

Prologue

Saigon

1972

THE CLUB DID NOT differ from hundreds of other Saigon clubs that catered to U.S. servicemen during the war. Dimly lit, crowded with tables, and smelling of marijuana and hashish, the room offered cheap drinks, the ear-blasting wail of western rock music, and a dozen young, sensuous dark-skinned girls with almond eyes swaying to the beat. But unlike the years before, American servicemen didn't crowd the club and most of the tables stood empty.

Most of the non-indigenous forces began withdrawing from the war the previous year, handing responsibility for the fight to the South Vietnamese. The American presence was a mere shadow of what it had been at the height of the war. Were it not for North Vietnam's Easter Offensive, the two American Marines sitting at a corner table—a sergeant and a private—would not have been there. The two were members of a battalion of Marines airlifted in from offshore amphibious landing ships to provide security at the Da Nang airbase, which was again filling up with U.S. planes helping to stave off the north's invasion.

The sergeant finished his beer, wiped foam from his mouth with the back of his hand and yawned.

"Let's blow this place," he said. "There's got to be someplace with more action."

The private shook his head. "I like it here," he said. He gave a wolfish grin as he leered at a bar girl a few feet away. The girl smiled back and did a little pirouette to show off the curves underneath her tight *ao dai* dress. "You go on. I'll catch up later at the hotel. I got a little business transaction to do."

"You better watch out," the sergeant said, "or you're going to get the clap from that business."

The private's eyes never left the girl. He downed the remains of his beer and stood with a slight sway. "Said I'd catch up later, man."

He stumbled toward the girl and his friend walked toward the door. The sergeant glanced back from the door and saw the girl wrap her arms around the private's neck and press her body against his.

The sergeant shook his head and left the bar. He had taken only a dozen steps when a blast threw him to the ground. Shaking his head, the sergeant raised himself and looked back. Smoke bellowed from the club's blown-out windows. He staggered to his feet and half stumbled, half ran back into the club.

Then the world exploded again.