



TERMINUS

'THERE'S NO DENYING THE
STRENGTH OF BAKER'S PROSE'

SFX MAGAZINE



ADAM BAKER

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About the Author

Before writing his horror novels *Outpost* and *Juggernaut*, Adam Baker worked as a gravedigger and a film projectionist. *Terminus* is his third horror novel.

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Terminus

Adam Baker



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For Oliver

Northrop Grumman B2 bomber Fatal Beauty.

BASE OF OPERATION:

509th Bomb Wing, Whiteman AFB, Missouri.

FLIGHT CREW:

Mission Commander Maj. R.G. DeWinter

Pilot Capt. T. Weiss

Co-Pilot First Lt. O. Gary

PAYLOAD:

Five kiloton B84 Sandman variable yield nuclear device.

DESIGNATED TARGET:

New York City.

CURRENT SPEED:

200 knots.

CURRENT ALTITUDE:

15,000 feet.

POSITION:

Holding pattern over Kinzua Dam, Allegheny, Pennsylvania.

Weapon armed.

Waiting for executive authorisation to commence bomb run.

2

A subway plant room deep beneath the streets of lower Manhattan.

A single, bare bulb furred with dust and webs.

Shadow and dereliction. Baroque electro-conductive ironwork. *Westinghouse*. Ampere/volt gauges. Ropes of cable sheathed in tar. Porcelain insulators, the milky glass bulbs of mercury-vapour rectifiers, a corroded rack of lead-acid batteries. Dormant, web-draped apparatus that hinted bygone years of high voltage crackle and dancing Tesla arcs.

Three prisoners cuffed to a water pipe. They each wore red NY Corrections state-issue.

‘Hear that?’ said Lupe. She nodded towards the plant room door. Rapid footsteps and shouting from the subway ticket hall outside. ‘They’re coming for me.’

‘Maybe the army guys are pulling out. Listen. Something’s got them spooked.’

Lupe shook her head.

‘No. I’m next on the kill list. They’re prepping the table, getting ready to dissect my ass.’

She gripped the pipe and tried to rip it from the wall.

‘Forget it,’ said Wade. ‘It’s anchored in concrete.’

‘Pull together. Come on. All three of us.’

She turned to Sicknote. The man was slumped against the wall in a drugged stupor. She kicked him alert.

‘Hey. Come on. We got to wrench this thing out the wall. Count of three, all right?’

They gripped the pipe.

‘One. Two. Three.’

They strained. Knuckles clenched white. Tendons in their arms and necks stood taut, distorting knife scars and gang tats.

‘Told you,’ panted Wade. ‘It’s not going to shift.’

Lupe hung her head.

‘Go down defiant,’ he said. ‘Kick. Spit. Don’t make it easy for them.’

The door handle turned. Light shafted into the room.

Moxon stood in the doorway. His guard uniform was mottled with sweat. He cradled a Remington pump.

He stepped into the room and closed the door.

‘You here for me?’ asked Lupe.

Moxon shook his head.

‘What’s going on out there?’ asked Wade. ‘Why all the shouting?’

‘A presidential address on the emergency network. They’re going to bomb New York. Last chanced to halt the contagion. Couple of hours from now this city will be

an inferno. The team are heading down into the tunnels.'

'Oh my fucking God,' said Wade.

'So what about us?' asked Lupe. She gestured to the shotgun. 'Going to shoot us like rabid dogs, is that the plan?'

'I got orders. Sorry.'

'So how about it? You got what it takes to pull the trigger?'

He shook his head.

'There's been enough killing.'

He engaged the safety and hitched the gun strap over his shoulder. He unhooked keys from his belt. He released the cuffs.

The prisoners flexed their arms and massaged cuff-welts.

'Thanks, dude,' said Wade.

Moxon gave him a canvas satchel. An MRE food pack and a couple of bottles of water.

'You got to run for it. Sprint across the ticket hall, down the steps to the platform and into the tunnel. Do it quick before anyone has a chance to draw down and waste your sorry asses. Don't stop for anything or anyone. Element of surprise. That's all you've got.'

'All right.'

'Two hours until detonation. Get deep as you can and ride out the blast.'

'Thanks, man,' said Lupe. 'Thanks for giving us a chance.'

'Get going. The plane is already in the air. Run. Run as fast as you can.'

They sprinted through the tunnel darkness.

Distant shouts. Gunshots. Bullets blew craters in concrete.

They threw themselves against the wall, took shelter behind a buttress.

'They won't follow,' said Lupe. 'Too busy saving themselves.'

Wade examined the wall.

'This section of tunnel is pretty new, pretty strong. Maybe we'll be okay.'

'I'm not staying here,' said Lupe. 'I'm heading up top. I'm going to try and get across the bridge.'

'You're nuts. You've got less than two hours. You'll never make it.'

'I'll make it.'

'What about the streets? Infected. Hundreds of them.'

'I'm fast. They're slow.'

'Madness.'

'Come with me.'

'No.' He gestured to Sicknote sitting slumped and narcotised by the wall. 'I can't leave him.'

Lupe stood. She gripped Wade's hand.

'Take it easy, bro.'

'*Via con dios.*'

She turned and ran into deep tunnel darkness.

3

Manhattan.

Cold dawn light. No people, no traffic. Avenues lifeless and still.

Looted stores. Abandoned yellow cabs. Dollar bills blew across Fifth like autumn leaves.

The city-wide silence was broken by engine noise reflected and amplified by Midtown mega-structures. Thin jet-roar reverberated through glass canyons, a shriek like dragging nails.

A high-altitude contrail bisected a cloudless sky. A thin ribbon of vapour. Something big, something vulpine. A B2: delta silhouette, wide span, heavy airframe.

Times Square.

Empty streets. Dead neon.

Theatres chained shut, yellow quarantine tape strung across the doors.

A stack of bodies outside Foot Locker, each corpse wrapped in carpet and tied with string.

All Uptown routes blocked by sawhorse barriers.

THIS AREA IS UNDER QUARANTINE FEMA 846-9279

A wrecked limo at the centre of the intersection. Fender bowed and roof flattened by a toppled light pole. A chauffeur lay dead in the street. He wore a gas mask. Rats tore flesh from his hands.

The distant turbine shriek echoed around the empty junction. Crows shocked into the air. Shrill caws and a flurry of beating wings.

Central Park.

Barren trees. Tiered penthouse balconies, deserted terraces and sky gardens.

A white, cylindrical object slowly drifted to earth, twirling like a sycamore seed. A bomb suspended beneath a canopy of silk.

Detonation flash. A sudden, terrible radiance. The park engulfed in stellar light. The buildings surrounding the park instantly shattered to stone chips.

The shockwave dilated at a thousand miles an hour. Midtown spires encompassed by a fast-expanding bubble of overpressure. A tornado of flame and debris swept down the avenues.

The Empire State collapsed in a cascade of rubble, Zeppelin docking tower liquefied by the furnace blast.

The Chrysler Building's deco pinnacle crushed like foil, limestone cladding pulverised to dust.

The pearlescent curtain walls of modern office buildings were ripped away in a blizzard of glittering shards. Girder frames wilted in supernova heat.

The firestorm washed down avenues like raging flood water, blowing out storefronts, flipping cars, melting asphalt to bubbling tar.

Then the inferno abruptly reversed and receded, snatching street debris and vehicles up into the conflagration as the nuclear heat-core rose and blossomed into a thunderous column of fire.

Liberty watched, impassive, as the roiling blast plume towered above the city, flame and hell-roar ringed by heat strata and an incandescent halo of ionised air.

Three days later.

The Empire Cinema: *'Brooklyn's Finest Viewing Experience!'* A sign taped to door glass:

**THIS BUILDING CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER
NOTICE
QUARANTINE ORDER 846-9246**

A derelict foyer lit by weak sunlight.

Torn posters.

Scattered popcorn.

Motes of dust drifted through weak sunbeams.

Lupe dived through the main door in an explosion of glass and rain. She brought down an old guy in blue striped pyjamas and a bathrobe. A rotted, skeletal thing, frame barely held together by sinew and cartilage. His eyes were jet black. His skin was threaded with metallic tumours.

They hit the floor and rolled.

Lupe sat on his chest. He snarled. He spat. Hands clawed her face, tore at her coat.

She pulled a tin of beans from her coat pocket and pounded his head. Skull-splintering blows. Brain spilt on blue carpet.

She caught her breath. She wiped sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

A yellow ribbon of quarantine tape had caught round her neck like a scarf. She tore it free.

She ripped the hem of the pyjama jacket. She towelled rain from her hair. She wiped her hands. She cleaned blood and matted hair from the bean tin and put it back in her pocket.

She searched the bathrobe. Coins. Candy wrappers. A lighter.

Distant engine noise. A gruff rumble. Something big, something powerful heading down the street. Sound of an automobile shunted aside: deep revs, shattering glass and metal shriek.

Lupe tried to stand. She fell to the floor. Glass embedded in bare feet. The soles of each foot were studded with granules of safety glass. Heavy blood drips.

She clenched her teeth and prized chunks of glass from her skin. She tweezed each little sliver-blade with ragged fingernails and cast them aside. She tore pyjama fabric and bandaged each foot.

The engine got louder.

A cop siren whooped a single rise-and-fall.

Feedback whine. An amplified voice echoed from the street outside, reverberated down the row of smashed storefronts:

'This is the New York Police Department hailing any survivors. Please come out of your homes. We are here to help. We have food and water. We can provide you with shelter and medical assistance. This borough is no longer safe for human habitation. If you can hear me, if you are able to respond, please come out into the street so that we can convey you to safety.'

Engine noise getting closer.

'This is the New York Police Department. Leave your homes. This is your last chance to evacuate the exclusion zone. Please come out into the street.'

Lupe tried to get to her feet. Stabbing pain. She fell to her knees.

Engine noise reached a crescendo. She lay prone and pulled the body of the old man on top of herself. She played dead.

Diesel roar.

An eight-ton armoured NYPD Emergency Service Vehicle slowly rolled past the cinema entrance. It mounted the sidewalk. The winch fender bulldozed a Lexus aside.

Lupe opened one eye. The vehicle slowly passed in front of the cinema doors. Daylight blocked by a wall of matt black ballistic steel.

The vehicle stopped and idled. A blue haze of exhaust fumes filled the atrium.

White light. She lay still and held her breath as the searchlight washed the foyer walls.

Scattered dollars.

A dead escalator.

A bloody palm print on the ticket booth glass.

The beam scanned the floor. Carpet dusted with scintillating granules of safety glass. Two bodies entwined.

Lupe tried to remain relaxed and impassive, tried not to screw her eyes tight shut as the harsh beam passed over her face.

Maybe they can tell I'm not infected. If I hear a door slam, if I hear boots on the ground, I'll have to get up, try to run.

The vehicle revved and moved on.

Lupe pushed the body aside. She crawled across the atrium carpet on her hands and knees.

She crawled behind the concession stand.

A corpse. A girl in an Empire Cinemas shirt. She was curled on the floor, surrounded by crushed popcorn buckets like she made a cardboard nest in which to die.

Lupe hauled herself through a doorway into a store room. Darkness. She sat with her back to the wall. She flicked the lighter and held up the flame.

Freezers. Steel food preparation counters. CO₂ cylinders and soda syrup. A big metal tub for popping corn.

She took the bean tin from her pocket and hammered it against the door frame, trying to split it open. She gave up and threw the dented tin aside.

A green first aid box and fire blanket on the wall above her head.

She picked up a mop and used the handle to prod the box from its hook. It fell in her lap. She cleaned her wounds with antiseptic wipes and dressed her feet.

Distant, ponderous boot steps. Someone pacing the sidewalk outside the cinema.

Lupe knelt on the mop and snapped the shaft. Muffled, splintering crack. She crawled out the door and crouched behind the concession stand, clutching the jagged spear.

A cop with a shotgun. SWAT body armour. Kevlar helmet, respirator. He wore a prairie coat with the collar turned up. Rainwater dripped from the barrel of his gun.

The cop approached the cinema entrance. He shone a flashlight inside. Lupe ducked behind the counter.

Faint rustle. Lupe turned. The dead girl curled behind the counter slowly came to life. She lifted her head. Half her face was a mess of metallic spines.

Lupe hurriedly backed away. She crawled into the darkness of the storeroom. The putrefied revenant followed.

The girl crouched in darkness, sniffed and looked around.

Lupe pushed the door closed. Weak light through an inch gap.

She kicked the creature in the head, then winced and hopped from the pain.

The infected girl rolled on her back, opened her mouth wide like she was about to deliver a shrill, animal howl. Lupe knelt on her chest and jammed the mop head in her mouth to stifle the scream. The girl thrashed her head side to side and chewed the wad of mop yarn jammed between her jaws. Lupe speared the infected creature's eye socket with the broken handle shaft, drove it deep into brain. The girl fell limp like someone hit an off switch.

Lupe peered through the door gap.

The cop had gone.

She opened the door. The street was empty. Sodden garbage. Rainwater tainted with ash.

She returned to the storeroom. She took the dead girl's shoes and laced them onto her own feet. She flapped open the fire blanket and wrapped it over her head like a silver shawl.

FIRE ESCAPE

She nudged the release bar with her hip and pushed the door ajar.

A narrow side street. Fading light. Burned out cars. Torrential rain.

Lupe edged into the street. A rat-stripped body hung from a yellow cab fifty yards away. A snub revolver clutched in a rotted hand.

She ran to the body. She paused. She circled the corpse, checked for signs of infection, any sign the dead thing would get up and attack.

Blinding light.

'Freeze. Show me your hands. Show me your fucking hands.'

Lupe shielded her eyes.

'Hands, or I'll shoot you in the face.'

Brief moment of decision. Snatch the pistol, or surrender.

She raised her hands and let the fire blanket fall to the ground.

‘On your knees.’

She knelt in pooled rainwater.

An approaching flashlight. Two SWAT cops armed with shotguns.

‘Don’t fucking move.’

One of the SWAT guys stood over her. Contemptuous eyes behind the Lexan visor of an M40 respirator. He lifted Lupe’s chin with the barrel of his gun and checked her out.

Mid-twenties, hair woven in tight cornrows. Gang tats circled her neck. LOS DIABLOS, in gothic script. Two tears inked beneath her right eye made her look cartoon-sad, like a Pagliacci clown.

Knuckle tats. Right hand: VIDA. Left hand: LOCA.

The cop pulled the lapel of her leather jacket aside. Stencil letters on the breast pocket of her red smock:

NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

‘Gangbanger. Better take her to see the Chief.’

5

Lupe sat cuffed to a bench seat in the rear of the armoured car.

They drove through forest. They jolted down a rutted track. She could see trees through milky ballistic view slits. A second prisoner chained to the seat beside her. A scrawny guy in a looted suit. Slate grey silk. A couple of sizes too big. He looked like he had been dressed for his coffin.

‘I’m David,’ said the guy. ‘Where did they pick you up?’

‘Brooklyn.’

A guard sat on the opposite seat. SWAT body armour. Respirator. Remington. The name tape on his vest said GALLOWAY.

‘Where are you taking us?’ demanded David.

The guard didn’t respond.

They continued down the forest track. Weak sunlight through bare branches.

They drove through a high chain-link gateway topped with razor wire. A rusted sign draped with creepers thick as jungle vine:

Ridgeway Flying School

A neglected airfield. A wide airstrip slowly reclaimed by woodland. Civilian planes overwhelmed by thick brush and saplings.

A wrecked Huey gunship sat in tall grass. Rotor blades dripped rain. Paint flaked from rust-stripped body panels. Nose art: red eyes and snarling teeth. *Hammer Strike*. A tree had grown through a hole in the cockpit floor. Branches protruded from vacant canopy windows.

They kept driving.

A Cessna lay in waist-high bracken, fuselage snapped in two like someone broke it over their knee.

The vehicle stopped.

The engine died.

‘So what is this place?’ asked David, craning to look out the windows. He could see hangars and a couple of fuel trucks.

The rear doors were pulled open. SWAT with assault rifles. Galloway flicked open a knife, leaned across the aisle and cut the plastic ties that bound Lupe and David to the bench.

‘Get out.’

They jumped from the truck.

‘Move.’

They walked a few paces.

‘Stop. Hands on your heads.’

They stood beside a battered FDNY fire truck. One of the cops slung his rifle and unwound the hose.

‘What is this shit?’ asked Lupe.

‘Decon shower,’ said the cop. He threw open a nozzle valve and blasted her with a jet of ice water. She was thrown from her feet. She curled foetal, covered her face and waited for the deluge to stop.

The scavenged hulk of a Fairchild Provider. Faded tail code and insignia of 302 Tactical Airlift. The airframe had been stripped for parts. The Pratt & Whitney turboprops were long gone. No flaps, rudder or undercarriage. The alloy wings and tail torn like ragged sail fabric. NO WALK. PROP DANGER. The fuselage was mottled with moss and lichen. The carcass sat in weeds, wing-tilt to the left like it was banking hard.

The cavernous cargo bay was ribbed with reinforcement spars. Frayed cable and hydraulic line hung from the roof. No seats.

Lupe sat cuffed to one of the spars. The rear loading ramp was down. Rain drummed on the skin of the plane, beat down grass and bracken.

David sat nearby, shackled to a floor stanchion. He shivered with cold.

‘What do you think they will do with us?’ he asked.

‘Nothing good.’

She looked towards the front of the plane. The cockpit door was open. Galloway sat in the pilot’s seat, smoking a cigarette. His feet rested on the flight controls. Reclaimed avionics: sheet metal studded with cookie-cutter holes where dials and fuel gauges used to sit.

David tried to saw the plastic tie against the stanchion.

‘Forget it,’ said Lupe. ‘They make this shit out of special nylon. You need a knife or bolt cutters to slice them.’

‘How many cops do you reckon they have here?’

Lupe nodded to the open loading ramp.

‘Couple of trucks by the hangar. They’re burning pallets inside the building, got themselves a campfire. Less than a hundred guys, at a guess. But they’re well armed.’

‘Reckon we could make it over the fence?’

‘Razor wire would cut you to shit, but you could get through it if you wanted freedom bad enough.’

‘Hey,’ shouted David. ‘Hey, you.’

Galloway turned in the pilot seat.

‘What are you guys going to do with us?’

Galloway stood and stretched. He walked the length of the plane. Boots clanked aluminium floor planks. He stood over them. He leaned against a retaining spar and cradled his shotgun. He took a long drag on his cigarette and blew smoke.

‘When do we get to speak to your boss?’ asked David.

‘The Chief ain’t got time for a lowlife like you.’

‘Bring us some food, at least. A blanket.’

Galloway gestured to a porthole in the wall of the plane. David and Lupe peered through dust-fogged Plexiglas. Silhouette against a stormcloud sky: three lynched bodies swinging from a tree.

Galloway blew the smouldering tip of his cigarette until the embers glowed like a hot coal.

‘Don’t worry. You’ll get what’s coming to you.’

Dawn. Ceaseless rain.

David sat sobbing. Lupe tried to chew through her cuffs.

Galloway walked up the aft loading ramp. He carried two lengths of rope. He threw the bundles on the floor. He ruffled rain from his hair and lit a cigarette.

‘Why drag it out?’ said Lupe. ‘Kill us. Get it done.’

‘I’m waiting on the results of your appeal.’

‘You’re kidding me.’

‘There was a trial. Someone spoke in your favour. Someone spoke against. Everything was done right.’

‘Who was the judge?’

‘The Chief.’

‘When do I meet this guy?’

‘You don’t.’

Galloway sat cross-legged on the floor, shotgun in his lap.

Lupe watched him smoke.

‘You’re not SWAT, are you? These other guys. A real takedown crew. Taut. Focused. But you’re just a slob in a vest. What did you do before this? Mall cop? Sit in a tollbooth all day?’

Galloway pulled up his sleeve. *Sine Metus. Brotherhood of the Wire.*

‘Corrections?’

‘That’s right,’ said Galloway. ‘Don’t expect mercy from me.’

‘Which jail? Some place upriver, I bet. Sing Sing. Attica. You look like a sit-on-your-ass union guy.’

Galloway didn’t reply.

‘Bet you walked out on them, didn’t you?’ said Lupe. ‘All those prisoners. You and your guard buddies. Left them to starve. Poor fuckers. Must have been hell in there. Worse than hell. Tier after tier, hammering the bars, screaming through their tray slots.’

Galloway lit a fresh smoke.

Footsteps. Someone thrashing through tall grass.

A second SWAT climbed the loading ramp into the plane. He handed Galloway two sheets of paper. Galloway read them and smiled.

He handed one of the sheets to David. David held rain-spattered paper with trembling hands and read the terse note.

The State of New York hereby provides notice that the defendant DAVID BLAKE has been found guilty of common assault, attempting to evade arrest and multiple counts of theft, and that upon a finding of guilt at the trial of these matters the State of New York sentences DAVID BLAKE to death on the grounds that the defendant will likely commit further acts of criminality and remain a continuing serious threat to society, pursuant to Martial Code 143.