

# Catch Me If You Can Summary

By Frank Abagnale

Andy Griffith famously said, 'Who is going to believe a con artist? Everyone if she is good.'

*Catch Me If You Can*, is the compelling life story of Frank Abagnale Jr., one of the 20th century's most infamous con artists. His talent for fraud allowed him to cash checks and fake his way into a cockpit as a Pan Am pilot, as well as numerous other job roles.

The question is, how did Abagnale do it, and, perhaps more importantly, how did he evade capture for so long?

This summary will briefly take us through Frank Abagnale Jr.'s fascinating life. We'll look at the influence of his parents, how he developed his confidence, and how, as his confidence grew, he became more brazen. Finally, we'll look at how the ultimate thief turned good, and ended up with his own security company.

## A Tale of Two Parents

Abagnale Jr. was born in Bronxville, New York, in 1948. His parents were well-to-do, and he lived a comfortable childhood. After a relatively normal childhood, his adolescence wasn't easy for him.

His parents had a complicated relationship, as well as differing parenting styles. Whereas his mother was a disciplinarian, his father had more of a *laissez-faire*

attitude. His father also spoiled him. Before the age of 16, Frank Abagnale Jr. was given a car by his father. The Ford was a hit with the local girls, and Abagnale developed a taste for chasing women.

However, Abagnale believed that in order to be attractive to women, he needed to be able to impress them. And in his mind, this meant having money. He tried to acquire cash by working typical teenage jobs, but he soon realized that what he was aspiring to, needed a lot more than what part-time work could give him. So the next step was getting a credit card from his father.

Things started to go pear-shaped when he developed his first scheme, on the back of having a credit card. Abagnale fleeced people for mechanical work that was never completed, and car parts that were never received. He racked up debt, and his first con was discovered. Despite all of his indiscretions, his father forgave him, but his mother had a fit and sent him to a very strict boarding school.

Boarding school was tough for him, not because of the rules and regulations, but because he could no longer impress girls.

## **The Allure of a Lifestyle**

When asked, 'What drives you,' how do you respond? For many people, obtaining a particular lifestyle and quality of life is a significant influence.

Abagnale's experience of life at boarding school wasn't the lifestyle that he had in mind. Abagnale always saw himself as a bit of a Casanova and a playboy. An all-boys boarding school was hardly the place where he could fine-tune his skills.

Then when he returned home and learned that his parents had split up, and lost a lot of their former fortune, he was devastated and left home to try and make it on his own. At age 16, he was alone, but he had a maturity beyond his years. He moved to New York and added ten years to his age. What followed was a spree of check forgery. Throughout his life, he was to cash 2.5 million dollars worth of phony checks.

## His Pilot Study

According to Dave from the HBO comedy series *Flight of the Conchords*, women love three things: 'Men in kilts, Southern Comfort, and Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game."' However, popular folklore says that women love men in uniform.

Taking the lead out of the book of popular folklore, Frank Abagnale Jr. decided to masquerade as a Pan Am pilot. First, he observed pilots and flight attendants to get a sense of the workplace culture, he then faked a pilot's license, and finally, he sweet-talked his way into a uniform warehouse to get a custom-made uniform. His transformation was thus complete.

With his newfound ticket to anywhere, he became a deadhead, which allowed him to travel throughout America. Being a deadhead enables you to gain free passage under the guise of reporting for duty at that destination. You may be dubious about the fact that a teenager could

hoodwink the airline industry and fly indiscriminately throughout the country, but airport security was very different in those days. Where Abagnale was careful was that he didn't try and fly any of the planes, but instead boarded the aircraft as a deadhead.

The other benefit of being a Pan Am pilot was that he got to stay at numerous hotels and run up an account that would be sent through to the airline.

## **Doctoring His Degree**

When Abagnale moved to River Bend, he put "doctor" in the box marked for employment on his rental application form. Coincidentally, his neighbor at his new apartment was a doctor. So again, he used his power of observation and conversational techniques to befriend his neighbor and pick up a few tricks of the trade.

After this, he forged documents and claimed to be on medical leave. Despite being unethical, Frank Abagnale did have some sense of moral duty, and didn't want to put lives at risk by treating patients. However, he did accept a job as a shift supervisor and had a host of interns that he was in charge of. In his spare time, Abagnale worked on his persona and learned medical jargon so that he could be even more convincing. Eventually, he bowed out of his medical career before anything too disastrous happened.

## **Law and Disorder**

Perhaps one of the most remarkable achievements of Frank Abagnale Jr. was when he actually passed the Louisiana bar exam. Then after faking a

degree from Harvard, he landed up in the Louisiana State General Attorney's office.

The game was eventually up when a colleague who actually attended Harvard smelled a rat. Abagnale decided that the curtain should close on his fake legal career.

You may also be wondering how he got away with all of this forgery and deception? The FBI had an interest in Frank Abagnale because of his bounced checks. However, he was tricky to pin down because he was clever with how he chose the routing numbers on his checks. The numbers he chose meant that the checks would take the maximum amount of time to bounce. However, when Sean O'Riley was assigned the case, he made it his mission to capture Abagnale.

There were a series of close calls where Abagnale just evaded capture. Finally, after running from the law in the States, he opted for a change of scenery and forged a passport to get him to France. It was there that Abagnale's life of crime came to a comparatively lackluster end. He was arrested in a grocery store. After being a pilot, a Harvard graduate, a lawyer, a professor, and a doctor, he finally was arrested while doing something as mundane as grocery shopping.

## **Behind Bars**

Frank Abagnale Jr. spent six months at Perpignan. And while this may seem like a relatively short stint, the conditions were dreadful. After that, he was transferred to Sweden, which was comparatively luxurious.

After the threat of numerous prison sentences across a range of

countries, he was extradited back to America. Abagnale knew that when he disembarked the plane, he would be met by O'Riley, so he allegedly escaped the aircraft through the toilet. Eventually, when he was locked up again, he escaped once more, helped by an ex-girlfriend.

## **The Game's Up**

The fear of recapture is powerful, and often criminals get tired of running. At the Canadian border, Frank Abagnale Jr. was finally captured. He spent some time in prison and then decided to opt for good honest work after a long life of crime.

After a difficult start at finding work, Abagnale went back to what he knew best and became a security consultant with expertise in forgery and detection. Abagnale and Associates is based in Tulsa and it provides advice on fraud. He also lectures FBI agents on identity theft and cybercrime.

## **In Conclusion**

*Catch Me If You Can*, is a fascinating case study on confidence tricksters and emotional intelligence. You can't be a top-class con artist if you're not highly observant or an excellent listener. As Abagnale says, 'Observation is a skill that can be developed, but I was born blessed (or cursed) with the ability to pick up on details and items the average man overlooks.' The art of the con is the ability to analyze fine details and remember them. Hence, having a good memory and keeping up with the hustle is one of the most challenging aspects of succeeding.

Frank Abagnale Jr. succeeded because he was highly confident, very

shrewd, creative, and brazen. Lying isn't easy to sustain, and it's a lot easier to remember truths than to remember lies. When it comes down to it, the devil really is in the details. However, as with most criminals, the chances of getting caught are highly likely, because the ego is powerful, and at some point, the con artist will take it a step too far in a bid to outwit those chasing them.

Although there's widespread speculation about the legitimacy of Abagnale's story, the book does assert that it's based on a true story. Moreover, O'Riley is based on Joseph Shea, who remained a great friend of Abagnale's. In the end, it wouldn't be beyond the realms of possibility that some of the book's claims had tricked us; after all, 'A con artist's only weapon is his brain.'