

Those Left Behind: Matt Baker

If a billion people were spared the horror of the zombie infection, that would still leave 5 billion zombies on the planet.

If only the odds had been that good.

The illness came upon us so quickly. Within a matter of hours, most of the population had died...and been reborn.

The zombies swarmed the cities. They were everywhere. The survivors fought back as best they could against the surging hordes. They took refuge wherever they could, converting churches, police stations, and whatever other buildings they could into strongholds against the waves of undead that sought to consume them. They scavenged the supermarkets and the malls, desperate for whatever they could find. They took what they could carry, leaving the rest to the rats.

Ultimately, heroes surfaced to lead the survivors in their struggles. But their burdens were heavy. Starvation and the dead were not their only enemies.

First came the remnants of the street gangs who thought they could take what they wanted.

Then came the cultists, a group of fanatics who believed that the zombies were meant to dominate the Earth. It was the solemn duty of the cult to aid the zombies in their conquest.

Faced with challenge after challenge, the survivors of the ApocalypZe strived to carve out a small place for themselves. This is their story.

This is your story...

The phone was ringing.

It seemed so out of place, the ringing. To begin with, he was in bed. If he was in bed and asleep, the phone shouldn't have been ringing. And yet the evidence was undeniable. So he rolled over, grabbed the cordless out of its cradle and pressed the button.

Dial tone.

But the phone was still ringing.

It takes a special kind of moron to program a ring tone for his cell phone that sounds exactly like the ringer on his home phone. Dr. Matt Baker, well respected neurobiologist at *Biozem Laboratories*, was just that special kind of moron.

Scooping his cell phone into his sleepy hands, he swiped the screen and mumbled something into the speaker.

"Matt?"

"Yeah. My God, Eddings, do you know what time it is?"

Eddings completely ignored his question. "Are you sick?"

"What? Am I what?"

"Are you sick, damn it? Runny nose. Coughing. Fever. Anything like that?"

"No," Baker said. "I was sleeping. It's three thirty in the morning."

Eddings said, "Can you come in?"

"Of course I'm coming in. It's Thursday. I'm due in at eight."

"You need to come now. Everyone's sick and we need to know why."

Baker sat up in bed. "What do you mean everyone's sick? And why do you need me? Where's DeMarco? Demarco's sick?"

"I don't know where DeMarco is. No one's seen him for days."

Reaching onto the nightstand, Baker grabbed his glasses and put them on. Then he took the remote and flipped on the television. The networks were busy with news stories of people becoming ill with some type of virus. It had started the night before. No wonder Baker had missed it. He'd been working extra hours and had crashed at around 8:30. People seemed to be getting sick all at once. There were reports from every country on every continent. The hospitals were overflowing with sick patients.

"Matt? Are you there?"

He'd forgotten all about Eddings. "Yeah. Sorry, Eddings. I'll be there soon."

Eddings started to say something else, but Baker hung up. He went quickly to the shower, knowing that today was going to be a crazy day, but not realizing just how crazy. He wondered how so many people, all across the country could get sick at the same time. It was as if some crazy epidemic had struck overnight. Baker wasn't a medical doctor but it didn't take him long to do the math. In order for a virus to strike in so many places at once, it would have to have an extended incubation period. Only then would it have time to spread around the country, and probably the world, before revealing itself. Though he didn't necessarily want to face this next conclusion, it seemed likely that the virus was engineered. And no one built a virus just to give the population a runny nose.

The worst was yet to come.

It was after four when he finally got into his car and started for the lab. The streets were practically empty. What was normally a forty minute drive took him twenty five minutes. Baker saw a few ambulances and police cars, but even those had only one person inside. Most of the buses didn't seem to be running. He passed one with a stern looking driver who was ignoring stops with what appeared to be sick people waiting at them. He was suddenly afraid, really afraid. For a moment he considered turning around and going home. After all, wasn't he exposing himself to the virus by going out? Then again, following his earlier logic regarding the incubation period, he'd probably been exposed to it long ago. But he wasn't sick. Eddings, too, wasn't sick. Did that mean they were immune?

Arriving at the lab, he pulled his car into one of the executive parking spots. He wasn't an executive but there were only half a dozen other vehicles in the lot. It was, of course, still way too early for the regular work day but Baker didn't think a whole lot of folks were going to show up.

Getting out of the car, he noticed some movement over by a pickup truck parked a few spots away. He didn't recognize the truck, but he guessed that it belonged to one of the night time janitorial staff. Curious, he moved over to see what was going on.

He heard an odd shuffling sound and then a grunt. Then the truck moved as if something heavy had been thrown inside.

"Hello?" he called, feeling very much like the blonde in the horror movie.

A face peaked up over the side of the truck. The eyes were sunken and the cheeks were sagging. Baker jumped back.

"Norm," Baker breathed after a moment. "You scared the crap out of me."

Norman Land *was* on the nighttime janitorial staff. Baker only knew him from the few times he had stayed really late at work. He seemed like a nice guy, if a bit quiet.

"Sorry, Dr. Baker. Are you all right?"

Baker ran a hand through his hair and circled around to absently stroke his goatee. It was a habit he had picked up when he'd been hired by *Biozem*. The job was high pressure.

"Yeah, fine. You okay?"

"I'm not sick," Land said.

"What are you doing here?"

"You'll have to call Dr. Eddings to get inside," Land said. "There's no security staff so the door is locked."

"Can't you let me in?"

"I've got to go to my daughter." Land slipped into the truck and started it up. Baker took a step forward but didn't have anything to say. He watched as the truck started first to roll and then sped off.

"Matt!"

Turning, Baker saw Eddings standing just inside the main entrance to the building. He was holding open the glass door.

Looking once to where Land's truck was now only a memory, Baker walked over to Eddings and entered the building.

"Did you see Norm?" Baker asked.

"Yeah. That's why I came down."

"I think he was stealing stuff."

"Who cares?" Eddings mumbled, shutting and locking the door.

Eddings had tremendous seniority at *Biozem*. Though he was only about ten years older than Baker, he had been recruited by the company right out of undergrad school. They had paid for his masters and doctorate degrees in exchange for a commitment that he had kept for the entirety of his career.

"Is anyone else here?" Baker asked as they marched across the marble floor of the lobby, their footsteps echoing hollowly in the dark expanse. Above their heads, the ceiling stretched several stories high. Each floor of the building wound around the circumference, leaving a giant courtyard inside. The labs and offices were nestled into the rim of the structure at every level.

"Redden."

"Great," Baker grumbled. He and Janet Redden had been at odds since she had joined the company three years earlier.

"We've got six patients, too. They're all staff."

"How are you caring for them and doing the research with just you and Redden? God, Eddings, I hope you didn't call me down here to be a nurse."

"Don't be stupid, Matt. No one's taking care of them. They're suffering and we're studying them."

Baker stopped short, standing in the dark hallway.

Eddings took only three more steps but turned quickly when he became aware that he was alone. "What, Matt? What? Am I an evil scientist, now? What am I supposed to do?"

"How about getting them to a hospital?"

Eddings began to laugh. It was a humorless laughter. He wasn't the kind of guy that discounted another's pain, but he was practical. "The hospitals are overflowing. Hell, the majority of *their* staff is sick also."

All of a sudden, a woman's voice drifted across the empty lobby. It was Redden. She was three floors up and hanging over the railing.

"We're on our way up," Eddings called back.

"Well hurry up," she said. "We just lost Ouritch."

Cursing under his breath, Eddings ran past the bank of elevators and hit the stairs. Baker followed close behind. He didn't know Ouritch well, but they had met a few times. He was, or rather had been, an executive rather than a doctor. Baker might have even parked in his spot.

Redden was there to meet them as they emerged from the stairwell. She looked haggard. Baker had never found her particularly attractive but that might have been due to the fact that he just didn't like her. She was pale and too thin for his tastes. Though she had high cheekbones and a tiny round nose, whatever it was she did with her hair pulled all the pretty out.

"He just flatlined," she said as they jogged around the circumference of the building.

"How are the others?"

She shook her head. "Only Muriel is still conscious and she isn't totally coherent."

Based on their direction, Baker figured they had the patients laid out in the overnight lounge. When he'd first come on board with *Biozem*, he'd thought that the idea of an overnight lounge was ludicrous. Who the hell was going to spend the night at work? Well, as it turned out, he'd used it countless times. Whenever he was totally engrossed in a project, he'd camp out in the overnight lounge, sometimes for several days. When it was all done he could submit the time and take a few days off. Working at *Biozem* was good for him.

Just inside the lounge there was a small room for taking meals. There was a refrigerator and a microwave. There were three small round tables and a mounted television set. Redden had been watching the TV. There was a tired looking newscaster on it reporting from the midst of chaos.

She was at a hospital in the city. All around her were sick people waiting to get inside. She stopped two young police officers in an attempt to question them, but they politely brushed her off.

In the back of the lounge was a door that led to a sort of barracks. Moving through, Baker could see three occupied beds. He only recognized one of the patients. It was Dr. Fahid. She was unconscious yet shivering. In the near corner of the room, huddling on the floor was a young woman. Baker assumed this was Muriel. She was an intern or something. He'd seen her around, even considered asking her out, but had never learned her name. Now she was feverish and frightened, her head angled upward, looking toward the back of the room. Baker followed her gaze until he found Ouritch. He was standing hunched over one of the beds, his back and his bald head to them. Baker could see that there was someone, a woman by the look of her legs, in the bed.

"I thought you said he was dead," Eddings whispered to Redden.

"He...was," Redden managed. "Mr. Ouritch?"

Baker suddenly became aware of several things. The first was that the blanket had been discarded from bed against which Ouritch was hunched. There were also a number of questionable sounds coming from it. It sounded like slurping and crunching.

"Is he...?"

Then he noticed the blood. There didn't seem to be that much. It wasn't dripping. It had just sort of seeped into the sheets.

Redden moved slowly across the room, extending a hand toward Ouritch.

Now who's the blonde in the horror movie? thought Baker unkindly.

"Don't," Muriel said in a small voice.

As Redden was passing between two beds one of the other patients died. He was hooked up to a monitor which began to whine. The noise attracted Ouritch. He turned and that's when they got a good look at him. The blood that had seeped into the sheets was just a hint of the carnage previously hidden by the executive. Ouritch *had* been eating the woman on the bed. He'd torn into her. There was blood all over his face and hands and the front of his shirt.

"Holy hell!" Eddings shouted.

Is this what this is about? Baker thought, elaborating on his engineered plague theory. *The virus turns them into cannibals?*

"He's dead," said Muriel. Then, as if to drive home her point, the woman that Oritch had been eating sat up in her bed. There was no doubt that she was dead. Even if she could have somehow survived the trauma of having chunks torn out of her, there was no way she was in any condition to sit up.

...let alone stand up...

...and take a step.

"Janet," Eddings said as the maniacal Ouritch took one jerky step toward her. "Janet, let's go."

Baker, closest to the exit, found the resolve to move deeper in and reach out for Muriel. She took his hand and stood on shaky legs.

"*Now*, Janet," Eddings said with more force.

Baker moved back, pushing Muriel in front of him. Unable to take her eyes off of the approaching monstrosities, Redden backed up slowly. While Ouritch continued to close the distance between them, the living dead woman found an occupied bed and began tearing into the patient thereon.

Eddings turned his head and threw up.

Maybe it was that sound that finally snapped Redden out of her funk. She spun away from Oritch and, grabbing Eddings by the arm, charged through the door. It was all Baker could do to get out of the way. Ouritch started moving a bit faster but it was clear that being dead was wreaking havoc with his motor skills. Baker was easily able to move back through the lounge and into the hallway. Somewhat recovered, Eddings closed the door behind them.

"So it does what?" Redden mused to herself, breathing heavily from fear and exertion. "They get sick, they die, they wake up, they eat people."

"And the people they eat also wake up and eat people," Eddings finished.

"Are they smart?" Baker asked. "Are they still the same people?"

"Ouritch didn't answer me when I called him," observed Redden.

"I don't think it matters," Eddings concluded. "They're dangerous and clearly don't feel any pain."

"And they're virtually indestructible," added Redden.

"Holy hell," Eddings cried. "If everyone with this virus is going to turn into one of those things..." He let the sentiment hang there. They'd all seen the news reports. The numbers were

staggering. It suddenly occurred to Baker that they had a potential six of these...people in the building with them. The hospitals were overflowing. He looked down at Muriel.

All three of them looked down at Muriel.

She was stretched out on the floor shivering. She seemed incoherent.

"Holy hell," Eddings repeated in a whisper.

All of a sudden there was a thump against the door. Then another. Redden and Baker jumped back, but Eddings stood his ground.

"Why don't they just open it?" Redden asked.

"Maybe that answers the intelligence question," said Baker. "Let's get to the lab and see if we can't find a way to beat this thing."

"What about her?" Eddings asked, indicating Muriel.

Baker swallowed hard. "Let's bring her along. I'll want to have a look at what the virus is doing to the brain."

"Wait, you're going to take out her brain?" Redden asked.

Baker was already getting her to her feet. "She's going to die and she's going to...turn. Maybe I can learn something that will help others."

Nodding to himself, Eddings got around Muriel's other side and helped Baker haul her around the building to the main biology lab. There was an examination table for cadavers and they laid her out on top of it. Baker wanted her tied down. They didn't have restraints so they made due with surgical ties.

"Now what?" Redden asked accusingly. "Are you going to wait for her to die or are you going to just cut her head open right now."

Baker was too preoccupied with the job ahead to really take note of Redden's tone. He went to a cabinet and put on a gown and some goggles. Then he found a pair of gloves and a surgical kit, including just the saw he was going to need to cut into Muriel's head.

"Let's do this now while we have power," he said. The responding glances from Eddings and Redden indicated that they hadn't considered the possibility of losing electricity. But to Baker's way of thinking, the power plants were, just like everything else, probably already working on skeleton crews because of the virus. Once the dead started swarming, those crews would have to abandon their positions and the power would go. He only hoped that those people working at nuclear facilities would have the good sense to shut them down properly.

Filling a syringe, Baker grabbed Muriel's arm and, without hesitation, jabbed it in and emptied it into her vein.

"Jesus," cried Eddings, but he didn't interfere.

Baker backed off, tossing the needle onto a tray. Muriel's body convulsed once and then went still. Standing like statues, the three doctors watched. It took a few minutes for her to turn. No one moved or said anything in that time. The transformation was surreal. She didn't start breathing again. But her throat started to move. It looked like she was swallowing and swallowing. It gave Baker the idea that Ouritch hadn't been trying to fill his stomach as much as his throat. When Muriel's eyes opened, Eddings jumped.

"Muriel?" Redden whispered, leaning in.

"Don't get too close," Baker warned.

As soon as Redden crossed some invisible threshold, Muriel reached for her. Her hands struggled against the ties and she lifted her head in an attempt to bite her.

Having seen enough, Eddings went to a cabinet and began rummaging through the supplies. Finding a roll of silver tape, he tore off a long piece and fastened it over Muriel's mouth. Careful to keep his hands out of reach, he put three more pieces of tape over it before letting Baker go to work.

"We need to turn her over," Baker said.

"What the hell for?" Eddings complained.

"I can't take out the brain without severing it at the base of the neck."

"And you're just thinking of this now?" Redden complained.

"Look, I'm sorry," said Baker. "She's taped up and there are two of you. Just do the best you can."

"Hold her wrist tightly," Eddings said to Redden. "Undo the strap and roll her toward me. We can uncross her legs after she's rolled."

Redden grabbed Muriel's wrist and held it down. As she undid the strap, Muriel lunged. Eddings reached across her body and grabbed hold of her arm just as Redden reared back.

"Take it," Eddings ordered. "*Take it.*"

Redden grabbed the arm again and held onto it with fury. Then, under Eddings' careful instructions, she rolled Muriel over so that her left arm, on Eddings' side, was pinned underneath her body.

Eddings took possession of Muriel's right arm and cut free the left. While he was lashing her down on his side, Redden pulled the left arm underneath the body. As she did so, it slipped free of her grasp and swiped at the doctor. Jumping back, Redden managed to deflect the arm with the back of her hand suffering no more than a minor scratch. Eddings, already done with his side, came quickly around the table and managed to secure Muriel's other arm.

"You okay?" he asked, looking up at Redden.

Redden looked down at the scratch on the back of her hand. "I'll live."

"Better disinfect that," Baker suggested so she went and did so.

With that out of the way, Baker smoothed back his hair, grabbed the electric saw, and got to work.

It was tough to maneuver the saw while Muriel jerked her head back and forth. She wasn't in any pain. She didn't cry out against the tape, nor did her thrashing become any more aggressive as the blade touched her skull, but her regular movements were troublesome nonetheless. Baker cut slowly, careful not to damage the brain. Once the top of her skull had been removed, he went in with a scalpel and severed the stem from her spine. The moment he did so, she stopped moving altogether.

"How about that?" Eddings said.

"I suspected that might happen." Baker set the brain on a tray and moved it over to where he could work. "This is amazing," he said after a few minutes. "Even separated from the body, there's still activity. It's as if it's got its own portable generator."

They worked for several hours, Baker taking sections of the brain and analyzing them using various pieces of equipment. Eddings and Redden took other tissue samples from the now lifeless Muriel and performed analysis after analysis.

"Well, there's something in her blood, but it isn't any kind of virus I've ever seen," Eddings ultimately declared.

"It's a parasite," said Baker, one eye buried in the scope of a microscope. "I've found thousands of them in the brain but they're all dead except for one."

"One? Just one?"

Baker went over to the brain with a pair of forceps. Reaching down, he speared a section and grabbed hold of something. He had to tug hard to pull it free and it dragged some brain matter with it. From across the room, Eddings could see a white wriggling thing about four inches long. It looked like a piece of living thread.

"How the hell did *that* get into her brain?"

Baker put the thing in a jar and sealed it. "Presumably, the parasites infect the host by the millions. Much like the fertilization of an egg, they travel to the brain. The first one to get a hold of it becomes the alpha parasite. It grows. When it gets big enough, it takes control of the brain. Any others die."

"That's crazy," Eddings mused. "Why do the victims eat people, though?"

Baker shrugged. "Presumably to feed the parasite."

Eddings shook his head. "Matt, food can't go from the mouth to the brain. It..."

Grabbing a pair of gloves and a scalpel, Eddings went over to Muriel's body and sliced into her throat. "Holy hell!" He jumped away, the bloody scalpel falling from his hand. Just over her chin, Baker could see something white and bloody wriggling in her throat. Going back to the brain, he found more pieces of the parasite. It was much longer than four inches and had intertwined itself throughout the tissue.

"That's sick," Eddings said. "But if this thing already had a grip on her, why am I finding so many live ones?"

"My guess is that once one inhabits the brain, the others sit tight and wait for an opportunity to infect a new host. We can assume that they've been dormant up until now and spread through fluid contact, maybe even coughs and sneezes. The dead won't have an opportunity for fluid contact unless they attack. That's probably another reason they're so aggressive. They can pass on the infection through, say, a bite or a..."

Both men immediately looked over at Redden. She was sitting in a chair. They didn't know when she'd stopped working.

"You all right, Janet?" Eddings asked.

She nodded dully. "I'm just tired."

"How many people do you suppose are still alive?" Eddings asked, eyeing Redden warily.

Baker had removed his gloves and goggles and ran his hand through his hair. "I suppose there are people who haven't been exposed to it at all. I'm not sure that's going to matter in the long run, though. You have to stick strictly with immunity which means anywhere from two to five percent of the population."

Redden coughed.

Baker looked over at her. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Look at her hand," Eddings said unsurprised.

The scratch was glowing red with infection. Redden looked at it and got this stricken expression on her face. "How can I be sick, though? I'm immune. We all are."

Eddings smacked himself in the head. "What if immunity is based on the strength of the body's immune system?"

"What?" Redden cried even though she should have easily been able to follow his logic.

Eddings continued. "Our bodies managed to kill off the dormant parasite before it had a chance to reproduce. Theoretically, no concentration of the dormant parasite will be able to infect us because it's too weak against our immune systems. But the scratch you suffered transmitted active parasites."

Redden now looked terrified. "So I'm going to turn into that?" She indicated Muriel's prone and mutilated form. "There's one of those things in my brain?"

"Don't panic," said Baker. "Now that we know what it is, maybe we can find a way to deal with it."

He looked over at Eddings who shook his head sadly. "Radiation or chemotherapy might be effective, but we don't have those facilities here."

"Then we need to get her to a hospital," Baker said.

But Eddings shook his head again. "I told you. The hospitals are overrun with sick people who are all going to die and become..." He indicated Muriel.

"Well I don't have any choice, do I?" Redden said, glaring angrily at Eddings.

"No," Baker said. "We don't. I'll drive you."

This declaration seemed to take her by surprise. All she could muster was a weak "thank you".

As Baker stripped off the gown and washed himself at the sink, Eddings came up next to him. "Are you crazy?"

"Maybe. What do you suggest? If we don't try then she'll die for sure."

"Matt, I respect what you're trying to do, but I don't think you're facing the reality here. There are thousands of sick people at those hospitals. They're probably already dying off and attacking whoever's left. You're proposing we walk through that and help ourselves to the radiation equipment?"

Baker cut the water flow, wondering just how long they would even *have* running water. He was facing the reality all right. He was facing it head on. Right now, he was looking at the end of civilization. Just exactly half of his companions was about to die. How long would someone like him last? He couldn't fight. He couldn't make a fire or hunt. As a wild animal, Matt Baker would be prey rather than predator. At least, this way, he could go out trying to help someone. He could go out with dignity.

"Are you ready?" he asked Redden.

She nodded weakly. She was deteriorating quickly.

He looked at Eddings. "Are you coming?"

For a moment, Eddings looked terrified. The he nodded, too, swallowing deeply.

Together, the two of them helped Redden from the lab and out into the corridor. It was mid morning now and the spring sun shone brightly through glass front. Leaving Baker, Eddings went to the rail and looked down at the lobby. He saw something that surprised him.

"There's someone at the door outside."

"Who is it?" Baker asked, pushing the button for the elevator.

"I can't see." Stepping away from the edge, he took a quick glance around the room and froze.

The door to the overnight lounge was open.

A bell rang indicating that the elevator had arrived.

Eddings started to say something, but his voice froze in his throat.

The elevator door opened.

Baker caught sight of a figure on the far side of the third floor. It was misshapen and moving awkwardly. He recognized it as the woman Ouritch had been eating.

"Eddings," he called, pushing Redden toward the elevator.

"I see it," Eddings said, coming quickly over and getting into the elevator.

The door closed and they started down.

"I forgot my car keys," Eddings said.

"I've got mine," Baker told them.

"I love my car."

"I know," said Baker. "I already miss my apartment."

Eddings was nodding. "I have a son in New Mexico. He's probably about fifteen now."

The elevator came to a halt and the door opened. Baker started out and then stopped short. Ouritch was laying on the floor fifteen feet from where the elevator doors. There was blood all around him and one leg was broken, the bone sticking through the thigh muscle. He must have gone over the side.

"Just go around him," Baker instructed.

Ouritch tried to reach them but it proved impossible on his bad leg. He didn't express any pain, but still hissed and spat as they sidestepped him.

It turned out that there was more than one person at the door. There were three. They were all dead. One was a young girl in a sun dress. There was a flower in her hair and a large bite wound on her leg. She must have gone out for a morning stroll having no idea what was happening in the world. The others were in pajamas. One was an elderly man and the other a large woman in a flowing nightgown. Neither of them showed any signs of damage, but the woman was covered in blood. Both had probably been sick from the initial infection. The woman had fed.

"Now what?" Eddings asked.

There were a few others milling about the parking lot. Another car had pulled in some time during the morning. The driver's side door was open and a trail of blood led from the car to what appeared to be a group of people huddling around something on the ground.

"I think we'll need to be quick," said Baker.

Eddings was wringing his hands nervously. The abstract concept of what they were facing was all too quickly becoming a reality.

"You all right, Eddings?" Baker asked. When the other didn't respond, he shouted, "Eddings!"

Eddings looked at him. "Yeah, Matt. Yeah."

Looking around, Baker found a fire station. He gave Redden, whose condition had worsened severely, over to Eddings. A fire axe would have been nice. He wasn't sure he'd be able to use it, but it would have felt good in his hands. Unfortunately, all he had was a fire extinguisher.

He looked at Redden. She wasn't going to make it. At this point he was sure of it. All he was really doing was using her as an excuse for something to do.

Taking his keys out of his pocket, he pressed the button that unlocked the car door. The beep attracted the attention of one of the huddled people, causing her to shift position. It gave them a quick look at the bloody mass in the center of the group.

"That's Polowitz," Eddings said. "I recognize his car."

Baker nodded. "Open the door."

Taking the building keys out of his pocket, Eddings unlocked the door and pulled it open. Instantly, Baker moved in and began spraying the zombies in the face. Foam filled their mouths, noses, and eyes leaving them stumbling around senseless. Using the extinguisher, he batted them down and shouted for Eddings to go.

As they ran to the car, Baker intercepted a couple of the people from the group around Polowitz. They'd been attracted to the noise. He sprayed them, backing away in the process.

"Open the door!" yelled Eddings.

"I did," Baker cried back.

And he had. But they'd taken too long to get to the car and the doors had automatically locked themselves. Cursing the makers of his car, Baker tried to figure out a way that he could keep spraying the zombies and fish out his keys again.

Eddings cried out something and then there was a thud. Baker spared a glance to see that he had abandoned Redden and run for it. Two new zombies set upon her. She screamed as they tore her apart.

Baker ran to her, spraying the zombies and kicking them away. The foam confused them enough to buy him a minute. Though still alive, Redden was badly hurt. He supposed it didn't matter. She was going to die anyway. But the pain. She didn't deserve the pain.

Somewhere deep inside of himself, Baker found the resolve to take action. Hefting the fire extinguisher with both hands, he slammed it down against her head. When it didn't do the job, Baker panicked, crying "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." over and over again. The next time he hit her, he killed her. After that, he couldn't bear to hold the extinguisher anymore. He tossed it away and dug for his keys, smearing blood on his pants.

There were more zombies approaching, but he had time.

"Eddings! Where are you?"

He so desperately didn't want to be alone.

Looking around, his eyes found Eddings back inside the building. He was safe, or so he seemed. He'd closed the door and locked it. Now he was staring out through the glass as five zombies

pressed themselves against it. Baker took a step toward him, but the two zombies were closer than he'd anticipated. With no other options, he got into his car and locked the doors behind him.

When he looked up again, Eddings had disappeared.

Putting the key in the ignition, Baker started the car and pulled slowly away. The zombies paid no heed to the car. He swerved away from them for fear of damaging his car. When he was finally on the road, he picked up some speed. He drove aimlessly for a while, just looking at the crumbling world around him.

It all seemed so peaceful, nothing like what the apocalypse was supposed to be. There were no cars on the road. There were no screaming people in the streets. There were no fires. There was just the sunshine, the breeze, and the occasional walking corpse shambling along.

He was just getting back on the highway for no good reason when his phone rang. The sound seemed so familiar and yet so out of place that he was completely befuddled by it. Careening from one side of the empty road to the other, he pulled to a stop on the shoulder and reached for the phone breathlessly. He expected it to be Eddings but when he looked at the screen, he saw "Mom and Dad".

"Hello, hello!" he shouted into the phone. "Mom. Dad."

"Matt?" came the sullen voice of his father. "Oh, my God. Matt, are you all right?"

"I can't believe it," Baker said more to himself than to his father. "Things are bad, here, Dad. Really bad."

"Are you...safe?"

"I guess. For now. You?"

His dad hesitated and Matt knew that the next words he heard would be a lie. "Sure, Matt. We're fine."

"Mom? Mom's fine, too?" Baker quickly calculated the odds of he, his father, and his mother all being immune to initial wave of the infection. If he and his dad were both unaffected, that suggested a genetic immunity. His mother wouldn't share that.

"Sure, son. She's good," his dad's voice broke a little.

"I'm coming there, Dad."

"There are a thousand miles between us, Matt. You'll never make it."

There was a thump against the window. Baker turned his head and saw a dead person clawing at the glass.

"Find someplace safe, Matt," said his dad. "Life may have changed but the fundamentals are still there. You can survive. You *can!* Don't worry about us."

Baker started to cry.

"Don't, Matt. It is what it is. We all leave things behind."

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you, too, Matt. I've got to go. Visitors."

"Give 'em hell."

"Goodbye, Matt."

And then it was over. His last conversation with his father had come and gone. He stared at his cell phone while the thing continued to claw and scratch at his window. Baker sat staring at it for awhile. He was thinking about his dad and this world and the poor pathetic thing at his door. What separated him from them? He wasn't smarter and he wasn't tougher. Matt Baker was in no condition to survive in a world that did not provide electricity and gasoline and specialty coffees. But his father had been right. They were just things that had to be left behind. If the world could change, then Matt Baker could change as well.

He was just reaching for the gear shift when there was a loud boom and the zombie's head exploded. Baker jumped, then noticed that a spider web crack had appeared on his window.

Coming down the hill were two men. The lead man was big with a square jaw. He was wearing a pair of police uniform pants and a grimy white t-shirt. He was carrying a shotgun, clearly the same weapon that had blown the head off of the zombie. The second man was smaller and looked Chinese.

Baker didn't know whether to get out and thank him or drive off. Despite a sudden sense of mistrust, Baker realized that part of adapting to this world was recognizing opportunity. The big man clearly possessed skills that Baker himself was lacking.

Opening the door slowly, Baker said, "Thank you."

This seemed to surprise the man. He lowered his shotgun and smiled wide.

"What's your name, friend?" the man asked.

"Matt Baker."

The big man looked him up and down. "You a doctor, *white coat?*"

Baker looked down at his lab coat. It was splattered with dried blood. He nodded.

"You a real doctor or a shrink like this useless son of a dog."

The Chinese man looked away.

"I'm a surgeon," Baker said. It was a half truth. While he had surgical skills, it had been a long time since he'd cut into anything living.

"Wo ho!" The stranger's face lit up. He came up to Baker and took his hand, shaking it vigorously. "That's the best news I've had all day, not that it's got much in the way of competition. I'm Antonio Jones. I'm a cop. This here is Adam Li. He's kind of a cop."

"I'm a police psychiatrist," Li elaborated.

"Sure. Half a cop and half a doc," Jones said, getting into the driver's seat of Baker's car.

Baker looked down at him. "Are we going somewhere?"

Jones nodded. "We'll find a good place, set up a stronghold."

"A stronghold?"

Jones nodded. "You coming?"

Baker took the passenger seat and Li slipped into the back.

"I work at *Biozem*," Baker said. "My friend is there."

"Is it overrun?" Jones asked. "Are there zombies there?"

"Zombies? A few I guess. He locked himself inside."

"I don't have the ammo to mount a rescue," Jones said.

"I can't just leave him behind," said Baker.

Antonio Jones' expression grew serious and solemn. He was a transformed individual. "We all leave someone behind."

Baker fell silent after that. With his father's words, echoed by Antonio Jones, reverberating inside his head, he stared at the road ahead trying not only to block out what lay behind, but what lay ahead as well.