

# **FINAL CROSSING**

Also by Carter Wilson

*Revelation*

*The Comfort of Black*

*The Boy in the Woods*

FOR REVIEW PURPOSES ONLY  
2016 Oceanview Publishing

# FINAL CROSSING

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

CARTER  
WILSON

 **Oceanview Publishing**  
Longboat Key, Florida

Copyright © 2013, Carter Wilson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, businesses, locales, or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-60809-234-5

Published in the United States of America by Oceanview Publishing  
Longboat Key, Florida  
[www.oceanviewpub.com](http://www.oceanviewpub.com)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*For Dad*



“The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of heaven will be shaken loose.”

— Matthew 24:29



# **FINAL CROSSING**



# PART I



# CHAPTER ONE

## SUBURBAN PHILADELPHIA

MARCH 31

RUDIGER WATCHES THE man who watches him. Dark eyes. Flecks of amber. Eye contact is difficult. His gaze wants to pull toward the ground, but Rudiger forces it to stay level. The man smiles. Rudiger tries.

The man's not too big. Good, Rudiger thinks. About five-ten, maybe a hundred and seventy pounds. Two hundred or more would've been a problem. He knows he's strong, but there's a limit. Hard work ahead.

"You're quiet," the man says. His upper lip twitches. Nervous. He wears a pressed blue Oxford; the monogram on the breast pocket reads MLC.

"My first time," Rudiger says. Appalachian accent coats the words in a glaze.

"Mine too," the man says.

*Liar.*

A cell phone rings in the corner of the bar and a woman answers. She's drunk, she tells the caller. A Neil Diamond song dribbles from an aging jukebox. The chrome sides of the machine are tarnished. Glass case covered in dried spit.

"So," the man continues. "What made you respond to my ad? Was ... was it the photo?"

The photo showed an erect cock that Rudiger doubts belongs to the man sitting across the booth from him. Who knows? Doesn't much matter. Preacherman would've had a mouthful to say about *homasechuals*, but Rudiger doesn't care. He didn't choose this man because of who he fucks. He chose him based on his words.

"Liked your wording, I suppose."

"That so?" Eyebrows raised in confusion.

"Yeah."

Internet personal ads. All the words, the arrangements. They seem random, but they're not. Random doesn't happen. Random is only for those without the ability to see all the patterns.

Rudiger sees the patterns.

The man sitting in front of Rudiger had written an ad on a local website, looking for a discreet encounter. Rudiger had found it. He didn't give a toad's left nut about what kind of deviant had written the message; the ad he needed to find could have been in any of the categories on the site. Rudiger hadn't been trolling the Internet to seek pleasure. He'd been there because the website was a wealth of words, and Rudiger appreciated nothing more than words. They were his playthings. He could do things with words no other person could, at least no one he had ever met.

He looks closely at the man to see if there's something special about him. Some kind of sign. *Man doesn't even know what he wrote*, Rudiger thinks. But he wrote it all the same, so that's just about the sum of that.

Rudiger sees the black letters of the computer ad float before him, as though he was still staring at the smudged screen of the library computer.

*HOT \*\*LONELY \*\*BORED \*\*\*\*m4m*

He looks at them in his mind once again, one by one, re-arranging, reinterpreting. The letters dance in his mind,

switching places, twisting and tumbling, falling into new words and phrases.

*Holy Blood Enter.*

“Nothing special about the wording,” the man says. He drinks Scotch, holding the glass with a delicate hand that quivers just a little. Manicured nails. His name is Michael, he says. Not Mike. Michael. “My God, I hardly knew what to write.”

“Caught my eye,” Rudiger says.

“What’s your name?”

“Gabriel.” Rudiger orders a Coke. “Not Gabe,” he adds. “Gabriel.” He scans the tabletop and focuses on a half-filled ketchup bottle, its insides streaked from use.

“Where are you from?”

He glances around the bar, sees more people than he wants but fewer than he expected. “Not here,” he says.

Michael smiles, then reaches across the table to brush fingertips. Rudiger retracts his, a spider in retreat.

“Shy?”

“Jes want to make sure you’re the one,” Rudiger mumbles.

The man leans forward, his salt and pepper hair coiffed just so. “I know I’m a little older but I’m in great shape and I’m totally disease-free.”

Michael is funny, but Rudiger doesn’t think he knows it. “Everyone has a disease, Michael. Some jes have it more than others.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothin.”

Michael studies him. “My God, you have great arms. You must work out all the time.”

“Body is a temple.”

Michael looks ready to worship.

“What happened to your ear? I mean, if I can ask.”

He’s not surprised by the question. The scar is obvious and he makes no effort to hide it. His blond hair is no more than a sprinkling of dust on his head. “Childhood accident.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? You didn’t do it.”

Michael takes a sip from his drink and looks downward. “Maybe ... maybe this isn’t right after all. You don’t seem into this whole thing.”

“No,” Rudiger says. His powder blue eyes blaze against his alabaster face. “You jes don’t know me. Trust me, I am very happy we met tonight.”

“So ... so what next?”

Rudiger pulls out a small roll of bills and drops a twenty on the table. “Figured on goin’ to my car.”

Outside, cold night air stings Rudiger’s face, making him even more alert. Michael follows behind him. Well-trained dog. He pictures Michael as a boss of many during the day, a powerful man. By night, his weakness builds by the hour, straining for release. Dog needs to shed his collar.

Rudiger leads him to a white van, front windows dirty and back windows non-existent. Michael hesitates. Rudiger smiles and nods. It’ll be okay, the smile says. It’s all good. *Get in.* Michael smiles back after a bit then climbs in the passenger seat, his movements delicate, a cat walking around puddles. Inside Michael fidgets. Doesn’t know what to do next.

“Buckle up,” Rudiger says. He presses a button and both doors lock. Michael slowly pulls the strap across his chest and clicks the belt into place.

“Where are we going?”

“Bout twenty miles from here.”

Hesitation. “Is that where you live?”

“No.” Rudiger leans down and picks up the bottle of ether on the floorboard. He unscrews the cap and dabs the top of the bottle against a black piece of cloth until it’s saturated. The smell is strong, so he cracks just his window a few inches. Screws the cap back on. Bottle falls to the floor. “Not close to anything, that’s the whole point there, Mike. Only thing waitin’ out there is a big cross I built. That’s where we’re goin’.”

It takes a few seconds, which is about five minutes longer than logic says it should have taken. The fear hits Michael. Rudiger glances sideways at him and sees in one second a lifetime worth of second-guessing on his face. All those times before. All those strangers. Never had a problem, though it was always a chance, wasn’t it? Always a risk. But the reward was worth it, each and every time. Probably swore to never do it again. But couldn’t. Just couldn’t stop. Now he’ll never do it again, but not by his own choosing.

Michael’s frantic fingers scramble for the release button on his seat belt. Rudiger begins to hum. Scraps of something he heard on the radio, little bit of country.

Michael can’t find the button because there isn’t one. Seatbelt locked tight, strap holding him down like he’s on a roller coaster.

Rudiger lunges, his speed preternatural, a monster attacking in a child’s night terror. His hand with the rag covers Michael’s mouth and nose while his other hand squeezes his throat. Just enough pressure. Michael shouts but his voice is muffled and weak. He thrashes but it doesn’t mean anything. Not a thing. Rudiger stops humming.

“You’re not dyin,” he says, for no real reason. Not to placate. He doesn’t care about what Michael thinks or about his feelings. “Need to stay alive a little longer. Can’t be dead when we start. Doesn’t work that way.”

Michael’s body begins to go limp. Rudiger barely feels warm from the struggle, but he knows the real work is just ahead of him. It’ll take all his strength to drag Michael far from the road and lift the cross with the man’s body nailed to it. He’s never done it with a real person before, though he practiced three days earlier with a two-hundred pound dummy.

Took him nearly an hour.

And the dummy hadn’t been screaming.

## CHAPTER TWO

WASHINGTON D.C.

APRIL 3

*Why don't you feel anything?*

Her words came back to him with the unpleasant certitude of an alarm clock reveille. Jonas downshifted, much to his Audi's protests, and deftly maneuvered around the minivan in front of him. The speedometer told him he was going almost eighty, but Jonas had a bad habit of ignoring things that tried to slow him down. Besides, it was the Beltway. It would slow down soon enough.

True to his thoughts, a sea of red lights illuminated before him, causing him to brake hard. Again his Audi protested. Jonas and his decade-old car had a love-hate relationship. He loved to drive it hard. The Audi hated him for it. He swerved behind a Fiat (*who the hell drives a Fiat?*) and hoped for a faster current in the swirling river of D.C. traffic.

Jonas cursed under his breath. There were directions for his anger to fly. Juliette, for one. She was beautiful, intelligent, and had the sexiest accent he'd ever heard. For almost six months, she had also been his.

Until this morning.

The Fiat slowed. Jonas cursed. The lane to his right was packed. The shoulder was to his left, and he had just enough respect for

the law not to drive on it. Nowhere to go. Goddamn Juliette. Bad enough she dumped him, but why the hell did she have to live so far away? Now Jonas was going to be late to work. The traffic growled around him. He was trapped.

Trapped.

*Trapped?* Juliette had asked this morning. *How the hell do you feel trapped? You have all the freedoms of the world. I don't ask you for hardly anything. What the hell do you mean trapped?*

Bored was more like it. But how could he be bored with such a beautiful and intelligent woman? How is that even possible?

Jonas gritted his teeth, wanting to gnash out around him. But all he could do was seethe and let the frustration of another failed relationship wash over him. Why couldn't he ever feel satisfied?

He checked his rearview. What was it women saw in those eyes that convinced them Jonas was *the one*? Were they trusting eyes? Eyes that bespoke long-term commitment and a deep desire to procreate? Or were they just pretty blue eyes that God shoved inside the skull of a heartless bastard?

He rammed the shift hard against the gearbox and made the Audi growl. It wouldn't get him where he was going any faster, but it made him feel good.

Then he saw the problem. Stalled Jeep, two vehicles up from him. No emergency vehicles on the scene yet.

Traffic wasn't moving. Horns started. Everyone trying to maneuver around the stall, pressing on.

The Jeep's driver – older man, maybe sixty – had gotten out of his car and was rummaging under the hood.

Not smart, thought Jonas. Too many impatient drivers out here. Wandering around on foot's going to get you killed.

The Fiat managed to get around the Jeep and Jonas crawled behind the stall. He turned on his hazards and studied the man for a few seconds. After that time, Jonas made his assessment. The guy had no clue what he was doing.

Jonas ignored the honking behind him and climbed out of the Audi.

The frosty morning air smelled like exhaust. Jonas paused, thinking he should put on his coat. Decided against it.

"I'm fine," the man said, waving Jonas off without a hello. "Tow truck's on the way."

"Then why are you still looking under the hood?"

"Thought maybe I'd find the problem."

"And?"

The man stared at him. "Not finding anything."

"Not safe out here, sir. I can help you push it to the shoulder. Let's clear this lane, then you should sit in your vehicle and wait for help."

Jonas saw the man's reaction to his advice. He was going to obey, Jonas knew. Civilians always did. They could see the military infused in Jonas's posture and his attitude, and, though he no longer wore a uniform, people always did what he said.

Almost always.

*Chrissakes, Juliette, just stay so we can talk, will you?*

"All right," the man said.

The Jeep inched forward after an initial effort. Jonas heaved against the back of the car, and then immediately realized how much dirt transferred from the vehicle to his suit. *Goddamnit.*

The man shook Jonas's hand and thanked him for his help, though he didn't seem thankful in the least. Then he got in the driver's seat, turned on the hazards, and waited.

Jonas looked at his watch.

*Shit.*

He was supposed to meet with the Senator in twenty minutes. He'd never make it. He wondered if this day was supposed to be shitty or if it just decided to turn that way, suddenly and on a whim.

He didn't wonder for more than a flashing moment. The next three seconds lasted just long enough for him to assess the situation and see he was fucked.

He reacted calmly and objectively to the sight of the Ford F150 smashing into the back of his parked Audi. His mind even wandered enough to consider it was probably a good thing – the Audi was released of its misery and would no longer be subjected to his daily torture. He considered the distance between his legs and the front of his car. Years of military and physical training even allowed him the reaction time to jump high enough to clear the top of the hood as the Audi careened beneath him.

He offered his shoulder to the windshield rather than his head or back. Absorbed the impact perfectly, just as his body had been trained to do.

As the impact propelled him into the next lane of traffic, Jonas then knew his luck had run out. Yes, he would try to do something about it. Maybe he could roll out of the way before a car crushed him. But, statistically speaking, he would most likely die. He accepted it. It did not anger him. It was just math.

He fell hard onto the concrete. He had a moment to look up.

Jonas saw the odds had caught up to him.

Then he saw nothing.

## CHAPTER THREE

*RED DUST CAKED Jonas's lips.*

*He was face down, his body armor pressing painfully against his torso. He lifted his head, aware his helmet was long gone. He squinted and tried to focus, succeeding after a few seconds. Pain rifled through his core, the kind that came not from the clean wound of a bullet but from the crushing blow of a three-story fall. He remembered it all – the little girl, that fucking Army grunt Sonman, the grenade ... The concussive force of the blast had blown him out the window, and he remembered thinking it would have been more desirable to die from the grenade rather than from the impact of a spine-shattering fall. But the corrugated tin awning had softened the blow. By the time he rolled off and onto the empty Mogadishu street, he still had a chance of survival.*

*He tried to push himself up but couldn't. Searing pain. If the sniper was still anywhere in the area, he could place as many rounds into Jonas's back as he wanted.*

*Silence.*

*Jonas turned his head to the left and saw the dead U.N. soldiers twenty feet away. Looking forward he saw what he hoped for – a platoon of U.S. soldiers double-timing it toward his position. He had*

*seen them out the window of the building, just before falling to the ground.*

*Jonas felt a sudden and inescapable desire to close his eyes as he waited the final seconds to be either rescued by his brothers or shot by the sniper. He turned his head once more and placed his left cheek down on the warm dust of the street. As he started to close his eyes, and as the sounds of the city began trickling back in through his overwhelmed eardrums, Jonas saw the little black arm next to him. Palm faced upward. Intact fingers spread wide and bent to the sky, as if holding a gift, an offering, that no longer existed ...*

\* \* \*

Jonas opened his eyes expecting Somali dirt, not a hospital room. He was alone, though in the distance he heard the muted sounds of administration. Someone paging a doctor. Creaky wheels squeaking on a linoleum floor. A rasping cough.

Jonas had been dreaming. Had to be, because his mind simply could not grasp the reality of where he was. It was too unfamiliar.

In his dream, he had been back in the Mog. The images so long ago repressed came back to him in a grainy but pure reality.

A nurse walked by his open door. She was heavysset with a slight limp, her body bowed heavily to the left side as she shuffled. She glanced into Jonas's room and he stared at her.

She stared back and stopped walking.

"Oh my," she said. She shuffled into the room, walking with more purpose now. "You're awake."

Jonas tried to nod but couldn't. It was then he realized he had no power over his muscles. A massive thirst struck him.

"Let me get the doctor."

\* \* \*

“It’s a cliché, but you’re lucky to be alive.” The doctor spoke with a thick Indian accent and his smooth brown complexion was marred only by dark streaks under his eyes. Jonas guessed him in his late thirties – like himself – though hints of gray were already dotting his thick black hair. The doctor had introduced himself but the name had already flown from Jonas’s memory.

“In fact,” the doctor continued, “it’s amazing there isn’t more damage done.”

“What ...” Jonas murmured.

“Car accident,” the doctor interrupted. “And don’t strain yourself trying to talk. You are going to be here for at least another day, so you’ll have plenty of time to ask questions.” The doctor looked down at the chart in his hand. “Long story short – you had a one-on-one with a Chevy Impala. You lost. Somehow you came out of it with a broken wrist, a concussion, and a canvas full of bruises. How you didn’t die, I can only attribute to you being a tough son of a bitch. Or just plain lucky.”

Jonas felt the words coming easier. “Army Rangers ... don’t break,” he rasped. “Only dent.”

The doctor nodded. “Yes, I heard you were a Ranger in a former life. Well, maybe that’s the reason.” He paused. “Or maybe the Impala is just a real piece of shit car.”

Jonas smiled. A familiar figure appeared in the doorway. The doctor turned to see who Jonas was looking at.

“Hello, Senator.”

Senator Robert Sidams offered a thin but warm smile to the doctor. It was a smile Jonas had seen a thousand times before. It said: *you’re not the person I’m here for.*

“How’s he doing?”

If the doctor was surprised by the presence of the Senior Senator from Pennsylvania, he didn't show it. "He woke up just an hour ago."

"I know. I got the call. Can I talk to him?"

Jonas took another deep breath and spoke. "I'm right here, you know."

They both looked at him, as if his statement was a matter for debate.

"He needs his rest," the doctor said.

The Senator stared him down. "I need my rest, too."

The doctor nodded. "Just a couple of minutes, okay?" Turning to Jonas: "How's the pain?"

"Manageable. How long was I out?"

"Just over a day. Not a coma, but more than just a good sleep. We will need to run some tests just to make sure your brain didn't get scrambled. That's medical speak."

"Yes, sir."

The doctor walked out of the room.

Senator Sidams placed the palm of his right hand on Jonas's shoulder. "Good Lord, Jonas. You scared the hell out of all of us."

"Just trying to be selfish. You know how I need everyone to be thinking about me at all times."

"I thought it was supposed to be all about *me*," the Senator said.

"But you're too fragile to get hit by a car."

"You're saying you're more of a man than I am?"

Jonas smirked. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

Jonas had been Sidams's senior aide before being promoted to Chief of Staff after the Senator's most recent election win. He had known the man for eight years and Sidams was almost a father figure to him, though Jonas would never be ready to let go of his real father.

Jonas sipped on a plastic cup containing room-temperature water. The Senator placed a palm on Jonas's chest, closed his eyes, and bowed his head.

Jonas understood, and closed his eyes as well.

"Bless you, O Lord, and in you we trust to keep your beloved from harm, so we thank you for protecting Jonas from greater injury." He cleared his throat and paused a moment before adding, "And we seek your guidance as how to keep this dumb son of a bitch from being so reckless in the future. Amen."

"Amen to that," Jonas said.

"So what happened?"

"Juliette dumped me," Jonas said. "Thought I would throw myself into traffic to ease the pain."

"Bullshit," Sidams said. "You were helping a stranded motorist. Always trying to save the world, one dumbass at a time."

"That's beautiful. Think I'll put that on my tombstone."

Sidams reached into his jacket pocket. "Brought you a present." He handed the BlackBerry to Jonas. "It's all that's left of your car."

"Thanks." God only knew how many e-mails had gone unread since the accident, Jonas thought. Several hundred, probably.

"I figured you would want some form of communication while you're here."

"Thanks. I miss anything in the last twenty-four hours?"

Sidams nodded. "There's been a killing."

"Figurative or literal?"

"Literal, Jonas. A well-known constituent." Sidams's gaze went to the floor for just a moment. "And a friend."

Holy shit. Jonas tried to sit up.

"Who?"

"Michael Calloway."

Jonas felt the air leave his lungs. Michael Calloway was the CEO of Calloway Manufacturing, a huge distributor of auto parts and one of the largest private employers in Philadelphia. He was also a major financial contributor to and a personal friend of the Senator.

“My God. Killed? What happened?”

Sidams removed his hand from Jonas’s chest. “They found him yesterday – it’s all over the national news. He was ... crucified.”

“Crucified? As in *crucified* crucified?”

Sidams nodded. “It’s unbelievable. Found his body in a cave in a state park outside of Philly. Holes in his wrists and feet. Cross was still standing nearby. Blood all over it. Moreover ...” A lengthy pause.

“What?”

“It ... it seems Calloway was soliciting ... gay men on the Internet.”

“Are you kidding me? He’s married.”

“I know, Jonas. I know. The media is just starting to sink its teeth into this, and it won’t be going away soon.”

Jonas had met Calloway once and had liked him. But the Senator had a long relationship with the man, and Jonas knew they had been close.

“Jesus, Robert, I’m so sorry.”

“Turn on the television if you want to know more details, because I don’t want to talk about it more. But I needed to tell you.”

Jonas didn’t know what more to say. *Crucified?*

“I have to stay in D.C. for a vote,” the Senator continued. “So I’ll miss the funeral. I was going to ask you to go, but you were too busy trying to arrange for your own funeral.”

“When is it?”

“Friday.”

Three days from now, Jonas thought.

“I can go.”

“Can you?”

“No problem. I’ll be there.”

“Your doctor will let you?”

“Let that be my problem.”

Sidams nodded and squinted his eyes in appreciation. “Thank you, Jonas. That would mean a great deal to me to have you there.”

“It’s my job.”

The Senator stared blankly at Jonas’s bed, looking through it at something else, deep in his own mind. Jonas wasn’t used to seeing that face.

“I don’t want to distance myself from him,” the Senator said. “Whatever he was doing ... whatever secret life he had ... he was still a friend. You understand?”

“Absolutely.”

The Senator seemed lost in thought.

“What is it?” Jonas asked.

The Senator remained silent for a long time. Jonas didn’t press him. Finally, Sidams responded.

“His ear was cut off.”

“What?”

“His ear. Whoever killed Michael cut his ear off. Postmortem, they think. It’s not in the news yet.”

*Ear.*

The word stabbed at Jonas.

“I’ve actually seen that before, you know.” The Senator continued to look through Jonas. “In Vietnam. It happened to one of ours. No one I knew, but we found the body. Both ears cut off.”

VC used it as a scare tactic. Like the Indians did with scalping. Goddamn brutal practice, but effective. Scared the living shit out of me, tell you that. Makes me sick to think something like that happened to Michael.”

“You never told me that before.”

“There are a lot of things I don’t tell people about that time. I tell you more than most. You can understand.”

*The horrors of men slaughtering men.*

“You ever see that kind of thing? In Somalia?”

The Senator would occasionally bring up Jonas’s time in the service, and he knew Jonas received an honorable discharge after coming home wounded from Somalia in ninety-three. Jonas never told him exactly what had happened. Sidams had undoubtedly read his military record, but Jonas knew it could never capture the evil of what had really happened. He had thought he’d purged the memories of what he saw that day, but just an hour ago he was back there. Something about Jonas’s accident on the Beltway must have jarred loose the collection of horrors wedged in the depths of his mind.

“I don’t know,” Jonas answered. “There’s a lot I don’t remember.” Sidams finally focused his gaze on Jonas’s face.

“Well, you’re one of the lucky ones, then.”