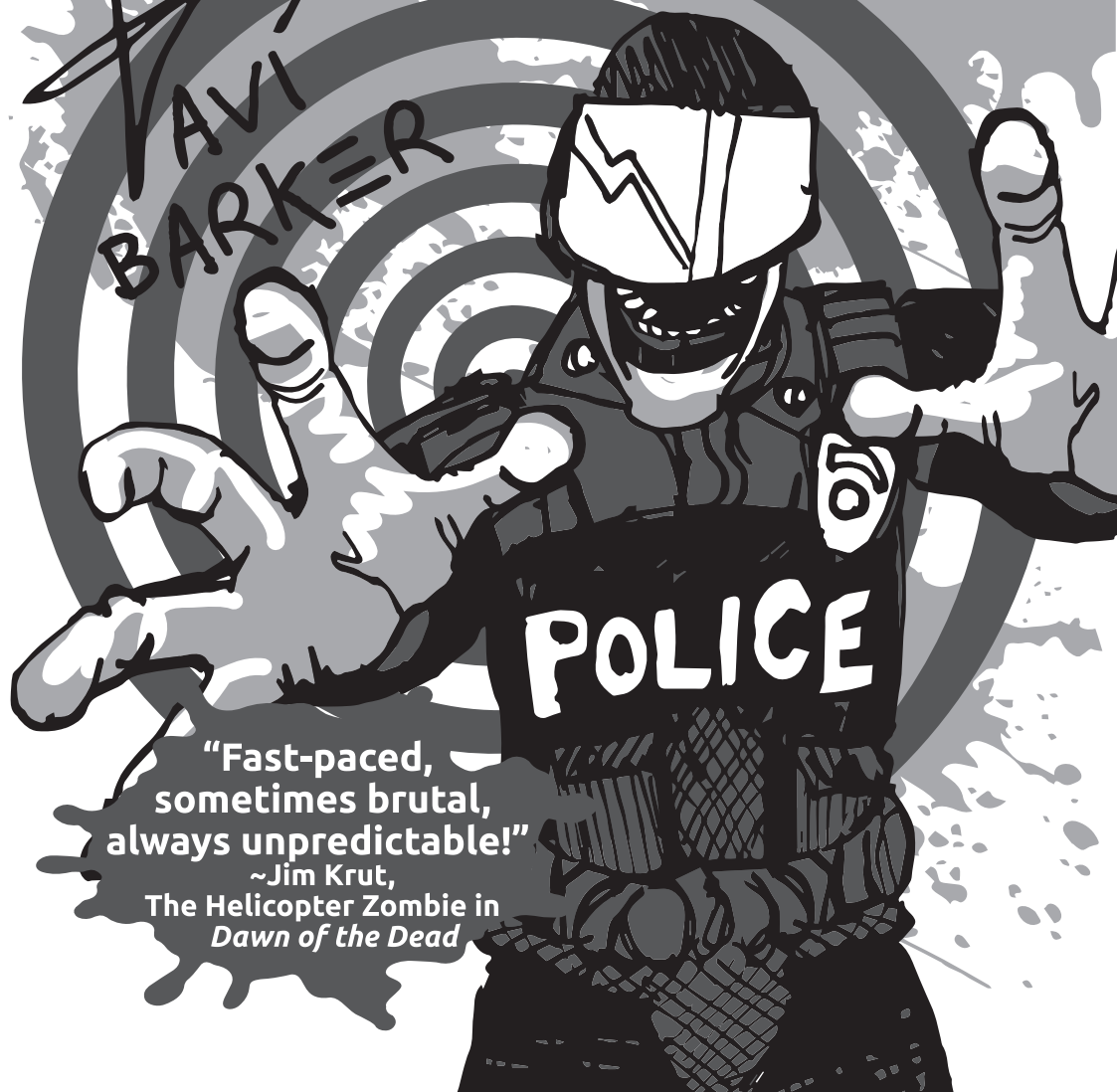


# SURVIVOR MAX

# SCHOOL BITES

VAVI  
BARKER



**"Fast-paced,  
sometimes brutal,  
always unpredictable!"**

~Jim Krut,  
The Helicopter Zombie in  
*Dawn of the Dead*

# Officer Friendly



The school was a militarized zone, littered with corpses, some gunned down, others eaten up. It looked like a horrific battle. The street was blocked with barricades, and we easily walked between them. Armored vehicles and cruisers formed a visual perimeter, but no one had kept watch for some time.

Ellie was exhausted.

I patted her burning-hot cheeks. She looked delirious.

“Leave me here,” she said. “I’m just slowing you down.”

“No way! You’re totally exposed here.” I pointed toward the closest armored vehicle. It was a wheeled personnel carrier designed for the military. “You’ll be safer in that thing, and from the top we can see the lay of the land.”

Ellie nodded, but she was looking weak. I helped her up to the top of the vehicle, passed her the rifle, and climbed up.

The school was grey and boxy, like a prison. The flag flew at half-mast and all the windows were boarded up. The largest building was two stories and had a helicopter on the roof.

The campus was enclosed in a black metal fence, mounted to red brick columns. There were gates at both ends of the driveway, and the main lot was filled with emergency vehicles, civilian cars, and a school buse parked in the passenger loading zone. The soccer field was filled with olive-green refugee tents. Parked between the tents were two ambulances and a Health Department mobile command vehicle.

Beyond the main parking lot was a smaller tent cluster enclosed by its own

chain-link fence. It looked like some kind of improvised police headquarters, and in the center was a large, white tent with a huge red cross on its roof. A medical tent!

I pointed it out to Ellie. "That's where I'm headed. If there are any antibiotics left, that's where they'd be."

"How're you going to get there? It's a dead zone."

There were dozens of creepers between us and the medical tent. The campus looked like it was bustling with survivors, except there were no signs of life, just wandering gray bodies, penned in by the fences. No direction. No leader.

I grabbed a bottle of Free Breeze I'd tucked in my belt.

"Air freshener?" she asked skeptically.

"They track by smell. If they can't smell me, and I act dead, they'll ignore me. I'm taking a radio. You'll be my eyes up here."

She nodded, half-convinced. "You need to keep quiet, or they'll come after you." She pulled a pair of ear buds out of her front pocket. "Plug these in your radio so they can't hear me."

"Good thinking. Thanks."

She handed me her hatchet. "I'll cover you with the rifle. That way the gunfire will draw them in my direction, not yours."

"We only have eight rounds left," I explained.

"Then I better make them count." She crouched into a firing stance and shrieked in pain from her infected leg.

"We're going to get through this," I said.

She nodded and grabbed my hand. "Max?" Her voice was breathy and weak. I could tell from her eyes there was more she wanted to say, but all that came out was, "Don't get bit."

I climbed out with Dad's radio in my hand. "Check, check."

"I'm here." Ellie's weak voice came back over the radio.

"Stay with me," I said, adjusting the ear buds so I could hear clearly. I looked up and saw she was watching me through the rifle scope. "I need you to walk me through." She had a better view of the area, and I wanted to keep her conscious.

I pointed to a dead cop dressed in riot gear. "That's my way in." It was dressed in all black with armor on its arms and legs, a helmet with a face shield, and a Kevlar vest with "POLICE" in white letters. I nicknamed it Officer Friendly.

"Max, that hatchet is no good against that helmet."

"I'm not gonna kill it." I ran up to the fence and hid behind a brick column. Officer Friendly was only a few feet away, standing as if it was guarding the gate.

"Watch this." I took a deep breath and tapped the hatchet on the bracket, where the fence connected to the column.

*"Ting! Ting! Ting!"*

Officer Friendly gave a curious grunt that told me I had its attention. I banged the fence again with a "clang!"

The riot cop shoved its arms through the fence and reached around the brick column I was hiding behind. I ducked, and its grasping fingers met above my head.



I grabbed a bundle of plastic zip ties hanging off Officer's Friendly's belt. Cops use them as restraints when they make mass arrests. I cinched its wrists together on my side of the brick column. Neutralized!

"Ha! Did you see that?" I exclaimed into the radio.

"See if it has a gun... And keep your voice down."

"Right!" I groped for Officer Friendly's pockets through the fence. I never thought I'd be frisking a cop. I accidentally plunged my hand into an open wound on its side. Something took a big bite out of it. I wiped the blood on its pants.

Officer Friendly yanked on its restraint, but couldn't get free. It pressed its face against the bars, but its helmet was too big. It roared, jerking back and forth, and then it stopped struggling. It just watched me. I hadn't seen a creeper behave that way before. It wasn't unthinking hunger. Its rage seemed almost human. My heart was pounding as it analyzed me.

"Incoming!" warned Ellie.

I peeked over Officer Friendly's shoulder. A woman in a bloody hospital gown was headed my way. Behind it, more creepers trickled out of refugee tents, attracted by the noise.

I searched Officer Friendly's vest pouch and found a pistol. It was small, but better than nothing. It was probably his backup weapon. I tucked it in the back of my pants.

The stragglers howled like beasts, but Officer Friendly was different. Not calm, but tense. I gulped when I saw it grinding the zip tie against the bricks. It understood!

I ran to the other driveway and hid behind another column. The gate was unlocked, and I inched it open. I sprayed myself with the air freshener until the nozzle sputtered out. I shook the can and tried again, but it was gone.

"Make it count," Ellie cautioned.

I looked back, surprised she could see from so far away. She had a good view through the scope. I nodded, and held my finger to my lips to shush her. I slipped through the gate, put my head down, hung my arms low, and shambled toward the medical tent.

The creepers lurked toward Officer Friendly and the others. The school was peppered with bullet holes. The school bus was full of students, sitting in rows, wasting away. Bloody hand prints on the windows told the story.

I glanced around, seeing all the familiar faces for the first time. I saw my old teachers and classmates. The clerk from the general store, my old barber, and the Thornton librarian were all there. This wasn't a compound of the undead. It was an open graveyard of all my friends and neighbors.

The entrance gate to the police tents was torn off its hinges and lying flat. Riot cops stood on both sides. They were slouched and awkward looking, but still guarding the entrance, just like Officer Friendly. Was this really just muscle memory?

As I inched passed them, they looked me over, but didn't leave their posts. I found the medical tent, and once inside I closed the entrance flap with Velcro latches.

"I'm in!" I whispered into the radio.

"I can't believe that worked. Hurry, this herd is about to rip the fence down."

"Hang tight, I'm almost done."

Three bodies were laid out on steel tables and covered in sheets. I rummaged around and found a tub labeled "Antibiotics" in a steel fridge. There were a dozen bottles of clear liquids, with names like Amoxicillin and Cephazolin. "I found them, but I don't know what these names mean."

"Grab anything labeled 'broad-spectrum.'"

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Let's just say this ain't my first rodeo."

"I hope you're not afraid of needles." I threw all the bottles in my gear bag. Better safe than sorry. I also grabbed some alcohol swabs. "Got it! I'm coming back!"

I pushed the tent flap aside and stepped into the cool air. Ellie's voice interrupted. "Max, you have company!"

It was Officer Friendly, its hands scraped and bloody from grinding against the bricks. Its eyes locked with mine, showing something more than hunger or rage. It was recognition. Somehow this had become personal.

Officer Friendly ran at me in a full sprint, and I froze, never having seen a corpse move so fast.

Ellie's rifle echoed across the campus as Officer Friendly's helmet exploded with glass and brains.

The pain was quick and hot. I looked at the blood on my hand, and before I even realized it was mine, I was on the ground. The bullet had passed through Officer Friendly's head and struck me right below my collarbone.

Ellie was frantic on the radio, but I couldn't understand. The blood pooling under me was warm, but I still felt cold. Between my deafening heart beats I heard a muffled rumbling, but I was so dizzy I thought the world might slip away.

The ground shook and pulled me back to consciousness. It got louder, and closer, until it was not a single hum, but distinct overlapping thumps. I barely heard the second gunshot over the clamor, but then I knew what it was. The herd was awake.

A third shot.

She'd run out soon. The thought came to me in my stupor. With each shot, the footfalls quickened. They were headed toward Ellie. I sat up, my shoulder burned like fire. The hatchet rested in a pool of my blood. I grabbed it with my good arm.

A fourth shot.

I pushed myself up with the hatchet handle to get to my feet. I felt delirious, like I might pass out from blood loss. My wound gushed as I staggered toward the gate.

A fifth shot.

I stumbled over the fallen gate and braced myself against the perimeter fence. The herd came pouring out of the refugee tents. They came out of bushes, cars, and other hiding places. If they couldn't run, they walked. If they couldn't walk, they crawled. They acted in unison, like a single organism, pursuing relentlessly to see if the sound was friend or food.

A sixth shot.

The herd piled against the outer fence. I yelled into the radio, but Ellie didn't answer. The fence held, but there was no telling for how long. The creepers climbed on top of each other to get over the fence and I could see Ellie taking aim.

A seventh shot.

Two riot cops heard me yelling and turned toward me. I tightened my grip on the hatchet as they approached.

The eighth and final shot rang out. Ellie was out of ammo.

I lifted the hatchet with my good arm and swung. It slid off the first riot cop's helmet and embedded in the shoulder plate. Blood spurted as the cop screamed in pain, falling to one knee.

Creepers don't scream in pain, I thought.

The second cop pulled my arms behind my back. The twinge of the bracelets tightening was nothing compared to the pain in my shoulder, but all I felt was relief.

Creepers don't take prisoners.

Ellie screamed over the roar of the crowd.

My captor forced me to the ground with his knee in my back. Two more riot cops flew overhead on a zip line from the roof of the school to the street. I hadn't noticed it before because it looked like a phone line.

These were survivors. This was a rescue team.

I went limp with my face in the dirt. The injured cop barked with a clenched jaw, "Stop resisting." His baton came down hard on my skull, and the world slipped away.