



Frank

Stephen Elder

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Frank Daceasy is an enigma. Good-looking but unmarried. Unemployed though talented beyond mere competence. Soft-spoken yet sometimes cutting; good to the point of saintliness yet given to devilish outbursts of malice. Even his first action upon arriving on the scene at the Lynnwood development is a puzzle—how does he manage to control; not merely control but tame and pacify the nasty German Shepherd living in the back of Duane's pickup truck?

Duane is the landscaper of the Lynwood operation and Lori the operations manager and ex-girlfriend. The situation is tense. Jack is the developer and Lori's father and he's lying about his relationship with the real estate agent. The situation is tense. Tad and Roberto are the two construction apprentices and they're so goofy they won't even admit who's who. Frank immediately begins to calm the waters and bring order to the universe. But the question remains who is this guy who lives out of his van and sleeps at the state park? Lori runs a background check on him and comes up with a suspiciously black hole.

Now add the fact that Frank is able to talk to animals. The birds and the bees call him the "Shining Man" and he patiently explains cars roads houses and "the Law": *those who can will*. Frank also talks to people and not just the usual suspects rather teenagers and career women the testiest of the testy. His virtue is noticing that people need people; he listens to them without judging or manipulation and he's a pro at the give and take of real conversation.

What he isn't adept at is love. Carnal love that is not the "love one's neighbor" type (although he sometimes trips over that as well). In the only enduring tension of the book Frank falls for the local veterinarian Elaine Azerian which he perceives as conflicting with his "mission."

There are plenty of opportunities for other long-term tensions the greatest among them when Frank is arrested on suspicion of being a terrorist simply because he lacks a digital history. But every problem is solved relentlessly by the *deus ex machina*. Literally. For as the old priest in the story says "...you can't fool small children or animals..."—or women he should have added. They're on to him from the beginning and readers will be treading on their heels.

Frank may be a predictable story but it is also written with all the milk and honey of a good Hallmark special. Author Stephen Elder has been a carpenter and cabinet-maker for most of his life and the knowledge of his craft that he brings to his writing is both tender and instructive. What in the end makes *Frank* a good book is the fully realized characterization. The reader will care about the people in this story and want to make sure that all's well that ends well. They won't be disappointed.

HEATHER SHAW (May 22, 2007)

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