Flags of Convenience: A Novel
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Chapter One

When Henrik McFagan stepped from the curb and was struck by the taxi, he dropped dead in a sudden, bloody heap.

The cab was making a right against the light—which is allowed in California—and the fat man was caught completely off guard. I saw the accident from my window seat at Torrefazione Italia, a coffee shop on the corner of Montgomery and Bush. Fat people are said to be graceful dancers, but McFagan's brief effort to avoid annihilation was feeble. A skip and a leap was all he could summon in his comic act of capitulation.

August is a month that brings San Francisco a fair share of heavy morning mist. The streets were slick that day, but the driver could have avoided the collision by braking sooner or by swerving left. That's what I would have told the police investigators, anyway, had I remained as a witness.

Cops swarmed the scene within minutes, but I managed to slip out the door before they began taking names. The driver was collared immediately, of course, although he seemed to be pleading his innocence from the moment he was pulled from the car. Giving the scene one final glance, I saw three paramedics loading Henrik onto a gurney and hoisting him up into the ambulance. Caravaggio's deposition it was not. Imagine Popeye, Olive Oyl, and Wimpy staggering beneath the battered remains of Bluto, and you get the picture.

When I got back to the gallery, Dad was with two prospective buyers.

"It's one of Bud Bonnetti's most powerful images," he said. "As you know, he was a contemporary of David Parks and is believed to have even influenced some of his palette choices."

Dad gave me the high sign, sweeping his right forefinger across the bridge of his nose, and I was soon joining him in the dialogue.

"Oh, you must be the Fossgates," I said. "I understand you're building a collection for your lakefront home. This will be an excellent start. Dad's quite right in steering you toward it."

"If the price is right," said the man, "we can work together."

"Will its value hold?" asked the woman. "We may want to turn it over in a few years."

Dad did not wince at this, although that was his usual response. He instead explained our gallery's policy of dealing in appreciating art only and supporting patrons when and if they decided to resell.

"It's a difficult market out there, I know," he said. "And that's why we confine ourselves to blue-chip artists. Bonnetti will be regarded as a major star in a few years."

The number of questions like this was increasing of late. Back in the '90s, buyers were more concerned with how paintings would match their furniture. Back then, we had had a hard time keeping inventory levels, and Dad had been talking about opening the

loft or leasing more space next door on Stockton Street. The flight of dot-com money had changed all that, of course. In 2001, as stock portfolios evaporated, we were struggling to break even and avoid the disasters afflicting so many of our former rivals who were now in bankruptcy court.

"That painting in your hands will certainly outperform any high-tech shares you may be shepherding," said Dad. "I would suggest you buy what you love and what will give you lasting satisfaction. Telecom and biomed may have been attractive options once, but what do they provide now? At the very least, if this recession deepens, you'll still have a beautiful work of art."

This observation tended to either close the deal or else it gave the prospective buyers reason to quickly leave "to think about it." When they left to think about it, invariably, they never returned. Rather than see which reaction would prevail, I excused myself and went upstairs.

Because our plans for the loft were in limbo, I made it my home last year. I have an economy kitchen and room enough for my baby grand. We bartered with a local decorator to make over the room last spring, and it was featured in several tony design magazines this summer.

Bryan & Son has the perfect live/work space for an aspiring young dealer, gushed one writer. *With father, Guy, as his mentor, son Eugene opted for a muted, understated look, reflective of the gallery's California Figurative Art collection.*

This particular shelter mag made special mention of the bare walls and high-gloss hardwood floors. Its photographer concentrated on shooting in the afternoon, when the fading light brought out the more resonant color tones of the main room's Tuscan wash and the bath's rose finish. I insisted that he also place an image of my double-barreled Beretta shotgun propped up near the door. This was done to impart a suitably masculine tone and stem the speculation that I was anything but aggressively heterosexual.

> *At age thirty, Mr. Bryan remains single and torn between his loves for fine art and music. Jazz critics maintain that he has considerable promise as a pianist, but his commitment to the gallery keeps him from pursuing an alternate career.*

This was utter nonsense, as I was certainly no more than an adequate piano player, and I was completely disinterested in taking over my father's business. I, in fact, had no career whatsoever and rather liked it that way.

Like Dad, my sole pursuit in life was pleasure—or at least some measure of comfort. Since losing Mom fifteen years ago, both of us had silently resolved to simply stay the course and enjoy what was left of our domestic order. Most interviewers knew better than to ask about my mother or the circumstances of her fiery car crash on the Bay Bridge. She had been drunk. She had been hysterical. She was dead. End of story.

We didn't own the gallery, anyway. It was leased and becoming more of a burden all the time. Dad had been a collector once, but he had liquidated most of the collection to pay off Mother's debts and to keep us from the brink of insolvency. Now, he would often declare "if I can't eat it, drink it, wear it, or screw it, I'm just not interested."

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I showered and dressed in my performance uniform: black suit, white shirt, and gray regimental tie. After running through some scales and favorite Bach etudes, I went to the fake book and rehearsed the heads of tunes I'd play that night. These were thirty-

minute sets and not very demanding, but I wanted to be prepared for requests, and I never knew if someone would want to sit in for a number or two.

The Wednesday night crowd at Moose's was generally well behaved, and, if there was any sign of trouble, the proprietor was quick to end it. I'd been holding this gig for the past year and played at Washington Square Bar & Grill on Thursdays. The good musicians owned Friday and Saturday, and the likelihood of breaking into that lineup was between nil and none. My repertoire consisted of West Coast jazz standards made familiar, if not famous, by George Shearing, Vince Guaraldi, and Dodo Marmarosa. If diners didn't recognize the theme, they may ask for something by Monk or Bud Powell, and I would put something together to satisfy them.

My departing ritual was to turn on the phone answering machine to determine which calls were worth returning. I never touched the instrument when it was ringing, even when I could safely screen the contact. The first was from Marilyn, one of the gallery's weekday interns.

"I really enjoyed our afternoon together … and hope we can do it again this Friday. You're the best, Eugene. Call me."

The next message was from one of Dad's creditors who had hoped that I might have some control or influence over Dad's financial obligations.

The third and final voice was that of my boyhood pal, Tommy McAllister.

"Eugene. Are you there? If you are, pick up. It's me, Tom. I've some rather upsetting news. It might provide an opportunity for you, though … so get back to me on this. It's urgent."

It could wait. But I'd give him a ring in the morning. I only spoke to Tommy now and then, and it would be good to reconnect. Marilyn was another matter. If I were to see her again after hours, she might make too big a production over our relationship. This required action, evasive or otherwise.

Dad was still downstairs, sitting at his desk. At fifty-three, he still looked fairly youthful, although, tonight, his face was drawn and he was clearly worried.

"Aren't you going out with Gretta?" I asked. "It's getting late."

"She's waiting for me back at the apartment. I've got to work with our accountant. His rate is a lot lower in the early evening."

"Did we make the Bonnetti sale?"

"Yes, after a fashion. I let them talk me down 10 percent and had to promise to resell the painting if they changed their minds within twelve months. They called it a 'win-win.' Nothing, son, is a win-win."

"Thrift is an overrated virtue, Dad. As is fidelity. I miss the Clinton/Lewinsky years."

Not that Dad or I had any interest at all in politics or current events. We both liked the former president because of his humor and reckless style. And if you were going to express any support for a political figure in this town, it might as well be for a Democrat. We never permitted a fund-raiser to be held here, though. And Dad despised merchants who displayed campaign posters in their windows.

Because he was tall and slender and had kept his dark hair, some members of the downtown dealers association thought he may like to serve on their Board or play some other leadership role. He looked presidential, in a Gregory Peck sort of way, and they reasoned that he may warm to the part.

Dad, though, would have none of it, even if it provided some commercial advantage along the way. "The Bryans are not joiners," he would say. "Our clan may have some virtues, but taking charge of others is not one of them."

Sure, he had joined the Presidio Golf Club after Mother died, but that was for fellowship on the weekends. He held together a regular foursome, and it provided him with the only physical exercise he would ever bother with.

Howard Lim, CPA, was at the door. I let him in as I was leaving and asked Dad if he needed anything else.

"No, son, you have a good night. I'll need you to compose some letters for me in the morning, and we have our fall catalogs to proof. Be careful, now."

This was not idle advice. One had reason to be on guard at dusk. Fewer suburbanites were coming to the City after the Crash, and the number of local homeless was increasing. As more business fronts became vacant, their doorways would fill with cardboard barricades and shopping carts. The Gap-clad revelers from South of Market were long gone, and I was even becoming nostalgic for the obnoxious tribes of New Economy marketeers who roamed North Beach after hours.

I usually walked up Grant through Chinatown, which was still fairly lively. Tourists kept this district going, although the class of visitor now was decidedly value-minded. You'd see them picking through bins, hunting for bargains, or negotiating a lower price for some useless artifact, which would reappear at next season's garage sale. The wind was kicking up, and I saw a number of these outsiders huddled together to keep warm. What guidebook, I often wondered, ever suggested that they wear shorts here in the summertime? Next month would bring our best weather, and it would stay reasonably pleasant through October. Visitors from overseas were better informed but equally innocent to the ways of these local merchants. They'd haggle, too, thinking they'd bested the best.

But most shopkeepers had been there for generations, and the sons and daughters who were now in charge had MBAs. Combine street smarts with that kind of education, and the buyer does not have a prayer.

The gig went fine. A lot of uniformed airline attendants sat near my piano for a good part of the evening. Lovely things. I took a cab back to my place just before three. City-Lights Taxi—the same company owning the car that had killed McFagan.