

Revelation

Also by Carter Wilson

The Comfort of Black

The Boy in the Woods

Final Crossing

For Review Purposes Only
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Revelation

A THRILLER

CARTER WILSON

 **Oceanview Publishing**
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For Mom

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THIS BOOK IS dedicated to my mom, who always reads my drafts, finds all the typos, and says nice things. Huge thanks to my agent, Pam Ahearn, who has been through all the ups and downs with me. Pam, I'm just realizing it's been nearly twelve years since our very first rejection together. And thanks to Pat, Bob, Lee, Emily, Lisa, and all the other fine folks at Oceanview who are putting this book out into the world—I couldn't do any of this without your resources, support, and vision.

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Dad, I am missing you every day.

I have a hard time sitting in a quiet, lonely room and typing away. Not that I can't do it, but I prefer the buzz of energy around me, even if I shove in earbuds and talk to no one. With that, I want to acknowledge the wonderful Starbucks crew in Erie, Colorado, who gets a visit from me nearly every day. You've made me a lot of

doppios over the years, you are always friendly, and you even give me my own little special cup. Now that's class.

Finally, thanks as always to you, the reader. As a reward for your continued support, here is a small token of appreciation: the recipe for my perfect margarita. Perhaps you should make one now and have it in hand as you dive into this book.

2 oz tequila (buy the good stuff)

1 oz freshly squeezed lime juice

½ oz Solerno blood orange liquor

1 Tbsp agave nectar

No salt. Not ever salt.

“God? No one really knows about that. Not truly, anyway. Tell you one thing, though, if there is a god, I hope he has a good sense of humor. Otherwise, I’m screwed.”

—Samuel Lowry, convicted serial killer

Revelation

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 1990

Harden opened his eyes to blackness just as something began crawling into his mouth.

He slapped at his lips, bringing a brilliant flash of pain to an injury already there. He turned his head and spit twice into the dark, into the dank space surrounding him, hoping to eject whatever creature was reaching into his mouth. Spider. Cockroach.

More pain, not just from his mouth. His face. Chest. Ribs.

Raging thirst.

Harden struggled to remember, but the real struggle was against the panic, the crushing sense of entombment, of being buried alive.

Focus. Figure out where you are.

He was lying down—that much he knew—with nothing under him except the cold hardness of scratchy earth, the kind that hadn't gone anywhere in a long time. Dead soil.

The smell of sewage. Powerful and close. Was that coming from him?

Eyes shut, then open. Shut. Open. Trying to focus only on *seeing*, but there was only blackness, the kind from the inside of a coffin buried deep in the ground. As he turned his head, Harden finally found what he wanted: a small, watery arm of light somewhere in the distance, as if a fissure just formed in the shell of his cocoon.

That bit of light assured him he at least wasn't blind, but that brought only mild relief.

He had known true horror in his life once before, and in this new darkness he saw himself once again as a seven-year-old boy, crying as he promised his teacher he wouldn't tell anyone. Mr. Kildare had been very insistent on that. Nobody could know what had happened in the storage closet next to room 4A of Owen Elementary School. It would be their secret, their bond.

He sat up and a wave of nausea roiled him, nearly collapsing him back to the dirt floor of whatever room he was in. But he steadied himself against it and gave himself a few seconds to breathe it away. His fingertips found a few small pebbles on the ground. Harden's gaze went back to the shaft of light, and there was no question to him now he was seeing the outline of a door. Maybe the only door in this room.

As he began to stand, pain seared through his rib cage, like someone twisting a butter knife in the gaps between his bones. He gasped and sat back down, remembering only flashes of the beating he took. Fists slamming against him, over and over.

A tooth was loose, dangling, tethered with only a thin string of flesh. His tongue pushed it back and forth. Harden tasted the salty blood for the first time. It made him aware of his desperate hunger.

The last thing I remember is . . .

Coyote.

The girl in the car. *She died with my hand over her mouth.*

Running away.

Coyote found me. Beat me nearly to death. He had . . .

He had a needle.

Harden saw the needle in his mind, the brief gleam of steel before it plunged deep into his flesh.

He felt his arm for a bump. He couldn't find one in the dark, but

he felt a spot where his cold skin seemed just a bit warmer. There was a dull sensation of pain there, like the phantom traces of headache.

Wherever this place is, Harden thought, I'm here because of what Coyote started. What I helped him start. He thinks he's God, and, worse yet, others now think the same thing of him.

What was it Coyote once said?

The hard part isn't believing in a god. The hard part is choosing the right one to follow.

Taking a deep breath, Harden stood again, exhaling through the pain. He separated his feet, trying to stabilize and orient his sluggish body in the void. There was only the sliver of light on which to focus, but it was something. The light was at ground level, some indiscernible distance away. Harden stuck his arms in front of him and took a step, his body lumbering forward. The tip of his shoe scraped the dirt.

He moved his arms around, feeling for a wall. Nothing.

Another step forward.

The smell of sewage grew stronger. Disorientation consumed him. How big was this room?

Another step.

Now he could make out more faint strips of light, forming a rectangle. It was a door. No question. A small, horizontal slash of light appeared in the middle of it.

Another step. His arms still outstretched, feeling nothing but the weight of darkness.

Another step, and the tip of his shoe plunged into something solid on the floor. Not hard like a piece of furniture. Dense but soft, like a sandbag. Harden lowered to one knee and reached out in front of him, slow and steady, as if trying to pet a skittish dog.

Finally, he felt something. Cold and smooth, like plastic. A lump, then softness. Hair? It felt like . . .

That's a fucking face.

Harden recoiled enough to send him falling backwards, and his tailbone struck hard into the dirt, sending a fresh wave of pain all the way up into his teeth.

“Who is that?” he said. “Who’s there?”

Light suddenly flooded the room, piecing his brain and forcing his eyes shut. When he reopened them and looked up, he saw a single, dirt-streaked lightbulb dangling from a thin black cord about two feet above his head. Like the wall in front of him, the ceiling was concrete, its surface etched and scratched with age.

Harden lowered his gaze, and that was when he saw the body.

Derek.

“No,” Harden mumbled, pushing himself backward along the floor. “Oh, Jesus, no.”

Harden had just been with him. They had had drinks together, celebrating Harden’s twenty-first birthday. Emma had been there. So had Coyote. Things had gone so wrong. The girl in the car. The accident. Her eyes rolling up at Harden as she died. When was that? Just last night?

Derek was barefoot, his feet covered in a thin layer of dirt, his jeans and the flesh beneath ripped in three different areas. He was wearing the t-shirt he had bought in the Bahamas on a family vacation, the touristy kind with the phrase *ANOTHER SHITTY DAY IN PARADISE* placed alongside the image of a hammock suspended between two palm trees. The words now mixed with dried blood and gore, and a section of intestine erupted through the fabric, right up through the middle of *PARADISE*.

Derek’s head and face seemed untouched, his hair almost defying physics to stay in place. Just below the chin, though, Harden saw what probably killed Derek: a long slice zigzagging the front of the throat. It wasn’t a clean, straight cut, but a brutal, jagged rip. Just

above the gash on the side of the neck, a simple message appeared in tight black ink.

Andalusian

He heard Coyote's voice in his head.

We have a word for people like you, Derek. We call you Andalusians. They were the first ones killed in the Spanish Inquisition, you know. They were the original doubters.

Harden turned his head to the side and retched, the hot, burning bile scraping like the tines of a fork along his raw throat. "Oh . . . oh, fuck." The smell of his bile mixed with the smell of Derek's body, the stench of the excrement Derek likely expelled in his final moments alive.

Then, for just the tiniest sliver of time, Harden's brain tried to soothe him, convince him none of this was actually real. That it couldn't possibly be, because the contrast of what was happening in this room was far too removed from Harden's normal life. He had just been in Tillman, New York, sleepy home of Wyland University. Graduation was barely a month ago. Things had been . . . well, not exactly *normal*, he supposed. After all, Coyote's experiment had attracted the attention of the FBI, and Harden was slowly being reeled into the investigation. But life had been nothing like . . . like *this*.

Yes, a dream. That must be it, he thought. Maybe Derek was back home in Rochester, spending the summer before going to law school. Maybe Derek wasn't *really* on the floor just feet away from him, his body cold and his exposed, torn flesh crusting in the dry air.

The moment of disbelief lasted one, maybe two blinks of Harden's eyes. Then reality reached into his chest and squeezed his heart until it threatened to burst like an overfilled water balloon. Harden staggered to his feet and turned away from his friend, gasping for air.

He needed to look somewhere else, anywhere. As long as it wasn't *there*.

The room did have a door—dull gray metal with rusted bolts. No handle on the inside, but there was a small frame in the center of the door that looked like it could be some kind of latch. Just large enough to pass a meal through. Harden thought of all the movie scenes with prisoners in solitary confinement. They all had doors like these.

The walls and ceiling were concrete, the dirt beneath him hard, scratchy, and dry.

Harden raced to the door and pushed, but it yielded nothing to him. He slapped the metal until his palms burned.

“Open the door!”

It was the only thing to say, but did he really want that door to open? Who would open it, and what would they do to him once they did?

A weapon. He had to find something to use. Harden turned and scanned the room, and that was when he noticed the small table and chair sitting in a shadowy corner. But that wasn't all there was. There was a typewriter on top of the table.

Harden walked over, his throat burning, trying to keep his gaze away from the body of his friend.

It was a simple folding card table with a spongy green top. The chair was equally utilitarian, a poured mold of cheap white plastic. The typewriter stood out as a retro work of art against a dreary scene.

The machine was old, but shined up as if recently restored. The black keys were perfectly round and displayed bright white characters. The word *Royal* blazoned just above the top row of keys, and a single sheet of paper had been rolled on the platen, waiting for the first words to christen it.

Next to the typewriter was a stack of paper, all blank save the sheet occupying the top position.

In a clear, sharp script, a simple message waited for Harden.

Tell me a story.

CHAPTER TWO

One hour. Two. Maybe three, perhaps as many as six. He couldn't know for sure. But Harden called out until his throat lost whatever moisture it had left, which wasn't much. He screamed to be released, and when that went unanswered, he begged. He swore using every profane word he had ever learned, and then made up a few of his own. He whimpered to be given a single glass of water.

Still, no one came.

He had no watch; there was no way of knowing what day or time it was. No way to call for help. No food or water. No toilet. He only had the table and chair, the typewriter, paper, and Derek's rotting corpse. Harden beat his fists against the immobile door, demanding the body, at least, be taken from the room.

Silence.

Harden didn't cry, but that would come.

All the while Harden kept looking over at the machine on the small desk.

Tell me a story.

It took those hours for him to realize his only way to live was to write. Coyote wanted a story. Of course, not just any story. Coyote wanted to read the story of how he became what he did, from the eyes of his first disciple. How it all happened.

Harden picked at a crust of dried blood on his lip and thought of something else.

Or maybe he wants to see exactly how much I really know.

Harden stared at the blank sheet of paper in the typewriter. He hadn't used a typewriter since he was in junior high—and had never used a purely manual one like this. When he pressed the first key, it did nothing. He pressed harder, and only the slightest ghost of the letter *F* appeared on the page. Then he pressed down hard, and the key released a satisfying *clack* along with a dark purple-blue impression of the letter he wanted to write. He practiced with a few words.

Fuck you. fUck you fuckity fuck you very mucu.

Harden yanked the page out, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it into the corner of the room. Then he slid a fresh sheet into the Royal.

He'd decided to give it a page and see what happened. He would tell his story, even if no one ever read it except the man who would probably kill him.

September 1989

I met Coyote in the strange, serendipitous way special friends are supposed to . . .

CHAPTER THREE

SEPTEMBER 1989

I met Coyote in the strange, serendipitous way special friends are supposed to. It was the second day of my senior year, and the air draped over me with the kind of weight only possible in the unyielding final days of a New York summer. Too hot even for the mosquitoes. As I crossed the quad on my way to my literature class, my face erupted in pain.

It took me a second to process what had happened, but I saw a blue Frisbee on the ground and blood on the back of my hand as I reached for my mouth. I thought the errant Frisbee bloodied my lip, but what it actually did was knock my front tooth out, and I felt the little chunk of bone threatening to jam my throat. I spit the tooth onto the freshly cut grass, followed by a viscous mixture of blood and spit.

Goddamnit. I always liked my teeth.

“Jesus, I’m so sorry.”

I was too absorbed to notice him at first. I just stared at the front tooth, which looked like a tiny little tombstone, a solitary tribute to the unknown soldier.

“Oh . . . oh, shit.”

The voice was now next to me. As blood dribbled from my lower lip, I turned and saw him for the first time. He was taller than

me—something I was unaccustomed to—and he reached out with a tanned arm wrapped in an expensive watch.

“Oh, man,” he said. “Your tooth. I can’t believe I broke your tooth.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was pissed off but scared to talk, somehow actually concerned about my appearance with all the blood on my face. Weird, isn’t it? But that’s what he did to people. He was a guy who made you think about how you appeared in front of him, despite what you were feeling inside.

He touched my face.

CHAPTER FOUR

JUNE 1990

Harden removed the page from the Royal and placed it faceup on the table. He reread it, spotting seven typos, and very much didn't care about any of them. Seconds after he finished reading his work, the solitary light went dark. As before, the room was suffocating in the immediacy of its blackness. The stench from Derek seemed to grow stronger. Panic welled inside Harden.

Breathe. Count your breaths, one, then two. Three, then four.

He closed his eyes, preferring to see the inside of his eyelids rather than the void surrounding him. After an eternity in the dark, he heard a sound. The scraping of metal against metal.

Harden opened his eyes.

The slat in the center of the door opened, bringing with it a brilliant, rectangular shaft of fluorescent light into the room. Then, the partial outline of someone's head eclipsed the beam.

"Put the typed pages by the door. Then turn around and stand in the back corner." The voice was deep, emotionless, and unfamiliar.

"Are you going to let me out?" Harden asked.

A few more seconds.

"Put the typed pages by the door. Then turn around and stand in the back corner." The voice was louder this time. More commanding.

Harden did as he was told. He picked up his solitary page of work

and made his way toward the door as the backlit head watched him. Harden noticed an unnatural, Charlie Brown–roundness to the man’s skull. He placed the page in the dirt by the door and then made his way back to the far corner of the room, walking along the walls to avoid the body.

“Don’t turn around,” the voice said. “We’re watching.”

We are watching. Not *I* am watching.

The slat closed, then Harden heard the sound of a heavy bolt sliding open on the other side of the door. The door opened and more light filled the room. Harden felt the air pressure in the room change as a slight rush of atmosphere rippled throughout the stale cell. He sucked it in and hoped that a bit of fresh air would wash away some of the death stench.

Should he try running? Who knew how many of *them* there were, but this could be his only chance. The door was open. He could run full speed and try to knock over anyone in his path, hoping just to make it outside. He could make it. He could be free. There was a chance.

Or he could end up like Derek.

He squeezed his hands into tight balls, his body shaking with indecision. Listening, he heard a dragging sound, quickly followed by the sound of clanking and a hollow thump. Before he could decide what to do, the door slammed shut, and the bolt slid back into place. Harden turned and stared at the cracks of light. He had missed his opportunity and could only hope there would be another.

The light turned on.

Derek’s body and the typed page were gone. In their place was a simple tray of food, a bottle of water, and a red plastic bucket.

Harden yelled at the door.

“I want to talk to him.”

There was only silence in return. At one point, he thought he heard laughing. But maybe it was only in his head.

CHAPTER FIVE

SEPTEMBER 1989

“We have to get you to a doctor, man. Let me help you.”

I finally chanced some words, mumbling through my fingers.

“It’s . . . it’s okay.”

I don’t know why I said it. It wasn’t okay at all. This guy just broke my tooth with a goddamn Frisbee.

“No,” he said. “It’s not. Let’s at least go to the university clinic.” He said the words with such decisiveness it was hard to argue against it. He called out to whatever kid was supposed to catch the Frisbee instead of my face.

“Jeremy, I’m taking him to the clinic.”

Jeremy mumbled something that sounded exactly unlike an offer of assistance. He almost seemed disappointed that my blood interrupted their game, and he picked up the disc and walked off without a word to me.

After I scooped up my tooth and shoved it into my pocket, the guy responsible for my new smile put his hand on my shoulder and walked me along the sloped terrain of the quad toward the center of campus. His hand rested on my shoulder for a while. Normally this would have made me uncomfortable. But not this time. This time it was actually comforting.

He finally released his touch, but only to stick his hand out to

me. “Wiley,” he said. I offered him my bloodied hand, which didn’t seem to give him a second thought. “Wiley Martin. I go by Coyote.”

I nodded, then almost asked him why he went by Coyote before I made the connection. Now that I look back on everything, there was much more meaning in Coyote’s name than the easy connection to a cartoon character. More than anything, there was something feral about it all.

“Harden,” I mumbled.

“Simon?”

I shook my head, then spit a glob of bloody saliva onto the ground. I was thankful to see no other teeth jettisoned with it. “Harden,” I repeated. “Harden Campbell.”

“Ah, Harden.” Coyote shook his head. “Well, Harden, I’m deeply sorry I just fucked up your mouth.”

The words *It’s okay, no big deal* rose in my throat, but I suppressed them.

“My aim sucks, man. I didn’t even see you there. But we’ll get you fixed up—whatever you need. I’ll take care of it.”

“I have insurance,” I said. I wasn’t actually sure about that. It all depended if the payment was made this month.

“No, no, I’ll take care of everything. We’ll get that tooth put back in there in no time.”

I studied him as we walked. He was one of *them*, I assumed. Wyland University was full of them. The more I looked at him, the more sense it made. Thick rugby shirt. Expensive watch. Styled hair made to look disheveled.

Rich kid.

He would throw money at my mouth, no matter how much it cost. He would buy his conscience clean.

Thank God, I thought. As much as I tired of the constant wealth around me, I was glad it was here now. My dad’s threadbare insurance

would probably only pay enough to fashion my tooth into a necklace. I would gladly accept Coyote's offer.

The university clinic was almost empty, the suffering flu-ridden masses still months away. After a triage check of my temperature and blood pressure, I was taken back to see the doctor. Coyote, to my surprise, insisted on going with me.

The university physician seemed annoyed at having to do any work. He opened my mouth and crammed some gauze in my gap.

"Got a missing tooth," he said.

No shit, I thought. I dug it from my pocket and presented it to him. He gave it a second's glance.

"Going to have to see a dentist," he said. "You can keep that one as a souvenir. They'll probably make you a new one."

"Are there any dentists here?" I asked.

"Nope," he said, crumbling his fists into the pockets of his pristine white medical coat. "I'll give you some ibuprofen for the pain. They can get you the names of some local dentists up front on your way out."

He scribbled something on a pad and left the room. Coyote shook his head and turned to me.

"You got a car, Harden?"

"No."

"Don't worry about it. Come on."

I followed him out as he strode up to the receptionist. He pulled out a slim leather wallet and placed a shiny platinum credit card in front of her. "Put his bill on this," he said. "And I need the name of the best dentist in town."

I wondered if there was such a thing in Tillman, New York. The receptionist must have, too, because she rolled her eyes as she took his card. She fumbled through a file cabinet and pulled out a sheet of paper.

“Here are all of the dentists in the area,” she said, sliding the paper across the counter to Coyote. “One of them has to be the best.”

As she rang up my charges on his card, Coyote asked to use the phone. Two calls later he hung up and smiled at me.

“Found a dentist. Don’t know if he’s the best, but he can see you now. I’m driving.”

At that point, I was just along for the ride. Coyote was in charge. Four hours later, I had a repaired tooth and a new friend.

I didn’t stop to wonder how long either would last.