trudge. She couldn’t get any wetter, so she didn’t see much point in running. A second later, however, a deafening thunderclap with accompanying lightning bolt encouraged her to at least shift into a power-walk.

She slogged across the street, her two-story, lemon-yellow house nearly within reach. The mailbox, which matched the color of the house’s faded turquoise shutters, had THE GRUBBS stenciled on both sides. Frances didn’t understand how her mother could

have given up a name as beautiful as Cristina Alvarez to become a Mrs. Grubb. She'd asked about it when she was nine.

"I was young and in love," her mother had responded wistfully.

"Aren't you still in love?" Frances had asked.

Mrs. Grubb had shrugged, "Sure," and continued folding laundry. Six months later Frances' parents were amicably divorced. Frances wondered when her mom was going to change the name on the mailbox.

The mailman hadn't closed the box all the way. Frances kind of looked forward to blow-drying the mail. Menial labor would take her mind off of everything else. She grabbed the damp pile of envelopes and coupons on her way up the walk.

There were no cars in the driveway, but that didn't mean no one was home. Her mom taught at the half-day preschool downtown and beat Frances home most days. Her mom's fiancé, Toby, directed community theater productions and taught private guitar and drum lessons. Toby sure seemed to borrow her mom's car a lot for someone who ate only things made from soy and wore bike shorts every day of the year and had passionate tirades about society's environmental negligence. Frances was pretty sure he kept a disguise in the glove box so nobody would recognize his thick dreadlocks.

The rain slowed to a drizzle as Frances opened the front door. Of course. Although she decided it was better to be sopping wet and home than dry and still at school. At least she hadn't been struck by lightning. She stood in the doorway, water droplets thudding on the rug beneath her.

"Frances?" said her mom's musical voice from upstairs.

"Yeah," said Frances dropping her heavy backpack to the floor.

The gorgeous Cristina Alvarez-Previously-Grubb-Soon-To-Be-Davidson appeared at the top of the stairs. “Oh no, sweetie, did you get caught in the rain?”

Frances didn’t answer. Her teeth began to chatter as she kicked off her shoes. She tried not to look directly at her mother as she glided down the stairs. Even in sweatpants the woman was breathtaking. More radiant than usual, actually, now that Frances looked up at her face. Her mother’s long, dark, wavy hair was pulled purposefully haphazardly into a not-quite-centered ponytail. Her perfect eyebrows arched over thickly-lashed, chestnut eyes. Her expression was a combination of motherly concern and something else Frances couldn’t quite put her finger on.

Frances used to think she was destined to eventually inherit her mother’s poise and beauty. Then she saw pictures of her parents as children and realized her father’s short stature, pudgy face, and receding hairline would more likely be her fate. She sighed. What was that hidden grin in her mom’s eyes today?

“Stay there, honey. I’ll go grab a towel.” Her mother swept around the banister toward the laundry room. She came back a few seconds later with a multi-colored beach towel. Frances spun slowly, allowing her mom to pat her semi-dry and then wrap her like a burrito. “Okay, Frances, go upstairs, and get out of those wet clothes. Toby should be home soon. We want to talk to you.” There was that mysterious gleam again.

*Family meeting, thought Francis. Fan-freaking-tastic.*

Frances lumbered up the stairs, careful not to trip over the towel dragging around her feet. Once in her bedroom she wanted so badly to climb under her comforter and snuggle with her cats until adulthood, she considered not even bothering to change clothes. But another shiver ran through her teeth down to her toes, and she locked herself in her

bathroom and turned on the shower. As soon as she saw steam billowing around the shower curtain, she quickly dropped the towel, peeled off her sticky, wet clothes, and stepped into the tub.

She convulsed with shivers for a few seconds as the cold worked its way out of her body. She looked down at her sore knees. Slight bruises had formed on each from her fall to the sidewalk. She examined the road rash on her hands. Tiny drops of blood had pooled and hardened in a few places. She held her palms in the hot stream, staring at her stubby fingers as her body relaxed.

About the only things that stood out about Frances were her left hand, which had contained only four fingers since birth, and a slight webbing between a few of her toes, both things from which she spent a great deal of time diverting attention. She sighed. She imagined long, slender fingers like her mother's. She visualized un-chewed fingernails and smooth skin, free of the scrapes and scars from so many clumsy accidents.

As she stared, unblinking, the skin on her palms seemed to melt, very gradually, like cheese on pizza while it's baking in the oven. The scrapes slowly disappeared. Was the water washing them away? She held her breath as her fingers extended half an inch, the fingernails lengthening in proportion. And her left hand, for the tiniest moment, actually seemed to contain the correct number of fingers.

A fleck of water landed in her eye. She blinked, and her hands were hers again. Nine stumpy fingers. Nails chewed to the quicks. She released her breath. Maybe the shower was a little too hot. The steam was clearly clouding her vision.

She would have stayed in the shower until the water ran cold except that she didn't want rant from Toby on wastefulness. She used a towel from the back of the bathroom

door to pat her skin dry and wrap her hair. She grabbed a second towel to wrap her body, kicked her wet clothes out of the way of the door, and bolted from the bathroom straight to her bed. As if on cue, her two fat black cats, Alexander and Calamity Jane, appeared out of nowhere to burrow under the comforter and nestle on either side of her. Frances covered her face with the blanket. She'd forgotten all about the family meeting until there was a rap at her door just as she was beginning to doze.

"Frances, are you dressed?" her mother asked through the door. "Toby's home. Come downstairs."

Frances wondered how long she'd be able to ignore them. She was so warm and comfortable in her cat cocoon. But by the time she'd decided to ask if Toby and her mom would just talk to her through the door, her mom had already disappeared down the stairs. She let out an involuntary growly noise. She tried to sit up and scoot out from under the blanket without disturbing the cats in the hopes that they'd keep her bed toasty until she got back.

She pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, the towel-turban still high on her head, and went downstairs. She walked in the direction of the low voices coming from the kitchen.

"Hey there, kiddo!" said Toby, chipper as ever. "How was school?"

Frances tried to pass off some kind of impassive expression with her shrug, but she was pretty sure it still came across as a grimace. It seemed like the question was rhetorical anyway since Toby clearly had his mind on whatever they were all about to talk about.

"Sit down, sweetie," said Frances' mom. "We've got some good news."

“Great news!” said Toby grinning broadly. The pair gazed mischievously at each other for what seemed to Frances like several minutes. She cleared her throat as she sat in the chair opposite them at the table. Her mom reached across the table and grabbed one of Frances’ hands in both of hers. Frances raised her eyebrows skeptically.

“We’re having a baby!” Toby blurted, obviously unable to contain himself.

Frances pulled her hand back to her chest. “Who’s having a baby?” she asked.

“I am, silly,” said her mom with a laugh. “Me and Toby. You’re going to have a brother or sister.”

Frances didn’t say anything for a minute while Toby and her mother sat forward in their chairs, expectantly awaiting Frances’ happy congratulations. They were both knocked backwards as if from a small explosion when Frances jumped up so abruptly her chair crashed to the floor. “Why are you doing this to me?!” She screamed, blood pounding in her ears. “Why is everybody ruining my life?” And she stomped out of the kitchen and took the stairs two-at-a-time back up to her room, leaving two stunned adults in the wake of her inexplicable fury.