

Chapter 1
Greetings from Atlas City!

“The emptiness is endless, cold as the clay
You can always come back,
But you can’t come back all the way.”

Mississippi
~ Bob Dylan

I thought I had it all figured out. The next sixty or seventy years with Gracie Gold by my side, sitting atop of the world. We would raise our extraordinary children, become pillars of our community, and run successful businesses. Live our lives without a care or a worry.

I hadn’t yet finished with compulsory education, but I was already a multimillionaire, the owner of several thriving businesses, a made man in the Jewish mafia, and a fearsome psychic assassin. As they used to say, the world was my oyster.

Then a trio of mindless backwoods fucks changed all that. How, you ask? They killed Gracie. That’s how. I killed them right back. It was the least I could do.

“But they were just teenaged boys goofing around.”

“They meant no harm.”

“There goes the State Championship.”

“Boys will be boys and all that,” apologized the goodly folk of Atlas City.

I might have gone a bit overboard with the dispositions. Last October, the tiny village of Atlas City, New Jersey, lost many of its notorious citizens, courtesy of yours truly, Julius Truman Briscoe, with an assist from the *Psychic Brotherhood of Greater Philadelphia* and O’HANLON MOVING AND STORAGE.

The job was finally done. Jeremiah ‘Dead Eye’ Dickinson was dead and gone, entombed in five hundred pounds of concrete on a plinth guarding the north entrance to the Atlas City Parkway bridge. It was time to move on.

Marva Mitchell’s Pinelands Hideaway was a fifty-unit roadside motel on Route 30 just south of Hammonton. The Golds and I had been staying there for three weeks. I was using the name Richard Philbrick. The Golds were registered as the Silberbergs: Myron, Jacob, and Hiram. It had been our base of operations during our campaign against the many wretched souls of Atlas City. The Golds left for home last week. Their surveillance skills were no longer required. The rest of the dirty work was up to me.

I spent the next two days, using about a million of those tiny shampoo bottles and all the hot water the motel had, and I still couldn’t get all of that concrete gunk out of my hair. I had no choice but to shave it off and start over. I hopped into the pickup and drove to a nearby K-Mart Shopping Plaza where one of the satellite businesses was a franchised barber shop.

My stylist did a good job. I was now as bald as Mr. Clean or Otto Preminger. I couldn't help but wonder what Gracie would think of my new look. The thought made me sad. Or, well, as sad as I get. I wasn't very emotional before I turned psychic. I'm far less so now.

The next morning, I drove to downtown Camden. I parked the truck in a lot across from the bus station, left the keys under the sun visor, and walked over to the Trailways depot. I bought a ticket for the next bus to Philly. There were 45 minutes to kill, so I went into a nearby Army-Navy store and bought a Waverley blue knit cap, new boots, and a pair of mirrored sunglasses. Back in the bus station, I picked up copies of the *CAMDEN COURIER POST* and the *PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS*.

I was among the first to board and took an aisle seat on the starboard side, three rows from the front of the bus. I leafed through the newspapers as I screened the incoming status buttons. Weary, anxious, eager, thoughtful, and aggressively stupid Normals on their way to Philadelphia and all points west.

"You're in my seat, dipshit," growled the bully with a Brando attitude. He slapped the back of my head and knocked my watch cap askew, revealing my trend-setting new look. A move guaranteed to intimidate most Normals. In case you haven't been paying attention, I am not a Normal.

My antagonist wore a black leather duster, scuffed work boots, and a gold earring. He had a gold-capped tooth and an unfiltered cigarette dangling from his lips. Before I could hit him with a mild dose of *FEAR & LOATHING*®, he shouted, "Hey, you mother fucking pick-pocket, that's my watch. Give it over. Right now. Punk."

Considering my position on Normals in general, you'd think that Normals with bad manners giving me shit on public transportation would have short life expectancies. You'd be right.

I stood up. The guy was huge. Jeremiah Dickinson, huge. Maybe not as tall, but filled out. Heavily muscled with a chip on his shoulder the size of the transistor radio in my shirt pocket. He probably was armed. He was menacing. Usually, he'd be dead already. But there were too many witnesses witnessing this confrontation for anything noteworthy to happen to that goon. So, instead, I put the bully into time-limited *ZOMBIE MODE*® and told him to sit quietly in the back of the bus. He'd revert to his normal Neanderthal self in about half an hour.

I got off the bus at the Reading Terminal Market, grateful to leave New Jersey behind me, and went inside to get a bite to eat. Norman the Neanderthal followed me in. I let him off easy before. I'd hoped he'd learned his lesson. It seemed that he hadn't. Who should we blame? The student? Or the teacher?

I made my way into one of our competitors, *SHANGHAI SAL'S*, and took a table in the back near the restrooms and pay phones. Thanks to my ingenious disguise, Shanghai Sal herself didn't recognize me. I studied the menu. It was one of those laminated deals that had color photographs of each dish. The photos were contrasty and over-saturated. I fucking hate those.

"I want that Rolex. Let me have it. Now you dumb-ass mother fucker."

Norman the Neanderthal stood opposite me, a snub-nosed revolver in his right hand and a shiny stiletto in his left.

Blame muscle memory. It's instantaneous. An unconditional response.

"Julius, there is a threat," says the inner voice in charge of self-survival. "There's a gun pointed right at you. Eliminate the threat."

There was no opportunity for an internal debate. No time to reason things out. Happens faster than you'd think possible. Zap. Tall, dumb asshole from Jersey fell down dead. He landed on an adjacent table. His death fart was loud and stinky, souring everyone's afternoon. I got out of there as quickly as I could. I didn't want to talk to the police. Didn't want to show them ID. All I had on me was Richard Philbrick's, and I didn't want that name in any investigator's report ever.

I went into ETHEL'S BAGELS and bought an assorted baker's dozen, cream cheese, and a rum babka. At the florist, I purchased flowers for Mom, Aunt Connie, Nettie, Dahlia, and for Ellie and Grace Gold's graves.

I flagged down a cab on Market Street and told the driver to take me to the **O**, Eighteenth, and Spruce. Years ago, Nettie Gold taught me the value of the cat nap. "Rest is a weapon, Julius. Take the time to recharge your batteries whenever you can." I rode in the back of the cab with my eyes shut, my feet flat on the floor straddling the transmission hump, hands resting on my knees. Five minutes of this was better than a two-hour nap.

"Youse alright back there, bub?" Growled the cabby. "I don't need no hippie puke like youse to go overdosing in my cab."

I was in no mood. "Do yourself a favor, pal, and shut the fuck up."

He slammed on the brakes, shut the meter off, and told me to get the fuck out of his fucking cab right fucking now, this very minute, or he was going to beat the living crap out of me. As if he could.

Post-Gracie, there was no way I was going to take shit from Normals ever again. I told him to SHUT THE FUCK UP®, turn the meter back on, and drive me to Spruce and Eighteenth. Don't leave home without it.

We arrived at the **O** without any more controversy. I paid the meter and told the ignoramus he had to pick up a fare in King of Prussia. Best hurry. Off he sped. If you think about it, that motormouth got off easy. But why bother thinking about it at all?

The eternally smokin' hot Margot St.James rushed from behind the counter and gave me a hug-of-all-hugs. The very same hug-of-all-hugs that launched the chain of events that led to the death of my cousin Victor.

"Julius, I am so so sorry about Gracie. She was the sweetest, the warmest, the nicest person I've ever known. How are you holding up, sweetie? Doing okay?"

I told her I was hanging in there, that time heals all wounds, and that I was going to need lots of time.

“Where’s Uncle T?”

“He’s downstairs. Sweetie, if you need someone to talk to, I’m always here for you.”

“Thanks. I gotta go. Great seeing you again, Margot.”

Uncle Teddy’s office door was wide open. He was lounging back in his chair, stocking feet on his desk; he had the telephone wedged to his left ear. Uncle T was wearing mismatched argyle socks. He looked up at me and grinned. “Listen, Fred, I’m gonna have to call you back.” He didn’t wait for a response and dropped the handset onto the base.

I got off the first shot, “Nice socks. I used to have a pair just like them.”

Argyle socks—black and white, just like Dad’s—are the Briscoe signature fashion statement. He stood up, and we gangsta-hugged.

“Nice haircut.”

“Get with the times, Uncle T. All us cool kids are sporting the skinhead look these days.”

“Julius, where the fuck have you been? What have you been up to?”

“You don’t want to know, Uncle T. You really don’t. It sure is good to see you. How’s Mom and Aunt Connie?”

“We’re all good, Julius. We’ve been worried sick about you. You coulda called!”

“Couldn’t risk it. What’s been going on here?”

“Well, let’s see. Dr. Fields reached out a couple of times. He had another big job lined up. It had Willie Novichok written all over it.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I had no idea where you were. If you were alive or dead. So I told him, you’re gonna love this one, Jules, that you took your Longstride money and bought a vineyard in the Napa Valley and were no longer looking for wet work.” I laughed. Who wouldn’t?

“So Fields counters that the job happens to be somewhere in California, exactly where he didn’t say. But that it was another big payday. This was right after we buried Grace. I told Fields that William Novichok had recently suffered a life-changing event and wasn’t taking any assignments, and that Fields should find another assassin.”

“Did Miles clue you in on my vineyard excuse? Or did you come up with it all on your own?”

“I cannot tell a lie, Julius; yes, he did. You and the Golds all went missing right after the funeral. When Miles showed up last week without you, I had questions. He told me you had decided not to do any more jobs for Morgan Fields. Is that true?”

“It was. But that was before Gracie was murdered. I’ll tell you this much, Uncle T, I’ve gotten real good at killing and crippling people—namely, those who were responsible, in one way or another, for Grace Gold’s death. Now I’m thinking that maybe I want to get paid for killing Normals. It’s so easy.”

“If someone wants someone dead, someone is going to make it happen. Right? That someone might as well be me. But I’m still on the fence. I told Miles I was done with Fields. Not necessarily done with contract work. Have you figured out how Fields finds his clients?”

“Not yet, no. But I’ll dig deeper if you’d like.”

“Please do, Uncle T. I’ve got to get going, many apologies to make and lectures to endure. Dig?”

“Hey Julius, almost forgot, I’ve got some good news to share. Leonard called to tell your mother he had been named an equity partner in his fancy-ass Chicago law firm. He needs to sell his share of BIG CORNERS to pay for his buy-in. Fucking lawyers, right?

Due to policies that remain unwritten, my brother and I inherited William Briscoe’s shares of BIG CORNERS INC. My mother had to sign a pre-nup relinquishing any claim on the business. According to Izzy Blafken, the *undzer shtick*’s chief accountant, the impetus for this blatant act of misogyny was Sam Briscoe’s second wife. Olga Briscoe embezzled a quarter of a million bucks from the business and ran off to Toledo with Larry Robards, a traveling accordion salesman from St. Louis.

Chico needed me to buy his half of our inheritance for the low, low introductory price of five hundred thousand dollars. Which, at that time, I happened to have on hand in my safety deposit box.

So my absentee older brother Leonard was recently named an equity partner in the law firm about to be known as FLEMING, KIRKLAND, PORTER AND BRISCOE (FKP&B.) That’s a big deal. Right? You betcha. There was going to be a ceremony at the annual pre-Thanksgiving dinner. We’re all invited.

Whoopee kai a! I was finally going to ride in a big ol’ jet airliner.

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Chapter 2 chicago bound

“You know you’ve got to go through hell
before you get to heaven.”

Jet Airliner
~ Paul Pena

We four Briscoes were among the last to board Flight #505 on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. We were in first class, row 3, seats A, B, C, and D.

Mother and Aunt Connie took seats A & B to continue their evaluation of their favorite radio soap operas without any further interruptions. Uncle T insisted on taking the window seat, which was fine with me. He slid the Zero Halliburton case with my half a million under the seat ahead of him. He fastened his seatbelt without being instructed, pulled the window shade down, reclined his seat, and said, “Wake me when we get to the bridge.”

I sensed a smidge of claustrophobia on every Status Button on board. There were more than one hundred loud, contagious, malodorous, insufferable Normals crammed into this one-hundred-fifty-foot-long tube. I had more than one hundred Status Buttons to keep track of. Any one of them a potential threat. Flight #505 had four. Potential Genuine threats, that is.

Century after century, every society known to man has benefited from and been plagued by various subcultures. Their methods and styles would vary over the millennia, but their role in society would not. Take armed robbery, for instance. Highwaymen, plunderers, pirates, marauders, bandits, and brigands were all predecessors of the skyjacker, the worst of the lot.

According to the wire services, skyjackers were currently trending at number three with a bullet on their top ten most hated lists. Four such daring villains were just minutes away from commandeering United Airlines flight #505—Philadelphia to Chicago non-stop. Men, women, and children headed home for the holiday—one hundred fifty-three passengers and crew.

Once our plane was off the ground and cruising at altitude, the passengers’ Status Buttons gradually morphed into similar patterns and colors like they do with movie audiences. There are enough powerful constants in the air travel experience to turn most passengers’ Status Buttons similarly placid. There were more model citizens on board that afternoon than there were rebellious Marxist hijackers. But then again, it only takes a few.

I poked Uncle T in the ribs. He opened his eyes and scowled. “Already?”

“No,” I whispered. “There’s going to be trouble—four assholes in the cheap seats. I can’t tell if they’re armed. But I can tell that they intend to act out. I should probably kill them before they get up and start making demands. But what if I’m wrong about their intentions? What if they’re just fearful flyers like me? What do you think, Uncle T?”

“Can’t you just paralyze them like you did to those *Submariners*?”

“Not until they are standing in the aisle. I’d explain why, but it takes too long.”

“Well, then, you don’t seem to have much of a choice. We’re going to have to wait and see. Let’s hope you’re wrong. Julius, it’s okay to be jumpy your first time in an airplane.”

As if on cue, four skyjackers sprang from their seats and took positions in the first-class and coach cabins. The two we could see were nattily dressed in olive drab fatigues. Black and white striped undershirts. Faces painted white. They both were sporting Ruger semi-automatics. They wore those M1951 Field Caps that complemented the leader’s Fidel Castro-style beard and the female’s true believer vibe.

The leader stormed the cockpit. His partner, whom I’ve come to think of as ‘Teri the Terrorist,’ stood guard while mimicking the standard instructions given by stewardesses everywhere. She was about to demonstrate the use of the oxygen masks when a breathy voice came on the public address system: male, early twenties, New England accent.

“Good afternoon, my dear, dear fellow travelers. I am about to announce a minor revision of our flight plan. While I’m giving you this exciting news, my associates will pay each of you a visit. You are to give them your cash and your valuables. If you resist, you will be shot. My associates are armed with twenty-two-caliber pistols. A shot to your head with a twenty-two will kill you without the risk of putting a hole in the aircraft. So be cool.”

“And oh, by the way, I sure hope you packed your swimwear. Our next stop is the fabulous Havana, Cuba, where the temperature just now is eighty-eight degrees. On behalf of the staff and management of *TRIA, Tabula Rasa Interworldwide Airlines*, we thank you so very much for your patronage. We realize that there are many airlines for you to choose from. Thanks for choosing *TRIA*. Now, start handing over that cash and those jewels. You won’t believe what a decent hotel room goes for in Havana these days. Have a nice fucking day!”

I asked Uncle T to remove his loafers and conceal the Zero Halliburton case behind them. I slipped my watch off and dropped it into my boot. When Teri the Terrorist reached row three, I was ready for her. I hit her with a TRUTH® bomb. Not only did she not scrutinize us, Teri the Terrorist wrote her name, phone number, home address, and the names of her favorite rock and roll stars on the palm of her left hand and showed it to me.

The visionary in charge of this squad of Marxist assholes called himself *Aristotle Lindberg*. Teri the Terrorist didn’t know the man’s real name but described him as a ‘dickless shithead.’

Sure, I could kill them or paralyze them or cause them to feel enormous shame and writhe in a swamp of self-loathing. But too many were on board to witness and remain silent about such

strangeness. Yes, I could cause *Aristotle Lindberg* to change his mind and reroute us to the closest airport where he and his followers would turn themselves into the nearest FBI or gate agent. The only fly in that ointment was that I would have to instruct *Aristotle Lindberg* verbally. In that crowded environment, it was not possible without being overheard. I'd never tried anything like that and worried about unanticipated variables. My main focus was on keeping my family and my money safe from those armed thugs. So I reclined my seat, closed my eyes, and kept tabs on the skyjackers and everyone else on board.

Like most big cities, Chicago, that toddling town, holds a Thanksgiving Day Parade that cannot be beat. This year's theme is '*The 50 States.*' Each one of these United States was invited to send and did send representatives to march down State Street, that great street, bright and early come Thursday morning. Pennsylvania dispatched the award-winning Mummers Club, *The South Street Strutters String Band*. All fifty of them were seated in coach. Although they perform boisterously in garish attire, Mummers are regular Normal folks just like you and yours. They have families, mortgages, Pontiacs, fishing boats, and real jobs. About half of the South Street Strutters String Band were active-duty law enforcement. All of whom were armed. Their Status Buttons were lit up. Alerted. Shades of aggression and caution. I sat up and whispered to Uncle T, "There's a bunch of cops back there. Twenty or thirty of them. They are pissed, and they are itching for a fight. You strapping?"

"I am. My Beretta and that little pea shooter I took off of Connie."

"Be ready. But don't shoot anybody." I shut my eyes again. It's easier to observe Status Button interactions that way.

Most people don't carry too much cash, so when they're facing a gun, they'll give it up. Same with most jewelry, but not all. Things with sentimental value, a family heirloom for instance, are worth risking a bullet for.

I don't know who it was, but one of the aft cabin skyjackers tried to take someone's something of great personal value and died in the attempt. In fewer than ten seconds, the rhythm section of the South Street Strutters String Band had subdued the *Tabula Rasas* working the aft cabin.

A silenced .22 fired into the sternum of a delusional idealist skyjacker isn't much louder than the steady thrum of the four jet engines propelling us on our merry way. The sound didn't attract the attention of the two terrorizing the first-class travelers. Aft cabin terrorist #2 surrendered without much of a fuss. The mummer/cops huddled up, presumably to discuss what to do about the two terrorists in the front of the plane. I paralyzed *Aristotle Lindberg* and *Teri the Terrorist* and walked towards the aft cabin.

The leader of this band of policemen/percussionists was Delaware County's very own Sheriff, Max Hermann. When I went through the curtain between the cabins, Sheriff Hermann's reflexes told him to 'shoot first, ask questions after.' I anticipated this response and dosed him with PECKINPAH®, which causes people to move very slowly.

"Don't shoot. I'm here to help."

I unfroze the first-class terrorists as soon as Sheriff Hermann and his posse had surrounded them. Considering the situation, Flight #505 was given green lights all the way to Chicago—a squadron of fighter jets our escort. With the air corridors cleared, Flight #505 touched down on runway 9A West at Chicago O’Hare, twenty minutes ahead of schedule. Everyone safe and sound except one Ashton Livermore III, the fool who tried to take Sheriff Hermann’s hand-me-down Bulova. The major downside? I wouldn’t have an opportunity to question the three remaining skyjackers privately.

Before we were allowed to deplane, guys wearing those nerdy FBI windbreakers swarmed into the cabin, trying to look all rugged and daring. Leading the charge was good old Jasper Sexton, the recently promoted Deputy Co-Special Agent in Charge of the Chicago Field Office. They ushered us into an empty hangar large enough to hold a pair of Boeing 707s with room to spare. A dozen folding tables were set up under the skylight in the center of the hangar. The feds had fashioned an assembly line of sorts for the debriefing of the witnesses and inspection of our carry-on items and our checked luggage. They lined us up in reverse order of our seat numbers. The folks in the way back of the plane would be processed first. They hadn’t witnessed much from their vantage. Their statements were vague and brief.

“Special Agent Sexton, why am I not surprised to see you here?”

“Don’t be such a wise-ass, Briscoe; this here is serious shit.” Just my luck, they put us in Sexton’s line. He asked me a bunch of questions about the Flight 505 situation. I gave the same answers, practically word-for-word, as had my fellow passengers and the crew. I sensed he was about to get chummy and ask about Gracie and Emma. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever. I disabused Sexton of the notion.

“Briscoe, Special Agent Coleman here is going to pat you down now. It’s procedure.”

“Fuck your bullshit procedure, agent. You need a warrant, and no judge in my town will give you one.” That’s my older and only brother, Leonard, to the rescue. He had bluffed, blustered, and bribed his way into the hangar. He was worried about me and his half a million in cash. It wouldn’t be convenient to have the FBI rummaging through our belongings. They didn’t.

Lenny put an end to this pissing contest by whipping out his updated business card that read:

Fleming, Kirkland, Porter & Briscoe
Attorneys at Law
Leonard C. Briscoe, Partner

There was an address on Wacker Drive, telephone and fax numbers elegantly printed on premium stock. It affected Special Agent Sexton like kryptonite affects Superman. He didn't go all weak at the knees or anything. He apologized to Lenny up and down and instructed a contingent of junior agents to help with our luggage. We had a lot of luggage. Uncle Teddy and Aunt Connie were flying off to Paris on Monday. Mother was meeting Ida May Lipshultz in Miami for some sun and house hunting. They were planning to move to the Sunshine State following my graduation, when I would take over running the family business. There was a lot of baggage to deal with.

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