

CHAPTER 1

USS Salvation (CV-44)—Yankee Station—Tonkin Gulf—October 31, 1972

Of all the ways Commander Robert Porter had witnessed death, he never expected this. It was 0200. All lights aboard ship had been switched to red following taps four hours earlier. Porter double-timed it along passageways and down ladders and sprinted aft, all through the dim red glow that radiated off every pipe and cable run. Breath came easy and deep despite his heightened alertness. With each urgent step the odors of wet iron and jet fuel made his mouth hot with the taste of rust. He slowed along the starboard passageway on the second deck, where broken glass crunched beneath his boots. Shadows in the red light played tricks. He stopped and leaned forward. Lengths of inch-and-a-half fire hose lay unspooled, their nozzles missing, as were various dogging wrenches—except for one sticking out of a fuel transfer gauge attached to the portside bulkhead. He cleared his throat of the rising heat.

This main thoroughfare should've been wide open with less than a third of the ship's crew awake to get in his way.

"Make a hole," he called out, intent on resuming his pace.

No one moved.

Farther down the passageway, through the red glow, those crewmen were not milling about, but rather slumped along the deck, many motionless with open wounds leaking blood. Porter's stomach felt like it had been kicked and his nervous eye twitched.

There had been no alarm or missile impact, not even heavy seas, yet dozens of casualties surrounded him. Those who were able applied direct pressure or tourniquets.

As he stepped over Seaman Runyan, a young striker from postal, his boot slipped in a puddle of blood. Gravity almost dragged Porter to the deck with his wounded crewmen. The kid looked nearly unconscious sprawled on the deck.

"Someone apply direct pressure to the postal clerk's head," Porter called out. "Now!"

Despite blood pouring like hydraulic fluid from his scalp, Runyan's eyes opened in time to focus on Porter. The blood covering the kid's pale face made his skin look as dark as Porter's. Runyan waved an arm, as if weakly mocking semaphore performed topside—on the flight deck and signal bridge. Blood and confusion filled his face.

"Mr. Porter, please," he called out. His head wound percolated into his mouth. "*They* ran aft."

The way he said the word "they" made Porter's windpipe grow tight. He looked past the multitude of injuries, contusions, and smeared blood and wished it wasn't true. The red light obscured colors, but the contrast was plain enough.

All the casualties were white.

"Mr. Porter," Runyan called out in a voice that might not live through the night. "Please, sir. Make the other blacks stop."

Porter's neck shivered beneath the weight of the kid's words. To keep himself upright, he reached out a hand to the yellow casing of an emergency light fixture.

As an airdale with a broken arm pulled his T-shirt over his head and used his good hand to staunch the blood flowing from his buddy's face, synapses in Porter's brain fired with the message to keep moving. First aid and mass casualties had procedures, but there was no script for being attacked from within. Nothing of the kind had been part of Porter's crises-at-sea training. He had to keep going, despite the wet puzzlement on that postal clerk's face.

Nervous energy propelled Porter faster despite the heaviness threatening to drag him to his knees. With each step, his stomach churned more. He wondered if the color of his own skin would help or hurt his efforts to restore calm aboard the ship. A dozen frames down the passageway, red lights made a tunnel leading to white lights.

His eyes adjusted to the brightness the closer he got to the mess deck. The smell of blood mixed in the air with fumes of jet fuel, old coffee, BO, pot smoke, and bad breath. Instead of the empty tables and chairs where twelve thousand meals were eaten daily, Porter arrived in time to see a firefighting nozzle swung as a weapon from its brass handle. It shined in the light of florescent bulbs overhead as it spun midair toward a blond kid's head.

"No!" Porter called out.

The crowd buzzed with cheers and rage. Bulkheads vibrated with animosity.

The kid had kneeled on the deck beside an ammo elevator, surrounded not by missiles or bombs but by a hundred fifty black men—one hundred fifty-one counting Porter. They were in various degrees of uniform, some bare chested with blood smeared on their faces; some with dilated pupils from smoking, snorting, or shooting smack; many others high from the fog of marijuana in the air. Their fists were still clenched. The blond kid's face bore wounds pounded and kicked into it earlier. As Porter noticed the hula girl tattoo on the kid's forearm and the anguish in his young eyes, that ten-pound nozzle struck the side of his blond head—ruptured skin, shattered bone across the eyes and the bridge of his nose—opened up his skull like a can of dog food.

Porter gagged low in his gut and covered his mouth with his fist.

The kid's body slumped and his shoulder hit the deck without sound. His opened head thudded wet upon impact. Porter's first instinct was to call for a corpsman, but it was already too late. During his career Porter had dropped ordnance on villages, so death was nothing new to him. He'd made his peace with it so he could have a chance of sleeping at night. But seeing something so senseless, so violent, up close and personal made him want to vomit.

No one spoke. The only sound was heavy breathing and an icemaker along the far wall as it pulled water and coughed a handful of cubes into its gray storage bin. Halfway between that icemaker and Porter stood Rufus Applewhite, a pissed-off brother all of twenty years old, in a blood-stained T-shirt and faded dungarees with a monkey fist key chain hanging out of his pocket. He dropped the nozzle. The brass thunked hard onto the deck. He walked toward Porter, his stare full of defiance.

The black sailors shifted side to side, opened and closed their fists like athletes preparing to compete. They stood in random packs like wolves among the tables and chairs where they'd eaten every meal for the past two hundred seventy-four days. Only a couple of them tried to conceal weapons improvised from firefighting equipment, dogging wrenches, and aircraft tie-down chains. Porter recognized a few faces, but every one of them knew who he was and what he might be worth to their cause. He watched the dead kid's blood puddle widen beneath his head. The men stared at Porter as Applewhite ambled up slow and cocky.

Pressure built in Porter's chest where wise words should have been.

Applewhite walked the long way, going around the group instead of cutting through it. The ball of the monkey fist bounced with each step.

Applewhite stepped up, toe-to-toe—so close Porter smelled pot on his breath and felt the rage radiating from the angry crowd and into the deck plates and up the bulkheads. It made Porter feel like he was plummeting through the air. He spread his feet to give himself a stronger base, digging in, intent on manufacturing the power to calm his black crew.

Ten weeks earlier, a CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter flew a dozen miles off the Vietnam coast. It was near noontime. The sun radiated across the cool blue water of the South China Sea and bounced off the haze-gray paint of two US ships. At that distance, the helo's only passenger, Commander Robert Porter, guessed the ships out there were a carrier and maybe an oiler from the battle group. Without binoculars he couldn't be sure. At distances like that, he'd always had a hard time distinguishing between smaller and farther away. That had gotten worse over the years the less he flew. Blame might rest on the aging process, but he was only forty-one and not ready to admit that to himself. It seemed like only a couple of years ago he had flown across the same water in an F-8 as one of the Navy's only black pilots. Now he was being chauffeured.

"Are you comfortable back there, Commander?" the lieutenant flying the helo asked over the headset built into Porter's helmet.

"It's not a limousine, if that's what you mean," Porter said, "but it's a hell of a lot more comfortable than the jump seat of the AC-47 I rode all the way to Singapore one time."

Laughter filled his headphones. "That's a good one, sir," one of them said.

During his nineteen-year career he'd been on the receiving end of a lot of admiring and flattering attention—more than he would guess white men of the same rank might get. Before his commission, most white people treated him like everybody else. That's how he grew up. That's what he was used to. Some kids in class had called him names, but by the third grade there were a hundred black kids in his school.

This new assignment, this role of executive officer, carried the weight of four thousand men and officers who would demand his full attention. It didn't worry him though. His confidence was rooted in rising to the occasion every time. He never understood where that trait came from. He damn sure didn't have an example of that growing up.

As they got closer to the ships, the carrier's superstructure, what they called the "island" and civilians called the "tower," came into focus, but the array of RADAR antennas and glass around both bridges and the flight control tower remained too far to see clearly.

The Sea Knight passed over a supply ship sailing away from the carrier and within seconds the carrier went from looking as small as a shoebox to being the real deal. A dozen F-8s lined the port side of the flight deck, with a squad of F-4s grouped in pairs along the starboard side, aft of the island. The center of the flight deck stood crowded with pallets of food, ammunition, replacement parts, and sundry supplies following replenishment at sea.

The Navy had been good to Porter, the progeny of a janitor and a librarian's assistant, who'd given him the gift of reading, which led to his interest in college and traveling the globe. Because his father worked at Sacramento Municipal Airport, where young Porter had spent every summer between the third grade and being commissioned as an ensign in the Navy, he'd begun flying planes at fourteen years old.

Catching sight of the familiar hull number painted on the flight deck transported his mind to the last time he'd landed on the *Salvation*—wing a little shot up—back in sixty-eight. This was a different kind of happiness now, but no less powerful. This was also the first time he'd flown onto a carrier without his hands on the controls. He felt everything in him clench. He trusted this lieutenant because he trusted all Navy pilots. And he was excited to get back aboard that ship.

And that ship was a workhorse—from all the reports he'd read, she was consistent and expert, exceeding goals every day during this deployment. The thought of being in charge of a crew with high morale made him anxious to get aboard. He leaned forward, tried to hide any display of

unease. If anybody accused him of being nervous, he'd deny feeling anything but honored to assume his position as second in command of that beautiful ship. This was an opportunity of a lifetime, and just one step away from being captain of such a ship himself someday.

The Sea Knight carried a crew of three highly trained Marines and came equipped with machine guns mounted on each side for self-defense. They were loaded, but unmanned. The cargo bay was empty and the internal winch in the forward cabin had nothing attached. The helo's sole mission on this day was delivering the *Salvation's* new executive officer—the first black man to attain this position on an aircraft carrier. They circled in anticipation of clearance to land.

Porter twisted in his seat, strained against the harness tethering him in place, trying to catch a clear view of the ship. She steamed below him churning a foamy wake in the same patch of cool blue water as she'd been every day since leaving San Diego seven months prior. Porter adjusted his sunglasses to see out the window. Each glimpse made his heart rate accelerate to match the rhythmic thwacking of tandem rotors as they fanned the air overhead. The *Salvation* was as long as four football fields put end-to-end, and it towered more than fifteen stories from the waterline. This aircraft carrier displaced 85,000 tons fully loaded as she was with eighty planes, six helicopters, and four thousand men and officers, whose mission was launching and recovering aircraft to support our troops in the jungle.

Porter remembered the first time he landed on that flight deck. It seemed a lifetime ago when he missed all three wires and had to double back. He'd never been that nervous again in his life, until now.

"I hope this works, Commander," the pilot said.

"Yeah," his copilot added. "Those dumb shits need all the help they can get."

"Don't say that," the pilot said.

"What? I'm not saying just the blacks. I mean all of them, Commander. Both. You know? It's a powder keg lately. Worse than usual, is all I'm saying."

Porter's stomach dropped though their altitude hadn't changed. He'd heard of tensions amongst the crew second hand. Tensions were to be expected on a long deployment.

In the helo, Porter adjusted his microphone. "You're talking about racial tension," he said, playing along.

"Can you imagine, sir?" the pilot asked.

"It's not that big a problem, gentleman," Porter said. "All our bones are the same color. There's nothing more to it than that. We'll all be one big, happy family before Old Sal sails back to San Diego."

"Sounds like you got it all figured out," the pilot said.

Porter cleared his throat to buy some time. He needed to come across as confident and in control. "I usually do, boys," he said with a laugh into his helmet-mounted microphone. "I usually do." He cupped his hand over the microphone, so his touch could convey the sincerity missing from his statement.

"They'll need that," the copilot said, "especially since the captain has been bearing down on them."

"Yeah," the pilot said. "The last time the *Salvation* got liberty there was a big dustup at one of the nightclubs. Nasty fight." The pilot's helmet reflected the sun as he spoke.

The copilot pivoted partially to face Porter. "A couple crewmen stayed behind 'cause of it."

Porter's research had mentioned a couple hard landings and widespread crew testiness, but he had no idea what the pilot meant about "bearing down" or how severe it might be.

"No better man for your new job. You gotta admit, Commander. Right?"

Porter didn't know which one said that. A wave rolled inside his ribs and he had a fleeting sensation that he might vomit. He kept it together by thinking this was his lucky ship. She'd always brought him success, and he'd be successful now as well. He always was.

"Isn't that right, Commander?" one of the voices asked again.

Porter's right eye twitched and he was glad they couldn't see him. The weight of it all seemed to press down on his shoulders in that moment. Surely, he was there based solely upon merit. His father had always called guys like this "jive turkeys," but that didn't change the question.

"You bet your ass," he said. As soon as the words left his mouth, he couldn't be sure if he'd conveyed confidence in his leadership or his race.

The helo hovered twenty feet above the deck. Blades thwacked, and Porter's heart raced even faster. They lowered to ten feet, then five, and hung there for what seemed like an hour. Porter's throat ran dry. He exhaled so that his next breath would be the mixture of jet fuel, scorched rubber tires, and sweat that comprised that *Salvation* air.

When they did touch down, it was more gently than he'd ever managed in his old Crusader. Porter removed his helmet and set it on the seat beside him.

The crew chief opened the clamshell door with the roar of rollers in tracks. "Sir," he yelled through the noise of the blades chopping the air above their heads and the wind washing across the deck. He gestured the "all-clear" for Porter to exit the aircraft.

Porter stepped onto the deck in khakis instead of a flight suit, then signaled a thumbs-up as he crouched and looked back at the helo. A strong crosswind flapped the slack in his khaki sleeves and pant legs. He adjusted his sunglasses and leaned his weight into the wind to move forward.

Awaiting him just outside the down draft were the chief engineer—a skinny man with a big, genuine Midwest smile; the chaplain—a young lieutenant who had a baby face and cynicism in his eyes; and the command master chief—a salty senior chief who must have been around since World War II. He had hands like baseball mitts and squeezed Porter's hand the hardest by far but avoided making eye contact.

Porter stood tall and proud on the flight deck of that ship—felt the surge of strength he'd previously known as a pilot taking off and landing on that very deck.

The chaplain and the chief engineer said, "Welcome aboard, Commander Porter," in unison, while the senior chief said, "You got big shoes to fill here, sir."

Porter thought he misread the tone of the man's voice. He looked over the top of his sunglasses at him. Dismissed the notion. Assumed his words had gotten caught in the wind blowing past their faces.

On the flight deck, a dozen airmen in color-coded shirts hustled around the helicopter, refueling the helo and assisting the flight crew with any additional items or services they needed prior to their return flight to the airfield outside Da Nang.

Porter did his best to keep up with the questions from the chaplain and chief engineer. "Yes," he said, "it was a good series of flights to get here. Yes, I am excited to be back aboard the *Salvation*. No, I didn't mind being called away from my cushy gig in Newport, because this is where I truly want to be."

All the while, the grizzled old master chief looked off toward the horizon and muttered under the weight of the wind.

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