

The Ambler Warning

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Extract

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

The building had the invisibility of the commonplace. It could have been a large public high school or a regional tax-processing center. A blocky structure of tan brick – four stories around an inner courtyard – the building looked like countless others erected in the 1950s and '60s. A casual passerby would not have given it a second look.

Yet there was no such thing as a casual passerby here. Not on this barrier island, six miles off the coast of Virginia. The island was, officially, part of America's National Wildlife Refuge System, and anyone who made inquiries learned that, owing to the extreme delicacy of its ecosystem, no visitors were permitted. Part of the island's leeward side was, indeed, a habitat for ospreys and mergansers: raptors and their prey, both endangered by the greatest predator of all, man. But the central part of the island was given over to a fifteen-acre campus of manicured green and carefully graded slopes, where the bland-looking facility was situated.

The boats that stopped at Parrish Island three times a day had NWRS markings, and from a distance it would not be apparent that the personnel ferried to the island looked nothing like park rangers. If a disabled fishing vessel tried to land on the island, it would be intercepted by khaki-clad men with genial smiles and hard, cold eyes. No one ever got close enough to see, and wonder about, the four guard towers, or the electrified fencing that surrounded the campus.

The Parrish Island Psychiatric Facility, as unremarkable in appearance as it was, contained a greater wilderness than any that surrounded it: that of the human mind. Few people

in the government knew of the facility. Yet simple logic had decreed its existence: a psychiatric facility for patients who were in possession of highly classified information. A secure environment was needed to treat someone who was out of his mind when that mind was filled with secrets of state. At Parrish Island, potential security risks could be carefully managed. All staff members were thoroughly vetted, with high-level clearance, and round-the-clock audio and video surveillance systems offered further protection against breaches of security. As an additional safeguard, the facility's clinical staff was rotated every three months, thus minimizing the possibility that inappropriate attachments might develop. Security protocols even stipulated that patients be identified by number, never by name.

Rarely, there would be a patient who was deemed an especially high risk, either because of the nature of his psychiatric disorder or because of the particular sensitivity of what he knew. A patient so designated would be isolated from other patients and housed in a separate locked ward. In the western wing of the fourth floor was one such patient, No. 5312.

A staffer who had just rotated to Ward 4W and encountered Patient No. 5312 for the first time could be sure only of what could be seen: that he was six feet tall, perhaps forty years of age; that his close-cropped hair was brown, his eyes an unclouded blue. If their eyes met, the staffer would be the first to look away – the intensity of the patient's stare could be unnerving, almost physically penetrative. The rest of his profile was contained in his psychiatric records. As to the wilderness within him, one could only surmise.

Somewhere in Ward 4W were explosions and mayhem and screams, but they were soundless, confined to the patient's troubled dreams, which grew in vividness even as sleep itself began to ebb. These moments before consciousness – when the viewer is aware only of what he views, an eye without an I – were filled by a series of images, each of which buckled

like a film strip stopped before an overheated projector bulb. A political rally on a steamy day in Taiwan: thousands of citizens assembled in a large square, cooled only by the very occasional breeze. A political candidate, struck down in midsentence by a blast – small, contained, deadly. Moments before, he had been speaking eloquently, ardently; now he was sprawled on the wooden rostrum, in a cowl of his own blood. He lifted up his head, gazing out at the crowd for the last time, and his eyes settled on one member of the crowd: a *chang bizi* – a Westerner. The one person who was not screaming, crying, fleeing. The one person who did not seem surprised, for he was, after all, in the presence of his own handiwork. The candidate died staring at the man who had come from across the world to kill him. Then the image buckled, shimmied, burned into a blinding white.

A far-off chime from an unseen speaker, a minor-key triad, and Hal Ambler opened his sleep-sticky eyes.

Was it truly morning? In his windowless room, he had no way of telling. But it was *his* morning. Recessed into the ceiling, soft fluorescent lights grew in intensity over a half-hour period: a technological dawn, made brighter by the whiteness of his surroundings. A pretend day, at least, was beginning. Ambler's room was nine feet by twelve feet; the floors were tiled with white vinyl, and the walls were covered with white PVC foam, a dense, rubbery material, slightly yielding to the touch, like a wrestling mat. Before long, the hatch-style door would slide open, making a hydraulic sigh as it did. He knew these details, and hundreds like them. It was the stuff of life in a high-security facility, if you could call it a life. He experienced stretches of grim lucidity, intervals of a fugue state. A larger sense that he had been abducted, not just his body but also his soul.

In the course of a nearly two-decade career as a clandestine operative, Ambler had occasionally been taken captive – it had happened in Chechnya and in Algeria – and he had been subjected to periods of solitary confinement. He knew that the circumstance wasn't conducive to deep thoughts, soul-searching, or philosophical inquiry. Rather,

the mind filled with scraps of advertising jingles, pop songs with half-remembered lyrics, and an acute consciousness of small bodily discomforts. It eddied, drifted, and seldom went anywhere interesting, for it was ultimately tethered to the curious agony of isolation. Those who had trained him for the life of an operative had tried to prepare him for such eventualities. The challenge, they had always insisted, was to keep the mind from attacking itself, like a stomach digesting its own lining.

Yet on Parrish Island, he wasn't in the hands of his enemies; he was being held by his own government, the government in whose service he had spent his career.

And he did not know why.

Why *someone* might be interned here wasn't a mystery to him. As a member of the branch of U.S. intelligence known as Consular Operations, he had heard about the facility on Parrish Island. Ambler understood, too, why such a facility had to exist; everyone was susceptible to the frailties of the human mind, including those in possession of highly guarded secrets. But it was dangerous to allow just any psychiatrist access to such a patient. That was a lesson learned the hard way, during the Cold War, when a Berlin-born psychoanalyst in Alexandria whose clientele included several top government officials came to be exposed as a conduit to East Germany's notorious Ministerium für Staatssicherheit.

Yet none of this explained why Hal Ambler found himself here, ever since – but how long had it been? His training had stressed the importance of keeping track of time when in confinement. Somehow he had failed to do so, and his questions about duration went unanswered. Had it been six months, a year, more? There was so much he did not know. One thing he did know was that if he did not escape soon, he really would go mad.

Routine: Ambler could not decide whether the observance of it was his rescue or his ruin. Quietly and efficiently, he completed his personal calisthenics regimen, finishing with

a hundred one-armed push-ups, alternating between left and right. Ambler was permitted to bathe every other day; this was not one of them. At a small white sink in a corner of his room, he brushed his teeth. The toothbrush handle, he noticed, was made of a soft, rubbery polymer, lest a piece of hard plastic be sharpened into a weapon. He pressed a touch latch, and a compact electric shaver slid from a compartment above the sink. He was permitted precisely 120 seconds of use before he had to return the sensor-tagged device to its security compartment; otherwise an alarm would chime. After he finished, Ambler splashed water on his face and ran his wet fingers through his hair, finger-combing it into some sort of order. There was no mirror; no reflective surface anywhere. Even the glass in the ward was treated with some antireflective coating. All to some therapeutic end, no doubt. He donned his 'day suit,' the white cotton smock and loose, elastic-waisted trousers that were the inmates' uniform.

He turned slowly when he heard the door slide open, and smelled the pine-scented disinfectant that always lingered around the hallway. It was, as usual, a heavyset man with a brush cut, dressed in a dove gray poplin uniform, a cloth tab carefully fastened over his pectoral nameplate: another precaution that the staff took on this ward. The man's flat vowels made it clear that he was a Midwesterner, but his boredom and incuriousness were contagious; Ambler took very little interest in him.

More routine: The orderly carried a thick nylon mesh belt in one hand. 'Raise your arms' was the grunted instruction as he came over and placed the black nylon belt around Ambler's waist. Ambler was not permitted to leave his room without the special belt. Inside the thick nylon fabric were several flat lithium batteries; once the belt was in place, two metal prongs were positioned just above his left kidney.

The device – it was officially known as a REACT belt, the acronym standing for 'Remote Electronically Activated Control Technology' – was typically used for the transport

of maximum-security prisoners; in Ward 4W, it was an item of daily attire. The belt could be activated from as far away as three hundred feet and was set to deliver an eight-second charge of fifty thousand volts. The blast of electricity would knock even a sumo wrestler to the floor, where he would twitch uncontrollably for ten or fifteen minutes.

Once the belt was snap-locked in place, the orderly escorted him down the white-tiled hallway for his morning medications. Ambler walked slowly, lumberingly, as if he were wading through water. It was a gait that frequently resulted from high serum levels of antipsychotic medications – a gait that everyone who worked in the wards was familiar with. Ambler’s movements were belied by the swift efficiency with which his gaze took in his surroundings. That was one of the many things the orderly failed to notice.

There were few things that Ambler failed to notice.

The building itself was decades old, but it had been regularly refurbished with up-to-date security technology: doors were opened by chip cards – cards that contained transponder wafers – rather than keys, and major gateways required retinal scans to operate, so that only authorized personnel could pass. About a hundred feet down the hall from his cell was the so-called Evaluation Room, which had an internal window of gray polarized glass that allowed for observation of the subject within, while making it impossible to observe the observer. There Ambler would sit for regular ‘psychiatric evaluations,’ the purpose of which seemed as elusive to the physician in attendance as it was to him. Ambler had known true despair in recent months, and not as a matter of psychiatric disturbance; instead, his despair flowed from a realistic estimation of his prospects for release. Even in the course of their three-month rotations, the staff had, he sensed, come to regard him as a lifer, someone who would be interned at the facility long after they had left it.

Several weeks ago, however, everything had changed for him. It was nothing objective, nothing physical, nothing

observable. Yet the plain fact was that he had *reached* someone, and that would make all the difference. More precisely, *she* would. She already had begun to. She was a young psychiatric nurse, and her name was Laurel Holland. And – it was as simple as this – she was on his side.

A few minutes later, the orderly arrived with his lead-footed patient at a large semicircular area of Ward 4W called the lounge. *Lounge*: neither the noun nor the verb was necessarily appropriate. More accurate was its technical designation: surveillance atrium. On one end was some rudimentary exercise equipment and a bookshelf with a fifteen-year-old edition of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. On the other was the dispensary: a long counter, a slat-like sliding window of wire-mesh glass, and, visible through it, a shelf of white plastic bottles with pastel-colored labels. As Ambler had come to learn, the contents of those bottles could be as incapacitating as manacles of steel. They produced torpor without peace, sluggishness without serenity.

But the institution's concern was not peace so much as pacification. Half a dozen orderlies had gathered in the area this morning. It was not unusual: only for the orderlies did the designation *lounge* make sense. The ward had been designed for a dozen patients; it served a population of one. As a result, the area became, informally, a sort of rest-and-recreation center for orderlies who worked in more demanding wards. Their tendency to congregate here, in turn, increased the security in this one.

As Ambler turned and nodded at a pair of orderlies seated at a low foam-cushioned bench, he allowed a slow rivulet of drool to roll down his chin; the gaze he turned toward them was unfocused and hazy. He had already registered the presence of six orderlies as well as the attending psychiatrist and – Ambler's one lifeline – the psychiatric nurse.

'Candy time,' one of the orderlies said; the others snickered.

Ambler made his way slowly to the dispensary, where the auburn-haired nurse was waiting with his morning's pills. An

imperceptible flicker – a fleeting glance, a fractional head nod – passed between them.

He had learned her name by accident; she'd spilled a cup of water on herself, and the fabric that was supposed to conceal her acetate nameplate became wet and translucent. Laurel Holland: the letters were ghosted beneath the fabric tab. He'd said her name aloud in a low voice; she seemed flustered yet somehow not displeased. With that, something was sparked between them. He studied her face, her posture, her voice, her manner. She was in her thirties, he figured, with hazel eyes flecked with green and a lithe frame. Smarter and prettier than she realized.

Conversations between them were murmured and brief, nothing that would attract notice from the surveillance systems. But a great deal was conveyed even through an exchange of glances and hovering smiles. As far as the system was concerned, he was Patient No. 5312. But by now, he knew that he was much more than a number to her.

He had cultivated her sympathy over the past six weeks not by acting – she would have been on to that, sooner rather than later – but by allowing himself to respond to her as she was, in a way that encouraged her to do the same. She recognized something about him – recognized his *sanity*.

Knowing this had bolstered his faith in himself, and his determination to escape. 'I don't want to die in this place,' he had murmured to her one morning. She made no reply, but her stricken look told him all he needed to know.

'Your meds,' she had said brightly, the next morning, placing three pills on his palm that looked slightly different from the usual dulling neuroleptics. *Tylenol*, she mouthed. Clinical protocol required him to swallow the tablets under her direct supervision and open his mouth afterward to show that he had not secreted them anywhere. He did so, and within an hour he had proof that she had told him the truth. He was lighter on his feet, lighter, too, in spirit. Within a few days, he began to feel brighter eyed, more buoyant – more himself. He had to make an effort to appear medicated, to feign the heavy-gaited Compazine shuffle that

the orderlies were accustomed to.

The Parrish Island Psychiatric Facility was a maximum-security center, well equipped with latest-generation technology. Yet no technology ever invented was wholly immune to the human factor. Now, with her body shielding her movements from the camera, she slipped her key card into the elastic waistband of his white-cotton uniform.

‘I’m hearing there could be a Code Twelve this morning,’ she murmured. The code referred to a major medical emergency, requiring a patient’s evacuation to an offsite medical center. Laurel Holland did not explain how she knew, but he could guess: the likeliest scenario was that a patient had been complaining of chest pains – early warning signs of a more serious cardiac event. They would be monitoring the situation, knowing that if there were further signs of sudden arrhythmia, the patient would have to be removed to an ICU on the mainland. Ambler remembered one previous Code Twelve – an older patient had suffered a hemorrhagic stroke – and recalled the security procedures that had been followed. As formidable as they were, they represented an irregularity: an irregularity he might be able to exploit.

‘Listen,’ she whispered. ‘And be ready to act.’

Two hours later – hours of glazed silence and immobility on Ambler’s part – an electronic chime sounded, followed by an electronic voice: *Code Twelve, Ward Two East*. The pre-recorded voice was of the sort heard in airport shuttle trains and modernized subway cars, unsettlingly pleasant. At once, the orderlies were on their feet. *Must be that old guy, in 2E. His second MI, right?* Most of them left for the second-floor ward. Both the chime and the message repeated at frequent intervals.

An elderly heart-attack victim, then, just as one would have predicted. Ambler felt a hand on his shoulder. The same thickset orderly who had been at his door earlier in the morning.

‘Standard procedure,’ the man said. ‘Patients return to their room during all emergency protocols.’

‘What’s going on?’ Ambler asked, thick tongued and dull.

‘Nothing you need to worry about. You’ll be safe and sound in your room.’ Translation: *lockdown*. ‘Now come with me.’

Long minutes later, the two men were in front of Ambler’s room. The orderly presented his card to the reader, a gray plastic device mounted at waist level near the door, and the hatch-style door slid open.

‘In you go,’ the thickset Midwesterner said.

‘Need help to . . .’ Ambler took a few steps toward the threshold and then turned back to the orderly, gesturing helplessly toward the porcelain commode.

‘Oh hell,’ the orderly said, his nostrils flared in disgust, and followed Ambler into the room.

You only get one go. No mistakes.

As the orderly came over to him, Ambler stooped, keeping his legs slightly bent at the knees, as if he were starting to crumple. Suddenly he shot upward, ramming the man’s jaw with his head. Panic and bewilderment showed in the orderly’s face as the jarring force of impact was absorbed: the shuffling, narcotized inmate had turned into a whirlwind of activity – what had happened? Moments later, the orderly fell heavily to the vinyl-tiled floor, and Ambler was on him, going through his pockets.

No mistakes. He could not afford even one.

He collected the chip card and the ID badge and then swiftly changed into the man’s dove-gray shirt and trousers. The fit was approximate but not absurd: it could withstand a casual glance. He quickly rolled the trouser cuffs up and inside, invisibly shortening the inseam. The waist of the trousers rode over the stun belt: he would have given almost anything to be rid of it, but this was physically impossible in the time he had. All he could do was cinch in the uniform’s gray fabric belt and hope the black nylon mesh of the REACT device remained concealed.

Holding the orderly’s chip card to the internal card reader, he opened the door to his room and glanced out. There was nobody in the hallway just now. All nonessential staff had been dispatched to the scene of the medical emergency.

Would the hatch close automatically? He couldn't afford to be wrong. Stepping into the hallway, Ambler held the card to the outside reader. After a couple of clicks, the door slid shut.

Now he raced a few yards to the wide push-bar-equipped door at the end of the hallway. One of the four-point Electrolatch doors. Locked, of course. He presented the same key card he had just used, heard a few clicks as a lock motor turned over. Then nothing. It remained locked.

This wasn't a passageway authorized for orderlies.

He realized why Laurel Holland had given him her chip card: the doorway had to open onto the same corridor by which the dispensary was stocked.

He tried her key card.

This time the door opened.

He found himself in a narrow service corridor, dimly lit by a strip of low-wattage fluorescents. He looked right, taking in the wheeled linen cart at the other end of the corridor, and crept toward it. It was obvious that the janitors hadn't visited the area yet today. There were cigarette butts on the floor, and cellophane wrappers, and then his shoe encountered something flat and metal: an empty can of Red Bull that someone had stomped on. Responding to an indistinct intuition, Ambler stuck it in his back pocket.

How much time did he have? More concretely, how long before the orderly's disappearance would be noted? Within a few minutes, the Code Twelve would be concluded and someone would be sent to retrieve Ambler from his room. He had to get out of the building as fast as possible.

His fingertips brushed against something projecting from the wall. He had found it: the metal lid of the laundry chute. He climbed inside, holding on to the entrance ledge with both hands and feeling around him with his legs. He had worried that the chute might be too small; in fact, it was too large, and there was no side-mounted scuttle ladder, as he'd dared hope. Instead, the chute was lined with smooth sheet steel. To stop from falling, he had to press against opposite

sides of the chute with both his hands and his sneaker-clad feet.

He slowly lowered himself down the chute, repositioning each of his limbs in strenuous sequence; the muscular strain imposed was terrific and, before long, terrifically painful. Rest was not an option; muscles had to be exerted at all times, or else he would plunge, in what seemed to be a straight drop.

It seemed as if hours had passed by the time he had scuttle-rappelled to the bottom, though he knew the elapsed time was closer to two minutes. His muscles were shuddering, spasming in agony, even as he pushed through bags of soiled laundry, nearly gagging at the fetor of human sweat and excrement. He felt as if he were digging himself out of a grave, clawing, wriggling, *forcing* himself through a resistant substance. Every fiber of his musculature was screaming for rest, yet there was no time for rest.

He finally pushed his way onto a hard cement floor, and he was – where? – in a hot, low-ceilinged basement space, loud with the rumble and din of laundry machines. He craned his head. At the end of a long row of white-enameled industrial washers, two workers were loading a machine.

He stood up and stepped across the aisle of laundry machines, forcing discipline upon his quivering muscles: if he *was* seen, his steps had to be confident. Once he was out of the sight line of the laundry workers, he stood beside a row of wheeled canvas laundry carts and assessed his location.

He knew that medical evacuations were conducted using a high-speed boat and that the boat would be landing shortly, if it had not already arrived. Right now the heart-attack victim was being strapped onto a gurney. If Ambler's plans had any chance of succeeding, he could afford no delays.

He had to get himself on that boat.

Which meant finding his way onto the loading dock. *I don't want to die in this place:* he wasn't just playing on Laurel

Holland's sympathies when he said it. He had spoken the truth, perhaps the most urgent truth he knew.

'Hey,' a voice called out. 'What the fuck are you doing here?'

The petty authority of a midlevel ward attendant, someone whose life consisted of taking shit from his bosses, and giving it to those he bossed.

Ambler forced an easygoing smile as he turned toward a small bald man with a cottage-cheese complexion and eyes that seemed to swivel like a surveillance camera.

'Take it easy, dude,' Ambler said. 'I swear I wasn't smoking.'

'This is a joke to you?' The supervisor walked over to him. He glanced at the badge on Ambler's shirt. 'How's your Spanish? Because I can have you busted down to ground maintenance, you –' He suddenly broke off, having realized that the face on the ID badge was not that of the man in the uniform. 'Holy shit,' he breathed.

Then he did something curious: he moved about twenty feet away and unhooked a device from his belt. It was the radio transmitter that activated the stun belt.

No! Ambler couldn't let it happen. If the belt was activated, he would be struck down by a tidal wave of pain and left twitching and spasming on the floor. All his plans would be for nothing. He would die in there. A nameless captive, pawn of forces he would never understand. As if of their own accord, Ambler's hands reached for the flattened soda can in his back pocket, his subconscious mind operating a split second before his conscious one.

It was impossible to remove the stun belt. But it was possible to slide the piece of flat metal *underneath* the belt – and that was what he did, shoving it against his skin with all his strength, hardly conscious of the way it scraped his flesh. The stun belt's two metal contacts now rested on the conductive metal.

'Welcome to a world of pain,' the supervisor said in a level voice as he pressed the stun-belt activator.

From the rear of the belt Ambler heard a raspy buzzing.

His body was no longer the path of least resistance between the stun prongs; the flattened metal can was. He smelled a wisp of smoke, and then the buzzing ceased.

The belt had been shorted out.

Ambler charged at the supervisor, swiftly overtaking him and tackling him to the floor. The man's head slammed against the concrete, and he let out a low, concussed moan. Ambler remembered what one of the training officers at Consular Operations always insisted: that bad luck was just the flip side of good luck. *There's opportunity in every mishap.* It didn't make logical sense, but to Ambler, often enough, it made intuitive sense. Glancing at the series of initials underneath the man's name, Ambler saw that he had inventory-management responsibilities. That meant overseeing how things entered and left the building – which meant regular use of the service entrances. The building's actual points of egress were far more demanding even than the internal gateways: they required biometric signatures from authorized personnel. Such as the man who lay limply at Ambler's feet. He replaced the orderly's badge he had been wearing with that of the superintendent. Even unconscious, the man would be his ticket out.

The steel gate at the west service exit bore a white-and-red sign that stated the policy bluntly: USE OF THIS PASSAGEWAY BY NONAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL STRICTLY PROHIBITED: ALARM WILL SOUND. There was no keyhole or card reader by the push bar. Instead, there was something far more formidable: a wall-mounted device whose simple interface consisted of a horizontal glass rectangle and a push button. It was a retinal-scan device, and it was virtually infallible. The capillaries that emerge from the optic nerve and radiate through the retina had a unique configuration in every individual. Unlike fingerprint-based readers, which worked with only sixty indices of resemblance, retinal scans involved many hundreds of them. As a result, retinal-scan devices had a false-accept rate that was essentially zero.

Which wasn't the same as foolproof. *Say hello to your*

authorized personnel, Ambler thought as he put his arms beneath those of the unconscious supervisor, hoisting him before the scanner and holding his eyes open with his fingers. He pushed the button with his left elbow, and two bursts of red light came from the scanner glass. After a couple of long seconds, there was the sound of a whirring motor from inside the steel door, and it swung open. Ambler let the man drop to the floor, walked through the gate and then up a short flight of concrete steps.

He was at a loading dock at the west side of the building, breathing unfiltered air for the first time in a very long while. The day was overcast: cold, wet, dismal. But he was *outside*. A giddy, silly feeling rose in him, fleetingly, clamped down by a larger anxiety. He was in greater danger than ever before. From Laurel Holland he knew about the electrified perimeter fencing. The only way out was to be officially escorted out – or to be one of the official escorts.

He heard the distant sound of a motorboat and then, closer by, another motorized sound. An electric vehicle, like an oversize golf cart, was driving up to the south side of the building. In short order, a gurney was wheeled up to the back. The electric cart would take the patient to the boat.

Ambler took a deep breath, strode around the building, and ran up to the vehicle, banging on the driver's side. The driver regarded him warily.

You're calm; you're bored. It's just a job. 'They told me I was supposed to stick with the heart-attack guy all the way to the medical center,' Ambler said, climbing aboard. Meaning: *I'm no happier with the assignment than you are.* 'Newbies get all the shit jobs,' he went on. The tone was of mild complaint, the message one of apology. He folded his arms on his chest, concealing his badge and its ill-matched photo ID. 'This joint's the same as every place I ever worked.'

'You with Barlowe's team?' the driver grunted.

Barlowe? 'You know it.'

'He's a real shitheel, isn't he?'

'You know it,' Ambler repeated.

At the wharf, the men who were in the express cruiser –

the boat's pilot, a paramedic, and an armed guard – grumbled when they were told that the body was to be accompanied by an attendant from the facility. They weren't trusted to do the job right? Was *that* the message? Besides, the paramedic pointed out, the patient was already dead. This was going to be a morgue run. But the combination of Ambler's blasé manner and the driver's shoulder shrugging reassured them, and nobody wanted to loiter in this weather. The crew members each grabbed one end of the aluminum-framed stretcher, shivering slightly in their navy wind-breakers as they transported the body to a below-deck sleeping berth, toward the rear of the boat.

The forty-foot Culver Ultra Jet was smaller than the vessels that transported staff to and from the facility. It was also speedier: with its twin five-hundred-horsepower jet drives, it could complete the distance to the coastal medical center in ten minutes, faster than it would take to summon, land, and load a helicopter from either the Langley Air Force Base or the U.S. Naval Base. Ambler kept close to the pilot; the boat was a recent military model, and he wanted to make sure he understood the control panels. He watched as the pilot adjusted the stern and bow thrusters, then shifted the throttle to full. The boat was riding high in the water now, pressing past thirty-five knots.

It would be ten minutes to shore. Would the ruse survive that long? It wasn't hard to make sure that the photograph on his ID badge was flecked with shore mud, and Ambler knew that people took their cues from tone – from voice, from manner – rather than from documents. After a few minutes, Ambler joined the paramedic and the guard on a bench behind the helm.

The paramedic – late twenties, red-splotched cheeks, curly black hair – still seemed offended by Ambler's presence. Finally he turned to Ambler and said, 'They didn't say anything about the body being accompanied. You realize the guy's dead, right?' A Southern accent, the speaker someone bored and irritable, probably resentful of having been sent to retrieve a patient who was already dead.

‘Is he?’ Ambler stifled a yawn, or pretended to. *Christ, would he let it go already?*

‘Damn right he is. I checked myself. So it ain’t like he’s gonna escape, you know?’

Ambler remembered the officious air of the man who had worn his badge. *That* was the tone to take. ‘Until they got a notarized certificate, your say-so ain’t shit to them. Nobody at Parrish has that authority. So the rules are the rules.’

‘It’s such bullshit.’

‘Quit busting his balls, Olson,’ the guardsman said. It was not solidarity; it was sport. But that was not all it was. Ambler could tell that the two did not know each other well and were not comfortable around each other. Probably it was the classic problem of unresolved authority; the paramedic wanted to act like he was in charge, but it was the guardsman who carried the service weapon.

Ambler gave the guardsman a friendly glance. He was burly, in his mid-twenties, with a haircut that came from a military barber. He looked to be an ex-Army Ranger; certainly his hip-holstered HK P7 pistol, compact and deadly, was a piece long favored by the Rangers. He was the only armed man on the boat, but Ambler could tell he was no slouch.

‘Whatever,’ the paramedic said after a pause. But he wasn’t deferring to the guardsman; he was saying, *What’s your problem?*

As the three resumed an uncompanionable silence, Ambler allowed himself to feel a tincture of relief.

The boat had gone only a few miles from Parrish Island when the pilot, wearing headphones, gesticulated to get the attention of the others and pressed a lever that brought the radio on the cabin speaker. ‘This is a Five-Oh-Five from Parrish Island.’ The radio dispatcher’s voice sounded agitated. ‘We have an escaped-inmate situation. Repeat: an escaped-inmate situation.’

Ambler felt his stomach clutch. He had to act, had to *use* the crisis. He jumped to his feet. ‘Christ on a raft,’ he grunted.

The speaker crackled again with the dispatcher’s voice:

‘Cruiser 12-647-M, the inmate may have stowed himself on your vessel. Please confirm or disconfirm immediately. *Holdings.*’

The guardsman gave Ambler a hard look; a thought was beginning to form. Ambler would have to get *ahead* of it, redirect it.

‘Shit,’ Ambler said. ‘I guess now you know why I’m here.’ A beat. ‘You think it’s an accident they’ve insisted on putting security reps on every vehicle leaving the island? We’ve been hearing static about some kind of escape attempt for the past twenty-four hours.’

‘Could’ve told us,’ the guardsman said sullenly.

‘Not the kind of gossip the facility’s looking to spread,’ Ambler said. ‘Gonna check that body right now.’ He scrambled to the rear below-deck berth. Inside, to the left, was a narrow tool closet, recessed into the cargo area of the inner hull. There were a few oily rags on the floor. On a platform of steel checker plate, the body was still bound to the stretcher with Velcro straps; it looked bloated, perhaps 250 pounds, and the gray pallor of death was unmistakable.

Now what? He would have to work fast, before the others decided to follow him.

Twenty seconds later, he raced back to the cabin.

‘You!’ Ambler said accusingly, thrusting his forefinger at the paramedic. ‘You said the patient was dead. What kind of bullshit was that? I just felt the guy’s neck, and guess what. He had a pulse same as you and me.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about,’ the paramedic said indignantly. ‘That’s a goddamn corpse down there.’

Ambler was still breathing hard. ‘A corpse with a pulse rate of seventy? I don’t think so.’

The guardsman’s head swiveled, and Ambler could tell what he was thinking: *This guy sounds like he knows what he’s talking about.* Ambler had a momentary advantage; he had to press it.

‘Are you part of it?’ Ambler demanded, fixing the paramedic with an accusatory glare. ‘You *in* on it?’

‘What the hell are you saying?’ the paramedic replied, his splotchy cheeks reddening further. The way the guardsman was looking at him riled him even more, and the effect was to make him sound defensive, insecure. The paramedic turned to the guardsman. ‘Becker, you can’t be taking this guy seriously. I know how to take a pulse, and that’s a goddamn *stiff* we got on the stretcher.’

‘Show us,’ Ambler said grimly, leading the way back to the berth. The pronoun *us* was a powerful one, he knew: implicitly it drew a line between the man he was accusing and the rest of them. Ambler needed to keep everyone off balance, needed to foment dissension and suspicion. Otherwise the suspicion would gravitate toward him.

He glanced back and saw that the guardsman was bringing up the rear with his pistol out of its holster. The three men stepped around the transom platforms and proceeded to the rear berth. The medic swung open the door to it and then said, in a stunned voice, ‘What the hell . . . ?’

The two others peered inside. The stretcher lay askew, its Velcro straps undone. The body was gone.

‘You lying sack of shit,’ Ambler exploded.

‘I don’t understand,’ the paramedic said, his voice unsteady.

‘Well, I think the rest of us do,’ Ambler said in a freezing voice. The subtle sway of syntax: the more he used the first-person plural, the greater his authority. He glanced at the tool-closet door, hoping nobody would notice how the slide latch was bulging with the strain of keeping the door shut.

‘You’re telling me a *corpse* walked hisself out of here?’ the buzz-cut guardsman demanded, turning toward the curly-haired Southerner. The guardsman gripped his pistol firmly.

‘Probably just slipped over the side and went for a nice swim,’ Ambler sneered. *Push your scenario; prevent them from thinking of alternate ones.* ‘We’d never have heard, and in this fog, we’d never have seen. Three miles to shore, at this point, not too strenuous if you keep your blood flowing. Typical corpse behavior, right?’

‘This is *crazy*,’ the paramedic protested. ‘I had nothing to do with it! You gotta believe me.’ The form of denial was automatic, but it effectively confirmed the crucial element of the allegation: that the man on the gurney was the escapee.

‘Guess we know why he was so pissed off they made me tag along,’ Ambler said to the guardsman, just loudly enough to be heard over the engines. ‘Listen, you better call this in ASAP. I’ll keep a watch on the suspect.’

The guardsman looked confused, and Ambler could read the conflicting impulses on his face. Now Ambler leaned over and spoke confidently into the guardsman’s ear. ‘I know you had nothing to do with it,’ he said. ‘My report’s gonna make that real clear. So you got nothing to worry about.’ The message relayed was not to be found in the content of the words. Ambler was perfectly aware he wasn’t addressing the guardsman’s concern: it hadn’t yet occurred to the man that anyone might suspect him of being involved in an escape from a maximum-security facility. But in giving assurance on the matter – and speaking of his ‘report’ – Ambler was subtly establishing his authority: the man in the dove-gray tunic now represented officialdom, procedure, the discipline of command.

‘Understood,’ the guardsman said, and he turned to Ambler for reassurance.

‘Give me your pistol and I’ll keep an eye on this joker,’ Ambler said, his voice level. ‘But you need to radio this in *right now*.’

‘Will do,’ the guard said. Ambler could tell that he was feeling a pang of unease, even as events – bewildering and unaccustomed events – overrode his normal caution. Before handing the fully loaded Heckler & Koch P7 to the man in the gray tunic, he hesitated for a moment.

But only for a moment.