
THE PASSAGE

A NOVEL

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Wolgast had been to the compound only once, the previous summer, to meet with Colonel Sykes. Not a job interview, exactly; it had been made clear to Wolgast that the NOAH assignment was his if he wanted it. A pair of soldiers drove him in a van with blacked-out windows, but Wolgast could tell they were taking him west from Denver, into the mountains. The

drive took six hours, and by the time they pulled into the compound, he'd actually managed to fall asleep. He stepped from the van into the bright sunshine of a summer afternoon. He stretched and looked around. From the topography, he'd have guessed he was somewhere around Ouray. It could have been farther north. The air felt thin and clean in his lungs; he felt the dull throb of a high-altitude headache at the top of his skull.

He was met in the parking lot by a civilian, a compact man dressed in jeans and a khaki shirt rolled at the sleeves, a pair of old-fashioned aviators perched on his wide, faintly bulbous nose. This was Richards.

"Hope the ride wasn't too bad," Richards said as they shook hands. Up close Wolgast saw that Richards's cheeks were pockmarked with old acne scars. "We're pretty high up here. If you're not used to it, you'll want to take it easy."

Richards escorted Wolgast across the parking area to a building he called the Chalet, which was exactly what it sounded like: a large Tudor structure, three stories tall, with the exposed timbers of an old-fashioned sportsmen's lodge. The mountains had once been full of these places, Wolgast knew, hulking relics from an era before time-share condos and modern resorts. The building faced an open lawn and beyond, at a hundred yards or so, a cluster of more workaday structures: cinder-block barracks, a half dozen military inflatables, a low-slung building that resembled a roadside motel. Military vehicles, Humvees and smaller jeeps and five-ton trucks, were moving up and down the drive; in the center of the lawn, a group of men with broad chests and trim haircuts, naked to the waist, were sunning themselves on lawn chairs.

Stepping into the Chalet, Wolgast had the disorienting sensation of peeking behind a movie set; the place appeared to have been gutted to the studs, its original architecture replaced by the neutral textures of a modern office building: gray carpeting, institutional lighting, acoustic-tile drop ceilings. He might have been in a dentist's office or the high-rise off the freeway where he met his accountant once a year to do his taxes. They stopped at the front desk, where Richards asked him to turn over his handheld and his weapon, which he passed to the guard, a kid in camos, who tagged them. There was an elevator, but Richards walked past it and led Wolgast down a narrow hallway to a heavy metal door that opened on a flight of stairs. They ascended to the second floor and made their way down another nondescript hallway to Sykes's office.

Sykes rose from behind his desk as they entered: a tall, well-built man in uniform, his chest spangled with the various bars and little bits of color that Wolgast had never understood. His office was neat as a pin, its arrangement of objects, right down to the framed photos on his desk, giv-

ing the impression of having been placed for maximum efficiency. Resting in the center of the desk was a single manila folder, fat with paper. Wolgast knew it was almost certainly his personnel file, or some version of it.

They shook hands and Sykes offered him coffee, which Wolgast accepted. He wasn't drowsy but the caffeine, he knew, would help the headache.

"Sorry about the bullshit with the van," Sykes said, and waved him to a chair. "That's just how we do things."

A soldier brought in the coffee, a plastic carafe and two china cups on a tray. Richards remained standing behind Sykes's desk, his back to the broad windows that looked out on the woodlands that ringed the compound. Sykes explained what he wanted Wolgast to do. It was all quite straightforward, he said, and by now Wolgast knew the basics. The Army needed between ten and twenty death row inmates to serve in the third-stage trials of an experimental drug therapy, code-named "Project NOAH." In exchange for their consent, the inmates would have their sentences commuted to life without parole. It would be Wolgast's job to obtain the signatures of these men, nothing more. Everything had been legally vetted, but because the project was a matter of national security, all of these men would be declared legally dead. Thereafter, they would spend the rest of their lives in the care of the federal penal system in a white-collar prison camp, under assumed identities. The men would be chosen based upon a number of factors, but all would be men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five with no living first-degree relatives. Wolgast would report directly to Sykes; he'd have no other contact, though he'd remain, technically, in the employment of the Bureau.

"Do I have to pick them?" Wolgast asked.

Sykes shook his head. "That's our job. You'll receive your orders from me. All you have to do is get their consent. Once they're signed on, the Army will take it from there. They'll be moved to the nearest federal lockup, then we'll transport them here."

Wolgast thought a moment. "Colonel, I have to ask—"

"What we're doing?" He seemed, at that moment, to permit himself an almost human-looking smile.

Wolgast nodded. "I understand I can't be very specific. But I'm going to be asking them to sign over their whole lives. I have to tell them something."

Sykes exchanged a look with Richards, who shrugged. "I'll leave you now," Richards said, and nodded at Wolgast. "Agent."

When Richards had left, Sykes leaned back in his chair. "I'm not a biochemist, Agent. You'll have to be satisfied with the layman's version.

Here's the background, at least the part I can tell you. About ten years ago, the CDC got a call from a doctor in La Paz. He had four patients, all Americans, who had come down with what looked like hantavirus—high fever, vomiting, muscle pain, headache, hypoxemia. The four of them had been part of an ecotour, deep in the jungle. They claimed that they were part of a group of fourteen but had gotten separated from the others and had been wandering in the jungle for weeks. It was sheer luck that they'd stumbled onto a remote trading post run by a bunch of Franciscan friars, who'd arranged their transport to La Paz. Now, hanta isn't the common cold, but it's not exactly rare, either, so none of this would have been more than a blip on the CDC's radar if not for one thing: all of them were terminal cancer patients. The tour was organized by an outfit called Last Wish. You've heard of them?"

Wolgast nodded. "I thought they just took people skydiving, things like that."

"That's what I thought, too. But apparently not. Of the four, one had an inoperable brain tumor, two had acute lymphocytic leukemia, and the fourth had ovarian cancer. And every single one of them became well. Not just the hanta, or whatever it was. No cancer. Not a trace."

Wolgast felt lost. "I don't get it."

Sykes sipped his coffee. "Well, neither did anyone at the CDC. But something had happened, some interaction between their immune systems and something, most likely viral, that they'd been exposed to in the jungle. Something they ate? The water they drank? No one could figure it out. They couldn't even say exactly where they'd been." He leaned forward over his desk. "Do you know what the thymus gland is?"

Wolgast shook his head.

Sykes pointed at his chest, just above the breastbone. "Little thing in here, between the sternum and the trachea, about the size of an acorn. In most people, it's atrophied completely by puberty, and you could go your whole life not knowing you had one, unless it was diseased. Nobody really knows what it does, or at least they didn't, until they ran scans on these four patients. The thymus had somehow turned itself back on. More than back on: it had enlarged to three times its usual size. It looked like a malignancy but it wasn't. And their immune systems had gone into overdrive. A hugely accelerated rate of cellular regeneration. And there were other benefits. Remember these were cancer patients, all over fifty. It was like they were teenagers again: smell, hearing, vision, skin tone, lung volume, physical strength and endurance, even sexual function. One of the men actually grew back a full head of hair."

"A virus did this?"

Sykes nodded. “Like I said, this is the layman’s version. But I’ve got people downstairs who think that’s exactly what happened. Some of them have degrees in subjects I can’t even spell. They talk to me like I’m a child, and they’re not wrong.”

“What happened to them? The four patients?”

Sykes leaned back in his chair, his face darkening a little. “Well, this isn’t the happiest part of the story, I’m afraid. They’re all dead. The longest any of them survived was eighty-six days. Cerebral aneurysm, heart attack, stroke. Their bodies just kind of blew a fuse.”

“What about the others?”

“No one knows. Disappeared without a trace, including the tour operator, who turned out to be a pretty shady character. It’s likely he was actually working as a drug mule, using these tours as a cover.” Sykes gave a shrug. “I’ve probably said too much. But I think this will help you put things in perspective. We’re not talking about curing one disease, Agent. We’re talking about curing *everything*. How long would a human being live if there were no cancer, no heart disease, no diabetes, no Alzheimer’s? And we’ve reached the point where we need, absolutely require, human test subjects. Not a nice term, but there really is no other. And that’s where you come in. I need you to get me these men.”

“Why not the marshals? Isn’t this more up their alley?”

Sykes shook his head dismissively. “Glorified corrections officers, if you’ll excuse my saying so. Believe me, we started there. If I had a sofa I needed carried up the stairs, they’d be the first guys I’d call. But for this, no.”

Sykes opened the file on his desk and began to read. “Bradford Joseph Wolgast, born Ashland, Oregon, September 29, 1974. BS in criminal justice 1996, SUNY Buffalo, high honors, recruited by the Bureau but declines, accepts a graduate fellowship at Stony Brook for a PhD in political science but leaves after two years to join the Bureau. After training at Quantico sent to—” He raised his eyebrows at Wolgast. “—Dayton?”

Wolgast shrugged. “It wasn’t very exciting.”

“Well, we all do our time. Two years in the sticks, a little of this, a little of that, mostly piddly shit but good ratings all around. After 9/11 asks to transfer to counterterrorism, back to Quantico for eighteen months, assigned to the Denver field office September ’04 as liaison to the Treasury, tracking funds moved through U.S. banks by Russian nationals, i.e., the Russian Mafia, though we don’t call them that. On the personal side: no political affiliations, no memberships, doesn’t even subscribe to the newspaper. Parents deceased. Dates a little but no steady girlfriends. Marries Lila Kyle, an orthopedic surgeon. Divorced four years later.” He closed the

file and lifted his eyes to Wolgast. “What we need, Agent, is somebody who, to be perfectly candid, has a certain polish. Good negotiation skills, not just with the prisoners but with the prison authorities. Somebody who knows how to tread lightly, won’t leave a large impression. What we’re doing here is perfectly legal—hell, it may be the most important piece of medical research in the history of mankind. But it could be easily misunderstood. I’m telling you as much as I am because I think it will help if you understand the stakes, how high they are.”

Wolgast guessed Sykes was telling him maybe ten percent of the story—a persuasive ten percent, but even so. “Is it safe?”

Sykes shrugged. “There’s safe and then there’s safe. I won’t lie to you. There are risks. But we’ll do everything we can to minimize them. A bad outcome isn’t in anybody’s interest here. And I remind you that these are death row inmates. Not the nicest men you’d ever care to meet, and they don’t exactly have a lot of options. We’re giving them a chance to live out their lives, and maybe make a significant contribution to medical science at the same time. It’s not a bad deal, not by a long shot. Everybody’s on the side of the angels here.”

Wolgast took a last moment to think. It was all a little hard to take in. “I guess I don’t see why the military is involved.”

At this, Sykes stiffened; he seemed almost offended. “Don’t you? Think about it, Agent. Let’s say a soldier on the ground in Khorramabad or Grozny takes a piece of shrapnel. A roadside bomb, say, a bunch of C-4 in a lead pipe full of deck screws. Maybe it’s a piece of black-market Russian ordnance. Believe me, I’ve seen firsthand what these things can do. We have to dust him out of there, maybe en route he bleeds to death, but if he’s lucky he gets to the field hospital, where a trauma surgeon, two medics, and three nurses patch him up as best they can before evacuating him to Germany or Saud. It’s painful, it’s awful, it’s his rotten luck, and he’s probably out of the war. He’s a broken asset. All the money we’ve spent on his training is a total loss. And it gets worse. He comes home depressed, angry, maybe missing a limb or something worse, with nothing good to say about anyone or anything. Down at the corner tavern he tells his buddies, I lost my leg, I’m pissing into a bag for the rest of my life, and for what?” Sykes leaned back in his chair, letting the story sink in. “We’ve been at war for fifteen years, Agent. By the looks of things, we’ll be in it for fifteen more if we’re *lucky*. I won’t kid you. The single biggest challenge the military faces, has always faced, is keeping soldiers on the field. So, let’s say the same GI takes the same piece of shrapnel but within half a day his body’s healed itself and he’s back in his unit, fighting for God and country. You think the military wouldn’t be interested in something like that?”

Wolgast felt chastened. “I see your point.”

“Good, because you should.” Sykes’s expression softened; the lecture was over. “So maybe it’s the military who’s picking up the check. I say let them, because frankly, what we’ve spent so far would make your eyes pop out. I don’t know about you, but I’d like to live to meet my great-great-great-grandchildren. Hell, I’d like to hit a golf ball three hundred yards on my hundredth birthday and then go home to make love to my wife until she walks funny for a week. Who wouldn’t?” He looked at Wolgast searchingly. “The side of the angels, Agent. Nothing more or less. Do we have a deal?”

They shook, and Sykes walked him to the door. Richards was waiting to take him back to the van. “One last question,” Wolgast asked. “Why ‘NOAH’? What’s it stand for?”

Sykes glanced quickly at Richards. In that moment, Wolgast felt the balance of power shifting in the room; Sykes might have been technically in charge, but in some way, Wolgast felt certain, he also reported to Richards, who was probably the link between the military and whoever was really running the show: USAMRIID, Homeland, maybe NSA.

Sykes turned back to Wolgast. “It doesn’t stand for anything. Let’s put it this way. You ever read the Bible?”

“Some.” Wolgast looked at the both of them. “When I was a kid. My mother was a Methodist.”

Sykes allowed himself a second, final smile. “Go look it up. The story of Noah and the ark. See how long he lived. That’s all I’ll say.”

That night, back in his Denver apartment, Wolgast did as Sykes had said. He didn’t own a Bible, probably hadn’t laid eyes on one since his wedding day. But he found a concordance online.

And all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died.

It was then that he realized what the missing piece was, the thing Sykes hadn’t said. It would be in his file, of course. It was the reason, of all the federal agents they might have chosen, that they’d picked him.

They’d chosen him because of Eva, because he’d had to watch his daughter die.