

# SAMPLE

# TEXT

## **Graveyard Kings**

**Volume 1 of**

*Everyday Life Amongst The Dead*

by S. R. Redfern

This book is especially for the children who inspired it, with my love:

Sheila, Paul, Alice, Holly and Nancy

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## PROLOGUE

*The cities of the dead are unseen by the living, though they are populous and noisy, brilliant and busy, always in motion, as vibrant in their way as the cities of our experience. The dead have a city near to you and you have seen it with your own eyes. Yet you have not really seen it. You have walked through it, yet you have not truly entered it, for you have been careful to navigate this city only whilst it is washed by sunlight, which renders it not only invisible but insubstantial.*

*In the cities of the dead there is no fear of death, for death is already familiar, and has already come and gone. Like a passing shower that has greyed and dampened a summer's day. Like a troubled night of frightening dreams, replaced by a dull anxiety and a mournful sense of loss of a glimpse of something beautiful which can never be glimpsed again.*

*In the cities of the dead people do not fear death. They fear instead what they have come to call 'vanishing'.*

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1969 Fleeing & falling

The boy was more aware of sounds than sights as he flew along the river bank path. The sights were blurred with speed and the wind in his eyes brought tears which stung as they mixed with the tears of fear. Sight was hazy. But sounds were clear. The sound of his own asthmatic breathing, becoming louder and increasingly staccato. The sound of just one point of the rim of his back wheel squeaking against the brake block. He'd always found the regular squeaking to be a kind of comfort before. A sound that made this bike distinctly his machine. Increasing in frequency as he pedalled harder and harder, like a high pitched pulse which matched his own racing heartbeat, the squeak of metal on rubber was no longer comforting but just underlined his panic. In the distance the sound of a police car siren which he hoped was coming towards him, but which gradually faded away. The sound of a man walking a dog, shouting "bloody hell be careful on that thing, you'll cause an accident you little beggar." The sound, behind him, of the Brenyon gang.

"You're bloody dead."

"We're coming for you, toerag!"

"No-one's gonna help you shitface!"

The boy pedalled and panted and wheezed and pedalled more. He was up on the river bank itself now, with the river twenty feet below on his left, and the roadway and path six or seven feet below him on the right. The road itself gradually curved away from the river to the right, the widening gap

between the high bank and the hard road surface filled with a lumpy long-grassed scrubland which was impossible to cross by bike.

If he could keep moving on this narrow hard-mud trail along the high bank he knew he had a chance to get ahead of the gang and perhaps even to cross the river on the new footbridge and then perhaps, just perhaps, he could lose them, double back on the far bank and try to get home before they caught him. And once home he was safe. Sort of.

He pedalled and panted and pedalled and panted. Talking silently to himself as he rode, up out of the saddle of his over-size secondhand push bike, pushing with all his strength down on each pedal as it reached the top of its arc. Down, and down, and down, and down. Every push feeling like he was putting perhaps a few more inches between himself and his pursuers.

I can get there, he said to himself. I can go faster than them. If they all try to come up on the bank they can't move so fast because there's so many of them. He thought there were a dozen or so behind him. I know a jumble of bikes on the path won't work. They'll have to slow down and string out in a line. And they'll be arguing about who goes first. That will give me a bit more time.

And as he rode the boy tried to calm his fear.

What can they do anyway? All they can do is hurt me a bit. They're not going to kill me. Well most of them wouldn't, but the Brenyon brothers themselves might. I know them. If they want to and they might be stupid enough to risk it. But if I can get home. If I can get home. They won't come there because Dad will call the police. They won't come there.

They had been there though. In the long days of summer, when the boy's Mum and Dad were at work, the gang had arrived more than once. Three times this summer already. Riding in lazy figure of eights outside the house. Occasionally hurling insults. Sometimes hurling rotten eggs from Eddie York's parents' hen house. Even lazily lobbing small stones from the road. Not heavy enough or hard enough to break a window, yet. When they did that the boy had to pray that they would get bored and leave early enough for him to come outside and clean off the broken eggs and check the

window woodwork for chips and scratches before his parents came home. Otherwise there would be upset and questions, which could only lead to the gang getting into trouble, and then taking some kind of revenge, which he knew they would.

In any case, the gang were determined to take their revenge now, and he hadn't done anything, except to briefly stand up to them when they grabbed a girl's bag outside of the village shop and tipped everything onto the pavement. All he'd said, quite quietly, was: "Stop. Leave her alone."

That was enough to make them turn, immediately losing interest in the girl. He wished he hadn't seen her. He wished he hadn't intervened. But she wasn't just any girl.

And now he was flying along the river bank, on the verge of losing breath completely, whilst they pursued him. And now, between his great heaving wheezes and the squeak of the distorted wheel rim against the brake block of his secondhand bike, he could hear their voices getting louder and clearer as they gradually gained on him.

The woods were a good hundred yards ahead. The boy glanced behind him. The leader of the pursuit, the eldest Brenyon brother, was standing up on his pedals too, pumping the Raleigh Chopper and making it sway wildly from side to side. Ungainly, but effective. As each second passed the gap between the boy and the gang closed. Eldest Brenyon was only fifty yards behind now, opening a gap between himself and the rest of them.

And then the squeaking of the wheel ceased and something felt different. Something was different. Sounds were different. The air had changed somehow. Instead of the racing rhythm of his frantic pedalling the boy felt a sudden resistance, then momentarily had a new and strange sensation, as though he might be being rescued by invisible angels, lifting him from his bicycle to fly freely in the air. But the unearthly flight was not angelic. An unearthed root from one of the willows which lined this whole half-mile stretch of river bank had caught in the front wheel of the boy's bicycle, causing it suddenly and definitively to stop. With the energy of his furious pedalling driving the rest of the bike forward, the whole frame pivoted on the front axle, the bike rising to a

surreal vertical position, handlebars down and rear wheel high in the air, as though it were about to ride straight down through the earth to hell.

And as the bike turned so the boy was flung forwards and upwards, not carried by invisible angels at all, but propelled by earthly laws of physics through the air before being dumped, badly winded and shocked on the hard mud trail along the top of the river bank.

Now they would come for him.

But as he shook his head and turned his neck gingerly, which hurt so badly it made him weep suddenly and with a whimper, the boy saw that elder Brenyon was now stationary too. And behind him the other members of the gang drew up in a cacophony of squealing breaks and shouts of:

"Bloody 'ell did you see that?"

"I thought he was going to fly into the river."

"Is he dead? Hope so?"

Loud laughter and another torrent of insults followed, but the gang remained at their distance. Thirty yards at most.

He panted. He slowly got to his feet. He looked at the bike. It might be rideable. But it didn't look it. The front wheel was badly twisted and was still caught on the root. The rest of it was connected still, but lay at an odd angle to the front wheel. He thought for a moment that it looked as though it were dead.

Then a sharp pain shocked him from his daze, as a stone flung by the younger Brenyon caught him just above his left eye. It started to bleed instantly and generously and he was immediately blinded in that eye by the blood. He put his hand up to it and could almost feel its puffy swelling happening beneath his fingers.

And now, through his one good eye, he could see them coming. Now they were moving. Fast. Like the charge of warriors, he thought. Or the charge of hounds after a fox. He was the fox.