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Opening extract from

The Unfed

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PROLOGUE

When you're staring into the jaws of death at the age of fifteen, there's not a whole lot of life to flash before your eyes.

'Brace! Brace! Brace!' a voice cries.

Huh? This is a bus, not a plane, *silly*.

There's a huge skid, I've got a face full of seat, and all the kids around me are screaming. Before I can grab something, there's a whack and a thud and for a split second we've stopped. Then I'm flying, weightless and silent, up through the air. The bus flips. My world is spun round and round and I bounce helpless off edges of things, like a sad little kitten in a tumble dryer. Glass smashes and the cold thrusts into the bus. A tearing, wrenching sound – the bus peeling open. In spite of the dark outside I glimpse a tree through an open window. We're still falling. The whole bus jerks from side to side as it pinballs off immovable obstacles, and with each hit there are new and terrible howls from my fellow

passengers. I try to hold on – to the overhead lockers, the seats, bodies – but everything seems to come away in my grasp. I bash off the back of something. A booted foot lands *thonk* in my throat, choking me.

There's a boom, so loud that the sound punches me in the chest. I curl tight. Did we explode?

I chance a peep. Bits of bus. Cushion-stuffing bursting out, a backpack with a lunchbox in it, someone's leg. I'm curled in a ball between what might be the bottom of two seats.

Father, Son and Holy Goat. I'm upside down.

Hair hanging. Pressure of blood running to my face, banging in my head.

A slither.

My hands shoot out, but it's no good. I'm in freefall.

I hit the floor with my head, an arrow in the ground, and I flick-flack like the worst gymnast in the world. An ominous rattle – a shadow moves across my view. I shut my eyes and something tumbles on top of me, a heavy thing, pressing me into the floor and crushing the air from my chest. I should hurt, but I don't.

'Bobby!'

There's a voice in my ear, breath warm.

'Wake up, Bob!'

And again. Soft, but urgent.

Smitty.

I open my eyes. But I can't see him. Everything's blurred round the edges. He must be behind me, and I think I'm twisted kind of funny, and the crushing thing is stopping me from turning over.

'Are you OK?'

I try to speak, but nothing comes out. I must look like a fish gulping for air. *Mucho attractivo.*

'They're coming, Bob. You have to move. You have to get up.'

I try, I really do. But my body doesn't listen.

'I can't shift this, Bobby. You've got to help me!'

He's shaking the thing on top of me; it's kind of annoying. Right now I really have to sleep. When I wake up, then I'll help him. I'm sure he'll understand.

'Bobby!' He sounds really upset. I mean, like, crying. *Wow*. That's so not Smitty. Maybe that gunk we injected in his leg had a weird effect on him.

The memories of what happened out on that frozen lake move in – Smitty bitten by one of *them*, the infected Undead, and the only known source of the cure in a syringe in my hand – but the darkness draws in faster, tempting me to slip away.

For a moment, I do.

Then I'm back with a rush of cold. And everything is real again. The thing that was on top of me is lifted, and a pair of sturdy black boots appears in front of me.

I peer up through the debris at my rescuer. Not Smitty. A man in black, balaclava, ski jacket, thick gloves.

My rescuer looks down on me, crouches low and stares into my eyes. There's a tiny yellow insignia on the lapel of his jacket, an X with a swirl around it. I know that logo. Xanthro Industries. The big bad. An evil pharmaceutical company, and oh – did we forget? – my mother's employer. Last on my list of desirable rescuers.

Pain rushes through me as my nerves finally catch up with reality.

And that's the last of it.

CHAPTER 1

I wake up, rasping at the air like I've been held under freezing water.

On my own. Lying in a bed.

The only sounds are my gasps and my heart beating loudly in my ears. Am I paralysed? I kick out with a foot and swear as I stub toes on the end of the bed. No, apparently not paralysed. *Goody.* Hands gripping the cold metal sides of the bed, I stare up at the bright, white ceiling, steadying myself while the room stops spinning, hanging on, waiting for the calm. I slowly roll my head from side to side, trying to push the fog away.

Where the hell am I?

Uh-oh. The memories pop up violently, one by one, like a malevolent gang of jack-in-the-boxes.

A school trip from hell. Me – the class newbie – born in the UK, but transplanted to God Bless America for the last few years. Freshly back in Mother England, with zero friends and a weirdy accent. We were on a bus; there was

a blizzard, a stop at a café called The Cheery Chomper, some poisoned Veggie Juice. My classmates turned feral with a capital Z. And then, hello! My mother, the creator of a stimulant called Osiris that turns normal folks into brain-hungry ghouls.

Just your average school trip.

And of course there's Smitty. The most maddening boy in the world. A fountain of insults, a kiss and those terrible bites on his leg. And how I gave him the only syringe of antidote in existence so he could cure himself.

But we were rescued – yes! – by a bus of school kids not so very different from my former classmates, before they went Undead.

Oh – but then the bus crashed.

Smitty . . . ?

Mum . . . ?

The others?

I remember the moans, then something else. Rescuers? Who got me out? Why can't I remember that?

My heart clenches, breath tightening.

Don't freak.

I'm alive, that's huge. Someone rescued me. I'm in bed in Whoknowswhere but it doesn't matter because I'm *alive*.

There's a bedside cabinet to my right, with a thick book on it. I reach out; it's heavy in my weak hand. *Ow.* There's a taped-over thing stuck in the back of my right hand by my wrist, a thin plastic tube leading up to a clear bag of liquid held high above the bed on a silver metal stand. *Urgh*. I want to pull the tube out, but I'm scared of what will happen if I do.

I rest the book on my chest, flicking open the bottle-green cover. A Bible, with a stamp on it saying, 'Property of St Gertrude's'.

So where you at, Gerty? And are you coming back for your Bible any time soon?

I thump it back on to the top of the cabinet.

At least I know where I am.

Hospital.

This is it. This is what happens in the zombie apocalypse – the empty hospital. It's a classic. Survivor wakes up alone. Everyone else has disappeared. The hospital has been abandoned; the corridors are streaked with blood, littered with overturned gurneys. The phone is off the hook, with a dead tone coming out of the receiver. There is no one left alive.

But there are dead people.

And Undead ones.

I swallow. This is real. It's happening to me.

Focus. I blink. *Try to sit up*. I roll on to my left side and try pulling myself up to somewhere approaching sitting. On the left there's a window, blinds open. The light outside is dim, so I can't see what's out there, only a girl in a bed staring at herself.

Bollocks!

The figure is deathly white, with huge dark eyes and spindly little limbs. *Me.* Man, I'm skinny. Like, model-orexic thin. But that's not the half of it. I raise a shaking hand to my head.

My hair has been shaved off.

I lean closer to the window, trying to see my reflection

better. On the side of the front of my skull is a huge scar. I run trembling fingers over a patchwork of nearly-healed wounds, a network of stitches. What happened to me? Tears of self-pity prick my eyes. *Don't do this. Don't break down, you coward.*

Enough already – I need answers, now.

'Hello?'

My voice sounds like I've been gargling wasps. It would be funny if it wasn't so completely alarming.

I grip the sheets and push myself up to sitting. Bare feet touch a cold tiled floor. Can I stand up? Things hurt. But I have to get out. I have to escape. I have to survive, all over again.

Behind me, a door flies open.

I twist around, unsteady. A figure stands there, mouth pulled back in a grotesque smile. Arms outstretched, the thing rushes towards me, and before I can fall in a dead faint, it has grabbed me.

I hear it cry out as I collapse on to the bed, fighting with all I have, which is nothing. Scrabbling pathetically under the bed sheets, I screw my eyes up tight and wait for the bite, curling my legs up in a ball in a futile move.

'You shouldn't be out of bed!'

Whoa, nelly.

It's talking to me. They don't usually talk. And it is not trying to chow down on my brains. Maybe I was a little hasty with the judging. I peekaboo over the cover.

'Sorry if I scared you.'

Woman. Live one.

The smile comes again – that huge mouth with

tombstone horse-teeth. Not attractive, but not monstery. She has apple cheeks, glasses, curly sandy-grey hair. And she is huge. Humpty Dumpty on steroids. I'm not being cruel, she's actually the roundest person I've ever seen in the flesh. And what a lot of flesh.

I blink at her. Open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes.

'My name's Martha.' Her voice is low, calming, her eyes intelligent.

I sit up in bed a little.

'Hi.' I find my voice, although it's more of a croak.

'I work here at the hospital. You're safe with me.' She waits, almost as if she's politely allowing me to invite her further into my territory. Nice, but I'm always kind of suspicious of adults who treat me like I'm their equal. 'I'm sorry if I shouted at you. It's quite a shock to see you awake – a good shock, of course!' She beams. 'May I sit?'

'Sure.'

She moves towards me as if she's on wheels, delicately, seemingly effortlessly picking up a chair on her way over to my side. She places it silently at the head of the bed.

I look at the slight plastic chair, and she reads my mind.

'They build these things to be robust, don't you worry.'

I flush red.

Martha sits slowly, the chair creaks a little, but holds. She folds her hands across her huge bulk; they're weirdly slender, the nails perfectly manicured and painted pale pink. There's an iridescent opal ring on one slim finger.

'You must have a lot of questions. Let me give you the run-down first.'

'OK.'

'You were in a bus accident. You sustained some head and leg injuries, but you're doing very well indeed. There's nothing to worry about on that score. You were unconscious for quite a period of time. We have been monitoring you. Do you remember anything in the hospital before today?' She leans forward ever so slightly.

I shake my head. 'How long was I out?'

She takes a breath, as if assessing whether I'm going to flip. I might flip, I really don't know.

'A little under six weeks.' Her eyebrows shoot up, as if she's only just totted it up herself. 'Forty days, to be exact.'

I swallow. Coulda been a hell of a lot worse. It's not like I've been cryogenically frozen and I've woken up to find all my loved ones are dead and I have a fashion faux pas hairstyle. Oh wait . . . I do have the hairstyle.

Martha suddenly reaches into my bedside cabinet and retrieves a large trash bag.

'Your personal items, recovered from the bus.' She offers me the bag, and I take it, gingerly. It is white with 'Hazardous Materials' written across it in red. 'Sorry about the bag. Nothing dangerous in there, I promise. But it's all I had to hand.'

I open it a little and peer in. There's my phone, my T-shirt, fleece, socks and boots, and my underwear.

'Your clothes have been laundered. I'm afraid they had to cut off your leggings in the ambulance.' She rubs her hands as if washing them, and the opal ring flashes at me.

'Hope they weren't a favourite pair. I'm sure we'll be able to furnish you with something to wear once you're up and about.'

I silently drop the bag to the floor. I'm gonna wait until she's out the door and then I am straight on that phone.

'Roberta . . .' she starts again.

'It's Bobby.'

'Of course it is.' She nods. 'Bobby, I don't know how much you know about what was going on, but it's been an interesting few weeks.'

Interesting. Yuh-huh. You could say that.

'I don't want to shock you . . .'

'You won't.'

'Quite . . .' She still looks unsure. 'There was an outbreak.' She pauses, to see what I'll say. I decide to play dumb for now. 'A dangerous disease spread around the area you were travelling through, and a relatively large section of the local population was affected. The infected became violent and attacked others.' She narrows her eyes. 'This isn't news to you, is it?'

'Not exactly.'

She nods, like she was just confirming something she already knew. 'Unfortunately the disease is highly contagious, and it was passed on to others. Many others, it spread very quickly.'

OK, now she has my attention.

'It spread? Where to? How many?'

'Rober— sorry, *Bobby* – Scotland has been quarantined.'

I rub my eyes. 'Say again?'

'Scotland has been cut off from the rest of the UK –

and the world, for that matter. For the time being, no one can get in, or out. The government is trying to contain the disease, but it took hold quickly and threatened to overwhelm the entire population. There are steps being taken to rectify the situation, make it safe again—'

'Hold the phone.' I raise a hand. 'Where are we?'

'We're in Scotland.' She nods, grimly. 'Just outside Edinburgh. For now we're in lockdown. You don't have to worry, though. This is a military hospital. We have a perimeter fence and the toughest security measures. We're really in no danger at all . . .'

I sit bolt upright in bed.

'You're telling me they're out there?' I shout at her. 'Right now they're at the "perimeter fence"?' The blood rushes to my head, making me dizzy. 'You mean this wasn't all cleared up? How did it get out of control? How could they let it? Oh god!' I clasp my face in my hands and slide my back down on to the bed. 'How difficult could it be? We killed a bunch of them ourselves and we're only kids. You cut off the head, it kills them.' I stare at her intently. 'Or blow them up. That works too.'

The tears shock me, running down my cheeks freely and furiously. I can't stop myself shaking, like I'm coming off some major drug – which, I suppose I probably am.

'I promise you we're safe here,' she says, as she places a delicate hand on my arm. 'We're lucky. We have food, water, electricity. The government assures us it should be a couple of weeks more, at most.'

I breathe, the sobs pass. I feel kind of embarrassed. But I guess I had licence. OK, she says we're safe. Military

hospital. In a way, it couldn't be better. Military. That means weapons. And big strong people to use them. I can do a couple of weeks here. And then life totally goes back to normal. I go home with Mum the Evil Super-Scientist, with my friend Smitty, the Only Known Source Of The Cure. I close my eyes.

'What about everyone else on the bus?'

She sighs, almost imperceptibly. Here it comes.

'Bobby, I'm really sorry to say, there were fatalities.'

'Who?' My fists are balled up and pressed against my eyes.

'Some were infected. Some perished in the crash.'

'Who survived?' *Give it to me quick*.

'You were one of four.'

I look at her, not bothering to cover up my gaping mouth. *Only four?* Out of a whole busload? Kids, teachers, everyone?

'I'm so sorry, Bobby. There's no easy way to say this.'

'Say what?' I bite down on my lip, already knowing the answer.

She shakes her head, sadly.

'Bobby, your mother is dead.'

Her words float up into the air and hang there between us. I look up at them, not letting them in yet. I can't.

And then the sirens start.

Sirens; loud, screaming sirens. So sudden and deafening they make my chest hurt. Or maybe that's my heart breaking, I don't have time to tell.

'Stay here!'

Martha's face reads panic. She rises and crosses the

room with surprising speed, opening the door a crack and peeping out. She's scared. She tries to hide it, but nobody peeps round a door like that unless they're pretty damn terrified.

'It's probably just a drill.' Martha's face is stretched tight, leaving me in no uncertain terms that it is Not. Just. A. Drill. My head is buzzing, but I'm not allowing myself to take in that last piece of news.

She leans over me, and I can smell stale deodorant on her, the sweet mixing with the sour.

'Bobby, you have to trust me. You are my number one priority.'

Before I can answer her, my head starts to spin. Martha is pressing a plunger into the liquid that is going into the back of my hand.

'No! What are you doing?' I scream at her. I feel myself lurch forward, my head seemingly floating behind me while my body is being carried on a rollercoaster climbing the steepest track.

'Don't worry,' she tells me. 'It's for the best.'

The rollercoaster peaks and starts the long descent into oblivion.

'No!' I try to yell more forcefully, but it sounds like a woof.

'You'll be safe,' Martha shouts from somewhere near the door. 'I'll come back for you!'

And with that, I sink.

CHAPTER 2

'Wake up, Roberta.'

Smitty leans in close, and I smell the raspberry shampoo he uses. He kisses me softly on the forehead, his hand warm against my cheek.

I can't see him. My eyes are blurred, and I rub at them, but that doesn't improve matters.

Oh, knickers. I know why I can't see. This is a dream.

'Get up. This is no time to be a-slumbering.' I hear the smile in his voice. 'We're all driving on the road to nowhere, and you're the only one who's got a map.'

I crinkle my brow. 'Seriously? We're doing cryptic dream messages now, Smitty?'

He laughs. 'Best I can do, Bob. But don't lay blame for the lame. This is your subconscious, after all.'

His hands have slinked underneath my bed sheets and I can feel skin against my skin. There is soft, warm breath against the back of my neck. The flutter of eyelashes on my bare head.

Joy fills me. I reach out and touch him. The familiar leather jacket creaks a little as I pull him towards me, relishing the hug. I sense his face moving down to mine. I try to open my eyes to look into his, but they refuse to open. Lips touch; we kiss, deeply. I don't care about anything any more, just this kiss. He rolls his body so that he's on top of me, and I let him, thrilled and a little scared by his weight. The kiss gets more fervent, more desperate, and I give in to it, a rush of heat pulsating through my body. I reach up to feel his hair, open my mouth, and his tongue pushes against mine. I feel rude. I feel wonderful. I feel happy.

And then, his tongue pushes further, filling my mouth, and before I know it I'm choking. I can't breathe and I'm trying to push him off me, trying to scream, and he's heavy on me and he's crushing my chest, and the hands that were soft and loving a minute ago are clawed and tearing at my flesh.

My eyes flick open. My hand wrenches a clutch of black hair from a bleached white skull with mad eyes. Gnashing teeth sink into my cheek and my face explodes with pain.

He's Undead. And soon I will be too.

The sirens are still screaming as I fall, panting, back into reality, eyes crusted and a dried trail of dribble down one side of my mouth.

Mum. Mum is dead and I'm having messed-up dirty dreams about Smitty.

I don't believe she's dead. I *won't* believe it. She always has a plan. Dying would not be part of it.

I scrub at my face to wash off the guilt and the beginnings of something that might turn into uncontrollable

grief, push myself up and rip the damn sleepytime tube out of the back of my hand. Rub it better, I'll mend. Teeth gritted, I swing my legs out from under the sheet, and press my weight down through my feet, gripping with my toes. And then I feel it: a quick sting between my legs.

Oh. My. God.

There's another tube. And this one is going up somewhere no tube should ever go. My good hand fumbles beneath the sheets, I claw at tape, and before I can even think about pain and consequence, I've yanked the tube out, flinging it away from me like it's on fire.

Think of Mum. Offset pain with pain.

Pale yellow liquid seeps from the tube. Horror of horrors. There's a hanging piss-bag on the side of the bed that is now emptying itself in a creeping puddle on the floor.

Ow, ow, ow.

This must be the crappiest wake-up ever. And believe me, there have been some crappy ones.

I rescue my bag of belongings before it can get wet, and dress as quickly as I can: underwear, T-shirt and fleece, socks and boots. No legwear; for now I'll have to have naked pins. I shove my phone into my boot, carefully step around Pee Lake and tiptoe to the door. I turn the handle, but no dice. It's locked, of course. Pressing my ear up to the wood I try to hear something. Shouts? Screams? Relieved laughter? But all I can hear is the screech of the sirens.

And then they stop.

I spring away from the door.