

*After a rigged election in Ohio in the near future leaves a strict fundamentalist group with dim views of women in charge of the state, a woman and her former lover unite with experienced veterans to rid the region of the forces of oppression.*

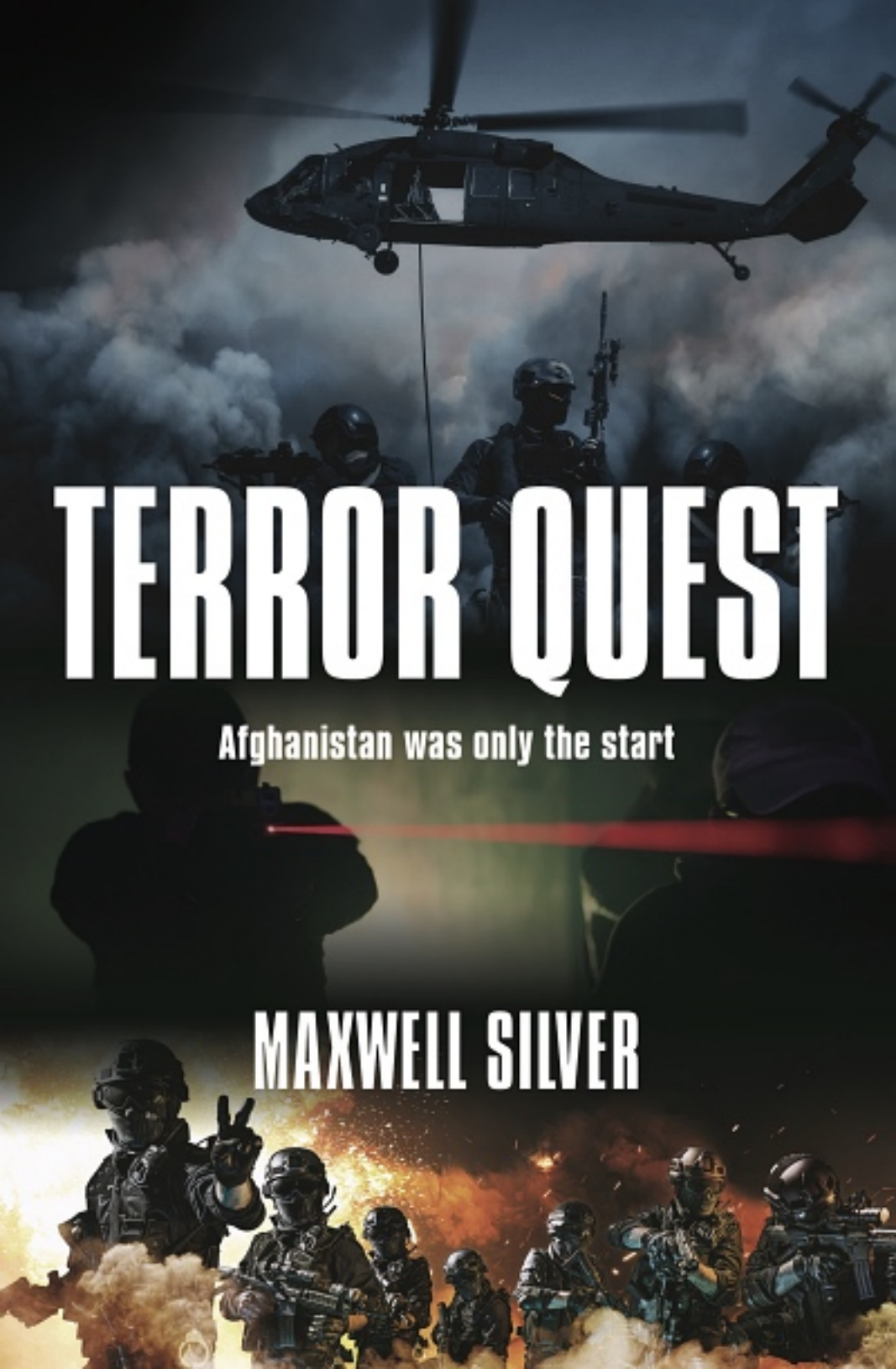
## **TERROR QUEST**

By Maxwell Silver

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# TERROR QUEST

Afghanistan was only the start

MAXWELL SILVER

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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The lines from Kipling's poem "The Young British Soldier" on page 24 are in the public domain.

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## **A Note to Readers**

When I was young, I carried a gun, but not in the service. In high school, I carried the flag and then a rifle in the color guard (I can still do a Queen Anne's Salute, but you might have to help me up).

This book is dedicated to the six guys I went to school with and worked with who died in Vietnam. I've never met anyone who was not there who knew more.

PFC Ronald McCracken (US Marine Corps, Died 17 September 1966, VVM Wall Panel 10e, Line 109)

Lance Corp Glenn Andre Sheppard (US Marine Corps, Died 6 March 1967, VVM Wall Panel 16e, Line 28)

Corporal Anthony Carlos Pino (US Marine Corps, Died 28 July 1968, VVM Wall Panel 50w, Line 26)

1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Norman Macleod Paulsen (US Air Force, Died 25 September 1968, VVM Wall Panel 42w, Line 13)

Spc4 James Joseph Buonaiuto (US Army, Died 26 November 1968, VVM Wall Panel 38w, Line 64)

Spc4 Richard Albert Doria (US Army, Died 19 August 1969, VVM Wall Panel 19w, Line 67)

### **AMOR PATRIAE VINCIT**

(When one of these men died, my mother was working for the telephone company, where international calls to handle funeral arrangements were billed by hand using "toll tickets." \$700 worth of these toll tickets mysteriously disappeared from my mother's accounting group. I was very proud of her.)

## Playlist

When I write, I listen to music. When I read, I tend to listen to music as well (unless I'm studying). So, consider this the playlist for the book. Some of them are directly referenced in the text, and all of them are found on the global public internet. The songs are in no particular order.

*The Men of MAG-16* (US Marine Jim Hatch)

*With God on Our Side* (Bob Dylan) (compare Liam Clancy's *Patriot Game*)

*Chimes of Freedom* (Bob Dylan)

*Silent Running (On Dangerous Ground)* (Mike + The Mechanics)

*The Living Years* (Mike + The Mechanics)

*It Flies Again* (Fireball Ministry)

*Two Tears* (Fireball Ministry)

*Mr. Blue* (Clear Light)

*Street Singer* (Clear Light)

*The Unknown Soldier* (The Doors (featuring Admiral Morrison's son Jim))

*I Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag* (Country Joe and the Fish (featuring Navy vet Joe McDonald))

*Take a Look Around* and *The Bomber* (James Gang)

*Rivers of Babylon* (Boney M)

*In the 2030s, the state of Ohio, concerned about election improprieties, instituted software known as the Source of Truth (SOT) to run and calculate results for all elections. The contractor had a solid reputation, using coders from Northern Europe exclusively.*

*To retaliate, the President began to ship all Middle Eastern refugees to Ohio, and then, when the Governorship flipped to the other party, Ohio invited oppressed Muslims from all over the world to settle and rejuvenate the aging population.*

*This helped Ohio breeze through several recessions, spawned by deficit spending and the collapse of tech stocks. Shorn of US protection, Israel became a radioactive husk due to several well-placed dirty nuclear bombs, perhaps originating in Iran.*

*The election cycle of 2048 resulted in the minority Muslim community electing not only the governor, but almost all of the state Senate and House as well. The Tariq Shifa (The Road to Recovery) and hardline Muslim fundamentalists soon shoved aside the moderates, and Sharia law and restrictions on women's dress and position soon followed, with cultural changes regarding education and books and music instituted later.*

*Citizens who recalled the old days stayed inside. Younger people soon knew no other way of life. The states around Ohio closed their borders.*

*Unknown to all, a subcontractor on the SOT project in Saudi Arabia had been bribed by a rich Muslim ex-USA football player to swing the election to the Muslims.*

*In 2058, only two people can put an end to this illegal religious regime.*

*Bob Springfield is the son of a famous war hero, and a man popular enough to rally the disheartened citizens to his cause. But he*

## *Terror Quest*

*is on a “Terror Quest” in the mountains of Afghanistan and does not know his wife and children have been taken into custody.*

*Najeeba is the former lover of Bob Springfield, one of the few remaining women who has the strength and vision to contact him and help him rescue his family, although reuniting Bob with his loved ones will break her heart at the same time.*

*The pair don't know how little time they have: University students are being forced to concoct suitcase-sized dirty nuclear bombs to use to blackmail other states into adapting the SOT software.*

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# Chapter 1:

## Over the Mountains on the Afghan-Pakistan Border

Sergeant Major Bob Springfield straightened his shoulders and sucked in his gut before testing his helmet command comm link to the rest of the team. He adjusted his wireless headset so his face was more visible. Once he started speaking, they would all instinctively look toward him.

They had used the common channel for idle talk since the squad had lifted off for the insertion point. The veterans sitting near Springfield were mostly quiet and thoughtful, but the newbies were always nervous. They often blurted out the most inane things, just to keep their minds off the coming battle and their possible mortality.

“Cooper, you still got that chicken salad sandwich?”

“Nope. And it was ham anyway.”

“Muslim kryptonite. I love it, dude.”

“You hungry, Kelton?”

“Starving.”

“I got something you can eat right here between my legs.”

“If I could find it. That’s more like a snack.”

Springfield cut them all off. The pilot, Dusty, had just let him know on channel 5 the chopper now labored over of the last mountain ridges before descending into the high valley drop zone in Pashtun territory.

“Listen up, people. We’ll be making a pass around the hills before we land to chase off any greeters with rocket launchers. It’ll be windy, so be ready for some jolts and abrupt tilts.” The new command channels allowed only one-way communications when the leader spoke. All eyes were on him as he surveyed the team. He had a handful of veterans and less combat-hardened people, handpicked for their skills and not their experience.

He surveyed the group, making eye contact with every one of the new guys. As they watched Springfield for signs of weakness and doubt, he watched them for signs of the same. At least they were easier

to read, even in their helmets and camouflage flak-wear. As the chopper quickly rotated nearly onto its side, Springfield glanced out the view ports. He saw the rocks of the valley wall were disconcertingly close, close enough the echo of the thumping blades merged with the initial pulse of sound. Yet a pass this close was necessary. It made sure the infrared sensors mounted on the bottom of the craft got a good enough reading to detect any opposition. They often hid in the hills and paid intruders a welcoming visit when they landed.

Springfield steadied himself against the slight torque of the massive rotor of the drop chopper. Ordinarily, the old EH-101 Merlin helicopter could carry thirty or more troops. But the ancient machine could barely lift the nine-man squad and its mercenary guards, given the altitude at which it operated.

To his left, one of the newbies – was it Cooper? – looked pale and sickly, but didn't lose it like a lot others would have. The rest, now that they were getting close, lapsed into silence and went back to hiding under their helmets and staring at their feet as they circled the mountain valley. But Springfield had more to say, giving a pep talk similar to the ones he had always heard before football games.

“From youngest to oldest here, we span almost fifty years. But that's okay. When the Romans sent teams to foreign countries before the legions moved in, they sent three ambassadors. They made sure that one was an old senator who had been doing this all his adult life. Another was the leader, a man who had been on previous expeditions, but had more energy than the old-timer. The third was always a young man who was mainly there to watch and learn and do what they told him. And that's the way I put together this team.”

Springfield called up the team roster on his heads-up visor display. It had photos of the team, and he scanned the list one last time, knowing some of them would be dead before the task was complete. He had four vets who had fought with his father:

TOWER. His picture showed a man tall and black, bald-headed and mean as hell.

BAILEY. An old vet almost as ancient as Tower. White, but just as mean.

REYNOLDS. Bob's old college roommate, but an eager learner and tough as nails.

D'ANGELO. Short and dark. Even older than Tower, but just as deadly.

Then there were the four raw recruits just out of training:

COOPER. A rich kid who offered to buy whatever they needed from his trust fund.

GARMAN. Eager and ready to fight, but that was not necessarily a good thing.

KELTON. Quiet and morose. He talked a good fight, but talk was cheap.

MABRY. Another question mark. He could go either way and help or hinder the group.

He had no idea how those last four would react under real fire. When you saw your own blood, that's when you found out what was really inside a person—no pun intended.

Springfield jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "These three guys behind me fought with my father many years ago in the Korengal Valley, the most dangerous deployment in the history of warfare. They aren't getting paid for what they do, but for what they know. You'll do what they tell you. Me and Staff Sergeant Reynolds here are command and backup. Anything happens to me, he takes over."

Now came the most important part. "And finally, we have this quartet of young animals before me. You aren't getting paid for what you know or for what you think, but for what you do. Pay attention and learn, and one day you'll move up here with the real professionals. I know you can do it." Springfield looked at each one again and none of them looked away. He knew enough about this business to realize that only one or two of the newbies would make it through the whole mission. There was no real way around that, but this was not the time to point it out. As good as training could be, there was no substitute for the real thing to weed out the ones who were stepping slow and lifting weak.

"Just remember this: you're on a mission to preserve the honor and security of the United States of America. No matter what happens, you'll never be forgotten."

As the chopper righted itself again, he held out his left arm bent at the elbow. The loose sleeve fell back, displaying his forearm, fitted from elbow to wrist with a tight yet flexible piece of fabric and metal. Readouts glowed green and blue. “This is your lifeline. Some of you might not have worked with them before. Less well-equipped expeditions still don’t. It gets feeds from all your vital systems, and displays instantaneous status info on your health, weapons and ammunition status, and even how much money you have in your pocket and accounts. Make sure it’s always functioning. If not, see Specialist Bailey here.”

Dusty the pilot spoke in his ear. “Things look clear, Bob. We’ll be down in about two minutes.”

“Roger that.” To the team, said “Okay, we’re going in. This is your last chance to back out, stay on the chopper, and take the trip back to see mommy.” No one moved or spoke. They never did. The hull vibrations shifted an octave in pitch as the chopper prepared for touchdown.

To his right, Big John Tower, a black veteran with a shiny bald head, grinned and tugged at his sleeve. Tower usually had something to say about Springfield’s father, often about how he would have handled things differently and how Bob was failing to measure up to his old man.

Springfield was tense enough as it was, but bent over so Tower could talk without used the comm link. “What?”

“Your daddy was a real dummy sometimes, Bobby,” said Tower.

That was a surprise. He wasn’t offended, but didn’t know what to say. So he simply asked, “Is that so?”

“Yeah. He named you Robert William Springfield. Whoever heard of a Bobby Bill? It should have been Billy Bob like it’s supposed to be.”

He laughed, feeling the tension draining from his body. “I can always change it, just for you, Big John.”

“Nah. Better not. I’m too old to learn new names.”

“Sure you are. And I’m too young to run this mission.”

Tower winked at him. “Guess we’ll have to show them they’re wrong.”

Bob Springfield's father had always said the men were always watching the leader and paying close attention. They were looking for any disconnect between words and body language, he said. "It's not always simple," the old man had told his son as they trekked over the desert and mountains of southern Arizona and California, which had served as a substitute for Middle Eastern terrain. "You can talk small and walk big, and they'll get the message. But whatever you do, Bobby, don't talk big and walk small. You'll get in a tight spot and turn around and find yourself alone."

He had come a long way since he was Bobby and not Bob. He was still Bobby those nights under the hard stars out in the desert when father and son had picked over the ruins of old training camps, from Camp Horn to Camp Hyder. That was where they had found the patch, the one that Bob always kept with him and carried into combat. He had just put it away, in fact, tucking it into an inner pocket for safekeeping. It was just an old piece of cloth, a truncated pyramid faded and tattered around the edges. It sported a gold Statue of Liberty stitched into a background of deep blue, with a tiny motto below, "Ours To Hold It High." Writing on the back identified it as the emblem of the 77<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, deployed in the Pacific theater during World War II.

That was when the United States had put one out of every ten able-bodied males in the country under arms. Then they sent them out to make the world safe for America's kind of democracy—and they did it.

Bailey, the veteran specialist, took out a cigarette and stuck it in his mouth. Horrified at this breach of protocol, Mabry managed to ask, "You're not going to light that thing, are you?"

"Nah. I only light up after I kill someone." Bailey held his ammo vest pocket open so Mabry could look inside. "But I got a whole pack."

"We're almost down," Cooper shouted, looking out the port.

Springfield licked his dry lips. Time for the big finish. "I'll say one more thing. You all know why we're here. After Osama bin Laden quit running around these mountains all those years ago, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. But then along came this guy they call *Al 'Aqrab*, the Scorpion, who they said will sting people like us. He's been raising

hell for more than seven years. But now he has the Afghan army on the west, the Paki on the east, and oxygen-mask high-mountain passes to the north. We're going in about thirty miles to his south. All he has is a handful of followers holed up with him in his caves. He's between the hammer and the anvil. Are we going to get him?"

"Hoo-ah," they all shouted as one.

"What? Let the bastard hear it all the way at the end of his cave."

"HOO-AH."

Springfield nodded. "That's better."

The ground was very close now. The churning currents of mountain air grabbed the chopper and it bumped down so hard that Springfield's lower spine compressed painfully. He hoped it was not an omen.

"Out! Out! Move! Move!" someone called from the ramp extending from the rear of the chopper. The transport team that operated the chopper supplied a landing crew of heavily armed ex-Marines who efficiently established a perimeter around the ramp. The rotors still stirred up grit and sand as they idled, sparks flying off the rotors as they spun. Dusty and his co-pilot waited anxiously for the team to unload.

They didn't have much to take, and it was all light gear. The strike team would rely on the chopper to ferry up supplies with the other two squads that were part of the team. All the first squad took along were the bare necessities. That meant they would have no mechanical transport or massive firepower until later, but they could react more quickly this way.

Springfield shouted at Dusty, who leaned out the open window to catch his words. "See you in seven days at the extraction point, Dusty. Don't leave us hanging." Working so closely with Dusty, a frequent rival of Bob Springfield's for honors and merit pay, always left Bob a little worried about coordinating efforts.

If Dusty minded, he did not show it. Dusty twirled the end of his golden-red handlebar mustache, gave Bob a thumbs-up, and started spinning up the rotor again.

Tower and Bailey were surveying the foothills with weapons at high ready when Springfield joined them. The sky was an angry gray,



with lowering clouds, the highest peaks lost in the stormy haze. The valley was desolate. A few shrubs and scraggly weeds dotted the plain, some tall trees broke the ridgelines, which followed a dry gully winding down the center of the narrow valley.

“It’s quiet,” observed Tower.

“Yes, very.” Springfield nodded. “I’m a little amazed that the landing didn’t draw even small arms fire.”

Bailey gave a shout. “We have achieved total surprise.”

Tower frowned. “Well, that, or...” None of them wanted to finish that thought.

Each of the strike team members took up post next to a landing guard. Then the guards turned and dashed back up the ramp and into the belly of the chopper.

Springfield waved as the massive helicopter lifted off, tilting and weaving to avoid the rocks on either side of the valley. It rose majestically into the high gray sky as scattered drops of rain began to fall.

The pounding of the blades receded, and they turned to the task at hand. The nine men needed to form up into a unified, mobile fighting squad, and quickly move out to find cover until the arrival of rest of the men and equipment. It was not an ideal arrangement, but they could only afford one chopper.

“Cooper,” shouted Tower. “Take Garman and head for the high ground over there and...”

Later, Reynolds told Bob he had noticed the rocket as he was still watching the chopper gain altitude. Reynolds saw the exhaust trail snake toward the chopper from halfway up a sharp peak.

They were much too far away to hear the rocket’s roar before it slammed squarely into the side of the transport, flowering into an explosive bloom silently. Reynolds shouted, but no one knew about what until the sound of the blast rolled across the valley. Then they all saw the chopper pitch and roll out of control, trailing smoke and fire in a leisurely arc across the cloudy sky as it turned back toward them.

“Scatter,” called Bailey to the team, and they did. Tower and Springfield stayed where they were, watching the last moments of the lives of all aboard the chopper unfold before them.

The chopper swayed and yawed, always swerving back toward them, as if drawn to the squad by a beacon. At the end, Springfield was so close he could see Dusty fighting the controls, no fear on his face, just disappointment. He could feel the sadness in Dusty, sadness that he wouldn't be going home to his wife and small children at the end of this mission, as he had after all the others.

Springfield and Tower jumped into a gully as the chopper hit the ground and exploded into a hundred thousand pieces of impossible-to-replace parts.

When the chopper shrapnel stopped rolling and tumbling, there was only silence, except for the low moaning of the wind. No screams came from the wreckage. All had perished.

Everyone on the team stood up again, shaken but unharmed.

The newbies were in a state of shock. The veterans and battle-hardened began assessing the damage and their changed circumstances immediately.

“Stinger NG?” wondered Reynolds, Springfield’s old roommate. “Did that take it down?”

D’Angelo, one the oldest veterans, shrugged. “Maybe. They’re old, ancient actually, but these next generation Stingers are still very effective. They pretty much changed the balance of power against the Soviets when we gave them to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan back in the 1980s.”

Bailey brushed himself off. “I wonder how these guys got them. And so much for the infrared scanners on the chopper. Can we get our money back?”

Springfield got up with Tower. He finished the thought they had all shrunk from completing before. “Or, they’re waiting until Dusty takes off and they can bag them all and leave us stranded with no ride out.”

“Exactly,” Tower agreed. “Stung by the Scorpion. We’re pretty well screwed.”

Springfield looked around at the small group, assessed their meager arms and supplies, and took in the surrounding peaks. From the ground, they seemed more jagged than from the air. He spit noisily and elaborately. “And before we even started.”

## **Chapter 2:**

### **A Park in Mogadore**

Najeeba always said the park was her favorite place to read. It was also one of the riskiest, and only the fine spring day had convinced her to take the chance and smuggle her novel into the park for an hour. She had even applied a little makeup. Not a lot, just something at eye and cheek to match her high spirits.

The park was large enough for her to lose herself in, away from the prying eyes of the authorities and their network of informants, or so she always hoped. She picked a bench at the edge of an open lawn, facing a playground with slides and swings, filled with laughing children calling to their mothers to watch as they played. It was a fine afternoon, warm and clear. Winter had lingered longer than usual and the park sustained a steady stream of people coming and going.

She tried to be discreet. With legs crossed and small paperback book in her lap, along with her dark glasses, she could just as easily have been praying. Technically, there was nothing illegal about being a woman or being out alone in public or reading. But when you combined all three with the new restrictive Sharia laws, well, that's when you were asking for trouble.

It was only ten minutes or so after she sat down on her isolated bench in the warm sun that she saw them. The bearded pair came by once, looked her over from the edge of the playground, and left. They were back no more than five minutes later, this time for a longer look and accompanied by a dour policewoman in dark robes and black hajib head scarf.

They could have been keeping a close eye on the young mothers and their squealing children on the slides and swings, but she knew better. She'd had run-ins with the local Islamic council upholding the religious Sharia regulations, most recently over whether her head scarf was thick enough to veil her long, dark curly hair sufficiently. At least they did not insist on the all-covering burka – yet.

She tried to ignore the three as they circled behind her. The bearded men whispered to each other and nodded while the policewoman frowned constantly. She read the same paragraph on the same page over and over, but the words refused to make any sense. She dared not turn to watch them, and when they reemerged, one of the males was whispering into his cell phone while the other consulted some type of pocket device as well. She found it ironic the authorities condemned the sciences that gave birth to such technology as a form of blasphemy, yet they were not averse to using such technology when it suited their purposes.

The trio buzzed her one final time, passing so close behind her that she imagined she could feel their hot breath on her neck. Then the two males remained behind by the mothers on the benches by the playground while the female approached her.

The woman was mature, but of indeterminate age, anywhere between forty and sixty. In another time and place, she could have presented herself in a grandmotherly fashion. But in this time and place, she had a permanently sour look on her face, like the overseer in that old story about Handmaidens.

“Christina?” she said sternly, all business. “You are Christina Hallal?”

“I am Najeeba Hallal,” she answered, quietly turning down the page and closing her book. “Christina was my infidel name. I changed it when I converted.”

“I see,” she replied. But clearly she didn’t, because she looked back at the two males nervously. They nodded for her to continue.

Najeeba bit her lip. It was not odd the databases at their disposal would have her old name, although she had not used it in years. She just hoped it did not go back far enough to reveal any of her secrets. Thankfully, the new regime did not care all that about the days before the *Tariq Shifa*’s hardline Muslim fundamentalists took over the state.

The dour woman regained her balance. “Your head covering is inadequate,” she pronounced.

Najeeba took off her sunglasses and raised a hand to feel if it might have shifted. It had not. “I have worn it this way for six months and it has not been a problem.”

The old woman bent down and peered into her eyes. "I can see your hairline in the front."

It was not Najeeba's usual nature to try to implicate others. But this was harassment, purely and simply. She pointed. "Some of those young women over there have the scarves halfway back on their heads."

The woman did not even bother to look. "They are mothers," she grunted. "Are you?"

Najeeba lowered her eyes. She did not want the woman to notice that on this fine day she had applied a little makeup.

"No, I thought not," the woman went on. "No children for you. You are too good for any man, aren't you?"

She did not reply. She thought about Bob Springfield, about how they could never be together now that he had married and had children of his own.

The woman interpreted her silence as guilt. "Do not worry about others. And here you sit reading a book."

Involuntarily, she slipped the novel into the folds of her dark robes. "I hope it is the holy Qur'an that you examine so intently. Is it the holy book?"

"No," Najeeba admitted.

"What is it then?"

"Just a story."

"Lies, you mean. They are all lies. Only the Qur'an contains the truth."

She did not reply.

"Where is your father?"

That snapped Najeeba out of her passivity. She did not want them bothering her father, who was old and frail. "He is ill. Please do not annoy him with something as petty as this."

"You do not live with him." It was not a question.

"I have my own apartment."

The woman suddenly turned and waved to summon the other two police officers. "Alone and with a book and dressed to encourage your own unclean thoughts. We will have to see what is to be done about this."

Najeeba told all three that she would get another head scarf and make sure that none of her raven hair ever showed from any angle, ever.

The taller of the two bearded men frowned. “The problems here are more than a few.”

Najeeba had no idea what he was talking about. He gestured with what she at first thought was a baton. When he did, she saw that it was a cattle prod capable of delivering a debilitating shock to anyone he chose to touch. “There is the problem of your legs.”

It took a few minutes, but Najeeba realized that they objected to her robe, which did not totally conceal her ankles when she crossed her legs. In fact, they even objected to her crossed legs. “A woman should always have both feet on the ground,” the woman admonished.

Now the tall policeman signaled for Najeeba to rise. Then other took out a pair of handcuffs. With a start, she saw that they meant to arrest her. What had she done to deserve this attention? Was another crackdown on public behavior coming so soon after last year’s?

Najeeba just wanted the torment to end. It was too nice of a day to have it spoiled by an arrest. She tried on her best abject countenance and found that it still fit. “Oh, please. My father is ill. It would kill him to find his daughter in custody. Surely there is something that can be done short of taking me away.”

Her pleas had drawn the attention of the mothers gathered by the playground. Some of the children stopped to look too, and this bothered the shorter of the two male policemen. “Wait, Rakiz...maybe there is something that can be done. The woman seems genuinely contrite.”

The taller man frowned. He caressed his weapon and stroked his beard. He looked at the children. Their mothers barked at them, telling them to resume their play and leave these things to the authorities. “Today it is a minor infraction. Tomorrow it is women in pants and high heels, working at a job like a man, trying to give orders...”

“Rakiz, look at her,” the shorter man said. “She is not going to do any of that. Are you?”

It bothered Najeeba to the very core of her being, but she managed to smile and nod her head. "Of course not. I want only to do better in the future."

"See?"

Finally, Rakiz sighed and lowered the cattle prod. "These are women's things," he announced. "It is up to the woman."

Najeeba found herself at the mercy of the dour woman. The woman stamped her foot. "She cannot do these things." She threw up her arms to heaven, as if Allah was watching the whole episode. "She is a corruptor of youth."

In the lexicon of the fundamentalist regime, there was no crime worse than an accusation as a corruptor of youth. For the first time, Najeeba felt a sliver of fright. This threatened arrest was not going to be merely a nuisance, but now could become a life-transforming event. People arrested for being corruptors of youth did not appear on the streets again soon, and if they did, they were not the same as they had been before.

Najeeba tried to force tears to her eyes, but part of her was inwardly angry enough that the tears would not come. "Please, no," was all she could manage. "I'll do better. Really, I will." She buried her head in her hands as much to show contrition as to conceal the risk that her inner anger would spill out and ruin any chance she had of escaping her fate.

It was quiet for a suspenseful minute while her accusers debated whether to accept her plea for mercy or not. Najeeba wanted to see what was going on, but she dared not look. Then the shorter man put a hand on her shoulder. "It is all right, child. You may go."

Najeeba was so happy that she did not react to the insult. She had recently turned thirty. All unmarried women were still children in need of a family's stern discipline in the eyes of the fundamentalists. She looked up to find the old woman still frowning and the taller man hitting one palm with the cattle prod. For a moment, she thought she had misunderstood, until the shorter man smiled. It seemed something he needed more practice at.

The old woman was not through. "There is a school on the street you came here by."

“Yes, yes,” the smiling policeman said to her. To Najeeba, he said, “You should not return the way you came. Avoid that street on your way home.”

“Yes,” said Najeeba, relieved. “I will.” And she hurried away, not looking back while the mothers and their children all followed her with their eyes as she scuttled past.

She was so relieved that she did not fully consider the question that popped into her mind when she left. How did they know which way she had come to the park?



## Chapter 3:

### A Large University Near Mogadore

Fazeem, Ron Sunaru's friend and roommate, had taken Monday off because he had gone to visit his family over the weekend. Ron Sunaru was alone in the lab until Tuesday. The university started spring break, so there were few students around the campus, only those taking special classes. Of course, since the *ulema*, the learned scholars, had taken over, there were many fewer students taking classes even during the regular semester. Today, religion was a key part of every subject, and even engineering and mathematics dealt with the blood of Islamic martyrs as examples of fluid flow and differential equations. But it had been that way for a long time. How much blood did three belly-shot infidels lose if each lost one liter per bullet wound as they lapsed into shock?

On his way to take his latest explosive concoction to the drying rack, on a whim, Ron took a detour past the open lab door and took a quick look down the hall. The desk for the building guard sat unattended, the simple, straight-backed chair empty. Beyond, the warm light of the warm day and the green grass of the trimmed lawn beckoned. Ron had no idea how long the guard would be away from his post, but the idea that not only could anyone enter the building unchallenged, but leave without any problem, made his pulse jump.

Ron had come a long way to attend this university, said to be one of the best left in the state, even after the fundamentalists had taken over. Born and raised in Hawaii, on the Big Island, he wanted to get as far away as he possibly could for personal reasons. While growing up, he had always gotten on well with the whites, the natives, and the Orientals, so he figured that he could handle the large Arabic contingent at the school in the same way.

He had only been at the university for a semester before he found out that he had been half right. He could handle them, but not in the same way. No, not in the same way at all. The Arabs in charge formed a branch of the *Tariq Shifa*, the Road to Recovery, and ran the

financially ruined state. They were immune to any form of normal discourse, it seemed, and only responded to religious initiatives and discussions. He had tried his best to grow his sparse beard out to the prescribed length of a clenched fist, but his scraggly half-Oriental heritage betrayed him. The few wisps of longish face hair he had managed to cultivate looked ridiculous. His dorm floor's Guardian of the Faith grudgingly allowed him to shave it off after more than a year of futile effort to fit in.

However, beardless Ron was not home free. The smooth face came with a price, as it turned out. He never found out who had told the authorities outside the university about his hobbies, but he suspected it was Professor Kambaal, his chemistry professor, who had never liked him. There was no pleasing the demanding instructor. If Ron's tunic was too short one day, the next day they caught him wearing trousers so short that his bright red socks showed at his ankles. Yet as long as Ron did his work, and passed all the tests with flying colors, there was little the disgruntled professor could do about his recalcitrant student.

However, one day the hall guards spotted Ron coming out of Kambaal's class wearing a new pair of white sneakers. He was sent to the dean of students, another one of the *ulema*, naturally, who pointed out that this was hardly acceptable, dignified Islamic dress. "Mr. Sunaru," he said sternly, "these shoes are decadent."

Ron nodded numbly. "I will try to do better, my brother." Every man was a brother these days, especially when you wanted something.

But then the man stroked his beard thoughtfully and ended by asking as many questions about Kambaal as about Ron's dress. Was he a good teacher? Did he ever mention the old days, before the *Tariq Shifa* took over? What did he say about the administration?

In the end, Ron knew exactly what had happened. They had leaned on Kambaal for whatever reason, and he, to get them off his back, had offered up Ron Sunaru on a silver platter.

As a teenager in Hawaii, Ron liked to blow things up. Perhaps Pelee, the fire god inside the flaming volcanoes who sent streams of lava to the sea where the red fire hissed and spit at the cool waves, inspired him. Maybe his anger at the way his stepfather drank and

treated his mother, treatment his mother accepted, fueled Ron's internal volcano. Whatever the reason, by the time he was ready to apply to colleges, Ron was adept at mixing his own black powder and adding magnesium and other ingredients to make decent home-made rockets and fireworks.

Some of the people in his town thought the fascination was in the beauty of the fireworks, but Ron knew what he was really after. Mayhem. He finally brewed up a supply of nitroglycerin in his bathtub, based on an old recipe he had found in a book from the 1960s. He delicately balanced the temperature of the mix with ice cubes and the sulfuric acid of the reaction accelerator with the touch of an expert. Right before he left for college, he put his supply of nitro to good use. Knowing his stepfather's penchant for shaking the orange juice bottle before mixing it with his vodka, it was a simple matter to prep the refrigerator and make sure his mother and he were far away.

The official ruling was that the old man had not been careful with his cigarette near the black powder. Which was ludicrous considering the explosion had reduced the beach house to splinters. Ron's satisfaction lasted until his mother's depression and loneliness led to sedation and ultimately sent her into a mental hospital. Ron left for school and never looked back.

Until the day they threatened him with expulsion unless he resurrected his old chemical skills. He had told few about his background, but he knew that Kambaal had checked his records carefully before approving his application to an advanced chemistry class. Having nowhere to go, and no way to get there, Ron had little choice but to accept the Islamic Guards' offer.

Now Ron worked all day, every day except Friday, in the lab on the first floor of the building at the edge of the campus and then they escorted him back to the room he shared with Fazeem at night. The next day when he opened the door to his room, there was the bearded guard with the rifle, always waiting for him. At first, they hung blast shields and piled sand bags all over the place. But when the saw how respectful Ron was of his materials, and how lovingly he could coax the most volatile brews to behave, they gradually returned the lab to a

more normal appearance. Besides, there were fewer questions from those not privy to his project that way.

Ron made classic plastique and newer, more lightweight explosives with ever higher specific impulse energy levels. He never knew for sure about the results of his work, but he suspected. When he overheard them talking about Canada, and then saw a report about a huge explosion in Toronto that had leveled a shopping mall, he had to wonder. There was blood on his hands already: he knew that. But this new blood was innocent.

At the beginning of that first summer something had happened that made him check the hall every once in a while, as he had that day. They had called him into an office high in the administration building, back under the eaves of the roof. The man behind the huge desk sat with his face shrouded in darkness. Two guards flanked him, armed with new Chinese rifles, and his dorm floor's Guardian of the Faith, Ali, was also there. But they did not bring his roommate Fazeem, which meant this was not about some indiscretion in the dorm.

"Ali says you have been doing fine work for Islam," the man in the shadows told him.

"I do what I am told," Ron shrugged, only recently having succumbed to their constant entreaties and converted. "I want an education. I am not doing it for Islam."

Ali coughed, and the two guards looked at each other, but the man behind the desk did not react in any way that Ron could tell.

"In that case, Mr. Sunaru," the man said, "If you have no religious scruples, you won't mind doing what I am telling you to do now."

"What is that?"

"You will make explosive lenses. Small ones. Small enough to put in a briefcase."

Ron's mouth went dry, but he said, "I don't know how."

The man slid a book across the desk. "Here is how. Read. Learn."

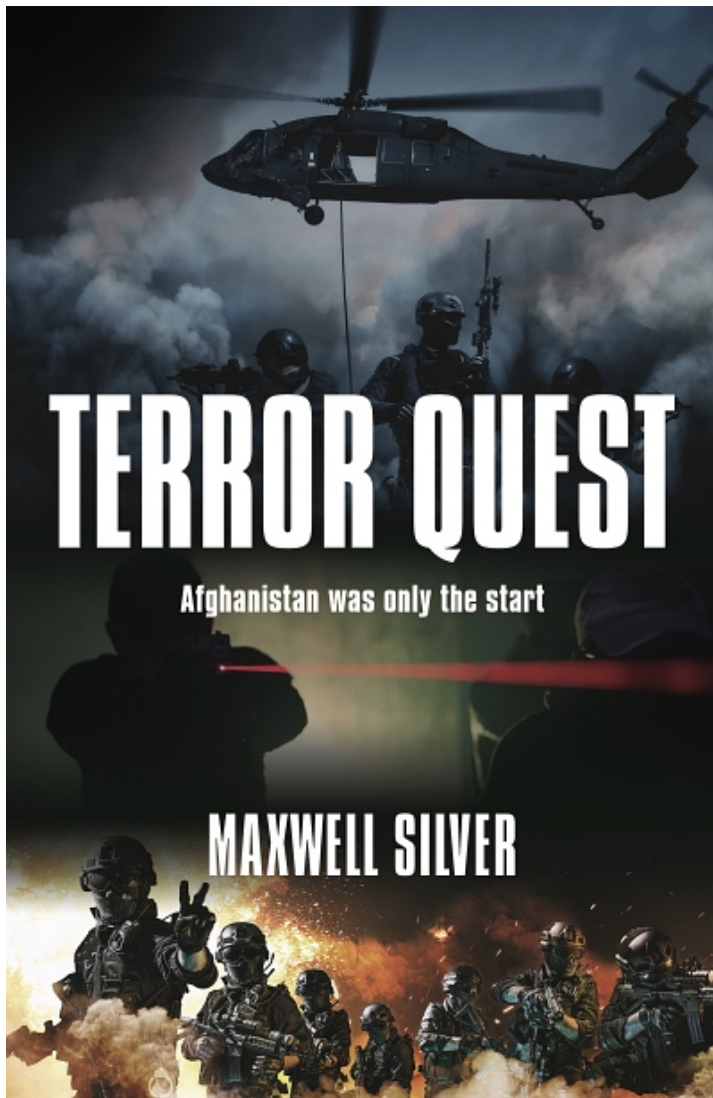
Ron slowly picked up the book. There wasn't anything else he could do about it.

"You will get everything required. Molds. Materials. And whatever else you need."

He had no doubt of that.

As they escorted Ron back to his dorm room, no one had to tell Ron what they were going to use the explosive lenses for. They only had one use. They triggered nuclear bombs. Big lenses for big nuclear weapons. Small lenses for more portable ones. Tiny ones for bombs small enough to put in a briefcase. That was when Ron started to track the comings and goings of his escorts and guardians.

His mind back in the present, Ron went to check the newly formed explosive lens and see how dry it was. He also checked the hall again to see if the guard had returned.



*After a rigged election in Ohio in the near future leaves a strict fundamentalist group with dim views of women in charge of the state, a woman and her former lover unite with experienced veterans to rid the region of the forces of oppression.*

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