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Opening extract from

Undead

Written by

Kirsty McKay

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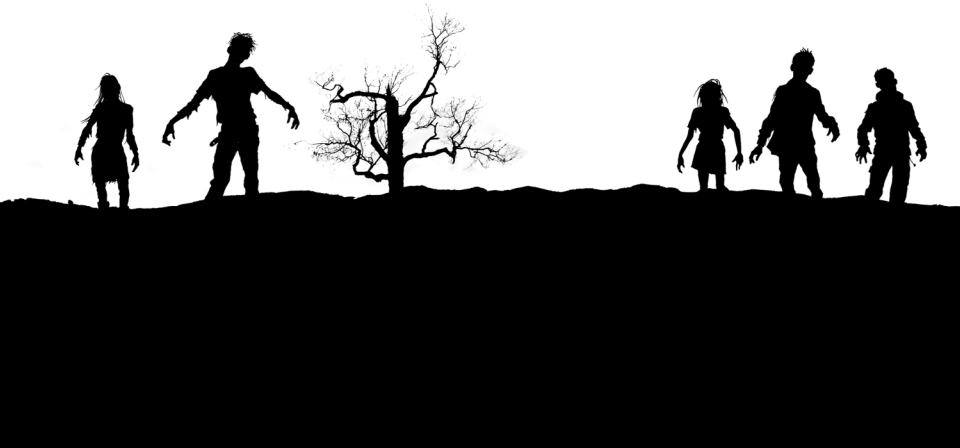

From the Chicken House

Don't you *love* being scared? First comes the bit when you don't know whether to laugh or cry, then that growing feeling in the pit of your tummy that something is *very* wrong. Then, BLAM! You jump out of your skin! Love it! Believe me, Kirsty McKay is *the* new queen of teen horror – some of the friends in this book you really wouldn't want to be seen dead with...

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

UNDEAD

KIRSTY McKAY

Chicken House

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For John
Gobble, gobble, gobble

CHAPTER 1

I would rather die than face them all again. Die horribly. In a messy, fleshy, blood 'n' guts kind of way. It is a total no-brainer.

I'm leaning my forehead against the cold glass of the bus window as we draw into the parking lot of the roadside cafe, earbuds in place. The music died long ago but this way I maintain the illusion of invisibility. I'm perfecting my thousand-yard stare out into the desolate Scottish countryside, and the weather is doing the whole pathetic fallacy thing. (As in, it's crappy, and it echoes my mood. Just in case you nodded off during that particular English Lit class. Hey, I make no judgement.)

Another coupla minutes and I'll be alone. My dear classmates will be going to lunch, and nothing and nobody can force me to go with them.

This would be the School Trip from Hell, if it wasn't so stupidly freezing. Cold and damp – the kind that seeps lead into your bones and slows your will to live.

Compared to the wilds of Scotland, even Hell has its perks.

'A skiing trip before the start of school, Bobby?' my dad had enthused all those months ago when we were still back in the States, and the England move seemed like a foggy half-idea that was happening to someone else. 'Perfect! What better chance for you to get to know your new classmates?'

'You can impress them all on the slopes!' my mum had chimed in, ever-so-helpfully.

Yep. So that was settled, then.

What my parents had failed to figure was that Aviemore, Scotland was hardly Aspen, Colorado. And that trying to make new friends by showing off my souped-up skiing skills would be the very best way to get my butt kicked, UK-stylee.

Bum, not butt.

Butt marks me out as different, like sidewalk, cell phone and soccer. When we moved to the States six years ago, they thought I sounded as British as the Queen. Now I'm back in the motherland again, I'm like some weird hybrid, a freako chimera with an ever-changing accent. I need to relearn my own language. And fast. I've had enough of the sniggering, the rolling of eyes and the throwing of hard snowballs when my back is turned. American high school can be brutal (song and dance routines in the cafeteria? Meh . . . not so much), but the British version is just as cruel. Every meal at the ski resort had been torturous. Looking for a space at a table. Hoping for Just One Friendly Face. Praying that Mr

Taylor and Ms Fawcett didn't beckon me over to eat with them *again*, knowing that it would be social suicide to be marked as teachers' pet.

But the horror is nearly over. That thought has kept me going for the last twenty-four hours. Just the journey back to school to endure.

Everyone troops off into the Cheery Chomper cafe for lunch, but I'm staying right here. I've prepared for this, for sure; squirrelling away a quickly made peanut butter sandwich at breakfast. As I hid it in my bag with an apple, that reality star skank wannabe Alice Hicks caught my eye and one of her cronies started singing 'It's Peanut Butter Jelly Time'. Whatever. Stupid girls with their pastel-coloured ski-wear and pink glitter nail polish. This lunchtime they'll have to find someone else to throw their fries at.

Gah! *Chips*, not fries.

My appetite is zero, but that's hardly the prob. Truth is, I have been dying to pee ever since we set off . . . but *come on*, only a fool would use the bathroom onboard. Pete Moore made a stink on the trip up, and they gave him hell about it for two hours straight. How could he have been such a goob? You'd think he'd have enough to worry about already with that whole Class Geek Extraordinaire thing he has going on. They call him 'Albino Boy' on account of his white hair and see-through skin, which is probably borderline racist by some people's standards. He smiled at me once, early on, but it was the kind of smile that someone gives when they recognize an easier target. He'll soon learn I'm not going to put myself in harm's way to save his cling-wrap skin. And if that means crossing my

legs for the next few hours, then so be it.

I wipe the condensation off the window. Wow. The snow is coming down thick and fast now. Typical. No fresh powder for five days at Aviemore, and now we are heading back to civilization we have major dumpage. I watch my classmates snake their way through a channel in the snow across the parking lot and up the steps to the cafe. As they reach the door, squeals ring out.

A huge furry carrot is standing in the entrance, waving at them. For a moment I think I'm hallucinating with carbon-monoxide poisoning from the bus's engine, but no, it's a huge furry carrot all right. The squeals quickly turn to laughter and derision. The carrot is some poor, unfortunate soul, dressed in an enormous orange suit and green tights and gloves. He's waving and handing out samples from a small cart, little cups of something. My fellow students grab the freebies greedily. I squint at a banner pinned to the wall above the door:

'Carrot Man Veggie Juice! Put some fire in your belly!'

Carrot Man stomps his carrot feet in the snow. He must be freezing his onions off. Suddenly, I feel kind of lucky to be me. Ms Fawcett shoos everyone inside, and Carrot Man is left to clumsily pick up all the discarded cups of Veggie Juice and tidy his cart.

'Smitty, you'll be staying here with me.'

I peek between the seats. Mr Taylor is barring the exit to an ink-haired indie kid in a leather jacket. Rob Smitty: rebel without a pause, freak show and dropout in the making. But the best snowboarder, fo' sho'. When I first clapped eyes on him, I was convinced he'd be the head of

the under-age drinking faculty – and he is – but he knows how to throw himself down a mountain, too. He was the only other member of my class crazy enough to tackle the double-diamond black runs. Respect due, in spite of the try-hard eyeliner and bad attitude.

'Mr Taylor, you can't keep me on this bus,' Smitty drawls. 'It's against my rights.'

'I can and I will.' The teacher pulls a wry grin, the effect of which is lost when he sneezes violently into a large checked handkerchief. 'You lost all your rights with me when you deemed it necessary to buy vodka and cigarettes with a fake ID. Now sit down and shut up, and pray I don't give you this 'flu.'

Smitty throws his arms in the air and stomps back up the aisle. 'I warned you, Mr Taylor. Don't know what the school governors will think when they hear you wouldn't give me any food. That's deprivation, that is.'

'Big word for you, Smitty,' Mr Taylor jokes, but I can see doubt in his glassy eyes. He puts on his ill-advised fluoro skiing jacket. 'OK, I'll get you a sandwich. But do not move from this bus.' He jabs a finger. 'Under any circumstances. Or there'll be hell to pay. Believe me, I am in no state to be trifled with.' He sneezes again as if to prove his point. As the driver releases the door for him, a flurry of snow flies inside.

'Don't forget I'm allergic to nuts, sir!' shouts Smitty. 'You wouldn't want my parents to sue if I drop down dead!'

The door swings shut. I huddle into my seat. The driver turns up the radio and this insanely happy song

assaults my ears, something about the sun shining every day, how lucky we are to be in the sun. Lucky, riiight . . . The driver opens a flask of coffee, steam funnelling into the air as he pours a cup. Why does coffee always smell so much better than it tastes? Not that I could drink a thing. I cross my legs and think of arid landscapes . . .

Useless. Gotta pee, gotta pee.

'Oi, mate.'

I flinch – mortifyingly – as Smitty hangs over the back of my seat. He isn't talking to me though, but to the bus driver.

'Let us off for a bit, will you?'

The driver glares at him. 'Sit down, lad. You heard what your teacher said.'

Smitty strolls to the front of the bus. 'Come on, geezer. Just want to get some fresh air.'

'Ha!' The driver says. 'Catch your death, more like.'

It's now or never. While they aren't paying attention. I remove my earbuds, shuffle out of the seat – keeping low – and make my move down the bus, bathroomwards.

'Hey you, lassie!' Driver's seen me. 'Toilet's closed when the bus is stopped!'

'But . . .' My cheeks are hot. Smitty is looking.

'Company policy!' the driver shouts. 'Use the facilities in the cafe.'

I linger in the aisle. There is no way I can hang on for another four hours; I might *damage* something. I have to face the mob in the cafe.

'I need to go, too!' Suddenly Smitty is hopping on one leg, the other crossed in front of him. The bus shakes as

he jumps in time to the song on the radio. What. A. Douche.

'Sit down!' the driver yells, then turns to me. 'And you—'

Something slaps the windscreen.

We all jump, and the driver swears, robustly. A streak of coffee is adorning his white shirt.

There's another smack on the glass.

A fat pink hand waggles away the snow from a patch on the window. Then it's gone.

'Damn kids!' the driver mutters, leaning forward to put his cup on the dashboard. 'Clear off!' he shouts, thumping the windscreen. As he does, something slams hard into the side of the coach. I grab at a seat to stop myself from falling.

'All right, you asked for it!' Rubbing his head where he banged it on the steering wheel, the driver stands up and pulls on his coat. 'Stay here!' he shouts at us as he pushes the lever that opens the door, clomps down the steps and off the bus. The door shuts behind him with a hiss.

'I won't tell, Newbie.' Smitty is smiling at me. I frown back, and he points behind me. 'If you wanna go potty.'

I give him my snarkiest eye-roll.

Suddenly, the bus shunts violently forward, flinging us both to the floor. I gulp for air, the wind knocked out of me, waiting to see if anything is hurt other than my pride.

After a moment, Smitty speaks. 'You OK?'

'Yeah.' Rubber matting, sticky in places, against my cheek. Gross. I push myself up to a sitting position. 'What was that?'

'Dunno.' Smitty is already on his feet. 'We were hit.' He leaps over me and runs to the back of the bus. He rubs his hand against the back windscreen. 'Can't see anything.'

I get up, trying not to cling too noticeably to the seats as I walk, and clamber onto the seats beside him. I peer through the back window. Whiteout. The snow is now filling the air, dense and whirling in a kind of violet light, obscuring everything.

'I'm going to look.' Smitty bounds back down the bus.

'No!' I don't know why I don't want him to, but I really *don't*.

'Someone could be hurt.' He's almost at the door, silhouetted by the brightness outside. I pull myself back down the aisle.

'We should stay here until the driver comes back.'

'What if the bus explodes because something crashed into us?' Smitty says.

I blink. 'Yeah. That *so* doesn't happen in real life.'

'Says who?' Smitty pulls a scream-face at me. He pushes the lever to open the door and it clatters open, with a rush of cold air. 'What if driver dude is stuck in the wreckage?' He affects what he presumably thinks is my accent, and flutters his eyelashes. 'I could, like, *totally* save the day.' He launches himself down the steps to the door, stops with a jolt. 'Whoa.'

'What's wrong?'

Slowly he points into the whiteness. I squint past him.

There in the snow is a large puddle of red.

'What is that?' I cautiously descend the steps until I'm

right behind him. Flakes of snow fall through the doorway onto my face.

'Nothing good.'

A crimson trail leads from the puddle to the front of the bus. Together, we lean out and peer round the doorway.

A screech, like a fox caught in a trap, comes from the direction of the cafe.

My head whips round.

'What the . . . ?' Smitty backs up into me.

The screech comes again, closer this time. I stare into the snow, eyes straining. A vague shape is moving in the whiteness.

'Move!' Smitty is behind me now, at the driver's seat. He slams the lever and the door unfolds shut, missing me by a hair's breadth.

'Hey!' I protest, then fall back in shock as the screech appears at the door, slapping hard and fast, trying to get in. Through the glass I see baby blue and yellow, a bundle of blonde hair, and shiny pink nails scraping the glass.

'Open the door!' I shout at Smitty.

'Are you crazy?'

'Now!'

When he doesn't obey, I scrabble up the steps and hit the lever myself before he can stop me.

The door opens, and a manic figure propels itself into the bus.

'Shut the door!' it screams.

I go for the lever but Smitty is way ahead of me and the door slides shut again.

The figure lies panting on the steps. It's Alice Hicks. She lifts her head, black mascara dripping down her pretty face.

'Dead!' she screams. 'Everybody's dead!'

CHAPTER 2

Alice Hicks looks good even when she is lying on the floor crying. When *I* cry – which admittedly is about twice a century – I look utterly destroyed. Beetroot face. Tiny little pig eyes and runny snot nose. It's a genuine talent, looking pretty while traumatizing. So if this is for real, I won't just be shocked, I'll be *impressed*.

'Dead?' I say. 'What are you talking about?'

'Your friends are dead?' Smitty leans back casually on the driver's seat. 'Have you only just noticed?'

'It's true!' Alice's voice trembles through the sobs. 'In the cafe. Go and look if you don't believe me!'

'All right.' Smitty springs up from his seat.

'No!' Alice says, raising herself to face him. 'You can't go out there!' Her legs buckle and she collapses on to the steps again.

'Why not?' Smitty won't be put off.

'Get back!' she screams.