

Chapter One



Prom Day

A dark high school hallway. Empty. Quiet.

The only lights are the red exit lights. Eerie. Spooky. About every thirty lockers there is a classroom door with a skinny window. These windows make sure students and teachers don't have privacy during the school day. Daylight shines through these windows and stabs into the darkness of the hallway.

We tear around the corner as we run down the dark hall. We move pretty fast for a couple of guys who have been beaten up all day long.

You're not allowed to run in school, but I guess when the world is ending and you're the only two humans in the building, you can pretty much do whatever you want.

Everyone is gone. When I say gone, I mean home or evacuated. But many of them are gone, gone. You know what I mean: shed their mortal coil, taking a dirt nap, playing a harp in heaven.

We run through the light streaming into the hall from each classroom door window. We dash through each pool of light, our senses on overdrive. My name is Chevy. I'm the first guy running down the hall. I'm 18, a senior, and this is my school. I'm wearing a black tux with a purple bow tie, which was Sweetie's idea. Right now she's out on the battlefield wearing a purple Prom dress. We match but we're not together right now. We should be, it's Prom Day. Sweetie's the love of my life. I hope I get to see her again. My tux has seen some *action*, not the Prom action that most seniors hope for. There's a rip on my left shoulder and dried stuff splattered here and there. Most of it's *their* goo so that's a good thing.

I run down the hall with a guy I call Not Rambo. We hold handguns, which may or may not be safer than running with scissors. Not Rambo also holds a small grey box. He runs into a water fountain that sticks out between groups of lockers. The hallway is dark. He didn't see it.

“Owww.” Not Rambo falls in the darkness. His gun slides down the hall.

I say, “The box. You still got it? Is it OK?”

Not Rambo stands. “Thanks for your concern about *me*.” He holds up the grey box. “It’s fine. I got it.” I pick up his gun and give it to him. He rubs his leg and whimpers. Now you know why he’s called Not Rambo. Others might call him Not Duke Nukem. Same thing.

I’ll tell you what he is. He’s 19 and a Private in the Army Reserve. *This is not who I should be sneaking around with on Prom Day.* If you don’t know, private is the lowest rank possible in the Army. A private’s main responsibility is to follow orders. Don’t get me wrong. I love the military, and ideally they’ll help us save the world, but me and this particular private don’t get along. Not Rambo wears a green Army Reserve uniform. He’s got short hair -- think buzz cut.

I peer through a window on a classroom door. The light streaming into the hall hits me in the eyes. Man, that’s bright. I wipe the sweat from my forehead with the sleeve of my tux.

Not Rambo says, “They’re going to charge you a cleaning fee.”

I laugh. “I’d be happy if they charge me a cleaning fee.”

“Why?”

“It would mean I’m alive to pay it.”

I push the classroom door open. The lights are off, but the classroom’s bright from the sunlight coming through the large windows from the outside world. The purple vest I wear matches my purple bow tie, but the vest has a camouflage pattern made up of different color purples. You can take the hunter out of the woods, but you can’t take the woods out of the hunter.

The classroom is clean and the desks are in perfect rows. It smells like orange blossoms and bleach. I inhale and the inside of my nose burns. The chemicals and the cleaning crew did their job; everything that was once alive in the room is now dead.

Someone has spray-painted something on the outside of the windows just above the hedges. The painted words are backwards, but they’re easy to make out.

Not Rambo reads them, “School Suc.” He pauses, “It should be illegal to do graffiti if you don’t know how to spell.”

Past the painted windows and hedges are the sand volleyball courts. There's a big push to get kids more active and in the sun. Something about kids being overweight and needing vitamin D to help the body absorb calcium.

Beyond the volleyball courts is the second practice field and the woods. We're in rural Pennsylvania. We've got plenty of open fields and trees, not like the city.

I look but don't see any. "Come on, we can make it."

A large, hairy, white thing scurries past the window just in front of the hedges. It's the size of a small elephant, but it moves fast. We don't get a good look at it, but we know what it is. It's big and has lots of legs, eight of them.

I stop. Private Not Rambo bumps into me.

"Watch it, I'm carrying the detonator." He catches the small grey box as it falls.

"Be careful."

"I know what I'm doing."

As if any of us know what we're doing. If this doesn't work, I'm not sure if we'll be able to save Prom, or, for that matter, the Earth.

Something moves in the hedges right outside the window. It's round, brown, and hairy. It's a little smaller than a basketball. *What evil thing is this?* Oh, it's the back of a human head. I've seen this kid before. I think he's a sophomore. He has a pasty white complexion. See, he should be getting more sun.

I'm going to tap on the window and talk to him. I whisper, "Stay calm, stay calm." He doesn't see us in the classroom. He looks at the woods beyond the volleyball courts and stumbles out of the bushes before I can make it to the window.

Not Rambo says, "He's not staying calm."

The kid is on the large size. See, he should also be getting more exercise. He wears a flannel shirt over a blue T-shirt with a lunch box on it. I tap on the window, but it's too late. Lunch Box runs toward the volleyball court, heading for the fields and woods beyond it. That was my plan. But Lunch Box is overweight. He doesn't run well.

I say, "He'll make it."

"You're wrong."

Lunch Box holds a can of black spray paint. He pumps his arms but that doesn't help. This kid is not built for speed. The sand volleyball court slows him down. It's hard to run on sand, and he didn't have much momentum anyway.

A web line shoots in from the left. We can't see where the webbing came from, the Space Spider must be around the side of the building. The webbing hits Lunch Box and sticks to him. Lunch Box trips and falls. Arms and legs flail. Sand flies.

I run to the window and raise my Glock right above the small "u" in Suc. It's hard looking through the graffiti. I lean in, but this doesn't help. I can't see the Space Spider because it's still around the side of the building, but I'm going to be ready. I reach my hand back.

"Give me your gun."

"No."

"Come on."

Not Rambo finally offers his Army issued Beretta M9 sidearm. I grab it.

Outside on the sand court, the webbing drags Lunch Box. The teen struggles out of his flannel shirt. He's free. Nice going kid. Lunch Box gets to his knees and shakes sand out of his hair as his flannel shirt gets pulled under the volleyball net and off the court by the web line. The Space Spider is still behind the corner of the building. Lunch Box stands and looks for something.

"Don't just stand there. Move!"

Lunch Box grabs the can of black spray paint he dropped. I guess it's nice to have something to hold onto. He runs in the opposite direction. Yes! He's going to get around the far corner of the school. His feet step out of the sand and onto the grass. Good. Now he'll get some speed. But before he disappears around the corner of the school he stops. He just stops as if he got hit with a freeze ray.

Not Rambo yells, "Keep moving! Don't stop!"

Lunch Box trembles as two big, white, hairy legs come around the edge of the school building. Space Spiders are about sixteen feet big, just a little larger than a full-sized pickup truck like the Ford F-Series or the Chevrolet Silverado. We don't see the Space Spider, just its two front legs.

I raise both guns, but I don't have a shot. Lunch Box is too close to it, and all I can see are the two front legs coming out from around the building. Not enough to aim at and hit.

The Space Spiders mandibles extend out beyond the corner of the building and touch the teen's thick arms. If you don't know, mandibles are the "little legs" that are near a spider's fangs and mouth. They are used like short arms to grab and hold prey.

I flip the safety off both guns. "Come on, show yourself."

Not Rambo says, "Chevy, even if you get a shot, you can't kill it with two handguns, not at this distance. You're only gonna piss it off and give away our position."

I ignore him.

"You're gonna sacrifice the mission and get everyone killed, including Sweetie."

I hesitate. Not Rambo knows which buttons to push, and I hate him for it.

Right behind the Space Spider's mandibles are its big tusk-like fangs. The tips come around the corner of the building. The fangs open but before they strike, the mandibles poke the teen's belly. Wobble. Wobble. Wobble. Lunch Box trembles. The Space Spider hesitates. The fangs close and the mandibles withdraw. The big legs back away from Lunch Box. It's letting the kid go.

Not Rambo says, "What just happened?"

I lower my guns, "See, the kid's not a threat. They're saving him for later. They only attack when ..."

But Lunch Box can't leave it alone. He raises his can of spray paint and yells, "I'm the boss of my body." Lunch Box finds some courage or anger and starts spraying the Space Spider. He shouts, "Wolverines!" Which is weird because at Fairland High, we're the Knights.

Lunch Box takes a step forward. For a moment we can't see him because he's advancing beyond the edge of the building.

The Space Spider screeches. Then we hear Lunch Box scream. It was a short victory. Lunch Box steps back into view. He holds the can of spray paint, but he's not spraying anymore. He looks dazed and confused. He looks down. Blood pours out of a hole in his light blue T-shirt making a big, dark purple circle. He looks to the other side of his body and drops the can of spray paint. His hands touch his sides. Both hands come up red. The fangs got him. He's a gonner.

Not Rambo lowers my arms until my guns point at the floor. There is nothing to do now. The teen falls backwards. A webline shoots out from the

corner of the building and hits the teen's feet and legs. The weblines pull Lunch Box behind the building so we can't see him.

Lunchtime.

There is nothing we can do.

Not Rambo pats me on the back, "Well, that's what you get for defacing school property."

Now you know why I don't like him. He's an idiot.

Not Rambo and I leave the classroom and run down the hall looking for another way to get back to...

Wait.

I need to start earlier.

I'm gonna start three days *before* Prom. I'm take you back to the Wednesday before Prom for three reasons:

This is the night SNAFU falls in love.

This is the night Sweetie dumps me.

This is the night the moon cracks.