

THE KILLING SEASON

MASON CROSS



First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 4570 7

ISBN (Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 4567 7

ISBN (Ebook) 978 1 4091 4568 4

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made
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DAY ONE

PROLOGUE

The first thing you should know about me is that my name is not Carter Blake. That name no more belonged to me than the hotel room I was occupying when the call came in.

It was nice without being too extravagant. The room, I mean. It was a city-view deluxe in the northwest corner of the seventh floor of a midpriced metropolitan hotel. I liked the room. It had served me well in the eighteen days I'd been staying there. The city itself was pleasant, too: not too big, not too small. A comfortable environment in which to work.

In much the same way, I'd grown comfortable with the name Blake in the last couple of years. To me, names are a lot like hotel rooms: You pick one that suits your purposes, inhabit it for as long as is feasible, and then move on when the time is right.

Although it was not quite five a.m., I was wide-awake when my cell phone buzzed, having given up on sleep a couple of hours before. Some nights are like that. I hit the button to pick up and held the phone to my ear, not speaking.

"Blake? You there?" The voice on the other end of the line was tired, and cranky about it. It was also familiar.

"What's going on?"

"As of right now? Who knows. What's important is what happened two hours ago."

I leaned forward on the wooden chair so I could look

through the gap where the curtains didn't quite meet. The lights of the city twinkled back at me. I knew I was expected to take the bait, so I didn't, not directly.

"You know, I've been busy."

"Yeah, I know."

"Was looking forward to a rest."

"You're in luck. Because a change is as good as a rest, right?"

I paused, thought it over, then said, "Where?"

"Initially? Illinois. Chicago."

I glanced at my watch, the luminescent points on the dial glowing softly in the predawn gloom. I had a car in the garage beneath the building. This time of day, I could make Chicago in three hours. Maybe two and a half.

One final question needed asking. "Black, white, or gray?"

There was a pause, and I could sense the owner of the voice on the other end of the line grinning.

"As the driven snow. You'll like it."

I sighed and leaned back in the chair again, relenting. "All right," I said. "Tell me what happened two hours ago."

1

TWO HOURS AGO **2:37 a.m.**

The moon hung gigantic and full over the expanse of fields as they rolled by like a calm ocean. Late October, northern hemisphere. That made it a hunter's moon.

Wardell breathed a philosophical sigh at the thought as he stared out at the night through the small, mean window. Out here in the darkness, the moon burned bright enough to dazzle if you looked directly at it, lit the world up enough to see everything for miles. A pity, then, that there was nothing to see but fields. Miles and miles of orderly nothing, right to the horizon. He kept looking anyway. Thinking his thoughts and letting his body sway with the rhythm of the vehicle as it rattled along the deserted highway.

Despite the lack of variation, or perhaps because of it, Wardell liked the view. It was ... *serene*. Serene was definitely the word. The moonlit fields reminded him of a line from the Simon & Garfunkel song "America." As a rule, he didn't like pop music, but "America" was one of his favorite tunes. It was a story about two lovers setting off on a voyage of discovery, starting out with youthful optimism and ending in emptiness and disillusionment. Wardell liked the sentiment.

That Simon & Garfunkel song was as close to contemporary

popular music as Wardell's tastes ventured, just another detail that had set him apart from the Cro-Magnons in his old unit. Most of the other men had displayed a depressing uniformity in their musical tastes: mainstream hard rock and rap. Nickelback and Kid Rock. Loud, anodyne trash like that. He was quite sure they'd mocked him behind his back for the music he listened to, for the expensive coffee he drank, for the books he read. But not to his face. Nobody ever said anything to Wardell's face, and if they did, they made that mistake only once.

He smiled at the pleasant memory and looked down at his hands, flexing them to kill a nascent cramp. Then he reached up with the right hand to scratch his full beard, having to lift the left along with it, of course.

Clarence, the skinny, sick-looking man beside him, was asleep. Or pretending to be asleep; Wardell didn't care which, as long as it meant he had peace and quiet. Clarence had attempted small talk when he first sat down and had kept at it longer than most people did when you pointedly ignored their conversation openers. Eventually, Wardell had shut him up by giving him the stare. The stare always worked, conveying the message that this was positively the last chance for the beholder to avoid serious physical harm. The trick was to absolutely mean it.

Clarence had come close to testing that by apologizing for being a talker, but he'd gotten the message; he was quiet now, and that was the main thing. That and the fact he'd had sense enough not to fall asleep on Wardell's shoulder. Instead, he was hunched forward over his own hands in a position that could not have been comfortable.

It was unusual, although not completely unheard of, for Wardell to have a traveling companion. It was even more unusual for him to be making a trip without an accompanying

convoy. He'd been transported almost as modestly before, usually on the occasions when they didn't want to draw attention to his movements; but he couldn't recall a time exactly like this. One vehicle, no escort cars, no outriders. Perhaps they didn't think he merited the attention anymore. Perhaps his entourage had fallen victim to budget cuts; this was a midterm election year after all. Or perhaps it was just evidence that his fame had receded far enough that the powers that be didn't need to be seen to care quite so much.

Wardell turned his gaze back to the window, the song continuing to play in his head. Silently, he mouthed along with the refrain.

I've gone to look for America.

America. He hadn't seen much of it, not nearly enough.

Having had the luxury of time to think things over, he realized now that he'd been thinking too small back then. Confining himself to one hunting ground, one city. Only now that the opportunity had passed did he see what he should have been doing all along. He should have embarked on a quest. Town to town, state to state, east to west. Surging ever onward like a forest fire, burning his name into the hide of the country. Building to something big. Something that had been denied him. He closed his eyes and said the name quietly.

Juba.

He flexed his hands again, adjusting the position of the handcuffs so they didn't abrade his wrists too badly, then rested them again on his thighs. The muscles there were firm and toned. Solid, like the rest of him.

Most men in Wardell's current position let themselves go. They gained weight, became soft and flaccid, smoked as many cigarettes as they could get ahold of, slept sixteen hours a day. They did that because they'd been broken; they'd decided, *What's the point?*

Not Wardell. He'd kept up his fitness regime from his days in the Corps, and in the last five years he'd only intensified it. He started every day with sit-ups and push-ups—twenty reps of twenty each and then one-handed push-ups, a hundred on each hand. His mostly free schedule allowed ample time for an afternoon session of the same and one more before lights-out. He walked ten miles around a fifteen-foot circumference every day. The advantage of such a predictable route was that he could read the whole time, keeping his mind in shape as well as his body. Because he knew what the other men did not.

Wardell kept going because he knew that keeping going *was* the point. They hadn't broken Wardell in the five years they'd had him, and they wouldn't break him in the two weeks he had left. Tonight was the first time he'd missed his evening's workout in a long while, and his body ached for the routine the way a junkie's aches for a fix.

It might be too late to do things right, to go back and carry out his work on a grander scale, but that didn't mean he had to meekly accept his fate. Those dozen witnesses who came to see him die would find a man who was going to meet his Maker looking *good*. He wondered who would be there. The governor, probably, and maybe Stewart, the man who'd brought him in. That prick Hatcher would be there for sure. And Wardell would stand up and he'd use his allotted time to the full and he'd look each and every one of those gawkers in the eye and tell them he'd see them in hell. And he'd make them believe it, too.

The trick was to absolutely mean it.

Caleb Wardell might have dropped off the national radar, but he'd make goddamn sure that the last people he saw remembered him.

His body listed forward a little with a reduction in road

speed, snapping him out of his thoughts. Instinctively, he looked ahead. A pointless reflex. This wasn't a tour bus; it wasn't as though he could crane his neck out into the center aisle for an unobstructed view to the driver's cabin and the road ahead. Instead, he moved his head closer to the window, jamming sideways against it, closing his left eye to try to see ahead with just his right.

Three hundred yards along the straight road, he could make out a pair of unmoving taillights. Even with the moonlight, the angle made it impossible to discern what type of vehicle they belonged to. A figure was silhouetted against the red glare, waving them down. An apparent breakdown. Wardell kept looking. Tried to see farther down the road. The heavy transport van accommodated him, swaying a little to the center of the road, away from the stationary vehicle as though obeying Wardell's will. The stationary *car*. It was definitely a car. A sedan, a bloodred paint job showing in the transport's headlights. Farther up the road, a black shape blocked a patch of sky. A farmhouse? A barn?

They were in the middle of nowhere, and it was the middle of the night. There had been no buildings and no side roads in miles. They hadn't passed another vehicle in a half hour. Now there was a breakdown and a building all at once.

The transport van picked up speed again. The driver hadn't been where Wardell had been, but perhaps he wasn't a complete idiot. They passed the red car and the waving man, giving them both a wide berth. The man stopped signaling before they reached him. He ignored the driver and watched the tiny side window as it passed. Wardell locked eyes with him for a fleeting second. He didn't look disappointed or even angry that they hadn't stopped to help. He looked very calm, very focused.

They were still gaining speed, and the barn—it was a

barn—was coming into view. It was an old structure. Solid construction, thirty feet high, gable roof. Wardell had acquired an almost subconscious habit of assessing every environment in which he found himself with a professional eye, deciding where the best vantage points were from both an offensive and defensive point of view. The barn was a good spot both ways. The best spot he'd seen on this road, certainly.

They were fifty yards from the barn now, and Wardell could see it was built close to the road itself. Perhaps the farmhouse it had once belonged to had been bulldozed to make way for this thoroughfare.

Something was about to happen. He was sure of it.

He trained his eyes on the roof, at the position he would have chosen, right next to the weather vane. Something didn't look quite right with the line of the roof, almost as though—

Something big, solid, and absolutely unrelenting slammed into the left side of the vehicle, the opposite direction from where the barn sat. The van was pitched horizontally off the road, and then the world flipped upside down and sideways. For a moment it felt like Wardell was floating in zero G. Then gravity's pull reasserted itself with an angry bump, and the transport van came to rest on its side.

Sounds, smells, noises, pain all jumbled together in a confusing mess of white-noise sensation. Wardell heard shouts, gunshots from multiple weapons, then somebody moaning. The scents of gasoline and sheared metal mingling with smoke. Wardell could taste his own blood. He was shaking his head, trying to sort everything into the correct order. And then there were big hands grabbing his shoulders, dragging him from where he lay and out into the cold moonlight.

The fresh air helped, cleared his throat and his eyes, let him begin to get a handle on things. The barrel of a gun

was pressed into the back of his skull as he was pushed, stumbling away from the wrecked transport van. He glanced to the side, registered the bloody bodies of the two marshals up front, a yellow construction digger jammed a couple of feet deep in the crumpled wreckage of the transport van. Then he caught a smack to the head.

“Move it.”

Wardell got the message, looked straight ahead. The man had spoken with an Eastern European accent—evident even from just two words. Russian maybe. That was odd. Wardell couldn't remember killing any Russians. He was marched twenty paces off the road, and then his legs were kicked out from under him. He managed to get his cuffed hands up in time to break his fall. Clarence was not so lucky, arriving a second later, face-first in the field dirt. He yelped and rolled over, his nose spouting blood. He didn't say anything, which meant he was smarter than Wardell would have given him credit for. He just looked up at the three men with guns. Two of them grabbed one each of Clarence's arms and dragged him away from where Wardell was kneeling.

Wardell recognized the guy on the left arm from the phony breakdown scene. The one dragging the right arm wore a brown leather jacket over a black turtleneck sweater. He was a little shorter than the other two and gave out boss vibes despite his evident willingness to help with the manual labor. The one who stayed with Wardell was built like a bear. Almost as hairy as one, too. He wore a tight red T-shirt in defiance of the temperature and cradled a pump-action shotgun. A Remington 870, that old standby.

“Good to see you again, Clarence,” Turtleneck said in accented English, ignoring Wardell completely.

Wardell glanced at Clarence, taken by surprise, suddenly indignant. This was about *him*?

Clarence was staring up at Turtleneck, his hands conveniently brought together in supplication by the cuffs. He took a series of sharp breaths, as though building up the courage to speak. "Don't kill me," he said. The broken nose meant that it came out as *Dod't gill be*.

Turtleneck snorted, feigning amusement. "Not just yet." Russian, definitely.

Without warning, the one who was built like a bear took a step forward and kicked Wardell full in the gut. He had just enough time to tense his stomach muscles to avoid serious injury, but he doubled over and coughed a few times to make it look good. He wanted them off their guard.

"What about this one?" the bear asked Turtleneck. Similar accent but thicker.

"None of our business. Take care of him."

Wardell was still bent over, and saw the bear step toward him again as the other two turned their attention back to Clarence. He was going to kick him again, put him on his back so that he could take a clean shot at Wardell's center mass. Mistake.

Wardell caught the swinging foot in his cuffed hands, braced his own feet on the hard-packed ground, and pushed upward. The big man yelped and toppled over backward. Wardell followed him up and over, came down with all of his two hundred pounds on one elbow dead center to the larynx. The satisfyingly visceral crunch let him know he was done with this one. He was on his feet with the shotgun in his cuffed hands while the other two Russians were still reacting. He squeezed the trigger, and Turtleneck's chest disappeared in a red mist. Wardell pumped the slide on the shotgun, the cuffs ripping the skin on his forearms, and charged, yelling. The charge was both instinctive and practical: It made him a moving target and unnerved his opponent.

As it turned out, the final Russian's nerve was solid, but his aim was lousy. He got off a shot, but it came nowhere near Wardell. Wardell brought the shotgun level, having to angle his body sideways to do it within the limits of the cuffs, and blew the top four-fifths of the Russian's head off. The truncated corpse toppled forward like a felled tree. The last gunshot gave the illusion of echoing for longer than the first, and then the silence descended again and the hunter's moon beamed down, impassive.

Wardell started to jerk another shell into the chamber and winced as the cuffs rubbed the fresh scrape on his left wrist. He turned his head to look at the wrecked transport van, wondering if the keys would be on one of the dead marshals or if he'd have to get creative.

"Th-thank you," a weak, shell-shocked voice croaked from behind him.

Wardell's head snapped around. He'd forgotten all about Clarence. It was easy to do. The skinny man was still on his knees, shuffling forward, his eyes glassy with a mixture of trepidation and hope. Those eyes reminded Wardell of a pet rabbit he'd methodically starved to death as a boy.

"Those guys, they would have—"

"Evidently," Wardell said, cutting him off. He wasn't particularly interested in who, what, or why.

Something in his voice made the other man shrink back, his eyes widening. "You're not gonna shoot me, are you?" Clarence said, a nervous we're-in-this-together-brother smile breaking out on his face.

Wardell looked down at the shotgun and at his bloody wrist, then back at Clarence. He smiled and shook his head slowly. Then he swiveled the shotgun in his hands and rammed the butt into Clarence's face.

Clarence dropped without so much as a squeal, and

Wardell adjusted his grip on the gun again, turning it into a club. He brought it down across the middle of Clarence's face, feeling bone and cartilage give way. He hit the same spot another three times and felt the facial bone structure crumble completely on the third strike. He lost count after that, stopped thinking. Kept pounding until what had been Clarence's head was just mush and matter and fragments.

He stopped when his arms started to get tired, letting the adrenaline seep out of him like an ebbing tide. As his pulse returned to normal, Wardell looked down at himself with disgust. He was a mess: covered in dirt, sweat, and blood. A lot of blood. Some was his own, most was Clarence's. It made him want to retch. He hated being unclean. He hated a mess.

Five minutes later, he'd located the keys to his handcuffs on one of the dead guards and shed his orange prison jumpsuit. He used it to wipe down his arms and face as best he could and discarded it, evaluating his sartorial options. Mess had practical drawbacks as well as aesthetic ones: the clothes belonging to the last two Russians and Clarence were absolutely unusable. That left the big guy.

Shrugging, he stripped the Russian and pulled on his pants and T-shirt. It felt like wearing a circus tent. He paced back to the wreckage and surveyed his choice of weapons. The dead guards had both been carrying Smith & Wesson semiautomatic pistols. The driver's was still in its holster.

He crouched down and looked inside the crushed cabin, at a spot between the front seats. What he saw there made him wonder if a long incarceration could knock your perception of time utterly out of whack, because this was surely December 25th.

There was a Heckler & Koch PSG1 rifle with a telescopic sight strapped there, within easy reach of both driver and

passenger. Good for picking off escapees like himself, he guessed. Good for lots of things.

It was a thing of beauty, as powerful and precise as anything he'd used in the desert. *More* precise, in fact, because it was specifically designed for law enforcement and did not require the compromises for weight and durability necessary for military use.

Wardell made a pretense of weighing up practicalities and logistics before giving in to his desire and taking the rifle. It would slow him a little more than taking one of the Smiths, but not much. Hell, it was what he was trained for. It was meant to be.

That was when Wardell remembered the barn roof. He looked back up there, saw only a straight black line against the dark blue night sky. There was no one on the roof, probably never had been in the first place.

There was a line of trees a quarter of a mile south. Wardell slung the rifle under his arm, cast a final glance at the barn roof, and then he was gone.

Gone to look for America.

2

5:06 a.m.

Nine minutes after the phone call began and seven minutes after it ended, I had showered and shaved and was opening the closet door.

I selected a single-breasted charcoal suit, off-white shirt, and Italian shoes. Nothing flashy, even though the full

ensemble had cost roughly the equivalent of a small family car. There were another three identical suits in the closet. I closed the door on them; I could pick them up later.

I dressed quickly and strapped on my shoulder rig. I opened the drawer in the bedside table and took out a Beretta 92FS and its detached magazine. I checked the load of seventeen nine-millimeter Parabellum rounds, slid the magazine home, racked the slide, clicked the safety on, and put the weapon into the holster. I slipped my jacket on top and walked across the hotel room to a small writing desk, on which sat the other three items I would need. The first was a wallet containing an even thousand in cash, a driver's license in the name Carter Blake, and a platinum Amex card. The second item was a Dell Latitude laptop in a leather carry case. Finally, there was a set of keys for the car in the basement garage.

I reached for my cell phone and my hand froze. The phone had a screen saver that selected random images from memory, refreshed every fifteen minutes. It had chosen a picture I hadn't seen in a long time: a twentysomething woman with strawberry-blond hair and long eyelashes smiling at the camera and shielding her eyes from the sun. In the background, you could make out the curve of a Ferris wheel. Astroland, Coney Island. It's not there anymore. It was the only picture of Carol I kept.

I tapped the screen to kill the image and pocketed the phone.

Less than fifteen minutes after my cell had buzzed, I was behind the wheel of the car and on my way to Chicago.