

THE UNDERTAKERS: Rise of the Corpses

by Ty Drago

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Chapter 1: Dead Men Walking

On a sunny Wednesday morning in October, a day that would mark the end of one life and the beginning of another, I found out my next door neighbor was the walking dead.

The day had started typically enough, with Mom nagging me to get dressed. Emily, my five-year-old sister, was wailing because the cable was out and she couldn't watch Dora the Explorer. And me? I was in the bathroom, trying to get that "sticky-up" part of my hair to lay flat.

My name's William Karl Ritter — Will to the world at large. I'm twelve years old and just about as "middle of the road" as you can get. I'm not skinny or fat, not really tall or short, not butt-ugly or particularly good-looking. What I am is a redhead. See, I've got my Mom's pale face and green eyes, and my Dad's freckles and mop of orange hair, which he always called the "family heritage" that dated back to the "old country". If so, then it was one weird heritage. After all, who ever heard of a redheaded German?

I hated being a redhead — and still do, sort of.

Back then, I guess I hated a lot of things. For example, I hated middle school. The classes were boring. I hated being called “Red” all the time. And I especially hated when the school bullies pinned me down and played “connect the dots” with my freckles and a ballpoint pen.

But most of all, I hated that my Dad wasn't there to make it all right.

“Bus in ten minutes, Will!” Mom called from downstairs. “I've got a Pop Tart for you!”

“Okay, Mom!” With a groan, I gave up on my hair, fled the bathroom and bounded down the steps three at a time.

Mom was in the kitchen, calming Emily down with a glass of apple juice. “There's nothing I can do about the cable, honey. It'll come back on when it comes back on. Will, grab something to eat. You've got ... eight-and-a-half minutes!”

"I'll make it!" I said, shoving half a Pop Tart into my mouth.

“Isn't today the deadline for the soccer signups?” Mom asked, glancing sideways at me.

The Pop Tart suddenly caught a little. "I guess so."

She gave me her “mother” look. “I want you doing more with your free time than Xbox. A little exercise maybe? Why don't you sign up?”

I made a sour face. “Soccer sucks.”

“You loved it up until two years ago. Tell me again how many goals you scored that last season you played. Was it eight?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “But it’s ... like ... different now.”

“Will, your Dad would want you to continue doing the things that interest you.”

“I know,” I sighed.

“Sign up today,” Mom said firmly. “Emmie and I expect to see you in some games this fall. Got it, mister?”

“I’ll do it today,” I relented, only half-meaning it.

Smiling, she forced a hug out of me, after which Emily dumped a sloppy kiss on my cheek. Then I snatched up my backpack from its place by the door and headed out.

"Have a good day!" Mom called.

It was the last thing she said to me.

I did *not* have a good day.

I leapt down the stoop, letting the door slam behind me, determined to get all the way up the hill to the bus stop in less than thirty seconds. But before I could get as far as the sidewalk, I heard Old Man Pratt call to me. He sounded pissed. He usually did.

Inwardly, I groaned. What had I done *now*?

I turned around — and instantly all thoughts of school and soccer and bus stops went right out of my head.

Pratt said, “You got your trash cans mixed up with mine again, boy!”

He'd moved in next door to us about two years ago. His house looked almost exactly like ours, which looked almost exactly like every other house on Grape Street: a two-floor, vinyl sided row home with square windows and a flat, tarred roof. “The Manayunk Standard,” Mom al-

ways called it.

Pratt was the neighborhood grouch. Somewhere in his seventies, he lived alone, kept to himself, and got pissed off more often and with less reason than anyone I'd ever met.

“I'm talking to you, Ritter!”

I tried to speak, I really did, but no sound came out. When you turn around expecting to see something familiar — not particularly pleasant — but familiar, and instead see something else altogether, it takes a little while for your brain to catch up with your eyes. Some people might call it shock. I call it the "Holy Crap Factor."

Ernie Pratt was dead — very dead, which didn't make much sense since, as far as I knew, dead men didn't get pissed.

He was wearing what he usually wore in the mornings: a white terrycloth robe and slippers, except the skin inside the slippers had gone as dry as old paper. His face was gray and pulled tight around his skull. One of his eyes was hanging out of its socket, dangling by a short length of thick, corded tissue. The other one, looking milky and sightless, nevertheless stared at me. His lips were gone, receded, revealing a black-gummed mouth with only half the teeth it should have, and even those were as yellow as old eggs.

Which is also how he *smelled*. The stench hit me like a hammer. I actually staggered back a step. The reek of rotted flesh turned my stomach, threatening the Pop Tart within with a hasty and violent eviction. I kept it down, mainly because I could tell that Old Man Pratt was watching me, ogling me with that one “good” eye. Looking for — what? Fear? Disgust? Right then, I had plenty of both! My knees had gone weak, and the world, my safe familiar world, seemed to be slipping like sand through my fingers.

“What're you staring at, Ritter?” the talking corpse demanded. "What's the matter? Cat

got your tongue?" Then it smiled, splitting what was left of its mouth open in a grimace that sent a chill down my spine and out through all ten of my toes.

Pratt wasn't just dead. He'd clearly been dead a while. Weeks, maybe!

But he hadn't been a walking cadaver yesterday. I was sure of that! So just what on Earth had happened to him?

"I'm ... okay," I stammered, somewhat surprised that words could come out of my mouth at all.

The dead man regarded me, tilting his head at an odd, thoughtful angle. As he did, a series of black beetles bubbled up through a hole in his neck and ran down his collarbone, disappearing inside the white robe.

That was all I could take. Wide-eyed, I started stumbling away from him. It felt like my stomach was about to explode out my mouth. I glanced toward the front door of my house, hoping my mother might be standing there to see me off. She did that sometimes. This, however, was apparently not one of those times. No doubt Emily was still griping. I was going to die because the cable TV was out.

"Okay, huh?" Dead Man Pratt replied. "You don't look it."

Then, to my utter horror, he reached up and caught my upper arm.

I didn't scream. If I had, Mom might have heard it and come to the door. Then things would have turned out differently — worse.

Instead, I flailed and pistoned my legs backward.

Pratt was strong. I could feel his strength in the clutch of his gray, dry fingers.

He grinned another of those hideous grins, looking like a rotting corpse that had just won the lottery. His one milky eye shone like a beacon as he held me in place and, flexing whatever

in that body still served as muscles, started to pull me toward him.

Then he spoke again. Except he didn't. His black, lipless mouth never moved. Instead, I seemed to hear the words coming from inside my head — disjointed, as if he were uttering them one at a time, making an individual sentence out of each.

"What. Do. You. See. Boy?"

Acting on pure animal instinct, I swung my arm in a wide arc and brought it down on his wrist. I didn't plan it. I didn't aim. I just did it.

I didn't know what I expected to happen. But one thing I didn't expect was for Dead Man Pratt's hand to snap right off the end of his arm!

Suddenly freed, I stumbled backward, almost fell, regained my balance — and took off up the street in the direction of my bus stop. Halfway there, I noticed that the black dead hand was still clutching my shirt sleeve. Worse, it was twitching a little.

At that I finally *did* scream.

Doing a panicked kind of bee-in-your-shirt dance, I threw the gross thing off of me. It bounced into the bushes. Then I kept right on running, risking a quick glance over my shoulder.

Pratt was standing where he had been, looking after me. His smile was gone, replaced by a scowl as he examined what was left of his arm. If lopping off his hand had hurt him, he gave no sign of it.

I think I made it to the bus stop in less than thirty seconds. First time ever. There's nothing like raw terror to get your butt moving.

A handful of kids were already waiting there. One of them was Mike Reardon, a friend. As I reached him, panting and sweating, he asked, "You gonna die or what?"

"Look down the hill!" I exclaimed, trying to catch my breath. My heart felt like it was

about to burst.

He looked. He frowned. Then he laughed.

"What'd you do to Old Man Pratt?" he asked. "He's standing there in his PJ's looking seriously pissed!"

I swallowed, steeled myself, and then faced down the hill.

The PJ's were there. But the thing inside them wasn't a man, or at least hadn't been for a really long time. As I watched, the cadaver waved with its one good hand.

This time the chill ran *up* my spine and squirted out my ears.

"Bus is coming!" someone announced.

My cell phone was in my backpack. Should I call the cops? Call my Mom? And tell them what exactly? That Old Man Pratt died maybe a month ago and didn't know it? But then why hadn't Mike seen what I'd seen?

Shuddering a little, I dragged my eyes away from the thing down the block, watching instead the yellow school bus rumbling to a stop at the curb. As the accordion doors creaked open, kids lined up to climb aboard. I stood in the back, my mind reeling.

Am I going crazy?