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catch me  if you can 

frank w. abagnale

with STAN REDDING



CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

**The Amazing True Story
of the Youngest and Most
Daring Con Man in the
History of Fun and Profit!**

Frank W. Abagnale
with Stan Redding

BROADWAY BOOKS / NEW YORK



This book is based on the true-life exploits of Frank Abagnale. To protect the right of those whose paths have crossed the author's, all of the characters and some of the events have been altered, and all names, dates, and places have been changed.

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CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR
Catch Me If You Can

"Frank Abagnale [is] a maestro of the flim-flam trade. . . . The book's ultimate rush is how complicit Abagnale makes you in his sin. You're rooting for a man who would no sooner look at you than see your face as a giant lollipop with the word 'sucker' printed on it. And why not? After all, these days, a criminal this good is hard to find."
—*Entertainment Weekly*

"[A] racy and rollicking read."
—*Chicago Sun-Times*

"If there were a forgery hall of fame, Frank Abagnale would have his own wing."
—*Fortune*

"Ever since Robin Hood parlayed his crafty trade into a legend, the world has loved a rogue, but Frank W. Abagnale is a rogue who would have skinned the bandit king of Sherwood Forest out of his last arrow. . . . Whatever the reader may think of his crimes, the reader will wind up chortling with and cheering along the criminal."
—*Times* (Gloucester, Mass.)

"Frank Abagnale could write a check on toilet paper, drawn on the Confederate States Treasury, sign it 'U. R. Hooked' and cash it at any bank in town, using a Hong Kong driver's license for identification."
—Former Chief of Police, Houston

ALSO BY FRANK W. ABAGNALE

The Art of the Steal

TO MY DAD

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THE FLEDGLING

A MAN'S ALTER EGO is nothing more than his favorite image of himself. The mirror in my room in the Windsor Hotel in Paris reflected my favorite image of me—a darkly handsome young airline pilot, smooth-skinned, bull-shouldered and immaculately groomed. Modesty is not one of my virtues. At the time, virtue was not one of my virtues.

Satisfied with my appearance, I picked up my bag, left the room and two minutes later was standing in front of the cashier's cage.

"Good morning, Captain," said the cashier in warm tones. The markings on my uniform identified me as a first officer, a co-pilot, but the French are like that. They tend to overestimate everything save their women, wine and art.

I signed the hotel bill she slid across the counter, started to turn away, then wheeled back, taking a payroll check from the inside pocket of my jacket. "Oh, can you cash this for me? Your Paris night life nearly wiped me out and it'll be another week before I'm home." I smiled ruefully.

She picked up the Pan American World Airways check and looked at the amount. "I'm sure we can, Captain, but I must get the manager to approve a check this large," she said. She stepped into an office behind her and was back in a moment, displaying a pleased smile. She handed me the check to endorse.

"I assume you want American dollars?" she asked, and without waiting for my reply counted out \$786.73 in Yankee currency and coin. I pushed back two \$50 bills. "I would appreciate it if you would take care of the necessary people, since I was so careless," I said, smiling.

She beamed. "Of course, Captain. You are very kind," she said. "Have a safe flight and please come back to see us."

I took a cab to Orly, instructing the driver to let me off at the TWA entrance. I by-passed the TWA ticket counter in the lobby and presented my FAA license and Pan Am ID card to the TWA operations officer. He checked his manifest. "Okay, First Officer Frank Williams, deadheading to Rome. Gotcha. Fill this out, please." He handed me the familiar pink form for nonrevenue passengers and I penned in the pertinent data. I picked up my bag and walked to the customs gate marked "CREW MEMBERS ONLY." I started to heft my bag to the counter top but the inspector, a wizened old man with a wispy mustache, recognized me and waved me through.

A young boy fell in beside me as I walked to the plane, gazing with unabashed admiration at my uniform with its burnished gold stripes and other adornments.

"You the pilot?" he asked. He was English from his accent.

"Nah, just a passenger like you," I replied. "I fly for Pan Am."

"You fly 707s?"

I shook my head. "Used to," I said. "Right now I'm on DC-8s." I like kids. This one reminded me of myself a few years past.

An attractive blond stewardess met me as I stepped aboard and helped me to stow my gear in the crew's luggage bin. "We've got a full load this trip, Mr. Williams," she said. "You beat out two other guys for the jump seat. I'll be serving the cabin."

"Just milk for me," I said. "And don't worry about that if you get busy. Hitchhikers aren't entitled to anything more than the ride."

I ducked into the cabin. The pilot, co-pilot and flight engineer were making their pre-takeoff equipment and instrument check but they paused courteously at my entrance. "Hi, Frank Williams, Pan Am, and don't let me interrupt you," I said.

"Gary Giles," said the pilot, sticking out his hand. He nodded toward the other two men. "Bill Austin, number two, and Jim Wright. Good to have you with us." I shook hands with the other two airmen and dropped into the jump seat, leaving them to their work.

We were airborne within twenty minutes. Giles took the 707 up to 30,000 feet, checked his instruments, cleared with the Orly tower and then uncoiled himself from his seat. He appraised me with casual thoroughness and then indicated his chair. "Why don't you fly this bird for a while, Frank," he said. "I'll go back and mingle with the paying passengers."

His offer was a courtesy gesture sometimes accorded a dead-heading pilot from a competing airline. I dropped my cap on the cabin floor and slid into the command seat, very much aware that I had been handed custody of 140 lives, my own included.

Austin, who had taken the controls when Giles vacated his seat, surrendered them to me. "You got it, Captain," he said, grinning.

I promptly put the giant jet on automatic pilot and hoped to hell the gadget worked, because I couldn't fly a kite.

I wasn't a Pan Am pilot or any other kind of pilot. I was an impostor, one of the most wanted criminals on four continents, and at the moment I was doing my thing, putting a super hype on some nice people.

I WAS A MILLIONAIRE twice over and half again before I was twenty-one. I stole every nickel of it and blew the bulk of the bundle on fine threads, gourmet foods, luxurious lodgings, fantastic foxes, fine wheels and other sensual goodies. I partied in every capital in Europe, basked on all the famous beaches and good-timed it in South America, the South Seas, the Orient and the more palatable portions of Africa.

It wasn't altogether a relaxing life. I didn't exactly keep my finger on the panic button, but I put a lot of mileage on my running shoes. I made a lot of exits through side doors, down fire escapes or over rooftops. I abandoned more wardrobes in the course of five years than most men acquire in a lifetime. I was slipperier than a buttered *escargot*.

Oddly enough, I never felt like a criminal. I was one, of course, and I was aware of the fact. I've been described by authorities and news reporters as one of this century's cleverest bum-check passers, flimflam artists and crooks, a con man of Academy Award caliber. I was a swindler and poseur of astonishing ability. I sometimes astonished myself with some of my impersonations and shenanigans, but I never at any time

deluded myself. I was always aware that I was Frank Abagnale, Jr., that I was a check swindler and a faker, and if and when I were caught I wasn't going to win any Oscars. I was going to jail.

I was right, too. I did time in a French poky, served a stint in a Swedish slammer and cleansed myself of all my American sins in the Petersburg, Virginia, federal jug. While in the last prison, I voluntarily subjected myself to a psychological evaluation by a University of Virginia criminologist-psychiatrist. He spent two years giving me various written and oral tests, using truth-serum injections and polygraph examinations on various occasions.

The shrink concluded that I had a very low criminal threshold. In other words, I had no business being a crook in the first place.

One of the New York cops who'd worked hardest to catch me read the report and snorted. "This head doctor's gotta be kiddin' us," he scoffed. "This phony rips off several hundred banks, hustles half the hotels in the world for everything but the sheets, screws every airline in the skies, including most of their stewardesses, passes enough bad checks to paper the walls of the Pentagon, runs his own goddamned colleges and universities, makes half the cops in twenty countries look like dumbasses while he's stealing over \$2 million, and he has a *low* criminal threshold? What the hell would he have done if he'd had a *high* criminal threshold, looted Fort Knox?"

The detective confronted me with the paper. We had become amiable adversaries. "You conned this shrink, didn't you, Frank?"

I told him I'd answered every question asked me as truthfully

as possible, that I'd completed every test given me as honestly as I could. I didn't convince him. "Nah," he said. "You can fool these feds, but you can't fool me. You conned this couch turkey." He shook his head. "You'd con your own father, Frank."

I already had. My father was the mark for the first score I ever made. Dad possessed the one trait necessary in the perfect pigeon, blind trust, and I plucked him for \$3,400. I was only fifteen at the time.

I was born and spent my first sixteen years in New York's Bronxville. I was the third of four children and my dad's namesake. If I wanted to lay down a baby con, I could say I was the product of a broken home, for Mom and Dad separated when I was twelve. But I'd only be bum-rapping my parents.

The person most hurt by the separation and subsequent divorce was Dad. He was really hung up on Mom. My mother, Paulette Abagnale, is a French-Algerian beauty whom Dad met and married during his World War II army service in Oran. Mom was only fifteen at the time, and Dad was twenty-eight, and while the difference in ages didn't seem to matter at the time, I've always felt it had an influence on the breakup of their marriage.

Dad opened his own business in New York City after his discharge from the army, a stationery store at Fortieth and Madison Avenue called Gramercy's. He was very successful. We lived in a big, luxurious home and if we weren't fabulously wealthy, we were certainly affluent. My brothers, my sister and I never wanted for anything during our early years.

A kid is often the last to know when there's serious trouble between his parents. I know that's true in my case and I don't

think my siblings were any more aware than I. We thought Mom was content to be a housewife and mother and she was, up to a point. But Dad was more than just a successful businessman. He was also very active in politics, one of the Republican wheels in the Bronx precincts. He was a member and past president of the New York Athletic Club, and he spent a lot of his time at the club with both business and political cronies.

Dad was also an avid salt-water fisherman. He was always flying off to Puerto Rico, Kingston, Belize or some other Caribbean spa on deep-sea fishing expeditions. He never took Mom along, and he should have. My mother was a women's libber before Gloria Steinem learned her Maidenform was flammable. And one day Dad came back from a marlin-chasing jaunt to find his home creel empty. Mom had packed up and moved herself, us three boys and Sis into a large apartment. We kids were somewhat mystified, but Mom quietly explained that she and Dad were no longer compatible and had elected to live apart.

Well, she had elected to live apart, anyway. Dad was shocked, surprised and hurt at Mom's action. He pleaded with her to come back home, promising he'd be a better husband and father and that he'd curtail his deep-sea outings. He even offered to forgo politics.

Mom listened, but she made no promises. And it soon became apparent to me, if not Dad, that she had no intention of reconciling. She enrolled in a Bronx dental college and started training to be a dental technician.

Dad didn't give up. He was over at our apartment at every opportunity, pleading, cajoling, entreating and flattering her. Sometimes he'd lose his temper. "Damn it, woman—can't you see I love you!" he'd roar.

The situation did have its effect on us boys, of course. Me in particular. I loved my dad. I was the closest to him, and he commenced to use me in his campaign to win back Mom. "Talk to her, son," he'd ask of me. "Tell her I love her. Tell her we'd be happier if we all lived together. Tell her you'd be happier if she came home, that all you kids would be happier."

He'd give me gifts to deliver to Mom, and coach me in speeches designed to break down my mother's resistance.

As a juvenile John Alden to my father's Myles Standish and my mother's Priscilla Mullins, I was a flop. My mother couldn't be conned. And Dad probably hurt his own case because Mom resented his using me as a pawn in their game of marital chess. She divorced Dad when I was fourteen.

Dad was crushed. I was disappointed, for I had really wanted them to get back together. I'll say this for Dad: when he loved a woman, he loved her forever. He was still trying to win Mom back when he died in 1974.

When Mom finally divorced my father, I elected to live with Dad. Mom wasn't too keen on my decision, but I felt Dad needed one of us, that he shouldn't have to live alone, and I persuaded her. Dad was grateful and pleased. I have never regretted the decision, although Dad probably did.

Life with Father was a whole different ball game. I spent a lot of time in some of New York's finest saloons. Businessmen, I learned, not only enjoy three-martini lunches, but they belt out a lot of boilermaker brunches and whack out scores of scotch and soda dinners. Politicians, I also noted quickly, had a better grasp of world affairs and a looser lid on their pork barrels when they were attached to a bourbon on the rocks. Dad did a lot of his business dealing and a goodly amount of his political

maneuvering close to a bar, with me waiting nearby. My father's drinking habits alarmed me at first. I didn't think he was an alcoholic, but he was a two-fisted drinker and I worried that he had a drinking problem. Still, I never saw him drunk although he drank constantly and after a while I assumed he was immune to the juice.

I was fascinated by my dad's associates, friends and acquaintances. They ranged the gamut of the Bronx's social stratum: ward heelers, cops, union bosses, business executives, truckers, contractors, stock brokers, clerks, cabbies and promoters. The whole smear. Some were right out of the pages of Damon Runyon.

After hanging out with Dad for six months, I was street-wise and about five-eighths smart, which is not exactly the kind of education Dad had in mind for me, but it's the kind you get in sauce parlors.

Dad had a lot of political clout. I learned this when I started playing hookey from school and running with some loose-end kids from my neighborhood. They weren't gang members or anything like that. They weren't into anything really heavy. They were just guys with a screwed-up family situation, trying to get attention from someone, if only the truant officer. Maybe that's why I started hanging out with them. Perhaps I was seeking attention myself. I did want my parents together again, and I had vague notions at the time that if I acted like a juvenile delinquent, it might provide a common ground for a reconciliation.

I wasn't too good as a juvenile delinquent. Most of the time I felt plain foolish, swiping candy and slipping into movies. I was much more mature than my companions, and much bigger. At