

Invasion of the Blatnicks

Chapter One

Steve Berman was the kind of nice Jewish boy that parents always wanted their daughters to meet, tall and good-looking, with the brown eyes and strong chin of a young Robert Taylor. He was twenty-five years old and worked on Wall Street, where he had spent most of the last year at a computer terminal, generating endless permutations of financial outcomes. “Such a nice boy,” the ladies in his mother’s mah jong group said, clicking their tongues. One lady always spit over her shoulder to ward off the evil eye after she said anything kind about anyone.

On the day before Steve was scheduled to leave New York to spend the Jewish holidays with his parents in Florida, his boss called him in for a conference. Alan Landesman was in his mid-thirties, a ten-year employee with a medium-sized window office. When Steve walked in, he saw that it was raining outside, knowledge that was denied to him in his windowless cubicle.

“Come in, sit down,” Alan said. “How are things going?”

“I’m almost finished with the Atlanta project.” Steve sat on a leather sofa that sagged toward the back, making him collapse into it as if it were a giant brown marshmallow. As he struggled to sit upright, he said, “I have just a few more scenarios to work out.” Steve knew the only scenario he had not analyzed was the effect of global thermonuclear war on property revenues, but he was hesitant about saying anything was finished until it was absolutely positively due.

“Good, good.” Alan stood up and opened his briefcase on his desk. “Don’t mind me, I’ve got to catch the Metroliner to Washington,” he said. “I’ll just do a little packing while we’re talking.”

Alan walked to the credenza, dodging the sharp edges of a scrap-metal sculpture that looked like it was ready to reach out at any moment and grab a swatch of blue pinstripe. He picked up an orange rubber ball, squeezed it a few times and tossed it in the briefcase, where it landed with a soft thud.

“I’ll get right to the point, Steve,” Alan said. He walked back to the desk and pulled a tangled mess of striped ties from the top drawer. “You just don’t seem happy here.”

Alan dumped the ties into the briefcase. “Your work is fine, but I can tell you don’t have the right fire in your belly to make it to the top. And frankly, with the new crop of recruits ready to jump out of the training program, we’re going to have to let you go.”

A stack of annual reports on the sofa next to Steve teetered dangerously in his direction. He looked back and forth from the pile to Alan, who produced a handful of key rings and pocket calculators shaped like credit cards from another drawer. “I’m sorry it had to work out this way,” Alan said. “I wish you well, though.”

“But why?” Steve finally said. “I didn’t make any major mistakes. I’ve been on time every day, maybe a little late because of the subways, but you can’t fire a person for taking the subway.” He struggled against the sofa but kept losing the battle to remain upright. Two glossy reports slid onto his lap and he pushed them aside.

Alan walked over to Steve, picked up a handful of reports, and took them back to the briefcase. “This isn’t like school, Steve,” he said. “Attendance doesn’t help your grade.” He cast around the room looking for other things to take. “You did a good job here. But we’re not looking for good people. We’re looking for great people.”

Alan took down the presentation easel behind his desk, retracted its legs, then folded it in half. As he put it into the briefcase Steve was tempted to get up and see how everything was able to fit. “People who are willing to plunge into financial analysis, heart and soul,” Alan continued. “Make it their lives.” He waved his arm around his office. “Look at me. This is my life.” Then he looked at his watch. He snapped the lock on the briefcase, picked up his Burberry and his umbrella, and headed for the door. Steve was still stuck to the leather sofa.

“Personnel will talk to you about severance and all the rest of the details,” Alan said. “Good luck.” He stuck out his hand and Steve shook it. Then he walked out the door, and Steve sank back into the accommodating leather. All he could see through the blurred window was the parking garage across the street, its neon arrow pointing out.

It was almost four o’clock when Steve returned to his desk. He looked at his watch, then at his computer, considered for a moment, and then picked up his coat and walked out. The rain had stopped but the air was still misty, and puddles yawned at the street corners, some so large they seemed to have tides.

He took the subway uptown without really thinking about it, getting off at the Times Square stop before he realized he was on his way to his girlfriend's office.

For about a year and a half, Steve had been seeing Cindy Levine, who worked in domestic credit at Citibank. He believed that if nothing unusual happened they would get married after a couple of years of dating and career development.

She worked at a windowless cubicle similar to Steve's, on a high floor of an office building filled almost completely with Citibank workers, like a drone in the middle of the hive. He had to pass two security desks before he reached her.

"This is a nice surprise," she said as he approached her desk. She stood up to kiss him. She was only four foot nine, and Steve always had to crunch down to reach her. "Did you have something to do in midtown?"

Steve shook his head. "I just came to see you."

"But it's only four-thirty," she said. "Shouldn't you be at the office?"

Steve ran his fingers nervously through his dark brown hair. "I got fired about an hour ago. I came to tell you."

"Oh, Steve, I'm sorry. What are you going to do?" Cindy's green eyes, which sparkled brightly thanks to colored contact lenses, were full of concern.

Steve looked earnestly at Cindy and said, "I don't know." She was pretty in a businesslike, organized way. She had her nails manicured, her upper lip waxed, and her face massaged every week. She favored man-tailored suits and white blouses and sensible black or navy pumps.

“I wish I knew what to tell you,” she said. She sat back down at her desk. “But I have all this work to finish. I don’t think I can get out of here for hours.”

Steve looked at her like a puppy dog who’s just been slapped. “I don’t know what to do,” he said.

“Go home,” Cindy said. She stood up and took him by the arm, steering him toward the elevator. “Work on your resume. Start making a list of all the people you can call, even people you haven’t spoken to since b-school. I’ll call you when I get home and we’ll talk about it.”

“I’m leaving for Florida tomorrow,” Steve said.

Cindy’s parents had died when she was young, and she was raised by an aunt in Nevada, far from the rest of her family and from any religious influence. She thought it was quaint that Steve visited his parents so much.

“Then you have a lot to do.” Cindy rang for the elevator, and when it came she kissed him and pushed him toward it. “It’ll be all right,” she said, as the doors closed.

The streets were crowded with commuters hurrying home in the velvety twilight, masses of men in navy suits and a single woman in a dress the color of blood. The street lights were coming on and steam rose from manhole covers in the pavement. The city seemed as mysterious to Steve as his own destiny. He bought a six-pack of beer from the Koreans at the corner store, and drank two cans before he’d even reached his apartment. He drank the rest in quick succession, then fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Steve's flight to Miami was delayed because of a freak late-summer hailstorm, so he waited in the lounge, reading the newspaper and squirming uncomfortably on a hard plastic seat. He thought he was like the plane, waiting for someone to guide him to one of a thousand possible destinations, so he read the classifieds slowly, ready to rip out any promising leads, but all he saw were ads for security guards and operating room nurses and sheet metal polishers. He did not feel qualified for any of those jobs.

He stood up and rotated his shoulders. His back muscles felt like brittle rubber bands. He threw the newspaper in the trash, took a real estate magazine from his carry-on, and walked over to the floor-to-ceiling window to watch the small white balls bombard the plane and the runway. He felt like he was out there on the tarmac himself.

While he was staring out the window, a big man with a bushy mustache came up to him. There was no threat in the man's size, and his mustache, which had traces of gray in it, made his mouth appear to be smiling. He was in his late forties, and he wore a plaid shirt with a somber navy blue business suit and a bolo tie. He looked somewhere between cool and really strange. Steve pegged him as an old hippie.

"That magazine called my last project a shopping center from hell," the man said, pointing to the journal Steve held in his hand. "I sent the editor a Polaroid of me flushing his goddamned rag down the toilet and canceled my subscription. Anything interesting in that issue?"

Steve shook his head. "Nothing to write home about," he said, and winced. He had not yet told his parents that he had lost his job.

The big man introduced himself. He was Maxwell K. Thornton IV, a real estate developer who had built two festival marketplaces, one along the shores of Lake Michigan, and

another at the end of the Skyline Drive in the Shenandoah Mountains. His latest project, the Everglades Galleria, was located in the swamplands west of Miami.

“So, what do you do?” Max asked.

Steve thought about creating a story, a life for himself. Instead he said, “I’m a financial analyst for a real estate syndicator,” as if he still held the job he had so recently lost.

“How do you think the new tax laws are going to affect the syndication business?” Max asked. He pulled a pipe out of his jacket pocket.

Steve leaned back against the window. “I think they’re going to send it down the toilet,” he said, and for the first time he was actually glad that he didn’t hold that dismal job any longer. “So what’s a festival marketplace, anyway? Isn’t it one of those outdoor malls where college-educated mimes panhandle outside stores that sell yuppie toys at big markups?”

Max began to fill his pipe with tobacco. “You could call it that,” he said. “You could also call it a license to coin money. That is, unless some government idiots get in your way.” He sealed the tobacco pouch. “It’s just a big goddamned swamp, after all. And it’s not like we’re gonna destroy it.”

Max stopped and looked at the pipe in his hand. “I thought I stopped smoking,” he said. “Hmm.” He dumped the tobacco back into the pouch and put it and the pipe back in his pocket. “What was I saying?” he asked.

“You were talking about not destroying the swamp.”

Max nodded. “Hell, the whole idea is to make the mall an environmental showplace and convince people how important the goddamned Everglades are. We’ll have a scientific study

center with ecological exhibits, alligator wrestling, a Miccosukee Indian village, and this place where you can rent an airboat and go out into the swamp yourself.”

“Alligator wrestling?” Steve asked.

“I thought you’d think it was interesting,” Max said. “I have this feeling about people. Give me your ticket.”

“What?”

“I can tell we’ll have a lot to talk about. Give me your ticket and I’ll get you upgraded to first class. We can talk on the way to Miami.”

Steve had been hoping to lounge across a couple of seats and read through a stack of Fortune magazines, but he thought he’d rather ride in first class and talk to Max Thornton. He pulled his ticket envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Max.

It gave him a little shiver, as if he was handing away more than an economy-class ticket in a paper envelope. While Max was gone, Steve turned back to the window. The hail had tapered off. The sun was shining and airport employees were already sweeping the tarmac. The hostess at the gate turned on the loudspeaker and announced they were ready to start boarding.

Steve relaxed in his extra-wide seat and sipped a glass of complimentary chablis. “Do you ever go shopping?” Max asked him.

“Sure,” Steve said. “I buy groceries every week.”

“I don’t mean that kind of shopping. Ever go to a mall?”

Steve nodded. "Where I grew up."

"So tell me what a mall is to you."

The stewardess came by and cleared away the glasses, and the plane began to taxi down the runway. "It's a place where you go to buy things," Steve said.

"Wrong," Max said. "But go on."

"There's usually a couple of department stores."

"Not necessarily."

The plane built up speed and launched itself into the air. Steve savored the moment. All his problems were back in New York. He turned a little toward Max. "Tell me what a mall is, then, if I'm getting it all wrong."

"First of all, you don't go there to shop," Max said. "You go to be entertained. While you're there, you'll buy things, if they're presented well and the price is right."

Max rolled up the in-flight magazine and tapped his knee. "Times have changed. Nobody's comfortable with their family any more. Even husbands and wives, they don't have much to say to each other. Nobody talks." He batted the magazine heavily on the seat in front of him.

The man in front of Max turned around and looked at him with alarm. Max ignored him. "So they go to the mall," Max said. "Maybe there's a performance in center court, or a car show in the common area. Maybe it's boats or antiques or the Special Olympics this week. The mall is a place where you can take your family, yet you don't have to act like a family there."

“Whenever I go down to visit my parents, they always want to go to the mall,” Steve said thoughtfully.

“So you don’t have to interact,” Max said. “It’s like TV.”

The plane gained cruising altitude and the stewardess began to serve snacks. Max pulled out a mini-cassette tape recorder with earphones and a fistful of tiny tapes. He handed one to Steve. The label read “Six Steps to Successful Selling.”

“Just listen to it for a minute,” Max said. He slipped the cassette into the recorder and handed the earphones to Steve. A man’s baritone voice came on giving a feel-good speech about selling anything to anybody. Steve listened for a minute and then pulled the earphones out. “Interesting,” he said.

“Gets me revved up to go out and lease space,” Max said. He sat back in his chair, stuck the earphones in his ears, and closed his eyes.

Max periodically changed tapes while Steve read through his magazines. Over North Carolina Max packed up the recorder and straightened the back of his chair. He crossed his legs in the lotus position, barely keeping his knees within the confines of the extra wide seat, and put his palms together, as if in prayer. Steve put down his magazine.

“It’s a little routine I picked up in a monastery in Nepal,” Max said, putting his hands down. “Helps the jet-lag.”

“You’ve been to Nepal?”

“Hell, I’ve been around the world twice,” Max said. “The first time with my first wife and the second time with my second. Couldn’t get along with either of them, so we ended up in

every museum and shopping center between here and Katmandu. The most interesting place of all was this outdoor shopping mall called a souk in Morocco.”

“Why?” Steve asked.

“That’s where I figured it all out,” Max said. “That families get along better when they’re distracted. The only time I got along with a wife was when we had something else to concentrate on. I’ll tell you, I jumped on the next camel out of that souk and hotfooted my way back to the U.S. of A. I felt like I had found my calling, so to speak.”

Max put his palms together again, bowed his head and closed his eyes. Just before they landed, his head popped up like a turtle’s and his eyes opened wide. He yawned and stretched, and came out of the lotus position. “This meditation always makes me feel a hell of a lot better,” Max said.

“I sure could use something that would make me feel better,” Steve said.

“Take my card,” Max said. “I’m always looking for good people. If you think you might like to work on the Everglades Galleria, give me a call.”

Steve stuck the card in his pocket as Max squeezed himself down the aisle. There was something interesting in the idea, moving to Florida to work for a developer. Then he stood up to get his bag down and hit his head on the bulkhead. He sat back down hard in the seat.

“Alligator wrestling?” he said out loud.