

Frankly Speaking

By
Don Massenzio

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my two daughters Maria and Lilliana. We all strive to keep our children safe. For every parent that watches their child with vigilance, there are monsters out there that seek to harm them. Hug your children and keep them safe.

CHAPTER ONE

The sun emerged from the blue-gray waters of the Atlantic off Jacksonville Beach. The rising fireball amplified the haze that hung in the sky as a precursor of the humid weather to come on this July day in North Florida.

There was a haze of a different type in Frank Rozzani's brain that slowly began to lift as he felt the moist sticky texture of Lucy's tongue on his ear as she attempted to wake him from his four and a half hours of sleep.

"C'mon Lucy. Can't I just rest a bit longer?"

At the sound of his voice, Lucy hopped out of bed and impatiently waited for Frank to follow.

Frank knew that it was now hopeless. Lucy, Frank's bed companion each night, was a black Labrador Retriever and Border Collie mix adopted when she showed up at his trailer soon after he moved in. It still wasn't clear who adopted whom.

Lucy enjoyed runs on the beach. It didn't seem to matter to her that Frank stumbled in at 1:30 AM after his last set at the Sun Dog, the local greasy spoon by day, jazz club by night. He played piano with his jazz trio at the venue each Thursday and Friday night. The Dog drew a small, but loyal crowd that appreciated jazz and those that play it.

Frank could never be angry at the sweet dog. Her persistence in waking him up kept him on a schedule. He needed to keep in shape for his line of work, but he wasn't always motivated, especially after a late night.

It was a night of Frank's favorite music mixed with the anticipation of another case, this one to investigate the disappearance of a teenager. Frank had spoken with the girl's desperate father as he relayed the story of his daughter's disappearance from a church retreat. The police had labeled her a runaway. The father believed she had been kidnapped and was in danger. Frank knew from experience that the police had definitely screwed up in other similar cases. Those that had cases bungled by the local authorities often sought out Frank's services as a private investigator.

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After resisting Lucy's tongue bath as long as possible, he sat up and pulled on an old pair of Syracuse University running shorts. Lucy bounced up and down in front of the trailer door.

"Just a minute girl," Frank said. "Old guys like me have to stretch unless you want to drag me back to the trailer when I cramp up."

Lucy cocked her head to the side as if she understood. After some halfhearted stretching, Frank grabbed a cold bottle of water from the refrigerator and left the trailer to start down the path to the beach. Lucy matched him stride for stride.

After crossing the pliable sand furthest from the shore, Frank and Lucy came to the firm, hard-packed sand at the water's edge. The sand in Northeast Florida close to the ocean was once the scene of cars driving on the beach. Thanks to sea turtle nesting and some careless drivers that used sunbathing tourists as speed bumps, driving on the beach was now prohibited in this part of the state.

At this early hour, there was a surprisingly large crowd of runners, bikers and yoga enthusiasts. Frank and Lucy fell into a comfortable pace as they ran north on their usual two-mile course that took them to the guard post at Naval Station Mayport and back. In his role as a private investigator, Frank used the run as an opportunity to reflect on his cases – past and present, upcoming endeavors, or to debrief himself on a completed case. The pain from his prior life in Syracuse was always in the back of his mind. For him the adage "time heals all wounds" didn't ring true. Some wounds were too deep for even a lifetime to heal.

As Frank and Lucy approached Mayport, the guard climbed down from his perch to the beach. As Lucy ran toward him he put a hand into his pocket. When she reached him, she rolled onto her back, and wagged her tail kicking up a spray of sand. The guard gave her the treat he had pulled from his pocket.

"Hello Lucy. Hello Frank," the guard said. "Beautiful morning for your run."

"It definitely is," said Frank.

Beautiful mornings in Florida were so numerous that they were almost expected. As Lucy and Frank turned to head back, Frank's stomach began to rumble.

"Let's go to the Sun Dog and get some breakfast," Frank said to Lucy.

As they approached the stretch of beach where Atlantic Boulevard ends at the ocean, a familiar figure emerged from the water. Clifford Jones III, aka Jonesy, was just finishing up his morning ride on the waves. He headed toward Frank and Lucy with his long board under his arm.

Jonesy's love for surfing bordered on obsession. He was known to brave the water of Jacksonville Beach every day, rain or shine; hot or cold. The only exception was when he took surfing trips to some exotic locale like Costa Rica, Hawaii, Australia, or other parts unknown in search of the perfect wave.

Jonesy was the drummer in Frank's trio as well as an attorney who had put his shingle on a rundown old building in Jacksonville Beach. It became the area's first surf shop and law firm combination. His clients were the poor and unfortunate that could not afford legal help. His law practice attire was mostly board shorts and a t-shirt, usually with a funny slogan or picture. Shoes were always optional. When a court appearance was necessary, long pants and shoes might be thrown in to make a good impression.

As Frank, Jonesy and Lucy sat at an outdoor table, their usual breakfast, cheese omelet for Frank with mushrooms and hash browns, and an egg white and spinach concoction for Jonesy arrived. Not to be left out, a healthy bowl of last night's chicken gumbo was set down for Lucy. Fat Sam knew his clientele so well that they rarely had to order.

Jonesy exuded his usual morning glow. He truly enjoyed his life. Whatever had driven him to turn his back on a promising and prosperous corporate law career clearly gave him no cause for regret.

"How do you do it, Jonesy?" Frank asked.

"Do what?" Jonesy replied in his Georgia accent.

"Play the drums until one AM and then hit the ocean surfing at five as if you slept for eight hours?"

"The ocean provides me with meditation time that beats the most comfortable deep sleep. Plus I knew I would get to see your smiling face this morning."

"Okay. Whatever you say," Frank said as he took a large gulp of high-octane coffee.

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As the two friends tore into their delicious breakfast, they naturally settled into the business at hand.

"Do we both need to meet with the Bullocks today?" Jonesy asked.

"I'd like to get your take on the situation, especially in terms of the truth about what happened to their daughter."

"So, am I the good cop or the bad cop this time?"

"You're the Zen cop. Try to focus your new age powers to see if you can spot any holes in their story."

"Hey, don't knock the new age stuff until you try it. It's relaxing and the yoga chicks are hot."

"Whatever," Frank said. "I'd rather eat a pretzel than end up looking like one. I'll stick to running with Lucy."

At the sound of her name, Lucy looked up from her food bowl long enough to see if she was needed and then went back to cleaning up every last morsel of gumbo.

The potential case had landed in their laps the previous night between their second and third set. Fat Sam summoned them to his private table where they met a fifty-something man with a desperate look in his eyes. The man was Travis Bullock, Jr., an attorney from the wealthy Jacksonville suburb of Ponte Vedra known for its McMansions. After introductions, Bullock, looking haggard and tired, relayed his story to Frank and Jonesy.

"My daughter Maggie is missing. She's 16 years old and was attending a church retreat when she disappeared. The church called us today to tell us that she didn't show up for breakfast. The staff checked her room she was gone," Bullock said, as tears welled up in his bloodshot eyes.

"Did you call the police?" Frank asked.

"We called them right away. They took a report from us, did a quick search of her room, and told us that she probably ran away and that we should wait to hear from her."

"And you don't believe them?" Jonesy interjected.

"Maggie is a straight A student, literally the perfect child. She wouldn't just disappear. It's not like her to do something like that," Bullock replied.

"If we take this case, Mr. Bullock, we'll need more than just your intuition that she didn't run away. It wouldn't be fair to you to take your money if this does turn out to be a simple runaway situation. Also, the police don't generally like us poking around in open cases trying to prove them wrong," Frank said.

"I understand, Mr. Rozzani. What I'm asking is for you to find my daughter."

Frank agreed to follow-up with Bullock and his wife at their home the next day so that they could explore the situation in more depth and determine if the Jacksonville Police Department had overlooked some key piece of evidence that might point to a scenario other than a typical teen runaway. Frank thought that he and Jonesy should come up with a strategy first thing in the morning which explained their breakfast meeting.

There was no question of paying the bill. They had an understanding with Fat Sam. He provided them food and a place to satisfy their desire to play jazz and he received services from them for himself and his patrons in need. Neither side abused the privilege.