

*You've entered a different world from the one you knew.
At home, we planted gardens. Here we only plant the dead.*

Max Bloomberg's journal

CHAPTER ONE

"I trust these ruffians didn't harm you, Herr Bloomberg, and the bindings aren't too tight?"

The tall, well-dressed man projected civility, even benevolence. He was perhaps thirty and handsome in a craggy-faced, broad-shouldered, athletic sort of way. Unlike the cracked and dirty fingernails of the others, the smiling man's nails were professionally manicured. Speaking in fluent German, he seemed sincerely apologetic that his prisoner, whose arms were securely bound to his leather armchair with clothesline, was being inconvenienced.

Max Bloomberg understood every word, though he hadn't used his native language in decades. If only he could get a grasp on what was happening here. The men must have crept in during the middle of the night and deftly disconnected the security system. They seemed well-armed, although Max understood little concerning firearms—except the ones that had been pointed at him by guards herding him and his fellow Jews into boxcars, herding them off boxcars, herding them through "processing" at the camp.

But that had been eons ago. Max closed his eyes, squeezing them tight to push away the memories. He opened them, blinked a few times, and glanced around. The home invaders had drawn the drapes before turning on the table lamp. Not amateurs, any of them, he supposed. It occurred to Max that the two rough men who accompanied the well-spoken, well-groomed, well-dressed man relished their work. He'd seen too much brutality not to recognize when someone enjoyed delivering pain.

Glancing toward his accomplices, the elegant interloper continued, "I told them not to gag you, but if you cry out, well, as they say in America, all bets will be off." The stranger switched to English with only the faintest hint of a German accent. The man almost sounded Jewish, with a few Yiddish phrases thrown in, though Max considered that was probably an act, an attempt to ingratiate himself.

The intruder still spoke softly, but his almost coal-black eyes bore into Max Bloomberg's own like steel daggers. There was something familiar about the man's manner, something Max couldn't help but recognize. He'd seen eyes such as these before—the color was of no importance. He'd heard voices such as this one long ago—the words didn't matter. The words soothed and the lips smiled, while the hands choked the very life from your throat.

But, how could this fellow possibly know Max? Though he'd encountered the type, Max had never seen this particular man before. And this incident couldn't be connected to what had happened so long ago. Not possible.

Since Winston, Max's companion cocker spaniel, had recently died, Max lived alone in this two-story Georgian in River Forest, an affluent western Chicago suburb. Head throbbing, Max found concentration difficult. He'd been having trouble sleeping since finding Winston's small body sprawled lifeless in the backyard. How long ago was it that his beloved Winnie had died?

A week? Two? Max had taken a Seconal only an hour before the rough men, on the German's orders, had dragged him—an old bookseller, not a rich man—out of bed and down to the small den that served as his library. Now they sat or stood among his treasured books, books Max had accumulated throughout his career and cared for like dear friends, though they had little monetary value. Were these devils here just to rob him? Could he be that lucky?

The other two men were each shorter and not nearly as well dressed as the German. They'd held handguns of some kind when they'd stormed into the bedroom, but the weapons were now out of sight. Standing almost like soldiers at attention on either side of Max, they stared at their leader as if awaiting orders.

A hint of a smile once again crossed the tall intruder's face. "Bitter cold and snowing tonight. Mind if we light a fire in your beautiful fireplace? Make the room cozy, yes?"

Max didn't answer.

The heavyset man standing to his left, wearing an old Navy peacoat, said, "Come on, we don't have time for fuckin' around. Let's get on with this shit."

An American with a hint of a Southern accent. Unusual here in Chicago. As he spoke, "Peacoat" played with a roll of quarters, tossing them from one hand to the other, sometimes grasping the roll tightly in his massive right fist.

The German held his left hand up, palm outstretched. "Now, now. Let's be civilized, shall we?" He crossed his arms and nodded. "Perhaps—hmm—perhaps, we can even put the heat to some good use. Very good use. *Verstehen?*"

A pile of dry kindling was stacked in the fireplace.

The man on Max's right, wearing a worn sheepskin bomber jacket, moved to the fireplace and nodded as well. "Yeah, *Ich verstehe*." No southern accent, but not a German speaker, either. "I'll need some newspaper to light the fire.

Or something.”

The leader glanced at Max. “Our good friend won’t mind if we take a few of his old Jew books to use. That’s what they were made for, don’t you think?” Without waiting for a response, he continued, “Remember those good old days when the *Führer* burned all the Jew books, old man?” The tall stranger’s voice deepened, the tone no longer benevolent.

“Sheepskin” snatched several of the oldest books with Hebrew on the covers and ripped them into chunks, tossing the pieces onto the fireplace with the tinder and the wood. Although he couldn’t make out the titles, Max had placed each book in its slot so often he knew exactly the ones chosen. One was a *siddur*, a prayer book considered holy to Orthodox Jews. If such a sacred book accidentally fell to the floor during a religious service, the owner would instantly retrieve it, treating it as gently as one would an injured child, and plant a kiss on the cover. Tears filled Max’s eyes.

Soon, they had a blazing fire. The leader nodded to his henchmen. “Bring him closer. Careful not to mark this beautiful floor.”

With Max still bound securely, Peacoat and Sheepskin dragged the chair across the waxed parquet floor, only stopping when the well-spoken German motioned for them to do so. Now Max was so close to the fireplace his bare feet began to feel uncomfortably warm, although he didn’t yet feel any pain.

The German stared hard into Max’s eyes. “You know what we want. So, tell me where the box is. Hmm? Then, we go. We know all about you. You’ve hidden long enough, old man. Too long.”

Max shook his head. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

His aching head began to clear. He kept the rest of his words inside himself. He wasn’t crazy. Something had been going on around him in recent weeks. My God, after all these years. How? How’d they find him?

Max tried to lift his right arm, but was only able to raise his index finger. Pointing it as best he could. "Get out of my home! Now!"

He felt like screaming for help, but knew no one could possibly hear him. The closest house was perhaps fifty yards away, and the windows would be shut during the freezing weather. His house was modest—one of the least expensive on the block—but it occupied a quarter-acre corner lot, carefully landscaped with Northern Accents rose bushes as well as tall red oaks and American elm trees.

He tried to study the men, so he could describe them to the police, but they had handled him roughly when they'd forced him out of bed, and he had difficulty focusing. His heart was pounding. Did that mean the drugged feeling from the sleeping pill was wearing off, or was he becoming even more frightened?

The German simply stood there, allowing Max's helplessness to sink in. "Oh, you'll tell me whatever I want to know. Perhaps time has caused you to forget the methods we can use on you Jew bastards? You've forgotten the camps?"

Heaven forbid, the camps. That was going back over fifty years. Before these evil men were even born. What could they know about the camps? Only stories they'd read. Max knew—really knew. And, sometimes in the dark, alone at night, his flesh bathed in a cold sweat, he only wished he could forget.

In the next instant, it came to him. His dog, Winston. That was what had happened to his sweet little friend.

"You, you rotten, filthy Nazis. You killed my beautiful little Winnie."

Now, for the first time, Max began to sob. He became even more short of breath as his chest tightened, and he began to wheeze. Prayers came automatically to his mind. *Please, dear God, no time for my emphysema to act*

up. I'm choking.

He tried to take in deeper breaths, but it didn't seem to help. If only he had the inhaler with him. But that was still atop his bedside table.

Ignoring Max's comment and grief, Peacoat lit a Camel, flicking the old-fashioned kitchen match with his thumbnail near his prisoner's face. The sulfur smell caused Max to cough, and the tightness in his chest increased. The room began to spin as his breathing became ever more labored.

"Go in the kitchen," the German said. "Get a dish for those ashes, so you don't leave a mess. No cigarette butts left behind. *Verstehen?*"

The leader had just confirmed what Max already suspected, since the men wore neither masks nor disguises. When they left, there would be no evidence of their crimes. Alive, Max would be evidence.

Resigned to his fate, Max turned his thoughts to his nephew, Bruce. If Bruce were half as smart as Max knew him to be, he'd find what Max had left for him.

Max silently thanked God he'd been suspicious. And that he'd carefully shredded his notes after finishing the detailed review of exactly what had happened to him so long ago. He had never spoken of it, even to his closest friends or family. But when he finished the journal, he'd hidden the document and left a clue for Bruce, should Max's worst fears be somehow realized.

The German put his hands on Max's shoulders and shook him, almost gently. "You haven't answered. Where's our box?"

Shortness of breath made speaking nearly impossible "Why ... why are you here? Take what you want ... leave. I just sell ... a few old books."

Peacoat laughed. "Look who's asking questions now." He turned toward the leader. "Better let this Jew vermin know who's running the show. Before you know it, he'll be ordering us around. And you'll probably click your heels

and say, 'Yes, sir, your honor!' That's what guys like you are trained to do."

The leader ignored Peacoat and tapped his right index finger on Max's head. "Pay attention. I'm running out of patience, and, as you see, my friends here are not as pleasant as I. I must have that box and its contents. Then we'll leave, and you can get on with your miserable life. You mean nothing, the box everything."

At that second, the fire crackled and flared, and Max felt a burning sensation in his feet. He did his best to pull them back. His eyes closed for an instant, and he silently prayed. *Please, dear God, let me be strong. This may be the last favor I ask.*

Max leaned forward as if to whisper something. The German leaned in toward him.

Max spat into his interrogator's face.

The German straightened, snatched a silk handkerchief from his pocket, and without uttering a sound, carefully wiped the sputum from his cheek. At almost the same moment, with the rolled coins clutched in his right fist, Peacoat punched Max on the left side of the head, knocking him and the chair onto the floor. Max let himself go limp. The pain in his head was excruciating, but he didn't cry out.

"Pick him up and cut out that kind of thing!" the tall German shouted. "Leave that to me. You'll kill the old Jew before we get him to tell us what we need to know."

As the two men lifted the chair along with the apparently semiconscious Max, the German carefully removed three fluid-filled syringes from the side pocket of his cashmere topcoat and laid them on a little table. Max began to groan. The German strolled to a nearby armchair, removed his coat, and folded it over the chair back. He dragged the chair close to Max, who was

thinking desperately, trying to dream up some way out of this. Through half-open eyes, Max watched the German sit down and cross his legs.

After a moment, Max slowly opened his eyes and blinked a few times. He shook his head, acting as if he were still trying to clear his mind. His whole body throbbing, he needed a few minutes to figure out if he had any options. From previous experience though, he knew these types wanted people to grovel, to be frightened out of their wits.

Max took a deep breath, sucking in as much air as possible. "Please, don't hit me again," he whispered. "I'll tell you."

"Speak up," the German urged.

"Those papers. Burned 'em. In the woods. Didn't ... didn't make any sense to me. That's the truth." Max looked the interrogator in the eyes without blinking. "They important?"

The German nodded. "Sure. And the silver box? What did you do with that?"

"Box? Oh, the box."

"You know exactly what I mean. You made it. Called yourself a silversmith back then. Where is it?"

Max didn't hesitate. "Melted ... melted it down. Sold the silver."

Peacoat stepped up to Max and waved his clenched fist, the roll of coins still in it. "You're a filthy, fucking liar." He turned toward the leader. "You going to let this piece of shit get away with this nonsense? Look! Let me at him. Leave the room, if you need to. Just give me ten minutes. Probably won't take that long."

"Patience, patience." The German waved his hand. "Now, do me a favor. Take a deep breath and sit down." Then the German whispered just loudly enough for Max to hear, "We do only what we have to in order to get what we need. Yah? After all, we are not animals. So."

Peacoat stared hard at his leader, shook his head, and frowned. "Talk. Talk

and experiment! That's what you're best at. The way you're going at it, we'll be here all fuckin' night. My way will be lots faster. You're too damned smart. And you know what? That makes you too damned soft."

"And you never learn how to follow orders. So, shut up and maybe we'll all learn something besides how strong you are and how brave when your victim is an old man, tied up and helpless, hmm?"

The German picked up one of the syringes. "So. Let us begin."