

THE
**PRODIGY
PROJECT**

A NOVEL

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DOUG FLANDERS, MI

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PROJECT

Doug Flanders, MD

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Prescott Publishing

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The Prodigy Project.

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*To those who fight
human trafficking worldwide.*

*To my adoptive parents and others
who take in orphans.*

*To my lovely wife, twelve wonderful children,
and beautiful daughter-in-law.*

*You are the inspiration
for the pages that follow.*

PROLOGUE

Audible bleeding. That's what we call it when the blood is hitting the floor so hard you can hear it. An improvised explosive device, or IED, had opened the spigot on the kid lying on my surgical table. You could hear him bleeding across the room, maybe in the next room. Technically, he was a grown man, but I couldn't get over how young he seemed. I'd spent the last four weeks in Iraq trying to save soldiers like this one—soldiers not much older than my own children.

When did we start sending children to fight our wars? I wondered, not realizing how prophetic that thought would soon prove to be.

I'd given five units of blood in as many minutes, thanks to the high capacity transfusers the Army provides for such occasions, but I knew it wouldn't be enough. In a war zone, giving anesthesia is less about keeping patients asleep and more about keeping them alive.

The surgeon was clamping and cauterizing everything he could see. I was reaching for more blood when I heard someone call my name.

"Lieutenant Colonel Gunderson? Colonel Richter needs to see you in his quarters right away."

"Well, you can tell the Colonel I'm a little busy right now, but he's welcome to come give me a hand if he wants to chat."

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We're a little looser about the chain of command in the medical corps than in the rest of the Army. I didn't even bother to look at the specialist passing along the order.

"I'm sorry, sir, but Major Vasquez is to relieve you, immediately, and you're to come with me at once."

Now I looked at the doorway. Even the surgeon paused and turned.

It wasn't a specialist after all. It was someone from the military police. One of the nurse anesthetists from my unit, Major Vasquez, was standing next to him. Vasquez glanced at me furtively and then avoided further eye contact as I gave her a quick report and left with the MP.

What little adrenaline I had left was suddenly in full swing. *Whatever's going on, it can't be good.*

We left the OR and walked down a hallway, our boots thumping as we went. In the civilian world I'd have worn some comfortable tennis shoes, but not here. Here it was combat boots around the clock. Another hallway branched to our right and led to x-ray. Ahead lay the main entrance and triage area, where injuries were sorted according to their seriousness.

The air was fresher in the hallway than in the operating room. It wasn't as stifling, and there was no smell of blood. The temporary medical facility we had established was air-conditioned, keeping it at least twenty or thirty degrees cooler inside than out under the desert sun. It was one of the perks of being in the medical corps, except for those on the very front lines who worked out of the back of modified Humvees.

We waded through a host of soldiers with minor injuries waiting to be seen. Some of them I recognized, but most I didn't. Several looked at me expectantly, thinking that I might be coming to see them. Expectancy gave way to puzzlement when they noticed the MP escort.

Yeah. Well, I'm puzzled, too, I thought.

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The MP held the door for me as we exited the facility. The sun's reflection off the white sand was painfully bright. I knew I wouldn't make it thirty seconds without my sunglasses.

Back home in Texas it was late spring and temperatures were on the rise, but nothing like here. Here it was blazing hot. My eyes were already starting to water as I paused to slip on my shades.

"This way, sir," the MP said, trying to hurry me along.

"I know where the Colonel's quarters are," I responded more forcefully than I'd intended.

I disliked being rushed—especially without any kind of explanation—but I despised leaving a patient in the middle of surgery. Although Vasquez was a skilled replacement, it didn't feel right to walk away.

This better be good.

The MP showed no emotion. We trudged along in silence. Soon I was sweating, and not just from the heat.

I attempted to mentally retrace everything I'd said or done in the handful of weeks that I'd been in Iraq. I'd taken care of many wounded soldiers. Most had lived, some had died; but each had received my absolute best. They deserved nothing less.

I always tried to act as though it were my own son or daughter who lay wounded on the OR table. It's the same principle I apply to my private practice in the States. If an elderly man comes in, I treat him the way I'd want my grandfather treated. I try to give a middle-aged woman the same care I'd want my wife to receive. Lots of doctors do this. It's just a little twist on the Golden Rule that helps us keep perspective when we're tired or overworked: *Do unto others as you'd do unto a family member.*

Yes, I felt certain I wasn't in trouble for any medical issue.

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Could it be something technical with the Army? The Army had been fairly lenient with the medical corps in the past, but the big push for political correctness was quickly changing all that.

Anyone who's ever worked in an operating room knows the innuendo's so thick you could cut it with a scalpel. Tasteless jokes are served up as the main entrée. I had laughed at my share—and even repeated a few of the funnier ones.

Could that be it? Maybe I'd offended someone and was about to be reprimanded. But why would they pull me out of a critical case to give me a tongue-lashing?

Then a horrible thought struck me: What if there's something wrong with my family? Maybe this interruption has nothing to do with me at all. Maybe it's the Army's way of breaking the news to me about some illness or accident at home.

I'd spoken to my wife earlier that morning, just before she'd tucked the kids into bed for the night on the other side of the planet.

I checked my watch. They'd be starting a new day now—the oldest two doing calculus with their mother on the couch, the middle ones eating breakfast, the babies still asleep.

No, an emergency at home seemed improbable. But then again, with eight people to worry about, anything was possible.

I was still wracking my brain when we arrived at Colonel Richter's quarters.

"Go ahead, sir," the MP told me as he held the door. I entered the room, but he closed the door behind me and remained outside.

Richter was seated at his desk with maps of the city spread out in front of him. Having known him to always be in complete command of both his personal appearance as well as his soldiers, I was surprised to find him looking a

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little haggard. It was subtle, but enough to convince me something big was amiss.

Leaning over his right shoulder was a medium-sized, muscular man in camouflage fatigues similar to the desert BDU, or battle dress uniform, the Army uses. He wore no insignia of any kind, not even a nametape. He glanced up at me as I entered the room, said a few more words in hushed tones to the Colonel as he pointed to something on the map, and then stood loosely at attention, his hands at his sides. He was deeply tanned with a thick mustache in the Iraqi style, but looked more Mediterranean than Arabic in origin. He'd blend in easily enough at a distance, if that were his intention.

"Gunderson, glad you're here," Richter gave me a half-hearted smile. "Sorry about the short notice and mysterious circumstances, but the Army needs your help, and we need it now. Full explanations will have to wait. We know you've got a Master's in microbiology and your thesis was on biological weapons, but—"

"So my family's okay?"

"Yes, yes, they're fine. And you're not in any kind of trouble, either. I just need to know whether you can identify anthrax under a microscope?"

"*Anthrax?*" I sure hadn't anticipated that question. "Well, yes. Of course, I can. It's one of the simpler organisms to identify due to its unique appearance. Even an undergraduate microbiology student with some basic skills—"

"Gunderson, time is critical. Forgive me for interrupting, but I need you to meet Mr. Smith here."

He nodded to the man on his right.

The name *Smith* didn't sound very Mediterranean to me, and I was immediately suspicious. Nonetheless, Mr. Smith took his cue and began.

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“Lieutenant Colonel Gunderson, you are in this theatre at this time for a very specific reason. When you were selected a year and a half ago—”

“Right after the 9/11 bombings?” I said.

Smith held up a finger and then continued. “When you were selected a year and a half ago, right after the 9/11 bombings, but more precisely, right after the anthrax attacks against Senators Daschle and Leahy, we hoped never to involve you. In fact, we hoped you’d never need to know about your true purpose here.”

“My true purpose? What do you mean? I’m a doctor. I’m here to save lives.”

“Yes, of course. And certainly, helping individual soldiers as an anesthesiologist is important. However, we wanted your expertise as a microbiologist for an even bigger purpose—identifying biological weapons in the field. The anthrax used against Daschle and Leahy was identified as Iraqi in origin because it contained bentonite.”

He was right. Bentonite is a kind of finely powdered clay used to separate anthrax spores when they’re blown into the air, or aerosolized. I’d covered that in my thesis. It’s a method of weaponizing anthrax unique to Iraq.

“But why do you need *my* help? Isn’t that the job of the UN weapons inspector?”

Richter and Smith looked at one another knowingly.

“Yes, well, that would be Plan A,” Smith cleared his throat. “Unfortunately, for reasons that will soon become apparent, Plan A is unacceptable for this particular assignment. Plan B was my special assistant on this mission—a young PhD from the University of Michigan, who is dying in your OR even as we speak.”

“You mean the kid I just left to Major Vasquez a minute ago? He wasn’t a soldier?”

“Not in the traditional sense, no. He was on his way to meet me and to examine the anthrax when he was caught by one of those homemade bombs that seem to be

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everywhere. Clearly, the Iraqis realize the importance of what we've discovered and are trying to protect it. If you can make a positive identification of the anthrax, we can destroy it before things get out of hand."

"So, I'm the back up to the back up?"

"That's right."

"Is there anyone backing me up?"

Smith smiled, "Let's just say I've taken an undergraduate class or two and have had a lot of on the job training recently—but I'd really like a professional second opinion for this one."

"Alright," I said. "Then let's go."

"Congratulations," Smith said, extending his hand. "From this moment forward, you are more than a soldier, you're a certified US government asset."

I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but I held off asking since everyone was in such a hurry.

"Gunderson, the first thing we need to do is to get you a different weapon," Colonel Richter said. He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a pistol very much like the 9mm Beretta I had at my side.

"It looks almost identical to the one I've got," I said, laying my weapon alongside the new gun.

"Looks can be deceiving. Pick it up."

I hefted the new pistol and immediately noticed the extra weight. "It definitely weighs more," I admitted. "And the handgrip seems a little bigger."

"To the untrained eye, you'll be carrying a standard issue sidearm," Smith explained. "However, the bullets are made of a depleted uranium and titanium alloy that is twice as dense as lead. Each round has additional powder to propel that extra weight. The clip only holds eight, so use them sparingly."

I'm fairly familiar with depleted uranium—I've seen several soldiers come in with the shrapnel. "So, basically, I'm getting an armor piercing pistol?"

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“Oh, it’s better than that. You can stop a truck with this gun. The bullets tend to burst into flame upon impact—something inherent in the depleted uranium—so just aim for the fuel tank and watch the fireworks,” Smith answered.

“I didn’t know we made pistols like this,” I commented, duly impressed.

“Technically, we *don’t*—which is why you have to give that one back as soon as this mission is complete,” Smith grinned. “Richter has some new paperwork for you, which we can discuss in the Humvee. Let’s get going.”

I grabbed the papers and saluted the Colonel.

“Good luck, Gunderson,” he said, rising to his feet and saluting in return.

I followed Smith to the Humvee and hopped in. As he pulled away, I flipped through the papers and read over my new orders. “It says here I’m being discharged home for a family emergency.”

“Yeah,” Smith answered over the knocking of the diesel engine, “that’s what they’ll tell your unit. Of course, your family will think you’re still in Iraq.”

“Won’t I be?”

“Not for long. This is the last sensitive site we know about in Iraq. Once you’ve confirmed the anthrax, you’ll be heading for The Farm at Camp Peary in Virginia to get briefed on your new role as an agent.”

Smith careened across the desert, leaving huge clouds of dust in our wake.

“From there you’ll go to the Army Research Institute of Infectious Diseases in Fort Detrick. They’ll bring you up to speed on all the latest biological weapons technology. Iraq is only one of many places on the planet where the US government has some major cleaning up to do. As of five minutes ago, you became the head janitor—and you’re going to need a really big mop.”

I let all that soak in as I folded the orders and put them in my pocket. I’d heard of The Farm before and

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knew it was where they trained new recruits for the Central Intelligence Agency.

Apparently, I'd just joined the CIA, which is why Smith had called me an "asset." For some reason, I always thought that the CIA would be a little more formal about it. Maybe this was their version of a field promotion.

Smoke was rising in the distance ahead of us. I pointed, "Is that where we're headed?"

"Yeah. The IED had gasoline and oil mixed together, so it's still smoldering."

"I'm sorry about your friend. I doubt he'll make it."

"I know, and I hate it. He actually came to us—not the other way around. He had a real sense of duty, not just to his country, but to mankind in general. He saw his work with biological weapons as being on par with nuclear disarmament. It may have been unrealistic, but he wanted to see everyone, especially the US, give up biological weapons for good."

"Is that why the UN weapons inspector is being left out of this? I mean—maybe we had something to do with the anthrax?"

"There's no maybe about it. We just need to make sure this is the real stuff and not a decoy. Once it's destroyed, all the anthrax we know about in Iraq will be accounted for. The US of A takes a big, black eye in world opinion either way, but it looks better to say that you never found weapons of mass destruction than to admit that you provided the technology to develop them. Let's face it, we trained Osama bin Laden, we backed the Taliban for years, and for a long time Iraq was our biggest ally in our undeclared war on Iran. It's like raising pitbulls: They're terrific guard dogs right up until the day they turn on you."

"So we're like some sort of top-secret extension of the EPA?" I asked. "We go around cleaning up biological weapons messes before they get out of hand?"

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“You got it, Gunderson. We’re like the Environmental Protection Agency on steroids.”

We wound our way through a barricade and were quickly waved on by the guards, who seemed to know Smith. We had climbed out of the Humvee and were heading into a storage building when we heard an explosion behind us. Smith pushed me to the ground.

Looking back, we could see that both guards had been ripped to shreds.

“We’ve got to make that identification, and then I’m calling in an airstrike with incendiaries,” Smith shouted, pulling me to my feet. “We need to make sure this stuff is completely destroyed.”

As we scrambled for the door, an Iraqi woman in full burka emerged from the smoke and destruction. She was walking towards us with outstretched arms, like some strange desert mummy. Smith shouted at her in several languages, but she didn’t seem to hear. Her belly appeared nine months pregnant, and we both thought the same thing: suicide bomber. Our guns were instantly in our hands.

“Get inside,” Smith barked at me. “I’ll handle this.”

He shouted a few more things at the woman as I reached for the door and ducked inside. Two loud shots left my ears ringing as I stumbled into the warehouse. He probably had the same kind of gun they had given me, maybe better.

Smith was instantly on my heels. He handed me a mask and some gloves, then led me to a microscope already set up with a sample. I looked at it briefly. It was definitely the real deal. We quickly ran through several more samples, all clearly anthrax.

“That’s it. I’m calling it in.”

We tossed aside our masks and gloves, and he got on his satellite phone.

“We’ve got about forty-five seconds to clear out of here,” he told me as he hung up and we ran for the door. I

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started for the Humvee, but he pulled me towards the left hand side of the building instead.

“No time!” he shouted. “Just leave it!”

We ran full speed towards the side perimeter. I caught a glimpse of the woman in the burka lying face down in a pool of blood just yards from the fallen guards.

The bomb she had under her burka never detonated. She lay on top of it awkwardly, tilted to one side with her left leg drawn up and her arms wrapped around it protectively.

I got a sickening feeling in my stomach and began to wretch even as I ran. Maybe it wasn't a bomb after all.

Smith reached the next barricade ahead of me and shouted the warning: “Thirty seconds! Thirty seconds! Pull everyone back now!”

One of the guards got on his radio even as he began to run himself. Everyone seemed to know what to do. We had made it about two blocks when I heard a high-pitched whistling sound, followed by a massive explosion that knocked us all to the ground. A wave of heat passed over us that made the desert seem cool.

And then it was gone.

Behind us a huge fireball reached to the sky. It seemed to just burn and burn, like an oil tanker on fire. I wiped my chin and shielded my eyes.

“Come on,” Smith shouted. “You’ve got a plane to catch.”

Within the hour, I was on my way back to the States. I had carried the modified Beretta for less than forty-five minutes, but what a life changing forty-five minutes it had been.

As far as my family knew, I was just finishing out my ninety days of “boots on the ground” as a reservist anesthesiologist in Iraq. Since I had been in the IRR, or Individual Ready Reserve, instead of a regular reserve unit, I barely knew my fellow soldiers. None of them would

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follow up on my “family emergency.” They’d leave that to Colonel Richter, which would leave me in the clear.

The plane sailed though the air with ease. The only turbulence was the turbulence inside my mind. The sun was setting on the horizon, leaving a red glow across the sky. I pulled down the window cover and closed my eyes. But I could still see the red.

CHAPTER

1

Was it a baby or a bomb under her burka?

The uncertainty was eating at me—a spiritual moth nibbling at the fabric of my soul. Now I understood why so many veterans struggled after returning home. It was all the unanswered questions left lying on the ground.

A little over five years had passed since the spring of 2003. I'd worked on numerous assignments all over the world, but it was that first one that still haunted me. A strange sense of guilt would wash over me like the desert heat, unbidden and merciless.

I'd always been ambivalent about my role as a military doctor. The military was all about blowing things up and killing people. Being a doctor meant putting things back together and healing.

Until that day in the desert, I'd been able to compartmentalize. I could separate what the military did corporately from what I did individually. I was safe in a little cocoon called the operating room, far from the fighting front.

And then I wasn't. The walls had been torn down, and I was in the thick of it.

As it turns out, I received training from the CIA and the Army, but worked for neither. In the wake of 9/11, a

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new anti-terrorism agency had been formed. Its actions were off-the-record and its funding off-the-books.

As far as I knew, the agency that recruited me didn't even have a name. We were just an invisible extension of Homeland Security. The American people had given the green light to do whatever it took to fight the war on terrorism. So now, when the government shifted into high gear and stepped on the gas, I was a big part of the engine that roared to life.

There were different divisions within the new agency, each of which specialized in handling a different type of threat—conventional, chemical, nuclear, or biological.

My area was biological. I'd helped to stop so many exotic dangers that I'd nearly lost count. I knew I'd saved numerous lives, but that was little consolation in moments like these—moments when my mind went back to that crumpled form lying in the sand.

How many lives must be saved to make up for the one that is lost?

Fortunately, I wouldn't have to do this much longer. With Presidential elections just around the corner and the public's memory of past events starting to fade, we all knew our agency was headed for the trash heap. I'd done my bit to make the world a safer place and was ready to move on. Maybe I'd be able to leave my guilty feelings behind, along with the job.

Despite my busy schedule as a doctor and my unpredictable assignments as an agent, my wife, Lauren, and I had somehow managed to have two more kids since Iraq. That brought the total up to nine, but the oldest two were currently taking classes at the local community college and could hardly be counted, since we saw so little of them anymore.

At the moment, I was eating my Saturday morning breakfast while admiring our newest addition, Matthew.

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Matthew was the cutest little cherub you could wish for, with blonde hair from Lauren's side and coal black eyes from mine. He had just celebrated his first birthday and was in the quintessential "wonderful ones" stage.

Lauren was spooning oatmeal into his eager little mouth when she caught me gazing at him. Only, I wasn't really looking at Matthew. I was staring past him, off into space, and thinking about a different baby. A baby that wasn't.

That's when she asked me the age old question that wives always seem to ask at such moments: "What are you thinking?"

Before I could stop myself, I mumbled something about the "duality of man." It was vague enough, but not my usual evasive response. Those few words were the tip of the iceberg.

If I weren't careful, I'd end up telling her all about Iraq, my subsequent training as an agent, and my double life over the last five years. How all of our "vacations" had really been missions for the US government. How she and the kids had been my cover and alibi in a world of international intrigue.

Basically, I would end up saying more than I wanted to say, and more than she had clearance to hear. Someday I'd come clean to her. But not yet.

The fact that I had said *that* much kind of startled us both, I think. We just looked at one another, uncertain how to proceed. It was one of those laugh or cry moments.

Lauren fixed me with a penetrating gaze. I could sense her struggling to bite back unasked questions, could feel my heart pounding in my chest as she studied me.

I looked away, afraid to let her look any more deeply into my eyes. What secrets might she be able to read there?

She watched quietly as I reached for another strip of bacon, shoved it into my mouth, and chased it down with a

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swig of orange juice. I was grateful when Matthew finally broke the silence.

“Ahhh,” he chirped, leaning forward in his seat and opening his mouth wide. He rubbed a gooey hand on the front of his shirt to say *please*, and Lauren aimed another spoonful of oatmeal in his direction.

“The duality of man?” she finally said.

“Yeah.”

She gave me a weak smile. “You mean how men can be both terrific and terrible at the same time? *Born to kill* written next to a peace sign? That kind of duality?”

“Yeah, that kind.”

“Well, that’s a new one.”

She coaxed Matthew to take another bite of cereal.

“Aren’t you supposed to just say, *Nothing*, and change the subject? You know, pretend you’re one of those World War II vets who never talk about it?”

“What makes you so sure this is about Iraq?” I asked defensively.

Lauren tilted her head and cocked an eyebrow. “Well, first of all, *I* didn’t say it was about Iraq, *you* did. Second, you were clearly referencing that old Vietnam movie, *Full Metal Jacket*. You’ve made me watch it at least half a dozen times, so I know...”

She offered the baby another loaded spoonful, but he clamped his lips tightly and turned his head.

“All finished?” she asked in a cheerful tone. Matthew nodded vigorously.

“...and third, but most important,” she continued, looking back at me, “you didn’t have that so-called thousand-yard stare for the first fifteen years of our marriage. It only started five years ago, when you came back from Iraq. It doesn’t take a math degree to put two and two together.”

I had to be careful. *She knows me too well.* I nibbled at another strip of bacon.

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“Well... I was also wishing that I’d studied harder in college....”

Lauren stood up and walked to the sink to retrieve a damp washcloth. “I think I liked your first answer better,” she smirked.

“I’m serious.”

“You have a Master’s degree and you’re a medical doctor, Jon. Forgive me if I don’t follow your logic.”

Matthew squirmed as she wiped off his sticky hands and face. Then lifting him out of his high chair, she set him on the floor and told him to run along and play.

“That’s just it,” I said, “the Master’s degree. Most people see those extra letters on your lab coat and assume you’re extra studious, but the exact opposite is often the case. At least, it was for me.”

Lauren sat back down at the table and turned her attention to the barely touched plate of food in front of her. Like most mothers, she was usually the last one to start eating and the last one to finish.

Stabbing a large strawberry with her fork, she said, “Now you’ve really lost me.”

“Alright,” I explained, “half the kids in college start out pre-med—at least, that’s what they tell their parents. Within a semester or two, it’s obvious who’s going to make it and who isn’t. Those who aren’t move on to other things, except for characters like me with more tenacity than brains. Somehow, that 2.0 GPA freshman year didn’t register as a handicap until it came time to apply to medical school and nobody wanted to talk to me. So I got a Master’s degree to prove I was ‘worthy,’ then reapplied. That was about the time I met you.”

“But what does *that* have to do with Iraq?”

“Well, if I hadn’t goofed off my freshman year, I could’ve gone straight to medical school and skipped the Master’s in microbiology. Without that extra degree, the Army never would have sent me to Iraq. I mean, normally

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they wouldn't send an anesthesiologist overseas at all. They usually keep the anesthesia docs stateside and send nurse anesthetists to the field."

I finished off my orange juice before continuing, "But they weren't just taking care of soldiers in Iraq. They were also looking for biological weapons—and they thought I could help do both. It was my graduate school training, not my medical training, that ultimately landed me in Iraq."

"They told you this?" Lauren asked.

"Basically."

I knew I was saying too much. It was a miracle I'd kept my role as an agent secret for so long. I didn't want to blow it now.

Mulling it over, she asked tentatively, "So you don't resent me and the children?"

I could hear the lump in her throat, could see her eyes tear up as she said it.

"Of course not," I assured her. "That's absurd. Why would you even ask such a thing?"

"Well," Lauren shrugged, "if I'd kept working instead of getting pregnant and staying home with the kids, you would never have joined the reserves in the first place, Master's degree or not."

We both knew it was true. We had needed the money. I couldn't have worked any more hours than I was already working at the hospital, and Lauren was determined to stay home with the baby. Patriotism is one thing; practicality is another.

I reached over and grabbed her hand. "Sweetheart, I've never resented you or any of our children, and I never will. I'm the luckiest man alive, and I thank God for all of you every single day. Any sadness I feel has nothing to do with you or the kids—can't you see that? You're not the *cause*. You're the *cure*."

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She leaned forward to hug my neck. “Jon?” she whispered.

“Yes?”

“Are you ever going to tell me about it?”

“About what?”

“About whatever happened in Iraq that has you so melancholy and staring off into space several times a week.”

“Someday,” I said as I stood up and patted her on the shoulder. “Someday.”

I turned to go to our library which doubles as my home office. I didn’t know it then, but as I walked away, Lauren said a little prayer for me. *Lord, let me have the old Jon back. Do whatever it takes, even if it hurts.*

It’s the kind of prayer I’d be afraid to pray, but Lauren’s the type who puts faith before fear. It’s just one of the many ways in which she is a better person than I am.

I felt my cell phone vibrating and checked it. It was Smith calling. Turns out, his name really *was* Smith—Eric Smith. His dad was English and his mom Italian, so I’d been half right about his origins.

Ever since Iraq, he had been my handler. We’d covered a lot of assignments together. I couldn’t believe he had another mission for me this close to elections. Maybe he just wanted to talk. I shut the door and answered the phone. Most of our kids were still asleep, so I could speak freely for a little while.

“Hello?”

“Hey, how’s it going, buddy?”

“Alright, I guess...”

Smith paused, picking up on my tone. I’m fairly transparent to those who know me, which is not a good trait for an agent. Then again, I’m not your typical agent. What other agent would drag a wife and nine homeschooled kids along on most of his missions?

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“Let me guess. You’re thinking about Iraq again, aren’t you?” he accused.

“Of course I am,” I answered defensively. “Don’t act like you don’t think about it, too. I know it still bothers you as much as it does me.”

“Sure it does. But look, that was five years ago. And besides—you didn’t shoot her, I did. And we were both cleared by the internal investigation.”

He rattled off the speech as if he’d rehearsed it a million times.

“After the incendiary strike, we’ll never know if she was carrying a bomb or not, but everyone agrees we couldn’t have taken the chance under the circumstances. Let’s face it—we wouldn’t even be having this conversation if we’d gotten blown to bits like the guards at the gate. Your kids have a daddy today because of a decision I made then. I can’t change what happened, but you’ve got to let it go.”

“Alright,” I agreed. I wondered whether he was trying to convince me or himself.

“Good. Now let’s stop having this conversation and focus on making the world a safer place for everyone—especially those beautiful children of yours. Neither of us created the biological weapons mess left over from the Cold War. We’re just the clean up crew.”

“The Environmental Protection Agency on steroids?”

“Exactly. Now you’re talking my language.”

I didn’t mention it, but Smith hadn’t been in the field since the incident in Iraq.

Most people have this vision of the battle-hardened warrior who gets tougher and more intense with each subsequent conflict. Pure myth. The human nervous system doesn’t work that way. It’s exactly the opposite.

The more pain and misery you see, the less you want to see. Young soldiers are an asset, not only because

THE PRODIGY PROJECT

of their physical prowess, but also because of their mental resilience. Their “horror” tanks are still empty.

Although Smith was still fairly young, he’d seen a lot more action than I had. After Iraq, I think he decided his tank was full. After five years in the field, dragging my family along, I couldn’t help but think that maybe my tank was getting full, too.

“So tell me what you’ve got this time,” I said with resignation.

“Let’s just say that it starts with an all-expense-paid vacation for you and the whole family, along with a few guests. It will be similar to Europe, but with a few twists we’ll discuss in greater detail later. But know this: It dwarfs the European assignment by several orders of magnitude.”

Europe had been the perfect assignment for an agent with a large family, if such a thing is possible. I’d actually had a great time with the wife and kids touring many of the major cities while gathering critical information.

The result was the complete shut down of a huge bio-weapons program run by old Eastern Bloc scientists selling to the Middle East and Africa. No one ever suspected that the goofy tourist with tie-dyed clothes and eight kids in tow was actually the centerpiece of an intelligence operation.

“How could anything be bigger than Europe?” I asked.

“By several orders of magnitude—trust me. We’re talking entire *nations* at risk. This isn’t just some bloodthirsty tyrant trying to poison his neighbors.”

“So our satellites picked up some suspicious heat signals?”

That was how the European assignment had started—our satellites picking up five star restaurants with bio-weapons kitchens in the back.

DOUG FLANDERS

To keep large quantities of infectious bacteria alive, you need big incubators to maintain the germs at a constant temperature. When these incubators are hidden in remote areas, like the mountains or the desert, satellites quickly spot their infrared heat signatures—they practically stand out like glowing beacons. It then becomes a fairly simple task to destroy the labs with little collateral damage due to their isolation.

Initially, the Soviets and others tried to move their labs to university campuses as a protective measure. But that was too obvious, and the advent of various watchdog groups quickly made it impractical as well.

Hiding a bio-weapons lab in the heart of a restaurant district was the latest evolution in the game. With lots of ovens going at all hours of the day and night, it was easier to hide from the heat sensing satellites. Fortunately, we'd developed a computer algorithm that could sift out the background heat of the ovens and pinpoint the incubators.

My job was to confirm on the ground what we'd seen from the sky. All I needed was a fancy infrared camera, courtesy of the US government, plus a hearty appetite for world-class food.

“The threat's a little different this time, possibly even revolutionary,” Smith replied. “Let me give you the details in person. Meet me at the usual place in fifteen minutes.”

Revolutionary? I thought.