

NORTHERN IRAN

SUNRISE BROKE OVER THE MOUNTAINS as the dune buggy worked its way up the next hill. Known officially as a Light Strike Vehicle, the buggy was little more than a tubular frame with seats bolted to a steel floor pan. A modified, air-cooled Volkswagen engine hanging off the back provided enough power to send the buggy scooting across the desert and over the roughest terrain. Painted the color of sand, it blended with its surroundings and, in spite of the engine's noise, all but disappeared against the muted colors of the desert.

Seated behind the steering wheel was Adam Kirkland. Twenty-three, Kirkland had enlisted in the Army the day after graduating from high school in Eustis, Florida. Following a year of training, he had been deployed to Iraq as part of a peacekeeping mission, patrolling the hills along the border with Turkey. While on patrol in a remote region of Iraq north of Dahuk, Kirkland and a three-man team had come under fire from radical forces. Pinned down and cut off, they held out for three days before maneuvering into a position from which they could be removed. Kirkland's leadership during those tense days had proved decisive in avoiding a major international incident. As a result, he had been sent to Ranger school and assigned to a special missions unit tasked with the Army's most sensitive covert operations.

Six weeks ago Kirkland and his partner, Chris Martin, were inserted into an isolated area of northern Iran. Satellite imagery and intercepted transmissions suggested the region was the site of an underground nuclear testing facility, but flyovers from unmanned drones had been unable to detect anything more than background radiation. Someone at the Pentagon's Nuclear Support Center wanted a conclusive answer. Kirkland and Martin were sent to get it.

Kirkland jerked the steering wheel to the left and maneuvered the dune buggy around a ravine, then pressed the throttle and continued their climb up the hill to the right. At the crest he brought the buggy to a stop and took out his binoculars. The hill they had just topped was a steep rise halfway across the floor of a broad valley. To the left and right, ominous craggy peaks of the Zagros Mountains towered above them. Kirkland raised the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the valley to the left.

"You see anything?"

"No," Martin replied. "Nothing but—" He stopped in mid-sentence. "I got a truck over here."

"Where?" Kirkland lowered the binoculars and turned to see. "You sure it's a truck? We're a long way from anywhere."

"A hundred yards," Martin pointed. "Behind that clump of bushes."

Kirkland turned in that direction. He squinted against the morning glare and looked past the bushes. "I think I see it." He raised the binoculars to his eyes again. "Yep. It's a truck all right."

Painted the same tan color as the terrain, the truck was all but invisible in the early morning light. Only the square corners of its van body gave it away. Kirkland adjusted the focus on the binoculars and searched along the side of the truck for markings that might give a hint of its identity or purpose. "Don't see any markings on it," he mumbled. "Do you?"

“Looks like one of those seismic trucks they use to search for oil.”

“A thumper truck?”

“Say what?” Martin grinned.

“Thumper truck,” Kirkland repeated. “That’s what we call them down in Florida.”

“We call them boomer trucks in Louisiana. That thing’s so square and clunky. Not sure how they got it out here.”

Something in the tone of Martin’s voice ignited a memory in Kirkland’s mind. Clear and crisp, it struck him so hard his eyes blinked and his head jerked spontaneously to the side. For one brief moment he was back home—riding to Leesburg with his grandfather, standing in the family orange grove at Yalaha, spending one more night parked with Lisa at the tennis courts on Bates Avenue. Most days he kept those memories well out of reach, but sometimes, at the sound of a word or when the light hit the bushes just right, he could smell the orange blossoms and see the look in Lisa’s eyes. As quickly as it surfaced, the memory vanished. He turned back to Martin.

“I don’t know,” Kirkland continued. “I’m not sure it’s a... thumper.” He studied the truck through the lens of the binoculars. “Doesn’t look like it to me.” He turned his head farther to the right. “I don’t see any blast holes. If they were looking for oil, they should have blast holes. We’d see little red flags to mark the charges.” He twisted from side to side, searching through the binoculars. “I don’t see anything. Do you?”

“No,” Martin replied. “Nothing but sand and rocks. We got a lot of rocks,” he chuckled. “And scraggly bushes.”

Kirkland lowered the binoculars and rested them on his lap. With his left hand he reached across his body to his right shoulder and keyed the microphone on his radio. “This is Delta Six.”

A voice crackled in reply, “Delta Six, this is Olympus. Go ahead.”

“Olympus, we’ve got a truck out here. Looks like a geological team. Any way you can confirm that?”

From high above someone in a JSTARS airplane answered. “Negative, Delta Six. That’s not an oil field crew. We’re picking up their telemetry. They’re sampling the air.”

Kirkland glanced over at Martin and frowned. Martin shrugged in response. Kirkland pressed the microphone once more. “Roger that. What do we do?”

“Hold your position. NADAK thinks you’re right on top of them. You see anything?”

“Any what? Nothing out here but—”

Suddenly Martin’s shoulder exploded. Blood spewed across the front of the buggy. Bone fragments peppered Kirkland’s cheek. Traveling faster than the speed of sound, the bullet had arrived without warning. As the sound of that first shot echoed from the mountains to the right, a second round struck Martin’s skull. His head flew forward then snapped backward against the seat. Seconds later, he slumped to the right and hung precariously from the opposite side of the buggy.

Kirkland rolled to his left out of his seat and spread himself flat on the ground. His heart pounded against his chest and veins in his neck throbbed as he grappled with the microphone. “Be advised! Be advised!” His voice was excited and tense. “We are under fire. One man down.” The sound of the second shot rumbled through the valley. He scanned the mountains to the right and shouted into the microphone. “Sniper! Sniper! On the ridge to our south!”

“Roger, Delta Six,” the JSTARS answered. “We’re checking his position now.”

Slithering across the ground on his knees and elbows, Kirkland crawled to the rear of the vehicle and peered over the engine. His hands shook as he raised the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the mountains to the south. At first he saw nothing, and then he caught sight of a man lying prone on a smooth flat outcropping two thirds of the way to the top. Kirkland raised the microphone near his lips and pressed the key to talk.

“This is Delta Six. I see—”

Searing hot pain sliced through Kirkland’s forehead. He jerked forward, slamming his cheek against the surface of the engine’s muffler. His flesh sizzled against the white-hot metal, filling his nostrils with the smell of burning meat. Then his arms went numb. The binoculars and radio slipped from his hands and clattered against the frame of the buggy. His legs buckled as his body slumped backward, striking the ground with his buttocks first, followed by his shoulders.

Overhead, he caught a glimpse of the cloudless blue sky as his head flopped to one side and bounced against the sand. Then the world fell silent.